

SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORIES ABOUT LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Mariana Gotseva
South West University

This article focuses on the socio-cultural nature of the process of language learning / acquisition, as claimed by socio-cultural theories, which see learning as a socially constructed cognitive phenomenon which relies on the semiotic tools, produced by the community over time (Lantolf & Thorne 2006). It presents evidence from an empirical research, assessing the implicit and explicit knowledge of learners, which has revealed that motivation and willingness to immerse into the native society, leads to higher achievements in the target language proficiency and vice-versa (Schumann 1986).

Key words: second language acquisition, socio-cultural theories, contextual factors

In the last five decades, there have been different competing theories and perspectives on language learning and acquisition, each of them researching core elements of the process of acquiring / learning L1 or L2. Nativist theories, claiming that language can be acquired, due to a series of innate genetically programmed structures (Fromkin, Rodman and Hyams 2011), in spite of dominating the field of language acquisition studies for the past 50 years or so, have co-existed with a variety of theories which criticised and rejected the former, mainly because they did not include or explain the role of any social factors in the process of language acquisition.

1. Learning theories

The learning perspective on language acquisition first appeared in some behaviourist theories which argued that language acquisition takes place through operant conditioning. Skinner (1957) suggested that a child can learn that a specific combination of sounds can stand for a specific thing through a number of repeated successful associations between them. A child learns to respond appropriately through social reinforcement.

A theory, based on behaviourist principles, the Relational Frame Theory (RFT), argues that “children acquire language purely through

interaction with the environment” (Hayes, Barnes-Holmes and Roche 2011: 54). The theory challenges the view that language acquisition is based on innate language-specific apparatus. The most important factors, affecting language acquisition in RFT, appear to be the type and period of linguistic interaction, together with the psychological events that the learner experiences.

Another learning perspective to language acquisition is the Social Learning Theory (Kail and Cavanaugh 2010), which highlights the role of imitation in language development. Researchers supporting this theory believe that children acquire their mother tongue through imitation of parents, carers or people in their environment. By memorizing words and sentences, children draw conclusions about the grammatical rules of the language. However, this theory does not account for the whole process of L1 acquisition and fails to explain how children, who make a lot of mistakes initially, master their L1 to perfection (O’Grady 2008).

2. Socialization theory

The theory of language socialization arose out of the anthropological view that language is a significant medium in children’s development of social and cultural knowledge, a domain which the field of language acquisition does not cover. Drawing upon Hymes’ (1964) paradigm of ethnography of communication and Slobin’s (1967) cross-cultural study of the communicative competence, language socialization research emerged in 1980s to consider different aspects of children’s socio-cultural environment and their communicative practices, which were left out of linguistic, psychological, and anthropological studies.

The term *Language socialization* refers to the process of novices or newcomers, joining a new community or culture, who develop communicative competence and gain legitimacy within it (Duff 2007). On the one hand, this process is mediated by language. Language and literacy learning involves implicit and explicit socialization through linguistic and social interaction.

The study of language socialization focuses on the role of caregivers as a source of social behaviour. Children are accepted as novices who are learning to act like those around them, so that they can express their needs or desires. Thus, grammar emerges directly from social interaction (Hopper 1987). Language development is facilitated by the corrective feedback from adults which provides the necessary cues, guiding children through every step of linguistic socialization. Language socialization is

best viewed as interactional rather than a unidirectional process (Pontecorvo, Fasulo, and Sterponi 2001).

Second language socialization shares many of the same principles and objectives as L1 socialization with the additional complexity of having to deal with persons who have already developed their L1 linguistic, discursive and cultural traditions before encountering the new ones (Duff 2007). The outcomes of second language socialization may vary, depending on both the local community's attempt to socialise the newcomers into appropriate and valued local practices, and the wish of the newcomers to emulate them or not (Duff 2002).

Social interaction is viewed as a crucial factor in developing communicative competence in L1 or L2, supplemented with knowledge of the values, practices and identities of the target community. In this respect, language mediates not only communication in general but specifically the learning of language and cultural knowledge. For L2 learners, the process of socialization could be very lengthy, sometimes a lifelong process, and the outcomes may vary widely. They may not necessarily lead to the reproduction of the existing L2 cultural and discursive practices. Instead, they may result into some hybrid practices, identities and values, and in some extreme cases – even to rejection of target norms and practices, which most probably affects their L2 competence as well.

3. Sociocultural theory

This theory has been introduced to the field of Applied Linguistics by James Lantolf and his colleagues (Lantolf 2000; Lantolf & Thorne 2006). The theory is trying to reveal “the relationship between human mental functioning, on the one hand, and cultural, historical, and institutional setting, on the other” (Lantolf & Thorne 2006: 3). It has Vygotskian cultural-historical orientation and focuses on issues such as “regulation by self, others, and by objects” and the role of “inner speech” or “private speech” in learning.

Some of the most important theses of the Sociocultural theory (SCT), related to language acquisition, include the claim that human mental functioning is mediated (or regulated) by language and other cultural symbol systems and tools, and particularly through private speech and inner speech. The psychological process of internalization (also called ‘appropriation’) is the result of social interaction. Therefore, learning is a socially constructed cognitive phenomenon which relies on the semiotic tools produced by the communities over time (Lantolf & Thorne 2006).

Both the socialization theory and the SCT have a social, cultural, interactional and cognitive orientation to language learning. They both acknowledge the key role of interlocutors, peers, relatives, caregivers and teachers in the process of joining an L1 or L2 community. Children internalize and gain communicative competence through social interactions in a socio-culturally defined context (Leontyev 1981, Vygotsky 1978). They also develop social and cognitive skills through interactions with more mature members of their society (Ochs 1988). Ochs also claims that “there exists interdependence between linguistic and sociocultural knowledge” (1988: 14).

A crucial aspect of language learning is that specific kinds of linguistic and non-linguistic cues help people understand the sociocultural context they exist in. Learners need to know how to interpret and use such cues appropriately. In the last two decades, sociolinguists, linguistic anthropologists, and philosophers of language have repeatedly stressed out the importance of contextualization cues which help speakers and listeners to understand what is being talked about, what genre or register is being used and so forth.

In terms of L2 learning, Duff’s (2002, 2007) research on Korean students studying in British Columbia, Canada, leads to some important conclusions about the significance of socialization in the process of learning English as a foreign language. She conducted a study on 45 Korean students who studied at a Canadian university in British Columbia but were simultaneously engaged with Korean and Canadian communities. It turned out that most students enjoyed only limited access to English-medium social networks and communities, due to access issues.

Despite their initial intention to become affiliated with local Anglo-Canadian students and their peer groups, after just a few months most students gave up the idea and realised that they have much more in common socially, linguistically, and culturally with other Koreans, Asians or Korean-Canadian immigrant students than with their Anglo-Canadian fellow-students. Thus, these Korean students’ socialization within the Canadian university community was not unidirectional, towards Anglo-Canadian community-of-practice norms, but multidirectional, oriented towards Korean and Asian groups and languages. What is more, certain sociocultural practices of their local Canadian peers, such as watching TV, wrestling or ice-hockey together, did not appeal to the Korean students. Thus, the latter created their own sociocultural environment, in which English was a *Lingua Franca* and co-existed with Asian languages, including Korean. As a result, they never fully sought to immerse into the

new community, which affected their level of English as L2 and their academic performance at university. The research concluded that sociolinguistic and sociocultural factors affect the way people learn / acquire a second / foreign language and they must be taken into account when studying the process of L2 learning / acquisition.

4. Evidence for the claims of SCT and the Socialization Theory brought about by the author's empirical research.

The claims of the Sociocultural theory and the Socialization theory found support in the findings of an empirical research, conducted by the author of the article, aiming at studying the relationship between certain contextual factors, such as starting age of L2 instruction, length of learning, length of exposure to the target language in an environment where it is used as native, type of learning (naturalistic or instructed) and type of input received on the one hand, and learners' attainment in tests on implicit / explicit knowledge and a test of proficiency in English, on the other hand.

4.1. The research

It was an experimental research, based on 103 adult (18+) participants, divided into two groups: learners who studied English as a second formal language with a very early starting age of learning declared; and ones who studied it as a foreign language in instructed conditions; and a control group of native speakers. The subjects performed on a battery of tests, designed to measure predominantly implicit or explicit knowledge of L2. They also completed a Background Questionnaire, in which they provided information about the ways English was learned; types of input received; length of learning; starting age of learning and length of exposure to L1 in the UK.

Participants' performance on the battery of tests demonstrated some unexpected results: subjects who had started learning L2 as a foreign language in their home country and spent sufficient time (around 5 years or more) exposed to L2 in naturalistic conditions, demonstrated better results on all tests and higher overall attainment in their proficiency in English.

Compared to them, students who started using English as a second formal language in their country from very early age did not perform as well as the participants from the first group. These results were obtained by analysing the collected data with the help of statistical analysis and software, specifically developed for quantitative research in social sciences – SPSS (for more details of this analysis, please, see Gotseva 2015).

These unexpected results found their explanation in the analysis of the data, collected through the Background Questionnaire.

4.2. Data related to contextual factors, affecting L2 acquisition

The information was very important as most of the questions targeted the variables of contextual factors and their potential impact on participants' performance on the battery of tests. The results showed that 71% of the participants from countries in which English is used as a second formal language reported starting learning English at early age (between 5 – 7). Compared to learners from countries in which English is learned as a foreign language, 80% of whom started learning EFL in their puberty (13 – 15), this should have meant a huge advantage for the former group. However, such advantage was not found by this research.

The next factor, length of learning, also demonstrates some paradoxical figures. Although 85% of the first group claimed to have studied English for more than 10 years, compared to only one participant from the second group who claimed such length of studying, and the majority of the subjects having studied it for about 5 years, the performance of the former group on the battery of tests did not show any supremacy. Presumably, this factor was also not among the most influential ones.

When it comes to Length of exposure (the period of time, spent in an English-speaking country, where English is used as L1), most participants from the second group (70%) had spent about 5 years in the UK, which is roughly twice longer than the length of exposure of the first group of subjects, 85% of whom had only spent between 2 and 3 years in similar conditions. This finding points out to the fact that the time spent in conditions, in which the target language is used as native, has probably much more significant impact on the successful acquisition of implicit L2 knowledge and the final attainment of proficiency in the target language.

The type of input also demonstrated some advantages for the participants from the second group, half of whom claimed to have received instruction mainly in English and 40% – a mixture of L1 and L2. The figures for the first group show that, although the participants come from countries in which English is used as a second formal language, the language input they received was mostly a mixture of L1 and L2 (for 91% of them). So, the type of input is obviously very important as instruction entirely or mostly in the target language has led to a better performance on the battery of tests for the members of the second group.

4.3. Data related to the way of learning / using L2 while in the UK

The information about how the participants continued to learn and use English while in the UK, i.e. in conditions of “immersion”, revealed some interesting facts which might offer some plausible explanation of the research findings. It showed that 65% of the participants from countries in which English is learned as a foreign language preferred English as a means of communication; 27% claimed using a mixture of English and their L1; and 13% confessed that they preferred to use their mother tongue as a language for communication but admitted actively seeking to socialize and communicate with local people and fellow-students and being interested in the local culture.

Participants from countries where English is used as a second formal language used more often a mixture of L2 and their mother tongue (35%) or their L1 (36%) and only about one third of them (29%) reported using predominantly English.

The most often ticked answers were, as follows: “I have no time to read or socialize” (61%); “I prefer to socialize with my friends in my mother tongue” (53%) which demonstrated a different mindset and lack of interest in socializing or actively communicating with local people, or interest in the local culture.

4.4. Analysis of Background Questionnaire data.

No previous research has investigated or interpreted such facts; therefore, their interpretation below is only a suggestion which should be studied further. My guesses are that there are a few possibilities which would explain the results.

The first one is that in countries where English is used as a second formal language there are much more external factors to be considered, such as social and educational background of learners. Students who come from richer and well-educated families receive better tuition in private schools and colleges and use English to communicate at school, at home and with friends, which is a marker of their social status. Learners from not so favourable background will probably have more limited exposure to L2 and use it less frequently. This might well explain the surprising fact that, despite the early starting age of learning, the final attainment of learners from such countries, might differ considerably.

Another possibility might be that, at certain stage, L2 learners fossilise and reduce significantly their further progress and development of the target language skills. Again, this is just a suggestion, which should be confirmed by further research of empirical data.

As for the L2 learners in a foreign language instructed environment, the comparatively high results, demonstrated on the battery of tests, showed that, depending on the length of learning and length of exposure, subjects who have learned English as a foreign language, can actually attain considerably high levels of proficiency.

Social interaction is viewed as a crucial factor in developing communicative competence in L2, supplemented with knowledge of the values, practices and identities of the target community by sociocultural theories (Duff 2005). In this respect, language mediates the learning of language and cultural knowledge. For L2 learners, the process of socialization could be very lengthy, and the outcomes may vary widely. They may not necessarily lead to the reproduction of the existing L2 cultural and discursive practices. Instead, they may result into some hybrid practices, identities and values, and in some extreme cases – even to rejection of target norms and practices, which most probably will affect their L2 competence as well.

4.5. Discussion of Background Questionnaire Results

Based on the data collected through the Background Questionnaire, it became clear that the majority of learners coming from a country in which they started learning English as a foreign language, were genuinely interested in ‘merging’ with the new social environment and the new culture and sought for any opportunity to communicate with their L1 peers – fellow university students or local young people. They also reported regularly reading local newspapers, magazines, and books, apart from their academic activities, as well as regularly watching films and TV in English, and socialising as much as possible with the local community. Participants confirmed their willingness to socialize and integrate, to communicate in English and express their interest in British culture and wish to become part of this culture and society. In other words, their motivation to master their L2 and to explore the new culture helped them significantly. This can probably explain the higher results achieved by this group of participants on the battery of tests and mostly on their proficiency test.

On the other hand, the participants from countries where English is used as a second formal language admitted their reluctance to seek active socialisation with local native speakers and lack of any particular interest in the western civilisation and culture. This lack of motivation must have played a negative role in the process of L2 learning and attaining proficiency in it.

Socio-cultural theories can also offer some plausible explanation of the results of this study. For instance, Schumann's theory of acculturation (1986) investigates the socio-psychological openness of L2 learners, which is manifested in their positive attitude towards the L2 community, motivation to learn L2 for instrumental or integrative reasons, and learner's willingness to use the new language. As he claims, if these features are present, they significantly facilitate the L2 acquisition, and vice-versa, learners who manifest the opposite attitude, may be regarded as socio-psychologically closed to acquiring the L2 concerned. Another socio-cultural factor in Schumann's theory, affecting L2 acquisition is cultural congruence – the claim that if cultures share certain similarities, this makes it easier for L2 learners to acquire the target language (Schumann 1986). These claims have been confirmed by the current research. Most participants from the second group, apart from expressing their interest in practicing L2 and in the local culture, were mostly from countries which share cultural similarities with the UK. This must have also facilitated their L2 acquisition.

On the other hand, the majority of participants from countries in which English is used as a second formal language (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh) reported being less involved in social interaction with their local L1 peers and less interested in British culture. Some of them, coming from a less favourable social background in their own country, confessed that they have to work part-time to support themselves, thus skipping even the mandatory university classes, nothing to say about time for socialising or reading books. A lot of them also reported their preference to socialise with their own country-fellows in their mother tongue, instead of searching for opportunities to communicate in English with local L1 members of the community.

Another trend, mentioned by the participants and witnessed by myself when I lived in London, is that for ethical or religious reasons, young people from such countries prefer not to mix up with the local people. Instead, they join local communities of people from their own nationality as they have much more in common with them and they share the same values and beliefs, which tend to be quite different from the western civilization values and beliefs. This inevitably leads to social isolation from the local L1 community and fewer, if any at all, chances to use L2.

Conclusion

The research found evidence in support of certain cognitive linguistic and socio-cultural theories, which claim that L2 acquisition is usage-based and it depends on factors such as social interaction, extensive exposure to L1 in a country where it is used as native, in which L2 learners can be exposed to linguistic models which they can imitate, extend, and generalise, using their cognitive abilities. Interest in L1 culture and environment can also significantly motivate and facilitate L2 acquisition. This, in its turn, could lead to a higher attainment of proficiency in the target language, as this research found.

It is these claims of cognitive linguistic and socio-cultural theories which can provide the most plausible explanations for the results of the current study. Having compared the results achieved on the battery of tests by the two groups of participants – those who have studied English from a very early age and have used it as a second formal language in their country, and those who have studied English mostly as a foreign language, it is striking that the latter group have achieved higher results on all the tests, despite the expected advantages for the former one.

This study has explained these results with the fact that once in the L1 environment, in which they had a full exposure to English as L1, the participants from the second group took the full benefit of active social interaction with their native peers, showed huge interest in the native culture and did their best to explore it. To use a term from Schumann's (1986) theory of cross-cultural interaction, they must have passed into the phase of "acculturation" – by adopting some of the local values, becoming integrated into a new social network and functioning effectively in the new environment.

The former group, on the other hand, although having an early start of learning English, did not show such enthusiasm in integrating into the new environment, for one reason or another. As they stated in the Background Questionnaire, they preferred to socialise with their fellow countrymen, thus encapsulating into their own community, in which English was rarely spoken. Coming from a different social and cultural background, which imposes significantly different moral norms and values, these young people did not make an attempt to integrate into the local social network, most probably because of the huge difference between the values of the local culture and their own culture. Accepting and embracing such new values would probably be interpreted as a betrayal to their own culture, traditions and beliefs. Therefore, they never showed a genuine interest to integrate in the local society or they have still been in the phase

of “cultural shock” – questioning local culture, habits, values and beliefs, and still rejecting most of them. This inevitably has affected their English as well.

In conclusion, studies of macro-contextual factors affecting L2 acquisition are worth researching further as they do have a significant impact on learners’ attainment and proficiency level, as the current research has found.

It is worth widening the research on contextual factors by including the effect of social and cultural factors, phenomena such as cultural shock and acculturation, as they could obviously add new facts about the psychological effect these have on newcomers who join a new environment / community and their indirect impact on the development of their L2, which is native for the new environment.

The implications can be of a significant benefit not only to the better understanding of the process of SLA, but also to informing teaching methodology for the improvement of the process of L2 learning and aiming at higher learners’ ultimate attainment.

REFERENCES

- Duff 2002:** Duff, P. Teaching and learning English for global intercultural communication: Challenges and opportunities. // *English Teaching*. 2002, 57(2), 245-263.
- Duff 2007:** Duff, P. Second language socialization as sociocultural theory: Insights and issues. // *Language Teaching*. 2007, 40: 309-319, Cambridge University Press.
- Fromkin, Rodman, and Hyams 2011:** Fromkin, V., Rodman, R., and Hyams, N. *An introduction to language*. 9th ed. Wadsworth Cengage, USA, 2011.
- Gotseva 2015:** Gotseva, M. Some factors which may affect the attainment of implicit and explicit knowledge in learning English as a second / foreign language. // *English Studies at NBU*. 2015, Volume 1, Issue 2, 85-100.
- Hayes, Barnes-Holms & Roche (Eds.) 2001:** Hayes, S. C., Barnes-Holmes, D., & Roche, B. *Relational frame theory: A post-Skinnerian account of human language and cognition*. New York: Kluwer Academic / Plenum Publishers, 2001.
- Hopper 1987:** Hopper, P. *Emergent grammar*. Berkley: Berkley Linguistic Society, 13, 139-157.

- Hymes 1964:** Hyams, N. *Language in culture and society: A reader in linguistics and anthropology*. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.
- Kail and Cavanaugh 2010:** Kail, R. V., Cavanaugh, J. C. *Human development: A lifespan view* (5th ed.), Wadsworth: Cengage Learning, 2010.
- Langacker 2000:** Langacker, R. A dynamic usage-based model, in M. Barlow and S. Kemmer (Eds), *Usage-Based Models of Language*. Stanford, CA: CSLI Publications, 2000, 1-64.
- Lantolf 2000:** Lantolf, J. P. *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford: OUP, 2000.
- Lantolf and Thorne 2006:** Lantolf, J. P., and Thorne, S. L. *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. Oxford: OUP, 2006.
- Leontiev 1981:** Leontiev, A. *Psychology and the language learning process*. London: Pergamon, 1981.
- Ochs 1988:** Ochs, E. *Culture and language development: Language acquisition and language socialization in a Samoan village*. Cambridge: CUP, 1988.
- O'Grady 2008:** O'Grady, W. Innateness, universal grammar and emergentism. // *Lingua*. 2008, 118, 620-631.
- Pontecorvo, Fasulo and Sterponi 2001:** Pontecorvo, C., Fasulo, A., and Sterponi, L. Mutual apprentices: the making of parenthood and childhood in family dinner conversations. // *Human Development*, Vol. 44, No. 6, 2001, 340-361.
- Schumann 1986:** Schumann, J. H. Research on the acculturation model for second language acquisition. // *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 1986, 7, 378-392.
- Skinner 1957:** Skinner, B. F. *Verbal behaviour*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice – Hall, 1957.
- Slobin (Ed.) 1967:** Slobin, D. *A field manual for cross-cultural study of the acquisition of communicative competence*. Berkeley: University of California, 1967.
- Vygotsky 1978:** Vygotsky, L. The development of higher psychological processes. // M. Cole, V. John-Steiner, S. Scribner, & E. Souberman (Eds.). *Mind in society*: Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.