Applying Sociocultural Theory to the Writing Classroom in Instruction and Assessment
社会文化理論を応用したライティングの指導法と評価

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Abstract

Key tenets of sociocultural theory (SCT) currently shape many aspects of EFL education in Japan. While practices such as university students collaborating to refine topics for graduation theses (see Ikeda, 2014) and content-based seminar classes (see Ashwell, 2014) have been reported on, we believe the regular writing classroom is one area where SCT has been relatively ignored. In this short article we present the argument for increased attention to be given to SCT in writing instruction in order to promote learner autonomy. We do this by firstly reviewing the fundamentals of SCT. Following that, we look at how this theory can inform key elements of the writing classroom. Finally, we address the issue of assessment and look at practical ways it can be approached.

Keywords: sociocultural theory, writing, collaboration, interaction

概要

今日の日本の英語教育現場において、社会文化理論の影響が多々見受けられる。例えば、大学の卒業論文の主題選択のための共同学習（Ikeda, 2014）、コンテンツベースのセミナー（Ashwell, 2014）などの実践が報告されている。しかしながら、通常のライティングの授業においては、社会文化理論が用いられることはそれほどまでにはなかったであろう。本稿では、学習者の自主性を育むためには、ライティングの指導においても社会文化理論にもっと目を向ける必要があることを論じる。そのためにまず、社会文化理論の基本事項について再考察する。次に、どのように本理論がライティングの授業における重要な要素に影響を与えることができるかについて考察する。最後に、アセスメントに関する問題への解決策を探り、実用的な方法について検討する。

キーワード: 社会文化理論、ライティング、協力、相互作用

Writing is commonly considered an individual activity (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009) despite there being evidence that collaboration in writing is not only beneficial for learners (Storch, 2005; Swain & Lapkin, 1998) but also reflective of real-life practice in the workplace (Ede & Lunsford, 1990). Furthermore, group work is widely used as assessment in universities globally (Wigglesworth & Storch, 2009). Regardless of these real-life practices, our experience within both universities and high schools in Japan has been that writing continues to be practiced and assessed as an individual activity. An overview of common writing textbooks displays some small shifts towards acknowledging the benefits of working collaboratively in the English language writing classroom. However, these texts tend to limit collaboration to pre-writing activities, peer review of individually written texts, or include pair/group work as alternative activities rather than collaboration being

afforded a central role in the pedagogical approach—for example, *Engaging Writing 2* (Fitzpatrick, 2011), *Focus on Writing 4* (Beaumont, 2011), and *Longman Academic Writing Series 1* (Butler, 2014). In this short article we outline the theoretical arguments in support of collaboration in the writing classroom and provide a framework for its implementation in both classroom instruction and assessment.

A Brief Overview of Sociocultural Theory

Our scope here does not facilitate a complete discussion of SCT and as such only a brief overview is presented. A key tenet of SCT is that the human mind is mediated (Vygotsky, 1934/2012). SCT advocates that just as we do not act on the physical world directly but instead use tools to mediate, or assist, our interactions with our physical environs, so too we use symbolic tools—such as language—to mediate our higher mental functions (Lantolf, 2000). This mediation takes three forms: object-, other-, and self-regulation (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). For language learners object-regulation depicts situations in which resources such as a dictionary or translation tools mediate a learner's behaviour (Lantolf, Thorne & Poehner, 2014). Lantolf and colleagues describe other-regulation as situations in which the learner receives assistance from another person—assistance which Lantolf and Appel argue primarily takes the form of participating in dialogue (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). Self-regulation refers to a learner internalising such object- and other-regulation so as to become able to perform the task without external assistance. Within a SCT framework, language learning shifts the focus away from mastering linguistic items in an individual's mind and emphasizes "dialectic interaction" to create meaning (Lantolf & Pavlenko, 1995, p. 110).

The process of a learner reducing the amount of object- or other-regulation and shifting towards self-regulation is said to take place in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) (Lantolf & Appel, 1994). The original translation of Vygotsky's ZPD is as follows: "It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1930-1934/1978, p. 86).

As Vygotsky only explicitly referred to the ZPD on a few occasions in his writings (Wertsch, 2010), there are controversies over how the ZPD is to be conceptualised. For us as language teachers, we argue there is a need to incorporate Ohta's (2005) argument that assistance can come in the form of utilising literary resources such as dictionaries or textbooks; that peers of varying levels can assist each other (Ohta, 2000); and Donato's (1994) findings that peers can construct a collective expert when peers of a similar proficiency level pool their resources together to perform at a higher level than they can individually. This leaves us with a working definition in the field of language education that conceptualises the ZPD as learners utilising the minimum amount of assistance required to perform at a level higher than which they could perform without assistance—with the assistance being in the form of either object-regulation or other-regulation, or a combination of both.

A final key concept of SCT is that development is said to have occurred when there is a reduction or change in the quality of assistance required for a learner to perform at the higher level. For example, if the assistance becomes less explicit, then development has occurred. Therefore, when working within a SCT framework, learning should not be limited to output only (Lantolf et al., 2014) but also consider the mediation required to perform the task.

Framework of Implementation

Applying SCT to an English language writing class results in learners having additional resources, in the form of both object- and other-regulation, available to them when producing texts. Facilitating access to object-regulation can be achieved by simply ensuring learners have access to literary resources such as online

dictionaries and example texts while writing. The provision of other-regulation, however, requires a greater shift from a traditional pedagogical approach.

It is impractical for one teacher to be available to provide other-regulation to all learners in class. Therefore, by drawing on Donato's (1994) notion that learners can create new knowledge through collaboration, other-regulation can be made available by making collaboratively written texts the locus of the pedagogical approach. For texts to be truly collaborative, learners need to work in pairs or groups throughout the whole writing process, including planning, researching, writing, and revision.

After learners have pooled their resources to produce a text, further support, or other-regulation, can be provided in the form of teacher feedback. This practice draws on the growing evidence of learners being able to co-construct knowledge when collaboratively processing feedback (Storch & Wigglesworth, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 1998). Furthermore, this feedback is best conceptualized as a continuous engagement in dialogue, in which all learners and teachers participate, rather than as an isolated uni-directional product (Price, Handley & Millar, 2011). Taking this idea one step further, Carless (2018) has argued for the amplification of the concept of the 'feedback loop' into that of the 'feedback spiral' (see Figure 1 further below). Whereas a loop suggests completion, a spiral recognises the ongoing and developmental nature of feedback in the learning process. These spirals fit very neatly into an SCT assessment model, as students engage with object-, other-, and self-regulation in order to deepen their knowledge and develop their learning strategies.

We recommend that feedback maintain some level of implicitness; in other words, provide hints but not the answer. Feedback which is too explicit will not allow learners to pool their resources and work within a ZPD. The aforementioned pedagogical approach shifts the act of writing from testing what was learnt to becoming learning itself. Furthermore, it reduces the marking load for teachers, with the provision of WCF having been reported as very time consuming (Lee, 2014). Our experience with the reduced marking load is it facilitated additional time to spend on each collaboratively written text, thus enabling feedback of a higher quality to be provided. When time is limited, it is tempting to focus on the more surface level errors, such as spelling, grammar and punctuation, as these are easy to point out. When more time is available, we felt we could give feedback on deeper level structural issues, such as the way learners expressed their ideas, supported their arguments, and wrote in a style appropriate for the genre.
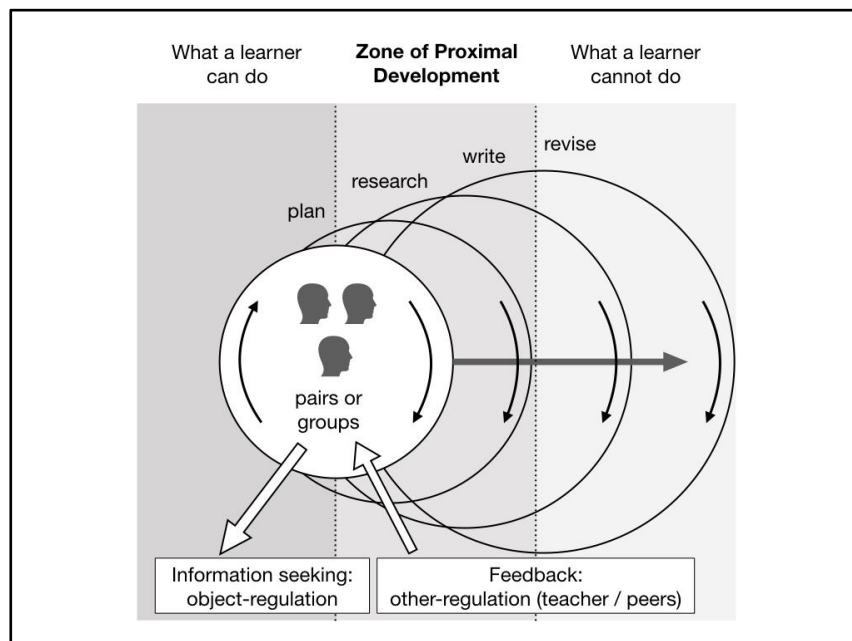

Figure 1. SCT and the feedback spiral in a writing course.

The framework of implementation described allows learners to work as a team, which allows learners to feel a sense of achievement, with discussions potentially leading to discovering new ideas (Ashwell, 2014) and fostering learner autonomy (Fitzgerald & Mullen, 2014). We also believe that if learners become more accustomed to pair work in writing classes, it may help them to make better use of collaboration in other subject areas. For example, Ikeda (2014) reported that learners were not able to fully utilize the benefits of collaboration in a project which investigated cross-institutional collaborative learning when developing graduation thesis ideas. If learners have been exposed to and more fully understand the benefits of collaboration in other regular classes, they may collaborate more successfully when working together to develop topics for their graduation theses.

Assessment

A number of models of assessment founded on SCT principles have been developed which can be used to guide assessment in the writing classroom. Dynamic assessment (DA) is one such model, which seeks to integrate instruction and assessment so seamlessly that an outside observer would be unable to distinguish where one finished and the other began, as instructional and evaluative functions would be embedded in every interaction (Poehner, 2007). In this way, there is a fundamental difference between the conceptualization of assessment from a DA perspective as opposed to a traditional perspective. Assessment is typically understood in educational processes as being concerned with inferring learner abilities by recording and measuring individual performance. DA, however, promotes a dialogic collaboration between learners and teacher-assessors so that learner abilities are grown and developed (Poehner, 2007). In this way, the mediation of the examinee's performance is essential to assessment.

However, due to the intense involvement of the teacher, which often takes the form of one-on-one interactions, DA is often considered unfeasible in large educational contexts. Even so, it is possible for the principles to be adopted and used in larger classes (James, 2012). One such attempt at this is the branch of DA known as Group Dynamic Assessment, or G-DA. While proponents of DA have favoured a dyadic mediator-learner model, G-DA proposes a system for dealing with multiple learners at a time. When the group is conceived as a psychological entity in itself, it can be claimed that its own ZPD can emerge, within which individual learning takes place. Poehner (2009) proposes two forms of G-DA, namely, concurrent G-DA (when the teacher dialogues with the entire group); and cumulative G-DA (when the teacher engages in a series of one-to-one DA interactions as the group works together). In the writing classroom, this could conceivably take the form of group conferencing at all stages of the writing process, or through written feedback on collaboratively produced drafts.

As SCT advocates that knowledge is created and transformed through interactions, encouraging learners to participate in diverse communities of practice is seen as beneficial. One of the most effective ways this can be achieved is having learners perform the role of assessor, thereby enabling them to become part of an assessing community of practice as well as a producing community. Assessment practice guided by SCT would work towards increasing student knowledge about assessment processes, criteria and standards, giving just as much attention to these as the course content (Rust, O'Donovan and Price, 2005). In practical terms, this could best be accomplished through peer review and feedback, as taking on the role of evaluator would necessarily entail learners having a deep understanding of these aspects of assessment. Peer assessment can be done with collaboratively-produced work or with individual work. When learners engage in peer assessment, they are able to see gradations in quality through viewing a number of different pieces of work, then apply a standard rubric to identify strengths and weaknesses in the work. Thus, "peer assessment seems to promote self-assessment by making otherwise invisible assessment processes more explicit and transparent" (Reinholz, 2016, p. 303). In this way, the act of providing other-regulation to peers creates a

symbolic tool which can feed into processes of self-regulation. In the Japanese context, the benefits of peer assessment in high school and post-secondary education have been supported by a number of studies. For instance, Asaba and Marlowe (2011) argued that peer assessment increases student involvement, responsibility and motivation, while Sato (2013) found that not only do Japanese learners have a positive belief about peer feedback, but training in giving corrective feedback facilitates trust and boosts willingness and confidence in providing feedback. (See also Matsuno, 2009; Saito, 2008; Taferner, 2008; Wakabayashi, 2008.)

An important issue that is bound to arise in the assessment of collaborative work concerns that of fairness. Mulligan and Garofalo (2011) conducted a collaborative writing course with Japanese university students, and overall received very positive comments from learners as to the benefits of that approach. However, when considering the small number of negative comments, the main complaint was that grading was unfair. In particular, some learners felt cheated because they had done most of the work, and yet they received the same grade as their partner. We have not found this to be such a major problem, perhaps because our students were in groups of three or more, rather than pairs, which creates a different dynamic. However, any attempt to use collaborative work for assessment purposes will need to take this issue seriously.

When considering all the above, there are a number of options for teachers wishing to implement a SCT informed approach to writing assessment. Firstly, students could work in pairs or groups to produce a piece of written work, rather than working on their own. Greater learning would be expected if collaboration occurred at all stages of the writing process, from brainstorming and planning, through to organising, drafting and editing. Although awarding a joint grade for the finished product would likely leave some students feeling cheated, this can be assuaged by having students choose their own partners and also by changing partners with each new assignment. Students would then be able to pair up with someone they felt comfortable working with, and yet if trouble did arise, they would have a chance to switch partners for the subsequent assignment.

When giving feedback on these group assessment tasks, effort should be made to keep the feedback implicit (see Appendix A for an example). Doing so provides learners with the opportunity to engage with their peers and pool their resources to identify the specifics of each error. While corrective feedback should be implicit, the criteria and standards to be applied in assessment need to be clear and explicit. Rubrics are perhaps the most effective way of doing this. With a rubric, the often hidden goals of the curriculum are made clearer, and students are able to evaluate their own progress and make plans to progress towards the next learning goals (Jonsson & Panadero, 2017).

A final, perhaps radical, option is to allow the use of dictionaries and smartphones during exams. Having access to these tools would facilitate opportunities for a ZPD to emerge as learners utilise object-regulation, thus transforming a purely summative exam into opportunities for learning.

Conclusion

Since its introduction to the west in the 1960s, SCT has been informing and guiding much educational research and practice, providing a clear paradigm through which teaching and learning can be understood. The preponderance of communicative language teaching approaches in classrooms across Japan has its roots in SCT. However, while SCT has undergirded the teaching of many language skills, its contribution to the writing classroom has been relatively muted. Furthermore, from our extensive experience in Japanese high schools and universities, writing is, for the most part, taught and assessed as an individual activity. Aside from the prevailing educational tradition in which we work, there is no reason why this should be the case. Collaborative writing and assessment is not only supported by theory which suggests there are many benefits for learners, but it is also more reflective of real-life practice. It is not our aim in this short article to argue that

such an approach is superior to others, but rather we hope that the ideas presented here will contribute to promoting the theoretical benefits of collaborative writing for language learners and assist in providing teachers with a framework by which to implement such an approach.

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Appendix A

Implicit WCF

The sentence is highlighted, indicating that a grammatical error has occurred within the sentence. The correct form of the error is not provided. The type of error and its location may, or may not be provided. In the following example, it has not been provided.

I go to the bank yesterday.

In the following example, the type of error and location is provided:

I go to the bank yesterday.

tense

Explicit WCF

The location and correct form of the error is provided.

I go to the bank yesterday.

went