

# Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: The Use of Culture in Intellectual Development and Mediated Action

Wakako Kobayashi

Faculty of General Studies, College of Humanities and Sciences, Nihon University

wakakoba@nifty.com

## Abstract

In this paper, I advance the discussion in Kobayashi (2008, 2009), review a few of Vygotsky's ideas that have particular relevance for the contemporary developmental psychology and to see how these ideas could be discussed in the light of social constructivism in which four key elements, the learner, the teacher, the task and context interact with and affect each other (William & Burden, 1997). Then I discuss a post Vygostkian, Wertsch (1991, 1998)'s theory, mediated action, in which action involves an irreducible tension between the mediated means and individuals.

## Keywords

sociocultural theory, social constructivism, mediated action, ZPD, reciprocal teaching cooperative learning

## Introduction

The sociocultural theory assumes that learning mechanism could apply not only language but also other forms of knowledge and skills. However, the more focus is attributed to the procedural relationship between learner and the social and cultural world, which could be interpreted almost as the same as the social constructivist approach discussed by William & Burden (1997). Vygotsky, a Russian developmental psychologist mainly argued that 1) cognitive development is a socially mediated process that may vary from culture to culture, 2) children acquire their cultural values, beliefs and problem-solving strategies through collaborative dialogues with more knowledgeable associates of society like the parents, teachers and peers.

## 1 Research Questions and Hypothesis

I adopt the research questions from Kobayashi (2008, 2009) as follows.

- 1) Although Vygotsky's sociocultural theory puts focus on the significance of mediation through enculturation, I hypothesize that theory could be more accurate and understandable to be called socio-historical cultural approach rather than simply called socio cultural theory. Because he treats language as social one and social as historical one, then mind is mediated especially by the teacher's spoken language
- 2) I hypothesize that his analysis of culture is a part of the attempt to elaborate the notion of mediation, especially semantic mediation so I call it the semantic mediated approach to culture. Again, I hypothesize that Wertsch (1991)'s notion of mediated action might be the key concept to solve the underdeveloped, primitive aspect in a sociocultural approach.

## 2 Social and Cultural Origins of Individual Mental Functioning

Kobayashi (2008) assume that cognitive development or language is socially constructed. There is, thus, a gradual process of internalization where a fully externalized culture becomes a substantially internalized cognitive (Lantolf, 2000) especially in discussing the children's developmental stage to build the higher mental functioning. His theoretical orientation clearly reflects the rejection of the active agency, which many Western psychologists advocate. From this point of view, I understand that Vygotsky views mental functioning as a kind of action-mediated action (Wertsch, 1991), which has some resemblance of notion of cultural anthropologist like Geerts (1997) in which mind is understood as extended beyond skin in at least two senses: 1) it is often socially distributed and 2) it is connected to the notion of mediation (Wertsch,,1991)

### **3 ZPD, Reciprocal Teaching, Cooperative Learning and Teachers Instruction**

Vygotsky (1978) assume that this zone is defined as the distance between the child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and their level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. It is important to see how teachers can change a learner's intermental first. Let us stress once again teachers can change the process of externalization to change the internalization since the developmental sequence always traces from the externalized to the internalized plane. Consequently, this has been to the key to many derivative concepts such as reciprocal teaching or cooperative learning in which learners are encouraged to assist each other in the mediated action and design to the adaptive effective instructions so that they could maximize the learner's output.

### **4 Non-Active Individuals in Sociocultural Theory and Wertsch (1991)'s notion of Mediated Action**

The questions which have been touched on from time to time, however, not exposed well enough in Kobayashi (2008) are that Vygotsky treats the individual as non-active in the process of intellectual development. As she discusses, it should be one of the critical motivations of a post Vygotskian, Wertsch (1991)'s notion of mediated action. As I have hypothesized in the research questions, more specific direct empirical evidence is required when I think about how I apply the concept of mediated action into the actual Second Language Acquisition field where teachers always try to maximize the learner's output in the classroom. As Kobayashi (2009) discusses, Vygotsky emphasizes the relationship between instruction and development especially concerning school age children. I assume that we should not overlook Wertsch (1985, 1991, 1998) suggests that one of the potential dangers of sociocultural theory is social reductionism, or the assumption that it is possible to reduce account of human action to social forces alone. With regard to mediated action, this means, avoiding both

forms of reductionism, maintaining focus on the irreducible tension between active individuals and cultural tools.

### **5 Conclusions**

The general issue I have tried to raise here is whether the notion of mediated action can serve as a basic unit of analysis for sociocultural research. The key to its viability in this role is the irreducible tension it recognizes between mediational means, on the one hand, and the unique instantiation, or use of these means, on the other. Many SLA researchers have tried to show how individual differences affect second language acquisition in a variety of contemporary instructional contexts and settings, however, there is still room left for empirically investigating the dynamic relationship between active individuals and context if we teachers as mediators apply the concept of mediated action into the classroom society. I assume that the notion of mediated action is partly responsible for avoiding the kind of social reductionism in the original Vygotskian works when I think about the significance of designing effective and adaptive instructions in the classroom.

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