Naoya's English Language Learning and Teaching Reflection Analysed in Sociocultural Theoretical Perspective

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Regardless of the situation, in the daily lives, people are surrounded by artefacts, such as mobile phones, pens, and even languages. They think they use such tools as mediational means; however, if they consider their experiences, the artefacts have symbolic meaning. Examining English language learning and teaching in English as foreign language contexts such as Japan, learners and teachers may learn the language as a material artefact, but their hidden objective may be a symbolic object. For example, "[t]eachers in Japan target the language learning goal for their future both seeking for jobs in the country and working abroad. However, most students take it for passing the entrance exams" (Cook, 2016, p. 208). Pondering on the citation, it seems that both teachers and students use English as just a tool to accomplish their goals, namely material use; notwithstanding, as achieving their aims can provide better career and background, learning and teaching English can also lead to the symbolic tool. Moreover, the use of artefacts can motivate learners and instructors to learn and teach English; accordingly, it is essential to consider the value of objects in language teaching and learning realm. The writer has studied English since he started to learn it at the age of seven or eight old at a cram school, namely for about twenty years. Based on socio-cultural theoretical perspectives, he will reflect on his language learning and teaching history.

When the writer started to study English, his cram school teachers implemented Audio-Lingual Method into their class; therefore, he had almost no opportunities to communicate with others in the target language, but do role play. However, role-play activities, which might be his primary mediator to better his language abilities

at that time, helped him to learn what kinds of expressions to use in the particular situations, but also made him realise that this task did not provide occasions for him to learn authentic communicational ways. Therefore, to make his demonstration with his classmate look slightly closer to the real situation, he started to use gestures and shadowing during the role play activities as if he became an actor. By redeeming the disadvantages of the role play and realising the importance of languaging by himself, the writer started to put his extemporaneous ideas into his line even though he often encountered difficulties due to lack of his vocabulary. Moreover, his teachers also conducted Grammar-Translation Method into their class; thus, the writer had to take many mechanical drilling activities, such as the tasks to translate given sentences from English into Japanese and vice versa, by doing which, the writer probably did not acquire the target language. Nevertheless, as he also had a role play activity sooner or later, he sought to say given sentences to himself and reply to himself even though he did not fully understand which situation to use given expressions; in other words, he conducted self-directed speech. Reflecting on the beginning of his language learning history, although he had a lack of opportunities to interact with others in English, role-play activities, and self-directed speech encouraged him to find out the value of the language in the society.

At his secondary school with the six-year secondary education system, although the writer had one speaking class once a week, he mainly had to be drilled on English grammar and pronunciation like he did at a cram school. What he found most challenging in his secondary school life was to translate the whole story of Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone from English into Japanese, which he spent almost two years finishing. As he had virtually no occasion of using the target language pragmatically due to the task, he had negative emotions impeding his learning and acquiring the English language. However, he found it interesting and beneficial to learn part of English cultures and social issues by reading and translating the story. Consequently, interpreting Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone became his mediator to study the cultural

difference between Japan and the UK at that time. Furthermore, although the task was challenging, translating the story from English into Japanese also became his goal and helped him to use other mediational tools, such as a dictionary, which encouraged the writer to learn vocabulary as well. Moreover, by doing the task for a long time, his behaviour was gradually regulated, and he started to do the translation activity of his accord. His English language experience at his secondary school seems to demonstrate that the writer did not still have enough opportunity to learn the target language communicatively and also demotivate him for some points. Nonetheless, his long-term assignment facilitated his regulation of studying English and helped him to realise the value of learning about different cultures.

As students could not keep up the lectures and the classes without seeking to improve their language abilities for themselves, the writer has had many opportunities to use English to interact with others in English since he entered at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. In other words, he has had many occasions to have collaborative dialogue activities since then. His first trigger to enhance his English skills was taking an Extensive Reading and Listening class due to reading numerous books, watching films, and listening to podcasts in English, all of which became his primary mediational tools to learn the target language. As he was permitted to choose his learning material for this module for himself, he was able to determine the appropriate level of tools. Consequently, this assignment helped the writer to establish scaffolding to prepare himself for the next step and realise his zone of proximal development (ZPD), which highly motivated him to learn the language mentally positively. Moreover, many opportunities to interact with others also encouraged him to recognise the importance of the zone of proximal adjustment (ZPA). Since a couple of his classmates had already studied in foreign countries before, the writer sometimes had to encounter and overcome the difficulties in comprehending their ideas and rebutting his thoughts. Collaborative dialogue, nevertheless, encouraged him and his classmates to adjust the level co-operatively by negotiating

for meaning and clarifying their opinions together. Moreover, learning American Sign Language at his university and Boston University in the first one and half years also fostered his language learning insomuch as he had to connect sign language with the meaning, which made the writer realise the importance of languaging and find an affordance for other language learning.

During his studying at Oxford Brooks University (OBU) in the UK for about ten months as one of the exchange students, the writer recognised the value of collaborative dialogue and self-talk in the target language. During his study abroad, he rarely hung out with Japanese students, but always with English students. As he firmly forced himself to belong to the surroundings, he had to establish his identity in his group by himself and also foster his willingness to communicate with others in English. Moreover, as the writer had to use English all the time, he unconsciously started to have self-talk and think in English. This method encouraged him to get used to speaking and writing English faster, and also let him prepare for the conversation with others in the target language. When the writer acquired self-regulation for self-talk, he even had a dream in English occasionally. Furthermore, as OBU was close to the University of Oxford, the writer had the opportunity to make friends studying there and discuss many controversial themes with them. To deepen the conversation and the discussion with his English friends, he had to reconsider the importance of contemplation, which he had not needed to pay attention to in Japan. While everyday chatting requires everyday concepts, such as vocabulary knowledge, the writer needed to acquire more scientific concepts, namely, discourse competence and the register of words as well as critical thinking abilities. To develop such skills was hard for the writer; notwithstanding, a conversation with his friends, namely collaborative dialogue, encouraged them to find ZPA and sought to interact with each other efficiently. Moreover, most of the modules at OBU started from discussions with pairs or in a group and ended with discussions, which motivated the writer to deepen his understanding of the realms he was learning at that time. The

teaching approaches both at NUFS, and English universities provided Content-Based Instruction (CBI) and Content and Language Integrated Language Teaching (CBLT), and let the writer focus on contents and meaning rather than accuracy. Hence, he successfully engaged himself in his learning communicatively. As he wanted to become an English teacher after his graduation from NUFS, therefore, the class style became his ideal model language teaching style.

Reflecting on his English language teaching experiences, the writer tried to implement activities that he had experienced in his language learning. His language teaching history started from his working as a part-time teacher at a cram school during his university life. As the primary purpose of classes was to pass entrance examinations and get better results for term tests at school, he had to teach English with the Grammar-Translation Method. Although the writer did not know anything about language teaching approaches at that time, he was aware that it was temporarily beneficial for learners. The writer himself did not find anything enjoyable from the class style, and neither did his students. English language teaching and learning might have worked as material mediations to achieve their objectives; however, this education and learning method did not provide any opportunities for learners to use the target language in factual circumstances. However, as the writer had only a couple of students to teach at the same time, it was less challenging to understand their zone of proximal development and find the ZPA by checking their understanding of the lessons aurally. Accordingly, albeit learners did not have enough occasions to speak English communicatively, they were able to establish scaffolding with the writer.

After graduating from NUFS, the writer started to work at a girl's private secondary school with the six-year secondary education system. As he took care of third-year junior high school students and second-year senior high school students, he had to understand ZPA and conduct an appropriate level of the classes. At the school, he also

had to teach English with mainly Grammar-Translation Method. Furthermore, almost all the textbooks were demotivating for learners due to the low readability and the complexity of the contents of the texts. Therefore, even when the writer tried to implement communicative activities for some points, it was challenging for learners to comprehend the subjects and deepen their understanding. To overcome the difficulty, the writer decided to implement Extensive Reading (ER) into his class. By paying out of his pocket, he bought 150 Graded Reader Series books, most of which were beginner level and level one, and let his students read for the first ten minutes of the class as Sustained Silent Reading Time (SSRT). After SSRT, the learners had opportunities to talk about their partner in English for a few minutes (collaborative dialogue). Although it took a while until they got accustomed to the activity, they started to converse with each other in the target language, and gradually engage themselves in their conversation. Consequently, they fostered their willingness to communicate with others and found it encouraging to read English books. Although ER and SSRT encouraged the students to learn English communicatively, it was still challenging to let learners focus on contents and deepen their understanding of the textbook.

As the writer was assigned to an international course in 2014, when he changed to work at his second school, he has sought to teach English with a greater focus on communication as compared to the classes he had taken before. For example, four years ago, when the writer started to work there, he kept conducting SSRT and ER, and also the third-year students he taught at that time were required to discuss and write essays about some controversial topics, such as segregation and endangered animals. Moreover, through this task, he also rated each student's class performance. Therefore, learners had many opportunities for collaborative dialogue and needed to find their ZPA by themselves and establish scaffolding co-operatively. Essay assignments also encouraged the students to focus on the contents of the given themes and deepen their understanding. As they had to accomplish the same objectives together, they sought to

co-operate with their classmates to fulfil the requirement and satisfy their needs psychologically (intersubjectivity); consequently, their action and behaviour to the language class became active. Therefore, communicative activities and essay assignment gave the learners some affordance to develop their social skills and worked as their agency.

When the writer started to research on writing at the MA TESOL course of NUFS, he began to implement a conversation style of a speaking performance test as well as essay assessments into his second-year students' English Communication studies. As the given themes for both evaluations were related to the subjects written in the textbook and the summative test tasks were the same as the formative test tasks, learners tried to deepen the contents of their ideas co-operatively and established their scaffolding and understood their ZPA. Furthermore, the writer realised that the activities in both speaking and writing and the textbook became both their material and symbolic mediations in their language learning, and the class became a significant affordance for learners to know about others. For example, they started to try to provide almost equal opportunities for each other to argue their ideas in speaking activities. Even in writing activities, although students used to tend to pay more attention to grammatical accuracy, namely a part of scientific concepts, they gradually started to focus on contents and meaning, a part of everyday thoughts, and to help their classmates to better their essays. Consequently, through intermental (interpsychological) processes, the learners regulated their procedure little by little (other- and self- regulation) and learned the given subjects eagerly. Moreover, as the time elapsed, the writer started to like students' writing little by little insomuch as he also gave them feedback on the contents of their essays and realised the development they made. Since he read and reread his students' essays and interacted with them in literacy and aural many times, the relationship between the writer and his learners went better, and he sometimes felt togetherness. Hence, the teaching approach the

writer conducted also helped him to establish a good rapport with students and to keep learning.

In conclusion, it is apparent that the writer experienced both fruitful and unsuccessful language learning and teaching. Nevertheless, he eventually found and used his effective mediation, such as books and essay assessments, which eventually established his ontogenesis. Furthermore, collaborative dialogue and evaluation indeed also encouraged the writer and his students to learn the target language. Through these affordances, both of them developed their intermental processes and established rapports with others successfully. Consequently, these material and symbolic tools seemingly mediated them and their ZPD was expanded and their skill to find ZPA was improved. Although both the writer and his learners need to encounter and overcome some challenges to learn the target language collaboratively, activities based on sociocultural theory can be the key to succeeding in their learning and teaching.

Reference

Cook, V. (2016). *Second language learning and language teaching* (5th ed.). New York: Routledge.