

The Theoretical Interpretation of EFL Teacher's Professional Development from the Perspective of Sociocultural Theory

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Abstract—The sociocultural theory offers a theoretical and methodological ways to explore the relationship between the macro-structure of sociocultural model and the micro-structure of individual context of EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers. It provides a unique perspective to investigate the dialogic processes on the construction of EFL teachers' professional development. Thus, the article focuses on the four core concepts of sociocultural theory that mediation, internalization, the zone of proximal development and activity theory to interpretate the EFL teachers' professional development.

Index Terms—mediation, internalization, the zone of proximal development, activity theory

I. INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, sociocultural theory has been widely applied to second language teacher education in China and western countries (For example, Wertsch, 1985; Johnson & Golombek, 2003; Johnson, 2009; Lantolf & Thorne, 2012; Xun yang, 2012; Li Yun & Xu Jinfen, 2015). Sociocultural theory emerges most directly from the seminal works of Vygotsky (1978, 1986). The primary concepts within sociocultural theory including the mediation, internalization, the zone of proximal development and activity theory (Lantolf & Thorne 2012), which provides a theoretical lens to explore the professional development of EFL teachers from the relationship between the micro-structure of individual context and the macro-structure of sociocultural model. It provides a unique perspective on the construction of EFL teacher's leaning and professional development.

II. MEDIATION

A. *The Theoretical Interpretation of Mediation*

As one of the core concepts of sociocultural theory, mediation means human being' activity and cognitive development do not act directly on the world, but mediated by all the kinds of artifacts, such as language, numeracy, books, computers and so on. Vygotsky(1978, 1986) points out that higher forms of human mental activity are mediated by culturally constructed auxiliary means, and the psychological mechanism is not generated by the individual's internal, but from external mediated activities to internal mediational control by individual, which results in the internalization of both the individual and activity. Vygotsky (1999, p.41) describes that "human development is the product of a broader system than just the system of a person's individual function, specifically, systems of social connections and relations, of collective forms of behavior and social cooperation", which means human being' activity and cognitive development do not act directly on the world, but mediated by all the kinds of artifacts, and the psychological mechanism is not generated by individual's internal, but from external mediated activities to internal mediational control of individual. Mediation can be divided into physical tools, cultural symbols, human behavior and abstract complex mind etc., such as language, numeracy, computers and so on, it assumes that the construction of the high level cognitive function of human (such as memory, rational thinking, conceptual thinking, sense of responsibility, etc.) are mediated by historical and qualitative aspects of symbolic artifacts, material artifacts and social relationships (Lantolf & Thorne, 2012, p.19).

Mediational means can be divided into object-regulated, other-regulated and self-regulated, object-regulated refers to individuals seek help from cultural artifacts in their circumstance; other-regulated means individuals seek help from other people or cultural artifacts; and self-regulated, in which individuals gain control both their cognition and activity. The process of choose mediation is not static or linear, but dynamic and dialogic, in that individuals can move from being object-regulated to self-regulated and then back to object-regulated (Johnson & Golombek, 2003, p.733).

B. *The Theoretical Interpretation of EFL Teacher's Professional Development on Mediation*

Sociocultural theory believes that the interrelation of individual and the external society is regulated by mediation. This article is based on object-regulated, other-regulated and self-regulated to analyze EFL teacher's professional development.

Firstly, object-regulated, in which EFL teachers construct new knowledge and learning by cognitive tools. For

example, EFL teachers take English video, loudspeakers, listening teaching equipment and other physical tools as physical mediations to connect both the external activities and internal activities of EFL teachers, and EFL teachers can take shape an efficient, real and situational classroom on the process of interaction by physical tools. School provides books and databases which about English teaching, language teaching theory as well as network account for EFL teachers to facilitate their professional development; Education sector equip enough teaching hardware, such as a sufficient number of computers for listening teaching ; EFL teachers using modern teaching techniques in teaching practice to enhance their new skills; EFL teachers can communicate and share teaching cases or strategies with each other by the use of Wechat, blog as well as digital university and so on. Therefore, the effective physical intermediaries can fully transform external knowledge of EFL teachers into internal knowledge, stimulate EFL teachers' positive consciousness and reflection, and promote the higher quality as well as professional development in teaching practice.

Secondly, other-regulated, in which EFL teachers seek help from other people or cultural artifacts. Vygotsky (1978) argues that the individual cognition is constructed and developed by participating in meaningful social activities. Thus, the development and promotion of EFL teachers' competencies can not be separated from the support of collectives, institutions and organizations. For example, the EFL teachers carry out intra-group cooperation and share professional experience with each other to discuss the confusion of teaching; Education administrative department send EFL teachers to the source and target language country to establish communication and cooperation with other teachers in second language teaching; School employs language teachers who come from the source language context country to train oral English of EFL teachers to enhance their oral expression and communicative competence; Schools can implement the modle of "the old guide the new" that the experts help the novices based on their own situation. Therefore, EFL teachers can take senior experts, important others those who more capable than themselves as an intermediary to enhance their new knowledge and new skills.

Thirdly, self-regulated, in which EFL teachers gain control both their cognition and activity. EFL teachers need having a positive response to their work environment, reflecting on classroom teaching actively, and learning on foreign language teaching materials at home and abroad; EFL teachers can adopt flexible, vivid, innovative teaching model so as to improve the participation and communication of student; EFL teachers through the recall or narrative way to re-understand their past experience, integrated with the current experience to warn themselves by mistakes and failures that they made before. The externalization of EFL teachers' thoughts enabling them to reconceptualize and recontextualize what their knew, and eventually reconstructing and regaining their professional expertise by self-regulate in new instructional circumstance.

III. INTERNALIZATION

A. *The Theoretical Interpretation of Internalization*

Internalization is a valid concept as one of the core concepts of SCT, Vygotsky (1978, 1986) proposes that internalization is the process through which interpersonal and person-environment interaction forms and transforms one's internal mental functions, in his account, the advanced mental function of individuals appears twice, first between individuals on the interpsychological plane and then within the people on the intrapsychological plane. Leont'ev (1981, p.57) argues that the process of internalization is not the transformation of an external activity into a preexisting internal "plane of consciousness", but a process of in which the plane is formed. Winegar (1997, p.31) describes the internalization is a negotiated process of development that is co-constructed both intra-and interpersonally, it is a process of reorganization of the person-environment relationships that itself emerges with person-environment relationships, immediate person-environment relationships are reorganized, and some aspects of this reorganization may carry forward to contribute to future reorganization through this process. Therefore, internalization involves a process in which a person's activity is initially mediated by the other people or cultural artifacts but later come to be controlled by the person who appropriates resources to regulate the activity (Johnson & Golombek, 2003, p.731).

Thus, internalization is a process that the psychological mechanism of social interaction transform into the psychological mechanism of the individual by the symbolic intermediary, it is a dialogic process of transformation of self and activity with complex and dynamic characteristics rather than simply the replacement of skills.

B. *The Theoretical Interpretation of EFL Teachers' Professional Development on Internalization*

The internalization describes that the development of individual knowledge is the result of the interaction between internal and external causes. Therefore, the function of internalization can construct a new psychological mechanism to enhance EFL teachers' professional development. This article described the EFL teacher's professional development on internalization from three aspects as follow:

Firstly, the change of EFL teacher's procedural knowledge into procedural knowledge. The narrative knowledge which teachers created in teaching practice is an abstract, subjective knowledge with the nature of spontaneous concept, however, EFL teachers take part in all sorts of activities, such as exchanging the millions of thoughts with other teachers in their practice community, which make they enable to transform the interpersonal activities into interpsychological gradually. EFL teachers change the procedural knowledge into procedural knowledge by the internalization process so as to transform social level to the psychological level of individual. Anderson (1983) argues that procedural knowledge play a more important role in solving problems of specific areas.

Secondly, EFL teachers imitate and innovate instructional strategy in their teaching practice. According to Vygotsky (1987, p. 211) that imitation is “the source of instruction’s influence on development”, and development based on collaboration and imitation is the source of all the specifically human characteristics of consciousness. Imitation has the characteristics of selective, innovative and proactive, therefore, EFL teachers can imitate the teaching management, teaching strategies and teaching skills of expert teachers on purpose in teaching practice; EFL teachers can innovate teaching with the characteristics of personal style and teaching ideas in classroom to enhance professional satisfaction and self-confidence. The external knowledge which they have learned has been transformed into their own activities on the process of imitation and innovation, ultimately, the psychological function with personal characteristics has been innovated by the complex and dynamic internalization process. The imitation and innovation of EFL teachers in practice can improve their professional satisfaction and self-confidence. Huberman (1993) points out that stimulate teachers to explore a more effective teaching model is beneficial for their professional development.

Thirdly, on the one hand, carry out the effective training in teacher education with specific and targeted advice. The indoctrination training model and “top-down” model have been unable to meet the needs of teachers’ self-development, in addition to centralized theoretical training, educational trainers can implement participatory training or “shadow” training model to implement the effective training. For example, EFL teachers observe the case of excellent teachers in a state of meticulous, persistence and roundly; EFL teachers participate in practical activities positively, such as collective lesson preparation, public courses, teaching and research activities, group discussions and classroom observation; Education sector should listen to the views and feedback of EFL teachers who participated in the training; Education sector can establish an open and interactive teacher training system to achieve the internalization of EFL teacher’ knowledge. On the other hand, the empowerment of EFL teachers, in which EFL teachers have the power and qualifications to take part in the design of curriculum teaching, teaching objectives, teaching plan and school personnel elections to adapt and innovate teaching content, school curriculum reform and semester teaching plans. The effective use of teacher empowerment can enhance teachers’ competence and enthusiasm. EFL teachers participate in external behaviors such as make curriculum outline, teaching tasks and so on, to produce a series of professional autonomy, decision-making power as well as professional development rights etc., the process through which interpersonal and person-environment interaction forms and transforms EFL teachers’ internal mental functions such as self-confidence, efficacy and so on.

IV. THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

A. *The Theoretical Interpretation of the Zone of Proximal Development*

The zone of proximal development is one of the core concepts of sociocultural theory, which is defined that the difference between the actual development 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, 1978, p.86). It means a person can achieve with the collaboration with other or with someone who more capable. According to Lantolf and Thorne (2012, p. 267), the ZPD is the difference between the level of development already obtained and the cognitive functions comprising the proximal next stage that may be visible through participation in collaborative activity, it is not only a model of development process, but a conceptual tool that educators can use to understand aspects of students’ emerging capacities that are in early stages of maturation. Vygotsky (1978, p. 57) states that teaching should aim at development, only the learning content and tasks occur ahead of the development of learners, can the learners’ development be developed effectively, the rational teaching should ahead of development, guide the development, and promote the mature mechanism that located within the zone of proximal development. The ZPD is a dynamic and complex stage of development in which connect both the current state and next. In this stage, the leaping of ZPD is that individual transform their external knowledge into inner knowledge by the guidance of someone more capable to promote the development of individual cognitive level.

There are two ways to leap the ZPD are scaffolding teaching as well as social interaction patterns. Wertsch (1979a) describes that scaffolding is a dialogically produced inter-psychological process through which learners internalize knowledge they co-construct with more capable peers. Thus, scaffolding teaching means that if the learners can not complete task independently in the current situation, someone more capable can take a “scaffolding” (such as the collaboration) to help learners build their own knowledge and ability system gradually, the scaffolding can be removed while the learners have been achieved the internalization process that transformed the external adjustment into self-adjusting, the learners can raise the current cognitive level to the higher under the effect of scaffolding in the end.

B. *The Theoretical Interpretation of EFL Teacher’s Professional Development on the Zone of Proximal Development*

The zone of proximal development describes the gap between “the actual level of development” and “potential level of development” of the individual, which argues that a lesser level of learners can across the ZPD to promote the growth of learner’ ability by the guidance of expert, peer cooperation and collective cooperation. In this way, the EFL teachers using the concept of ZPD as a diagnostic have the potential to create conditions that may give rise to specific forms of development in their teaching practice. This article described the EFL teachers’ professional development on the zone of proximal development from the mentor and social interaction.

On the one hand, the function of scaffolding in zone of proximal development on the process of professional

development can be expressed by the mentor, in which the process of cooperation that the senior teachers or the experts provide guidance to the novice teachers (Richards & Farrell, 2005). The senior teachers provide novice teachers with demonstration, management classroom strategy etc., to help their find the root causes of confusion; The experts provide teaching content design, teaching demonstration, the display of case, emotional support for novice teachers to help their across the ZPD. The teacher educators provide teachers with teaching content design, emotional supports, teaching demonstration and other strategies to help their across the ZPD. The senior teachers or experts take strategies as an imitation to stimulate the mature psychological mechanism of the ZPD, resulted the actual development level of novice teachers develop to the potential level of development. Therefore, the mentor can help novice teachers achieve the leap of the actual development level to potential level of development through activity of social interaction.

On the other hand, social interaction in zone of proximal development, which refers to the dynamic process where the interaction and mutual effect in behaviors between individuals and groups, groups and groups (xu zhi xin, 2015, p. 51). Individuals and groups, means the interaction between individual and collective. Individual teacher participates in activities of collective teaching and research, such as lesson preparation, group discussion, assessment and so on, to share different opinions within the group members, achieved the cross of the ZPD by the guidance of experts and excellent backbone teachers within their practice community. Groups with groups, refer to the collective research activities which occurred in EFL teachers' working environment. For example, the leaders of English teaching and research team lead EFL teachers to observe and experience other schools' instructional strategies. EFL teachers transform psychological mechanism of social level into internal mental functions to achieve the leap of The ZPD by the intermediation of physical or symbolic mediation, resulted in the development of their ability and cognitive.

V. ACTIVITY THEORY

A. The Theoretical Interpretation of Activity Theory

Activity theory has become a well-established approach to contemporary research in fields of applied linguistics, education and workplace studies. It is a subsequent close relative to sociocultural theory, a concept initiated by Vygotsky, A.N. Leont'ev and Engeström.

The development process of activity theory can be divided into three stages. The first stage is centers on Vygotsky(1978), he put forward the theory of cultural mediation that an individual is mediated by concepts and cultural entities, the mediation can be divided into physical tools and symbolic tools. The second stage is represented by Leont'ev (1981), who shifts emphasis from cultural mediation toward a more doctrinal interpretation of activity by hierarchy theory that divided the activity into "activities - actions – operations", in which activities are at the highest level, followed by operations, and operations are final, actions are made up of a series of operational stage, it is more closer to activities while the action reaches a certain stage. The third stage of activity theory is, at the time of this article, still a work in progress, is the work of Engeström (1987,1993, 1999b, 2001), a Finnish scholar who is best known for the schemata that extends Vygotsky and Leont'ev's models to graphically represent a collective activity system. Within a collective activity system, the actions of individual occur at the nexus of three factors: the symbolic and material artifacts, the community and its rules, and the division of labor in their community- settings. As Engeström defines the conceptual framework of activity system(1987, 1993), a "subject" is an individual or group whose agency is; "Object" describes the orientation of the activity and arises from the motive for an outcome, as Engeström(1993, p. 67) explains that the object refers to the raw material or problem space at which that activity is directed and which is molded or transformed into outcomes with the help of physical and symbolic, external and internal tool; The "rules" means historical and institutional ones and those that arise from a local set of social-material conditions; The "community" is the participants who share the "object" that shapes and lends direction to the individuals and shared activity at hand; The "division of labor" refers to the horizontal actions and interactions among the members of the community (Lantolf & Thorne, 2012, p. 222). As is in SCT, the subject adjusts the activity of object by the mediator, and eventually transform into the result, then form the organic activity system model (Figure 1.1)

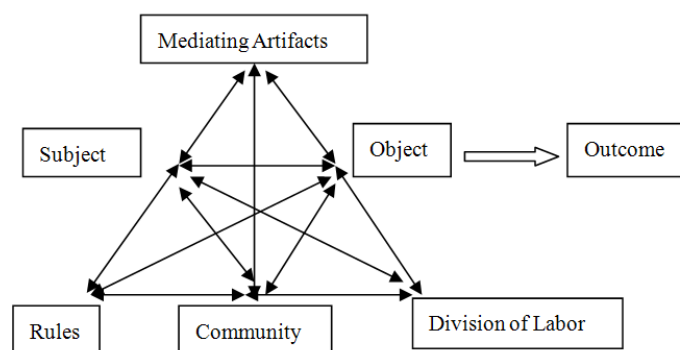


Figure 1.1 Activity system(Lantolf & Thorne, 2012, p.222)

The significance of theory activity emphasize the key idea of mediation, connect individual mind with the social and cultural environment where it is located, explain the change of individual psychology, and advocate the activity with multiple types and levels on the process of interaction between individual and external context. Activity system is not static or purely descriptive, rather, it implies transformation and innovation with the characteristics of heterogeneous and multi-voiced, and may include conflict and resistance as readily as cooperation and collaboration (Engeström, 1993, 1999b, 2001; Lantolf & Thorne, 2012). Activity theory combines the activities of individual teacher with the social and cultural structure, and fully expounds the construction of EFL teachers' professional development.

B. The Theoretical Interpretation of EFL Teacher's Professional Development on Activity Theory

The theoretical interpretation of EFL teacher's professional development on activity theory should meet the following conditions: First, there is a positive subject, an individual who has the motivation of development in social activities. For example, EFL teachers participate in the activities of curriculum construction, teaching mode innovation with a sense of ownership and emotional responsibility; EFL teachers work in their practical community with a firm teaching beliefs and correct values. Second, an object in EFL teachers' activity theory is the development of EFL teachers' professional, which is the goal of all the activities. As Engeström (1999b, p.31) describes that the object determines the horizon of possible action, and gains motivating force that gives shape and direction to activity, thus the object is a nexus of power and resistance in EFL teacher's professional development. Third, exist a positive practical community, which means those who share the professional development as the same object that shapes and lends direction to the individual, such as research group members, colleagues and students ect. Fourth, the rules refer to the teaching rules and regulations that EFL teachers need comply with in the social practice activities. For example, provide EFL teachers a positive and comfortable development platform instead of offer the cumbersome administrative constraints. Set the comfortable rules and environment which is beneficial to promote the teacher professional development. Fifth, implement the efficient division of labor, such as various roles, assignments and organizational relationships of EFL teachers and their practice community. The division of labor within community involves regulational norms, which support and constrain the goings on within activity system. Sixth, an effective intermediate tool can be divided into physical tools, symbolic tools or behavioral tools and so on. For example, physical tools mean the use of courseware, lesson plans, computers and other physical tools; symbols tools refers to the demonstration, assistance of someone more capable and so on.

Thus, the theoretical interpretation of EFL teachers' professional development on activity theory can be described as follow: EFL teachers are the subject who participate in social activities zealously to take classroom settings, teaching materials, lesson plans and other mediational means as an intermediary to develop the professional development under the constraints of school rules and other norms. On this process, members of the teaching and research group, colleagues, school environment, students and other members of practice community are involved in the division of labor, for example, EFL teachers encouraged and communicated by colleagues, supported by school environment, cooperated by student and so on. The external recognition transforms into individual awareness and individual psychological mechanism by the function of internalization to achieve the cross of the ZPD, improved the EFL teacher's professional development ultimately under the intermediary role of the positive factors on the process of teachers participating in social activities.

VI. CONCLUSION

The article focuses on the four core concepts of sociocultural theory that mediation, internalization, the zone of proximal development and activity theory to interpretate the EFL teacher's professional development in detail. It provides a unique perspective on the construction of EFL teacher's professional development from the relationships between micro-structure of individual context and macro- structure of sociocultural model.

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