

**SCAFFOLDING STRATEGIES AND CLASSROOM  
DISCOURSE: A DESCRIPTIVE REPORT ON A  
LANGUAGE TESTING COURSE**

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**ABSTRACT**

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) suggests socialization of individuals in various discourse communities. That is, becoming a member of a community means learning to be able to function in the discourse acceptable for that community. This article followed Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to investigate the contribution of mediational practices during a Language Testing course and considered the discourse of the class. Participants were a group of senior Persian learners of English. Aljaafre and Lantolf's (1994) developmental levels of interactions were used for analyzing participants' interactions. The analyses revealed that learners were able to notice the errors, correct them with assistance, understood and even offer assistance and feedback to their peers. However, they were not able to notice and correct their productions without interventions.

Key terms: SCT, mediation, scaffolding, artifacts, interaction.

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## Introduction

As an integral aspect for any effective learning process, assessment relates both to learning and teaching so much that altering assessment practices and rendering new tools equals introducing a new curriculum or a new course book (Brindley, 2001). For Weir (2005), testing provides rich data to the process of learning so that learners and teachers are able to modify their behaviors. Similarly for other scholars, “the only thing pedagogy can do is to prepare people to learn for themselves: it is concerned with what can be taught not what can be learned. And you can only test what you can teach” (Widdowson, 2007:20).

The field of language evaluation has smoothly expanded its borders beyond psychometric limitations and learning and teaching are perceived in social contexts (Gipps, 1994; McNamara and Roever, 2006), however, in Iranian educational setting, assessment and learning are treated as two different concepts; the crux of the problem escalates when Language Testing is a required technical course for students of language teaching or language translation. Students get superficially familiar with different concepts included in curriculum and just occasionally they may evaluate some language tests developed for high school students. In such purely theoretical testing courses, there is no place for students to practice testing issues and enhance what they are to learn as language testing ability. Neither is there any “formal policy” to involve students in assessment practices (Farhady, 2006).

The problem that this study considers is the gap that exists between assessment as an indicator of learners’ achievement and assessment as a process for expanding learners’ views about assessment itself; the problem has ironically underscored the role of assessment practices in enriching assessment skills. The present study argues that there are some theories affluent with rich tenets and practical extensions that might be useful in narrowing down the gap and bringing assessment close to learning, rather than postulating testing as an aim for learning.

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) calls for socialization of individuals into various discourse communities with regard to specific cultural contexts. According to Vygotsky (1976) as well as other researchers of SCT theoretical framework (Ellis, 2003; Beckett, Gonzalez and Schwartz, 2004), communities embrace discourses in form of different practices; therefore, communities that students are expected to become members of are not exceptions. That is, becoming a member of a community means learning to be able to function in the discourse acceptable for that community. SCT uses terms like "participation" instead of "acquisition" for language learning arguing that language learning is not a matter of taking in some knowledge but of taking part in social practices.

Ellis (2003) elaborating on Sfarid (1998) asserts that in L2 learning, knowledge equals use and use brings about knowledge. It is followed that if language organizes thought and plays a bidirectional role - as a means and as a manager - and if language learning involves how to use language to mediate language learning (Vygotsky, 1987), learners assessment abilities could also be connected to and enhanced through meditational practices of SCT due to a handful of experimental results (Vine, 2008). Students who are doomed to receive so many tests, are expected to learn the social practice of language testing through interacting assessment issues and performing practices like their assessors; teachers in turn, are to adopt appropriate register expected of them to achieve the goal. Socially-supported concepts like mediation and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of SCT could be adopted in Language testing classes to alter teacher-centered atmospheres and enhance class interactions. Due to the mentioned problem and related arguments, the present study formed the following question:

1. Did EFL learners of the study follow scaffolding strategies to learn assessment-related issues and assess their peers? What strategies do they use?

## Mediating in SCT

According to SCT, human beings inherit a biological capability which accounts for their development and this endowment determines the growth of language. For Vygotsky (1978), the capability processes relatively lower mental functions. Higher order mental functioning like rational thinking develops via the “interweaving of our cultural and biological inheritances” (Lantolf and Thorne 2006: 59); social activities which develop in each particular community mediate human minds (Lantolf and Pavlenko, 1995). Such activities, can enhance and reform genetically endowed capacities (e.g., language learning) into higher order forms.

The concept of mediation presupposes social relations (Lantolf, 2000a; Artigal, 1992). Lantolf and Thorne (2006:79) defined mediation as ‘the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts, and activities to regulate the material world or their own and each other’s social and mental activity’. Artifacts can be either concrete (for example, Google Search Engine) or symbolic (for example, language). Language is called the most powerful artifact for mediating thought (Ellis, 2003, 2008). In second language learning, mediation can engage others (peers or teacher) through social interaction -external mediation- or involve the learner by him/ herself through private speech –internal mediation (Lantolf, 2000).

Expectedly, mediation creates settings where beginners can participate actively in their own learning and the expert can manage the assistance that learners are experiencing (Antón, 1999). Learner’s abilities and capabilities are deterministic in such occasions. Ellis (2008) asserts that the level of interaction should be modified according to the learners’ present ability. Related to these hallmarks is Poehner and Lantolf’s (2005) suggested dynamic assessment. This method of assessment has “the expressed goal of modifying learner performance during the assessment itself” (p.235). These arguments are in contrast with those testing methods which aim to obtain a fixated measure of a learner’s proficiency without feedback or intervention of any kind. Furthermore, it is said that there must be a firm socially-supported interaction between teachers as peers and students as learners (Poehner and Lantolf, 2005).

## Scaffolding and Zone of Proximal Development

Scaffolding describes the process of supportive dialogue which directs the attention of the learner to key features of the environment. These features are prompted to the learner in successive steps of a task by a teacher or peers (Mitchell and Myles 1998: 145). Although a couple of other terms like “instructional conversation” (Donato, 2000) and “collaborative dialogue” (Swain, 2000) represent these ideas, in this study scaffolding is preferred as it is the one used by Vygotsky (1978). In fact, scaffolding is an “inter-psychological process through which learners internalize knowledge dialogically” (Ellis, 2008:235).

Scaffolded interactions have been investigated via conversation analysis (CA) techniques (Wood, Bruner and Ross, 1976; Vine, 2008). Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) reported that through scaffolding, the directions to goals are identified, the differences between what is produced and the ultimate solution are identified, and learner’s frustration is controlled. Besides finding similar features, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) showed that the degree of scaffolding offered by the tutor diminished as learners achieve control over their L2 and needed less assistance. Sometimes EFL learners could produce utterances collaboratively that they may not perform otherwise due to scaffolding techniques they used (Donato, 1994).

Another key construct of SCT which comes as a bedfellow to scaffolding is the Zone of Proximal Development. The concept of ZPD is firmly linked with the construct of ‘assisted performance’ which is conducive to a formative view of the role of assessment (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). Also in line with present study, these ideas suggest that assessment should focus on what learners can do with assistance at the present moment rather than what they are capable of independently. Mitchell and Myles (1998) also assert that the learner moves through stages of other regulation to independent self-regulation, and then he is able to solve his problem.

ZPD also explains a number of important phenomena about learning. First, it “explains why there are some structures that learners fail to perform no matter what the external

mediation”(2008:533) is; some learners cannot build the proper ZPDs that make the performance of such structures possible. Secondly, some learners are able to produce some structures with social assistance but not independently because they are able to construct ZPDs for performing these specific functions even though they have not internalized them. Thirdly, learners are able to internalize new structures because they invest on structures for which they need external mediation; hence they create the necessary ZPDs.

Crucial to this type of assistance is semiotic mediation, with language as the main semiotic tool of mediation (Ellis, 2003, 2008; Johnson, 2009). By means of language and the exercise of certain fundamental scaffolding behaviors, participants in the interactions come to share a common perspective and an equal degree of commitment to the task (De Guerrero and Villamil, 2000). Lantolf (2000) suggested that mediation in second language learning can be realized through social interaction or through private speech. For example, when a beginner is given assistance in assessment related discussion or practical tasks, he/she is assisted socially (external mediation); when that individual uses his or her own resources to achieve control over assessment he/she uses language internally.

## Method

### Participants

Twenty seven EFL seniors provided data for this study during a Language Testing I course. Seniority was applied in selecting participants so that they may have no serious problems in discussing assessment issues in English. It was also supposed that what participants may attain during this study could immediately be implemented in their future assessing practices after their graduation. These participants were both male (No.24) and female (No. 36) and their age mean was 23.6.

The framework for classroom discourse analysis was Aljaafre and Lantolf's (1994) specifications of five developmental levels of interactions; however, the first two levels were merged as the level of notice in this study.

Level 1: The learner is unable to notice, or correct the error, even with intervention.

Level 2: The learner is able to notice the error, but cannot correct it, even with intervention, requiring explicit help.

Level 3: The learner is able to notice and correct an error, but only with assistance. The learner understands assistance, and is able to incorporate feedback offered.

Level 4: The learner notices and corrects an error with minimal or no obvious feedback, and begins to assume full responsibility for error correction. However the structure is not yet fully internalized, since the learner often produces the target form incorrectly. The learner may even reject feedback when it is unsolicited.

Level 5: The learner becomes more consistent in using the target structure correctly in all contexts. The learner is fully able to notice and correct his/her own errors without interventions.

### **Data Collection Procedures**

Nine sessions were predicted according to curriculum calendar, and the experiment began in the second session. Each session included two phases. A discussion phase, which embraced all technical information related to language testing in general and an assessing phase. During the former, participants were supposed to carry out different tasks such as discussing the reason for developing final exams, suggesting the best method for assessing oral skills, inconsistency between class performances and final scores, practical measures to boost reliability and validity of oral skills. Each of these issues was presented in one session. Students were instructed and encouraged to use the four strategies of waiting, prompting, co-construction, and explanation (Ohta, 2001b) for two sessions.

The second phase of each session for the experimental group continued with assessment tasks. That is, the experimental group was asked to orally present some passages, selected from TOEFL Arco; each student presented two passages during the experiment, one at the onset of the experiment and the other in the final session (they are called Oral production I and Oral production II respectively). Their performance was recorded by a cell phone. The recorded presentations were exchanged randomly by the participants via Bluetooth. Students were scaffolded by the teacher and peers to assess their peers' presentations. Information related to scoring based on the mentioned framework were the main sources of input suggested by the teacher during the assessment tasks. They were directed to collaboratively assess their friends' oral productions, and when necessary refer to the teacher for clarification. The scores that they gave to each presentation were recorded, discussed and then compared with those of the teacher and finally both students and teacher suggested just one score for each student in place.

During the experiment, students' class interaction were recorded to be used for further analysis based on Aljaafre and Lantolf's (1994) specifications of five developmental level of interactions. An analysis of scaffolded interactions provide information about the effects of exercising meditational practices in the mentioned EFL classroom.

## RESULTS

*Did EFL learners of the study follow scaffolding strategies to learn assessment-related issues and assess their peers? What strategies do they use?*

The students and teacher's experience and the type of meditational interactions they had require detailed conversational analyses which are beyond the scope of this single question, however, some descriptive reports based on participants' interactions may elaborate on the issue.

The specific meditational practices that EFL learners actually perform during the experiment could be classified into four levels (Aljaafre and Lantolf, 1994). During the second and third sessions of treatment, the learners were unable to notice the errors and even find the



answers to theoretical questions like different ways to ensure reliability even with intervention (level of notice 1). Mediated with explicit help from their teacher and peers, the learners were able to notice and correct their peers' presentations, from the third session onward. In fact, they well understood assistance, and could incorporate feedback they were offered with to discuss assessment related issues and assess their friends according to the scales that their teachers use (level 2).

After the third session, the learner could devour the questions with minimal or no obvious feedback, although cooperatively, and began to assume full responsibility for error correction and making decisions about their peers' scores and finding the answers to questions. However, all these tasks were not correctly accomplished and the concepts were not yet internalized; the participants sometimes suggested answers and assigned scores incorrectly. On the other hand, they never rejected feedback and corrections offered by the teacher and more knowledgeable peers (level 3). Following Lantolf (2000), development occurs when individuals receive appropriate mediations in their environment to improve control over their own mental activity. Therefore, a theory of the mediated mind might be useful in improving EFL learners' assessment literacy.

Finally, the EFL learners of the study became more consistent in explaining the concepts and assessing their peers voluntarily during the two final sessions (Level 4). Such practices directed the learners to notice and correct their own errors without interventions (according to what they said). Such results are consistent with what Mendoza (2004) identified as evidence of learning when participants took advantage of the information provided in the task, using each other's expertise, the tools available to them, and the instructor's assistance to internalize knowledge about the words. From a discourse point of view, Hall (1995) noticed that when knowledgeable teachers inject all necessary information to the class, without involving the students, they may limit student opportunities as well as facilitating interactional development. She found that the class format which was IRE (initiation, response, follow-up evaluation) did not bring about interaction between students or teacher and students.

The results of discourse analysis of this study, suggested that participants were not mere knowledge consumers as they were scaffolded to find answers to abstract assessment questions and also actually evaluate their peers. Simister (2004) recognizes the importance of the student's personal voice and claims that emphasis on the regurgitation of facts and repetition of accepted ideas will only produce dull and uninspired students. This implies that students should be taught how to create, adjust their strategies and assimilate learning activities into their own personal world. As a result of the recognition of the role of abstract thinking in students' intellectual development, nowadays there is a call for the introduction of less concrete issues like validity and reliability. According to Swain (2000), L2 acquisition involves learning how to use language to mediate language learning. With the same token, this study concludes that assessment literacy could be one of the mental activities which could be enhanced through class interaction - as one form of social interaction.

To summarize what the results of discourse analysis in this study suggest for the experimental group could be summarized into three points:

1. Students were less dependent on the teacher comparing with the controlled group, and were more active. As far as peer assessment is concerned, and bearing in mind that the present study involves learners with very little experience in being autonomous learners, the experiment revealed some reassuring points. Participants could explain rather abstract concepts like validity and actually evaluate their peers although the tasks of peer assessment and clarifying theoretical concepts were thus a novelty to them.
2. The borders of the classroom were expanded from teacher-student interactions to student-student interactions. When students attention were directed from assessment as an end to assessment as a process that could enhance learning, they were prompted to reinforce their own and peers' assessment abilities.

3. A feeling of accomplishing some real tasks aired the classrooms. Students could do what their teachers actually do. They could upgrade themselves from knowledge consumers to mediators who learned about assessment and assessed their peers.

Assessment literacy could be sub-categorized under concepts which Vygotsky (1978) refers to as higher mental activities. As language achieves its meaning not through underlying meaning encoded in words, but through communicative activities in specific socio-cultural contexts, different language skills and various activities like language assessment may be effectively practiced and internalized via social interaction.

## Conclusion

Second language learners have the right to become part of the community where they are taught to understand and express the language belonging to that community (Smit, vanEerde, and Bakker, 2012). Learners learning subject matters like language assessment while acquiring a foreign language are grappling with a serious challenge. Scaffolding such challenging academic courses is crucial for their progress and unique to SCT.

Socio-cultural theory is outstandingly different from its cognitive counterparts since it considers learning as a collaborative achievement, not an isolated individual's effort; teachers and learners are given opportunities to mediate and assist each other to not only enhance learning but also enjoy it. Furthermore, as Williams and Burden (1997) assert, the theory also emphasizes the importance of meta-cognition and insists that education should involve learners in learning, developing learners' skills and strategies to continue to learn, making learning experiences meaningful and relevant to the learner's life. Such practices are conducive to helping learners to develop and grow as a whole person.

Development is far beyond taking in and possession of linguistic knowledge, but is inclusively taking part in social activity. The premise that "learning is no longer viewed as an internal and individualistic activity" (Dangwal and Kapur, 2009: 5), may well couple assessment

with the social process that invests on cognition and aims to reinforce learning. If cognitive and social processes can be well- understood not in isolation since they both aim to enhance learning and if assessment by nature aims to enhance learning, a perspective which is socially oriented may better clarify language learning including assessment ability.

### Implications

Theoretically speaking, the findings of this study can be helpful in enrichment of SCT theory as well as task-based language teaching and assessment and an integration of both theories. This study also has some implications for interdisciplinary practitioners as the study demonstrated that a language testing event was related both to social and linguistic concerns. Pennycook (2001) asserts that movements that connect language to social use include transformative pedagogy which entails a transformative research paradigm, too.

Similarly, as the study takes some preliminary steps to find out how SCT suggested techniques affect learners' interaction and learning, the descriptive report could be significant to testing and evaluation, teaching, and methodology, as well as curriculum and materials development.

As the study found that students and teachers who are two major test parties can collaboratively carry out assessment tasks, first and foremost, basic modifications in evaluation measures and testing practices might be implications of the study. The analytical report may suggest a reconsideration and slight reconstruction of the evaluation methods and programs by teachers to make evaluations more effective, efficient and democratic.

Regarding curriculum and materials development, the study suggests a learner based approach which also entails both cognitively- and socially-supported methods. The results of the study revealed that participants welcome and acknowledge participating in assessment tasks and can shoulder responsibility of their own and peers' learning. That is, the syllabi would be a posteriori and retrospective one, open to further negotiation during teaching and testing phases,

not a prescribed a priori one dictated by elites, and adorned and implemented by teachers and students (Weir, 2005).

From another point of view, the results of the present study have focused on the importance of meaning construction for learning assessment activities. Zimmerman (1997) argues that developing students' competency in L2 is not equated with mastering skills since sacrificing learning opportunities to mastering skills could prevent students from involving in what he refers to as aspects of literacy.

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