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A Sociocultural Approach to Teaching Reading Comprehension: Teacher and Peer Scaffolding of High and Low Iranian EFL Learners' Text Comprehension

A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Studies Office in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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We hereby recommend that this dissertation by Mahmood Dehqan entitled "A Sociocultural Approach to Teaching Reading Comprehension: Teacher and Peer Scaffolding of High and Low Iranian EFL Learners' Text Comprehension" be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) in Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my parents for their continued support, love and encouragement.

Abstract

The main purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of implementing sociocultural teaching techniques (teacher and peer scaffolding) on second language reading comprehension as compared to a non-scaffolding teaching technique and to explore and document the microgenetic development of the learners' dialogic interactions within the scaffolding groups. A Nelson English Language test, a reading comprehension test and a reading strategy questionnaire were used to address the quantitative questions. To answer the qualitative questions of the study, the learners' interactions in the sociocultural group (teacher & peer scaffolding) were recorded and transcribed. In order to determine the learners' microgenetic development and to identify their transition from other- to self-regulation, Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) regulatory scale has been used. The sociocultural teaching techniques resulted in better reading comprehension and reading strategy use for EFL learners. It was also indicated that proficiency factor played a determining role in reading comprehension development of the two groups and that the low proficiency learners outperformed the high proficiency learners. However, the interaction effect between proficiency factor and teaching technique was non-significant for reading strategy use, leading to the conclusion that strategy use of the learners was not affected by their proficiency level. The teacher scaffolding mechanism was more effective in moving the learners to a

higher level of development in their ZPD than did peer scaffolding. Teacher scaffolded learners made the most out of their collaboration with a more knowledgeable peer in achieving self-regulation and independency. Analyses of peer scaffolding group demonstrated that the help provided by peers was partially effective as learners, in the majority of the cases, provided random feedback in dealing with the problematic areas. Unlike teacher scaffolded help which started from implicit feedback and gave appropriate level of help, peer scaffolded assistances started from explicit help. Peer scaffolding learners' interactions, though dialogic, were not graduated and contingent in the sense Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) put forth. In this regard, they consist of several different types of random moves by the learners to help each other in the process of learning. In other words, the peer scaffolding learners' interactions did not conform to the learners' ZPD, which consequently did not lead to the potential level of development.

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Table of contents

Dedication i

Abstract ii

Acknowledgments iv

Table of contents vi

List of tables x

List of figures xii

List of appendices xiii

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction 2

1.2. Statement of the problem 6

1.3. Purpose of the study 9

1.4. Research questions 10

1.5. Null hypotheses 12

1.6. Significance of the study 13

1.7 Definition of the key terms 15

1.8 Limitations and delimitations of the study 19

Chapter 2: Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Introduction 21

2.2. Reading comprehension: General overview 21

2.2.1. Reading approaches 24

2.2.1.1. Bottom-up approach 24

2.2.1.2. Top-down approach 26

2.2.1.3. Interactive approach 29

2.3. Language learning strategy 32

2.3.1. Language learning strategies classification 36

2.3.2. Reading strategy 42

2.4. Sociocultural theory: General overview 45

2.4.1. Zone of proximal development (ZPD) 47

2.4.2. Scaffolding 51

2.4.2.1. Characteristics, principles and methods of scaffolding 53

2.4.3. Mediation 61

2.5. Research on reading strategy and sociocultural theory 63

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1. Introduction 81

3.2. Participants 81

3.3. Instrumentations 83

3.3.1. Language proficiency test 83

3.3.2. Reading comprehension tests 84

3.3.3. Reading strategy questionnaire 85

3.4. Data collection procedure 86

3.5. Data analyses 95

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

4.1 Restatement of the problem and research questions 101

4.2. Quantitative analyses 103

4.2.1. Reading comprehension development in the two groups 103

4.2.2. Language proficiency, intervention and reading comprehension 105

4.2.3. Reading strategy use in the two groups 109

4.2.4. Language proficiency, intervention and reading strategy use 111

4.2.5. Discussion of quantitative analyses 113

4.3. Qualitative analyses 117

4.3.1. Teacher scaffolding 121

4.3.2. Peer scaffolding 131

4.3.3. Discussion of qualitative analyses 141

Chapter 5: Conclusion, Pedagogical Implications and Suggestions for Further Research

5.1. Introduction 147

5.2. Summary of the findings and conclusions 147

5.3. Pedagogical implications..... 152

5.4. Suggestions for further research..... 155

References..... 157

Lists of Tables

Table 2.1 Ohta's methods of assistance 58

Table 3.1 Demographics of participants 83

Table 3.2 Proficiency-based group division 87

Table 4.1 Mean scores, SDs and the gain score means of the two groups in pre and posttests of reading comprehension..... 103

Table 4.2 Independent-samples t-tests on the gain score of the two groups from pre to posttests of reading comprehension..... 104

Table 4.3 Mean and SD of Pre and Posttest of reading comprehension with low and high proficiency in non-scaffolding and scaffolding groups 106

Table 4.4 Results of split-plot ANOVA for mean scores on reading comprehension of non-scaffolding and scaffolding groups with high and low proficiency levels (pre and posttest)..... 108

Table 4.5 Mean scores, SDs and gain score means of the two groups in pre and posttests of strategy questionnaire 109

Table 4.6 Independent-samples t-tests on gain score of the two groups from pre to posttests of reading strategy use 110

Table 4.7 Mean and SD of Pre and Posttest of reading strategy use with low and high proficiency in non-scaffolding and scaffolding groups 111

Table 4.8 Results of Split-plot ANOVA (GLM) for mean scores on reading strategy use of non-scaffolding and scaffolding groups with high and low proficiency levels (pre and posttest). 113

Lists of Figures

Figure 2.1 Vygotsky's model of ZPD 49
Figure 3.1 Design of the study 94

List of appendices

A. Language proficiency test (Nelson) 171

B. Reading comprehension test 176

C. Reading strategy questionnaire 185

D. Aljaafreh and Lantolf's regulatory scale 189

E. Sample reading comprehension lesson 191

Chapter One:
Introduction

1.1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is of utmost importance in learning languages and it is widely believed that the more you read, the more you learn. Second language teachers have always been engaged in the process of improving their learners reading ability because they long believed learning to read in a language equals learning it (Harmer, 2001). Furthermore, taking into account the context of learning another language like English in a non-English speaking country as a foreign language, it would seem more understandable to talk about the importance of reading. Although many learners in non-English speaking countries do not have the opportunity for speaking, listening, and writing, they have the chance for reading a lot and it seems that reading is the main source of learning another language in non-English speaking countries. Because of this, reading was the focus of attention for many years among scholars and those interested in the process of language learning.

Reading is a multifaceted process and its understanding requires that we investigate several different processes that are involved in it. It is probably true to say that more time is spent teaching reading than any other skill (Nunan, 2001). The reason for this is that reading is a complicated process that involves so many other processes in it. For this reason, there are plenty of researches in this area.

Yet, reading comprehension continues to be a problematic area for foreign language students (Dreyer & Nel, 2003) and traditional teaching techniques in reading comprehension do not seem to solve learners' reading comprehenson problems.

For many years reading was investigated purely from a cognitive perspective and a great deal of research has focused on the cognitive aspect of reading (King, 1987; Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzo & Arzubiaga, 2001; Segalowitz & Lightbown, 1999). For those who are working in this area, reading is considered as a receptive skill and the central question is what cognitive processes underlie and account for success and failure in learners' attempt to master the second/foreign language in general and second/foreign language reading in particular (King, 1987; Rueda, MacGillivray, Monzo & Arzubiaga, 2001; Segalowitz & Lightbown, 1999). For cognitive theorists and researchers the main areas of inquiry include memory, information processing approaches, attention and noticing. Claros (2008) stated that

> cognitive theorists conceived language learning as a cognitive and individual process in which knowledge is constructed as the learner 1) is exposed to comprehensible input, 2) is given opportunities to negotiate meaning, 3) and receive negative feedback. They tend to

> agree that a learner needs to be exposed to input. However, there is no agreement on the type of input needed and much less, how such input is processed in order to become acquired (p.145).

The main criticism leveled against this view to language learning in general is that the social context of learning is overlooked to a great extent. This criticism, which is drawn upon from sociocultural theory of learning, tries to put more focus on the social factors in the process of learning. Indeed, it states that learning is not an individualistic process and it needs to be learned in a social context with the help of some peers or expert teachers (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Yang & Wilson, 2006; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). Unlike cognitive approaches which view learning as something that is to be learned based on some predetermined stages, sociocultural theory points out that learning takes place in a sociocultural environment and views learners as active constructors of their own learning environments (Johnson, 2006; Mitchel & Myles, 2004; Williams & Burden, 1997). Sociocultural theory, like cognitive theory, is concerned with cognitive development, but unlike cognitive theory it puts social factors first. In other words, sociocultural theory states that without social interaction with other more knowledgeable peers, cognitive development will not occur. Indeed, mediation and scaffolding are prerequisites for cognitive development to take place (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).