Application of Vygotsky's SCT in Chinese EFL Classroom
Suggestions for Contemporary Chinese High School Classroom

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Abstract. The Chinese government attaches great importance to English education in senior high schools. However, there are still some problems in the learning process of part of high school students in China. This article reviews the application of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in second language acquisition and gives three possible suggestions for current Chinese EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Sociocultural theory · second language teaching · Chinese high school classroom

1 Introduction

The Chinese government attaches importance to education and has made remarkable progress in the past decades through educational reforms. New teaching concepts are being explored in English as a second language classroom, including the classroom application of information technology and new media, and the growing emphasis on independent study skills [1]. The quality of English teaching in China has improved, but there are still some problems.

According to Yang, the two main features of the current Chinese high school ESL classroom are, first, the teacher-centered classroom teaching model, and second, the exam-oriented environment [1]. Chinese traditional culture could be a possible cause for these features. Aw-Yong believes that Confucian culture has influenced the current situation of English education in China [2]. The central position of Confucius and the personal realization promoted by Confucianism may lead Chinese students tend to listen to their teachers and then practice on their own. However, students have relatively fewer opportunities to practice. This is the first problem existing: Chinese students acquire reading and listening more efficiently than speaking and writing.

Another problem is the lack of pragmatics, which means students have relatively less exposure to cultural content. An essential component of learning English is developing intercultural communication skills. However, due to the influence of exam-oriented education, some Chinese high school English teaching activities are still dominated by vocabulary and grammar, and students have relatively little understanding of cultural knowledge [3]. In terms of Chinese culture, Huang believes that high school students

and teachers have cultural awareness and identification with Chinese culture, but students are less exposed to cultural expressions, and high school students rarely have the opportunity to express content related to Chinese culture [4]. In addition, English textbooks for contemporary high school students do not provide enough cultural content. It is challenging for teachers to give children adequate cultural training because of the constraints of the learning environment, resulting in students' lack of confidence in expressing Chinese culture in English. Ren Zhiqiang also believed that English textbooks lacked the description of traditional Chinese culture, and pointed out that learners' neglect of understanding traditional Chinese culture may affect the in-depth exchanges between Eastern and Western cultures in the future [5].

The application of Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory in second language classrooms may help with the two problems. It can be beneficial for students to develop in a balanced way throughout the four areas of listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and also for culture to play a more prominent part in the contemporary Chinese EFL class.

Sociocultural theory points out the necessity of participating in the social mediating activity in the process of learning [6]. It affirms the importance of teaching and emphasizes what the teacher taught should go beyond the student's current cognition, and it is considered as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) [7]. The sociocultural theory also values collaboration in learning, arguing the importance and significance of the interaction between learners and the environment surrounding them [8].

This article reviewed the application of sociocultural theory and then puts forward three suggestions that may help with the two existing problems for Chinese high school English classrooms: establishing a student-led classroom model, setting various classroom activities, and adding more cultural content into teaching.

2 Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Acquisition

2.1 The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Lantolf believes that the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) talks about how the cognitive level of second language learners who did not receive any assistance differs from the potential development level they may become after they got a professional guide [9]. Vygotsky proposed that children should stay with the person who is more knowledgeable or more capable than them, like their parents or teachers [10]. In this way, they are able to learn more and develop themselves. Donato developed this idea by giving a discussion of collective scaffolding [11]. His study supports that second language learners can help and guide their peers. Second language learners can share their language learning progress and exchange their thoughts together while experiencing collective scaffolding. Not only do L2 learners give guidance to their peers, but also improve their own language efficiency.

Besides, Donato's result also found that if the L2 learner stays with their classmates or peers who have approximately similar or equal capability to them, they will improve their learning process in a more efficient way [11]. This result does not seem exactly the same as the existing viewpoint, but Jonhson mentioned the significance of this study. That is, proving that second language learners can be seen as one of the languages acquiring resources [12]. He also argued that the process of collective scaffolding is not just for

individuals [12]. Participants in Donato's research provide influence on the process of learning together, so the change should be social. Besides, Donato's result has found that L2 learners can absorb language forms acquired during collective scaffolding or learned through peer communication and use these expressions in their own speech. Moreover, the language forms learned by the second language learner in this process can be used for a longer period of time after finishing the learning process [11].

2.2 Interaction

Interaction is an important component of Vygotsky's ZPD [7]. Second language learners may improve language efficiency through social interaction, especially dialogue. For example, L2 learners can understand what meaning can and cannot be expressed by their language in collaborative dialogue. In this process, L2 learners need to pay attention to the linguistic forms so that they can identify the deficiencies in their language [13]. Research has been made on 16 Chinese EFL high school students, and the online chat records of these students were analyzed. The results showed that through collaborative dialogue students prefer to give help to their peers, and these students can eventually improve their own language efficiency [14]. The results give of the significance of collaborative dialogue in second language acquisition. Swain believes that collaborative dialogue can have implications in second language classrooms [15]. Through conversation and collaboration with others, second language learners can discover the language issue in their sentences and make their own grammatical corrections.

Collaborative dialogue plays an important role because it is significant for both social aspects and cognition. In this case, the application of collaborative dialogue in second language classrooms should be related to culture, including society, community, politics, etc. [16]. Baraldi made a research about inter-cultural language teaching in a foreign language classroom that taught Italian as a second language [17]. The interaction between students appeared in certain cultural backgrounds. So, Baraldi believes it is important to focus on inter-culture communication [17]. Besides he also mentioned that dialogue can be used in problem-solving. Dao gives evidence on using interactions in second language classrooms [18]. He investigated 56 EFL learners and found that through interaction, L2 learners are able to improve their ability to communicate with others and they are more likely to have positive emotions.

2.3 The Activity Theory

Positive emotion may relate to the Activity Theory and the concept of motive. Although it is proposed by students of Vygotsky, the Activity Theory can be regarded as one of the principles in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory that influences the study efficiency of L2 learners [12]. The Activity theory suggests that participants with different motivations may have different processes of the same activity even when they achieved the same outcomes. In this way, different processes of the activity will also affect the final results, which may lead to changes and differentiation in the results [12]. Therefore, through this theory, the importance of motive is reflected. During the learning of a second language, the goal of learning, whether learning can persevere, and the duration of learning will all be affected by motive [12].

At the University of Delaware, sixty students taking French as a foreign language participated in a study by Gillette. The study aims to figure out whether participants' language acquisition is efficient [9]. Gillette found that students' orientation first comes from personal experience and social background and that orientation will affect students' learning outcomes [9]. As the Activity Theory mentioned before, students with different language learning outcomes may have different motives. The motive has an impact on the orientation of student learning, which in turn influences student learning outcomes. In addition, different orientations of language learning will affect the attitudes and learning strategies of second language learners [9]. Different orientations lead to effective and ineffective language learners showing differences in values and learning interests. Their satisfaction with learning results will also be influenced. Therefore, the behaviors L2 learners showed will differ, such as how they treat their assignments and whether they believe learning a second language is worthwhile.

2.4 Private Speech

Private speech, which is also called egocentric speech, talked about the relationship between language and thinking [10]. McCafferty believes that the way children learn their mother tongue is mainly mimesis. They do not actively learn but are affected by culture [25]. When acquiring a mother tongue, the phenomenon of private speech appeared in children, but private speech will disappear as children grow up. According to Vygotsky, private speech is not disappeared; but is transformed into inner speech through the process of internalization [12].

McCafferty's study confirmed the relationship between the L2 learning outcome and the frequency of using private speech [26]. A similar situation that native speaker shows appeared in second language learners. When learning a new language, private speech will also be used by L2 learners. With the growth of their own language skills and an increase in language efficiency, second language learners tend to use less private speech gradually. Moreover, private speech is less used by second language learners with higher language proficiency, as their language proficiency enables them to use the language more proficiently and to express their ideas.

The phenomenon of inner speech also occurs in L2 learners. Johnson believes that second language learners mainly use inner speech in the following two situations [12]. First, when L2 learners use vocabulary that they are relatively unfamiliar with, they may practice the usage or pronunciation of the vocabulary in advance. Second, the use of inner speech will be affected by the second language learner's inner function. For example, when they want to remember something, or mentally rehearse and talk to themselves before talking to others. Besides, effective L2 learners tend to give a longer inner speech which usually contains more complex grammar and words [11].

3 Suggestions for Contemporary Chinese EFL High School Classroom

3.1 Establishing a Student-Led Classroom Model

Establishing a student-led classroom model is one of the ways to apply Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to Chinese high school English classrooms. Chinese students are

more accustomed to listening to the teacher and then practicing, rather than what promote by western education that explores first and developing skills later [19]. While in a student-led classroom model, students are at the central position of the class, and student discussions and other activities occupy the main time of the classroom. In this process, the teacher plays a guiding role. The teachers are asked to design classroom activities that include knowledge of the potential development that the students may achieve in class.

This idea is proposed as the "flipped classroom" by Stevenson [20]. Aw-Yong believes that this model is more suitable for Chinese students for two reasons. First, most Chinese students will feel ashamed for speaking in public (classroom), especially when they talk about wrong answers, and this model can help avoid or reduce this situation, thus, to help students learning process. Because this model requires students to do preparatory work before class and understand the content of the class in advance. For example, prepare a speech on the topics for the class discussion in advance. Second, such a model can view teachers as tools to influence students' learning progress. Under the teacher-oriented classroom background, this model is more conducive to the role of teachers in guiding students to participate in classroom interaction [2].

The concept of flipped classrooms was mentioned by Aw-Yong in the paper relevant to the application of electronic products (iPad) in Chinese EFL classrooms [2]. This paper believes that the application of electronic products to high school English classrooms has limitations at this stage. Because, first, bringing electronic products to campus is not allowed in most high schools in China. These high schools often have a large number of students. In order to facilitate management and force students to prepare for the college entrance examination, these schools may choose to limit the use of electronic devices by students. Second, not only the financial situation of high school students' households but also the income status of each high school are not the same. Therefore, it may not be suitable for students to buy iPads either at their own expense or for schools to purchase iPads uniformly. Nevertheless, this paper believes that it is reasonable to retain the flipped classroom model but reduce the proportion of electronic products in the classroom.

Students do classroom preparation work before class, including reading the text in advance, looking up the grammar and words they do not know, listening to relevant listening materials, etc. Discussions between classmates before and after class are encouraged. A variety of student-led teaching activities are carried out in the classroom, including group discussions, presentations, role play, interviews, etc. Students are only allowed to speak English during this process. The advantage of this model is that students can order the tasks according to their interests while preparing for the work, which will stimulate the role of motives in the learning process. The collective scaffolding is presented in the communication and interaction with classmates in class; so that students can not only learn linguistic forms; but also exchange ideas such as learning methods. The teachers will answer students' questions or correct their mistakes in class.

This model is not only designed for improving students' speaking ability; but also for writing. Vocabulary dictation, impromptu essays in class, and reflective writing are all classroom activities that can be performed in a student-led classroom model. Students engaging in collaborative writing in classroom activities is also a learning strategy. Research shows that not only the collaborative writing itself, but also the process of

collaborative writing, including reasonable group work, resolving group conflicts, and equitably distributing writing content can promote the learning efficiency of second language learners [21].

In short, establishing a student-led classroom model, that is, students prepare the relevant content of the classroom theme in advance, and conduct more student interaction activities in the class, as well as the teacher acts as a facilitator to promote students to engage in collaborative dialogue and answer questions raised by students, is conducive to solving the problems of imbalance between listening and reading ability and writing and speaking ability existing in current Chinese high school English classrooms.

3.2   Setting Various Classroom Activities

Establishing a student-led classroom model requires students to do preparation work before class. So, this model may suit better for students with more self-discipline. Because it is difficult for students to participate in class discussions if they do not prepare or search for information before class. In order to make students better participate in classroom activities, this paper believes that it is necessary to set up various kinds of classroom activities.

First, different types of classroom activities, such as role-plays, class debates, etc., may arouse students' interest and give students a motive for learning. The purpose of this suggestion is to use the positive effect of students' motives on learning; so that students can be more seriously involved in the learning process, and achieve a better learning outcome. Setting various classroom activities may be a way to help relatively undisciplined students find their motives and learn better [27].

Setting up different teaching activities can be done in two ways. First, activities related to learning materials. When learning English articles, students can be asked to do a book show, act in a play, watch movies, and do other activities, so that the content of students' learning can satisfy their curiosity about new knowledge. Secondly, set activities relevant to students' daily life. A common situation in life, such as shopping and asking for directions may be more attractive for students [27].

Activities related to the learning content give students the opportunity to learn about the pragmatics of the language, such as how to use the word or grammar. Moreover, it enables students to apply the knowledge to reality, which is beneficial to alleviate the unbalanced development of Chinese students in the four aspects of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. At the same time, setting various activities is also conducive to students' learning of grammar, because it may help students feel that the grammar of the sentences is clearer [28].

Apart from that, setting these activities gives students chances to rehearse. This article holds the opinion that students should have opportunities to consider how to express their meanings in advance in order to play the function of private speech and inner speech in students' learning. During the classroom activities, students can consider the use of words and sentences, rehearse and get familiar with the use of words.

3.3 Adding More Cultural Content into Teaching

When students are asked to discuss (output) in class, they should first have enough knowledge of the relevant content (input). In this case, cultural content is needed in the teaching process. The content about culture added in Chinese high school English classrooms can be divided into two aspects, namely Chinese culture and foreign culture (culture of English-speaking countries). Culturally related content can make students more efficient in remembering and recalling classroom content, including vocabulary [22]. In addition, adding Chinese culture-related content will help students better overcome cultural shock [2]. Besides, according to Genc, cultural learning is significant to learning language skills [23]. The participants of his study believed that learning cultural content was beneficial for learning the grammar of a language. Because when explaining the grammatical structure of different languages, L2 teachers often use real events in daily life as examples. The expression of the same thing in different languages often cannot be translated word by word. Therefore, the teaching of cultural content also helps students understand expressions in different cultural contexts.

Introducing culturally relevant topics when establishing classroom themes is one of the effective ways to enlarge the pragmatics of students' language learning. Setting topics related to traditional Chinese culture can build an environment that students are more familiar with, and make students more actively involved in classroom discussion. It can also enable students to expand relevant vocabulary, so as to be more confident in the process of expressing themselves in English, which is conducive to enhancing students' cross-cultural competitiveness. For example, set the theme of Chinese New Year in the classroom, and students may involve new vocabulary when talking about this topic, such as firecrackers, red envelopes, and Spring Festival Gala. Learning about these cultural words may allow students to perform better in cultural exchanges.

Setting up cultural comparison activities, such as comparison of Chinese and Western cultural differences, debates, etc., can not only enhance students' understanding of Chinese culture; but also provide students with a transition between Chinese and Western cultures. In addition, a comparison of Chinese and Western proverbs is also required in this process [24]. Setting up this activity will help students understand more authentic English expressions and English culture, understand the differences between Chinese and Western cultures, and improve language efficiency.

This article believes that in view of the current situation of Chinese high school English classrooms, culture-related content is in need. The proportion of Chinese culture and English-speaking culture should keep in a balance. Adding content about traditional Chinese culture to student-centered classroom activities will help students to grasp relevant expressions and language knowledge. It also helps with students' cross-cultural competitiveness. In addition, cultural comparing activities are also required in second language classrooms to help students understand differences and relieve the pressure of cultural shock.

4 Conclusion

This article first points out two problems in Chinese high school students English learning. First, speaking and writing skills are relatively weak compared to listening and

reading. Second, there is a lack of cultural environment and opportunities for language use. Then, through a literature review of second language acquisition and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, three suggestions have been given. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Interaction require students to stay with their peers. Students acquire knowledge by helping each other and learning by themselves. The significance of motive in learning is emphasized in the Activity Theory. And the inner speech argues the process between L2 learners' thinking and speaking.

From the perspective of sociocultural theory, this article proposed three suggestions for Chinese high school English classrooms. First, to establish a student-led classroom model and give students chances to learn with their peers. Second, to set various classroom activities and help with students' motives and inner speech. Third, to add more cultural content into teaching and give chances for students' pragmatics.

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