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Implementing the Sociocultural Theory While Teaching ESL

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Abstract

Previous literature presents there is a demand to teach adult learners English due to the amount of non-English speaking citizens. Therefore, educators have responded to the need for programs that teach adult learners English. English as a Second Language (ESL) classes help adults by providing a foundation of comprehension for the English language, this foundation helps adults navigate their lives. Previous educational research states that Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory is a theory practiced in the ESL classroom because the Sociocultural Theory consists of cultural approach in addition to an educational approach. The Sociocultural Theory and has been beneficial for adult learners because it involves social interaction, cultural involvement, and all components of the teaching environment. This article discusses a Service Learner's experience and reflection while incorporating the Sociocultural Theory into teaching English as a Second Language to adult learners.

Keywords: ESL, education, adult learners, sociocultural learning

Christopher House provides services to the community such as infant and preschool, elementary, school age, and adult education programs. The organization thrives to meet the needs of Chicago's low socioeconomic neighborhoods by providing services for success in school, the workplace, and life ("About Us, Christopher House," n.d.). Adult education programs in particular are crucial to communities because they develop skills that help adults direct their daily lives, workplace, and home environments (Lakin, Elliott, & Liu, 2012). This paper will present my experiences as an ESL tutor through a Socio-cultural perspective.

Currently, there is a high demand for English as a Second Language (ESL) programs, teachers, and tutoring due to the growing number of non-English speaking citizens in the U.S. (Ryan, 2013; Wikelund, Reder, & Hart-Landsberg, 1992). The amount of non-English speaking citizens is due to past and recent immigration movements, resulting in language diversity in the U.S. (Ryan, 2013; Wikelund, et al., 1992). In response to the amount of non-English citizens, ESL programs were created to act as a "bridge" in teaching the students English while being culturally sensitive (Hayes, 1989; Mori, 2014; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Due to the

diverse population in the Chicago area, Christopher House has responded to the need for ESL programs for adult learners.

    I provided ESL tutoring services to adult learners during an academic semester. I observed experienced ESL teachers and attended classroom sessions in order to learn how to teach ESL learners. Following my ESL teaching preparation, I participated as an aide in the classroom, created lesson plans, and facilitated weekly tutoring sessions. I took into consideration the population at Christopher House in order to serve the organization in the most beneficial manner. Students from Christopher House are often characterized as adult learners of low socioeconomic status, and they come from a variety of ethnic groups. Research suggests that these factors may lead to the two major concerns with current ESL programs: participation rates and student's lack of continuity with their ESL education (Buttaro & King, 2001; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002; Wikelund, et al., 1992). These two concerns are often a result of the interaction of external factors that influence the ESL student both prior to and during class (Park & Choi, 2009; Terry, 2007). Therefore, the analysis of these learner-related factors is essential to understanding the design of ESL programs.

    One of the first characteristics to assess is the age of the students at Christopher House who are primarily adult learners. As adult learners, these students have responsibilities such as family, financial, and health responsibilities (Buttaro & King, 2001; Wikelund, et al., 1992). Adult learners often face the challenge of managing aspects of life that consistently overlap with one another before and during the ESL program (Beckett, 2005; Brooks, 2009; Buttaro & King, 2001; Park & Choi, 2009; Wikelund, et al., 1992). Skilton-Sylvester (2002) argued that, "The actual lived experiences of students need to be a key element of curriculum development and pedagogy" (p. 24).

    Another characteristic to consider is the socioeconomic status of students at Christopher House. ESL learners are often undocumented immigrants who have minimum-wage occupations where income must be stretched to provide for the whole family. Some individuals may not be able to afford to take time off from work or have child-care or transportation issues while enrolled in an ESL class (Hayes, 1989). Lastly, the cultural background of the ESL learners must be considered. ESL learners are challenged in deciding whether or not to assimilate with American culture; therefore, the complex relationship of the two cultures must be addressed (Buttaro & King, 2001; Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Often ESL learners feel pressured to assimilate to American culture and learn a new language yet their social circle may not encourage their participation in ESL classes due to cultural reasons. Success for students is dependent upon organizational, peer and family support (Park & Choi, 2009; Terry, 2007). Without that support, feelings of isolation may cause individuals to resist learning ESL for fear of being excluded from their own culture (Skilton-Sylvester, 2002). Success depends in large part, on the supportiveness of the learner's environment.

    Buttaro and King (2001) argued that the most suitable learning environment is when ESL students have a community of learners who are from the same cultural background and can openly discuss English content. ESL students thrive when the organization hosting the ESL course provides instructors familiar with the primary language of the students who can incorporate real-world learning scenarios (Buttaro & King, 2001; Park & Choi, 2009; Vu & Vu, 2012). Buttaro and King (2001) claim that, "The cultural dimension of ESL learning gives meaning to language being learned and leads to richer and more extensive language use" (p.

56). Thus, the application of teaching ESL in a format that serves a diverse population of students must occur. Based on the characteristics of Christopher House students, I applied Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory when tutoring ESL.

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

The Sociocultural Theory aligns with serving the needs of the Christopher House organization and its students. Administrators and educators have found consistent evidence validating the importance of applying Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory to teaching ESL students (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Antón, 1999; Brooks, 2009). Ajayi (2008) purports "the sociocultural framework provides a dynamic interaction, interrelation, and interconnection of theory and practice in such ways that theories are grounded in specific contexts of practice and, in turn, these practices inform theories" (p. 654). There are two major tenets of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. The first tenet is that cognitive development is mediated by culture and social interaction. The second tenet of the Sociocultural Theory is the zone of proximal development model (ZPD) (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). The ZPD occurs when the social interaction occurs between a student and a more knowledgeable individual in a particular subject matter (Vygotsky, 1978). Specifically, I provided aid to the student by guiding learning tasks that the student would not have been able to achieve as easily without my assistance. This process is identified as scaffolding (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997), giving students the framework to extend their knowledge. Vygotsky (1978) argued that development occurs in two locations, externally from social interactions and internally.

Therefore, the cognitive development of a new language occurs as a product of the interactions between student and teacher (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Vygotsky, 1978). The application of the ZPD has continually been shown to be beneficial by educators (e.g., Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Antón, 1999; Beckett, 2005; Brooks; 2009; Chen & Jiang, 2004; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997). The usage of the ZPD is vital in teaching because it incorporates all aspects of the learning environment: the learner, the teacher, their relationship and shared experiences, and the resources used to facilitate learning (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). Students often have the intellectual ability to learn new information but may lack a realization of their learning potential (Antón, 1999). This misconception can be corrected if a teacher facilitates the ZPD. A teacher facilitating the ZPD can establish a healthy learning environment and guide students to learn the new concepts by building relationships with them and utilizing effective learning materials (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997).

Numerous studies present the effectiveness of ZPD in learning environments. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) provided evidence of the importance of the ZPD where error corrections with second language learners were dependent on the mediation process between teacher and student. Similarly, Nyikos and Hashimoto (1997) examined the ZPD within the division of labor in group settings and found that the role of social interaction played a stronger role in learning environment than expected. Nyikos and Hashimoto (1997) observed, "that without a strongly supportive social component, the potential for learning (or ZPD), for both the individual and the group was radically undermined" (p. 516). These findings suggest that student learning is mediated by social interactions from teachers and peers.

The ZPD is typically applied in a one-on-one setting, but it is also flexible enough to be

applied in a variety of learning environments, such as group or classroom settings (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Antón 1999; Beckett, 2005; Chen & Jiang, 2004). This flexibility is particularly helpful in community organizations that may not have the finances to provide ESL learners with individualized tutoring (Beckett, 2005). Chen and Jiang (2004) suggested that learning environments with small groups with similar learning abilities who work with one another can foster constructive learning environments. Similarly, Antón (1999) found that the application of the Sociocultural Theory in classroom environments creates the development of beneficial language practice. When the teacher executed "learner-centered" rather than "teacher-centered" methods, learners were more likely to become highly involved. The learner-centered approach involves consistent interaction among learners such as using group activities. The ZPD can be successful in language learning and easily implemented because it can be applied in adaptable formats and varied learning environments (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Antón 1999; Beckett, 2005; Chen & Jiang, 2004; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997).

Reflection

I observed several emerging themes while tutoring ESL and implementing the Sociocultural Theory at Christopher House: 1) A student-teacher relationship was mandatory in order for students to learn from me; 2) an interactive learning community was more valuable than a traditional lecture teaching style; and 3) being culturally sensitive was crucial while working at Christopher House.

"Our relationships were important to the learning process because it allowed me to determine what the students needed to learn to navigate their daily lives, helped me approach a struggling student, and humbled me by understanding the perspective of an ESL adult learner."

A strong relationship between the student and me was mandatory while tutoring English. When I first arrived, I observed students hesitant to approach me for help. I solved this problem by verbalizing clear expectations for students and creating a relationship with the students. In order to create a relationship with students I sat in a different seat when class was in session, facilitated regular conversations, and played introduction and icebreaker games with students. As I was consistent with attempting to build a relationship with all students, I noticed a teacher-student relationship forming. For example, students started calling me by my name and not "teacher", approached me for help, and had less formal conversations with me.

Our relationships were important to the learning process because it allowed me to determine what the students needed to learn to navigate their daily lives, helped me approach a struggling student, and humbled me by understanding the perspective of an ESL adult learner. The student in return was able to advance in English skills and approach me if there was confusion with material. Therefore, it is clear that the relationships formed between student and teacher can influence learning. This notion of teacher-student relationships contributing to successful learning is also represented in academic literature (Ajayi, 2008; Brophy, 1986; Klem & Connell, 2004).

The Sociocultural Theory includes a relationship between the teacher and student based on social interaction. Klem and Connell (2004) observed that when teachers create an organized learning environment, explained classroom discussions, and were sympathetic, students tended to be more engaged in the learning material. This correlated to what I observed at Christopher House. When I built a relationship with my

students, I observed a return in that students were willing to put more effort into work because of the reassurance of a more personal relationship with me. Schwarzer (2009) discussed that the instructor must consider ESL students as adults with families, jobs, responsibilities, previous learning experiences, and dreams. Similarly, during my experience, I had to take into consideration that the students were more than ESL learners; they were individuals with complex lives. Therefore, creating a healthy teacher-student relationship parallels the literature about the critical role that educators play in students' lives (Brophy, 1986; Klem & Connell, 2004).

I believed that one way to foster a positive learning environment would be to create an interactive learning community. After serving at Christopher House I did find that an interactive learning community was more beneficial than a traditional lecture teaching style. In the interactive learning community, students were working in groups and partner activities while the teacher monitored the progress of students. I observed the benefits of group activities, such as students with greater confidence in their speaking abilities, easily-facilitated social interactions, and the mutual enrichment of strong relationships.

I would facilitate an interactive learning community by pairing students based on their strengths and weaknesses. For example, I would pair a struggling student with a student who understood the material well. Students were more responsive to this process when compared to a traditional lecture because it involved social interaction among peers. When students were in a friendly learning community, they worked together in order to learn English. Thus, it is apparent that facilitating an interactive learning community helped students learn ESL.

 By providing an interactive learning environment I took the role of a mentor to students more than a traditional instructor. Vygtosky (1978) refers to the mentor as the "More Knowledgeable Other" (MKO). Moreover, it is possible for peers to occupy the position of the MKO. I implemented this ZPD when partnering students. It helped the struggling student by offering a new perspective for learning the material and helped the knowledgeable student further sharpen their English skills. This tactic is often implemented in educational settings due to the differences in ability among classrooms (Brooks, 2009; Chen & Jiang; 2004; Guerro & Villamil, 2000).

Further, the usage of ZPD in group settings provided learners with growth in subject areas by generating different points of views, problem solving, and creative and reflective thinking (Guerro & Villamil, 2000; Nyikos & Hashimoto, 1997). The benefits to using a group ZPD that I observed were consistent engagement among students, as represented by attendance, comprehension of material, participation in the classroom and desire to learn (Klem & Connell, 2004; Schwarzer, 2009). The learning community helped the students to feel comfortable working with their peers and they were willing to participate in the daily lessons. Therefore, it is clear that the ZPD component of the Sociocultural Theory aided in the creation of an interactive learning community that helped ESL students learn at Christopher House.

Cultural sensitivity was also crucial to my work while serving at Christopher House. I was aware of the challenge I faced in working with a new population, because I had limited experience with adult learners who were of low socioeconomic status. Although I spoke Spanish, I wanted to refrain from using it because it would encourage the usage of Spanish in the classroom. The first day I spoke Spanish, the students were quickly responsive and attempted to utilize the fact that I could be used as a direct translator. This was particularly helpful to the lowest level ESL students. Additionally, because I am

from Hispanic descent it made it easier to explain certain concepts and words. I deliberately balanced the amount of Spanish and English that I used in the classroom setting.

Additionally, I found that cultural factors influenced the learning of the students. For example, when I expressed concern to a student who was missing class regularly, I would find out that the student would often mention cultural constraints such as family and work responsibilities that restricted their class attendance. Although I encouraged the students to make time to attend class I knew that I had to remain culturally sensitive during these discussions and knew that often cultural factors were more important to the student than learning English. Thus, the relationship between the students and their ESL learning was clearly influenced by culture.

The Sociocultural Theory also considers culture (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) suggested that culture plays an important role in influencing and shaping development therefore, development is partly driven by culture. In teaching ESL there is often the issue of conflicting learning experiences. Educators suggest the solution to this problem is to aim for a medium where past culture and current culture is used in the learning environment (Ajayi, 2008; Berry & Williams, 2004; Buttaro & King; 2001).

Based on my experience I observed that bilingual teachers were more beneficial than monolingual teachers because bilingual instructors were able to reach a happy medium of past and present culture. Further, when teaching ESL it is crucial that teachers are culturally sensitive because cultural factors influence students' daily lives that also apply to their learning (Auerbach, 1993; Mori, 2014). Students are often grateful when teachers integrate cultural material because it shows that teachers are culturally aware (Brophy, 1986; Vu, & Vu, 2012). It is apparent that culture is considered an important part of learning with regards to the Sociocultural Theory.

The application of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory was successful in teaching ESL to adult learners, which is consistent with past educational research. The Sociocultural Theory worked at Christopher House because the theory was relevant to the adult learner and Hispanic population and helped me serve the community of learners. With the guidance of the Sociocultural Theory, I was able to successfully teach adult learners ESL, monitor the progress of the students over the ESL course, and developed healthy learning relationships with the students. The importance of this paper and my experiences can be translated into helping future educators teach ESL and understand the importance of being culturally sensitive, in future ESL educational settings.

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