

Socio-cultural and Social Constructivist Theories and Its Application in EFL Classroom for Thai Pre-service Teachers: A Review for Further Research

Bussayarat Nithideechaiwarachok
Mahasarakham University, Thailand
Email: bussayaratnij@gmail.com

Jiraporn Chano
Mahasarakham University, Thailand
Corresponding email: jiraporn.j@msu.ac.th

Chi Cheng Wu
Kun Shan University, Taiwan
Email: deakinroy@gmail.com

Received: 3 January 2022
Reviewed: 16 April 2024-17 July 2024
Accepted: 1 August 2024
Published: 30 September 2024

Abstract

Socio-cultural and social constructivist theories are crucial in learning and education. This article aims to inform readers about socio-cultural and social constructivist theories and to present their application in language classrooms. The body of knowledge in this article was synthesized from journal articles and books concentrating on the theories that are significant in preparing pre-service teachers in EFL classrooms. The article begins with an overview of socio-cultural theory involving mediation, activity theory, cooperative learning activities, and scaffolding. Then, the article explains the social constructivist theory and its application in EFL classrooms. The final part of the article sheds light on suggestions and future research.

Keywords: Socio-cultural theory; social constructivist theory; pre-service teachers; EFL classroom

Introduction

English is used for communication on a global basis and is considered an international language. In the educational context, the English language is definitely essential. Teachers and students both utilize English to access reputable resources. English is becoming a more important language for increased communication as well as a tool for social advancement. Numerous countries where English is not the primary language actively advocate for their population to acquire the language (Kongkerd, 2013; Rao, 2019).

In Thailand, English language teaching and learning are essential for the growth of the nation and its citizens. All Thai educational institutions, from kindergarten to university, provide

courses in English. The standard of English language instruction has steadily increased since it was first introduced in Thai classrooms. The Ministry of Thai Education has made numerous efforts to promote English proficiency in order to improve educational standards and maximize student potential (Ministry of Education, 2017). English is crucial for both educational and communication settings. In addition, in order to succeed in international communication, excursions, and studying overseas, students need to develop the four skills of listening, reading, speaking, and writing.

The government has a policy on education and learning, providing for educational reforms and learning to create the quality of Thai people to be able to learn and develop themselves to their full potential. The Ministry of Education has a policy to raise the standard of English in all courses in order to develop English language teaching and learning so students have the ability to use English as a tool to search for international knowledge and to keep modernizing with the world. In addition, to support the entry into the ASEAN Community and to increase the competitiveness of the country for the next step (Ministry of Education, 2019).

In addition, preparing pre-service teachers, especially English pre-service teachers, is crucial. The Ministry of Education (2019) announced the national qualifications framework standards for higher education, particularly for education programs, that pre-service teachers should be concerned with regarding moral and ethical aspects and knowledge. To illustrate, pre-service teachers should love, believe, and be proud of the teaching profession with the spirit and ideology of being a teacher. Also, follow the professional ethics of teachers. Moreover, they could be a volunteer, patient, self-sacrificing, responsible, and honest in the work assigned, both academically and professionally. Besides, be able to continually develop and behave as good role models for students, family, society, and the nation. Enable sustainable development. Furthermore, they could have democratic values and characteristics; in other words, respect the rights and honor others. Be harmonious and work with others. Use reason and wisdom in life and decision-making.

Other aspects pre-service teachers could be concerned with is having knowledge of the principles, concepts, and theories of teaching professional content, such as teacher values, morals, ethics, teacher spirit, teacher philosophy, teacher psychology, and learning psychology to manage to learn and assist, solve problems, promote and develop students, learning curriculum and management, innovation and information technology, learning to measure and evaluating education, learning research, innovation development for learner development, communication language for teachers, supervision and teaching skills, technology and digital skills, research and assessment skills, and creative collaboration skills. Furthermore, to have knowledge in 21st century skills: knowledge and understanding in integrating knowledge with practice and cross-disciplinary integration and be able to apply them (Ministry of Education, 2019).

In order to prepare English pre-service teachers for both English language skills and principles for teaching skills, the assumptions of the approach and theories are significant when taking them into account. In the study of second languages, scholars provide guidance on a variety of language acquisition concepts. These theories are based on research, language acquisition, and observation. One of Vygotsky's important theories is that Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory has changed people's perception of language learning. Additionally, this is an attempt to rationalize how ideas work in the child's language development. Besides, Vygotsky's studies also highlighted important theoretical elements such as the zone of proximal development, mediation, scaffolding, internalization, and private speech. However, he focuses on social, cultural, and historical artifacts that are important in the intellectual growth and future performance of children.

According to Lamy and Hampel (2007), sociocultural theory links psychological processes with the society of individuals. As Vygotsky (1978) explains that interaction is fundamental to the learning process in socio-cultural theory. In addition, interacting with others is essential for learning with the assistance of guides or peers who are capable of managing problems linked to the learning process. Also, with the assistance of specially designed technological devices and tools, for example, virtual conference programs, announcement boards, and even messengers, the virtual environment provides many opportunities for learners to interact, study, collaborate, and understand the cultural aspects of the target language.

Literature review

Socio-cultural theory

Vygotsky (1987) described the nature of social-cultural theory as a theory that describes human consciousness with basic concepts called a general genetic law of cultural development, attention, and memory. The conceptualization and desire for the cultural development of each human being is a mental change that begins with the influence of the social and cultural environment passed down from the ancestors and the exchange of cultures between different societies. In the present, through the experiences that each person has experienced, and together they eventually transform into individual mental attributes. Moreover, Packer and Goicoechea (2000) stated that a social-cultural theory believes that knowledge is built on the requirements of society, joint activities, as well as interpersonal relationships in society, encourages individuals to strive for individuality in order to give themselves a role that is accepted by society and be able to coexist equally with others.

Mediation

Vygotsky introduced the concept of mediated action to explain semiotic processes that allow human consciousness to develop through interaction with inventions, tools, etc., socially in the environment, and, as a result, individuals search for new meaning in their world (Yamagata-Lynch, 2010). Students do not ask for clarification in these cases because they care about their identity and do not want to be identified for fear of being inaccurate, unattractive, or uncool (Wartch, 1998). In this case, we should look at the isolated parts of the system to see how changes in the mixture affect the system as a whole. This shows that cultural tools are ineffective without a person using cultural tools. From a socio-cultural point of view, the interaction of cultures in language learning and acquisition are the main dimensions of the direct learning process that involve emotional considerations such as aspirations, subjective relationships, interrelationships and participant motivation.

Activity theory

The contextual framework for interaction, the theory of sociocultural activity, develops new forms of reality and is driven by social, cultural, and physical needs (Vygotsky, 1978; Fogarty, 1999). The implementation of teaching comes from activities since it is the basis of learning, especially language learning. To bring theory into practice, general classroom instruction is first used to create an activity framework. The work is then applied to the structure, context in which the physical environment is required, the purpose of the change, the role of the participants, and the standards of interaction that are socially and culturally accepted. It can be assumed that students will complete tasks with guidance from professors and peers in this way (Vygotsky, 1978; Magnan, 2008).

Cooperative learning activities

Scaffolding is a supporting structure built around it. For buildings under construction, when the structure is strong enough, the scaffolding can be removed, and the structure will remain strong and stable. In Vygotsky's (1978) metaphorical sense, scaffolding refers to the help of others, for example, parents, friends, teachers, or reference sources, such as dictionaries. This will help your kids perform better. Scaffolding, according to Hammond and Gibbons (2001), is "High Challenge, High Support". In other words, teachers must assign tasks that push students beyond their existing abilities so that students can perform these activities. Teachers must provide support measures that allow students to perform at this new level. Students will get bored and may not be motivated if the work is not demanding enough. However, students will be dissatisfied and may give up if there is not enough support. As a result, scaffolding helps students make great progress in language learning.

Scaffolding is also associated with what Vygotsky refers to as the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This refers to the variety of tasks and activities that the student can complete with scaffolding, but that may be beyond their current ability if left alone. Teachers must be extremely skilled in assessing and then utilizing their pupils' ZPD. Scaffolding is related to Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD). Vygotsky (1978) defines ZPD as "what a person can achieve while working collaboratively with others compared to what they could have achieved on their own." Besides, assistance from a more skilled person is essential for children's continued development. To summarize the notion of Vygotsky, "the zone of proximal development is the distance between what children can do by themselves and the next learning that they can be helped to achieve with competent assistance" (Raymond, 2000). As ZPD displays in figure 1.

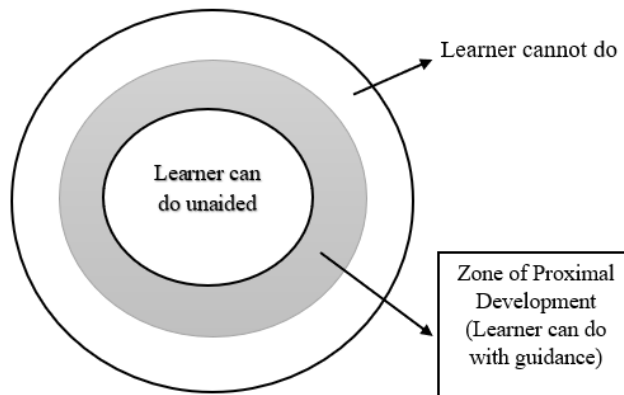


Figure 1. Zone of proximal development (ZPD)
Source: Vygotsky's concept (1978)

Scaffolding in language learning

In learning a second language, scaffolding plays a significant role in assisting students to achieve tasks, in particular, language learning skills. Scaffolding was introduced, and the term was first used as a metaphor in the learning context by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). The term since then has been interpreted and employed in educational research and practice in many different ways. Scaffolding refers to the "practice of providing appropriate support to help learners engage in tasks that are beyond their current level of proficiency" (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976; Zhang & Quintana, 2012). Moreover, assistance may be provided by parents, more experienced peers, or

technological tools. In addition, it could be illustrated that teachers, parents, and even peers in the same class can administer scaffolding as well as more knowledgeable and experienced individuals close to the learner (Walqui, 2006; Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976).

According to learning principles within a supportive learning environment, it could be explained that scaffolding can emerge during teacher-student and student-student interactions to encourage learners to complete their tasks independently. This assistance is provided during tasks that students are unable to complete without the help of a teacher. It is essential to support learners so that they can complete activities successfully. It could be noted that teacher help may be reduced when students gain knowledge of new ideas and build upon them. Also, it should be mentioned that scaffolding works best when teachers step in when required by students. In order to improve second language (L2) acquisition, educational researchers emphasize the crucial roles that scaffolding plays in EFL pedagogy by focusing on teacher, peer, and material scaffolding (Malik, 2017; Yawiloeng, 2022; Zhang & Quintana, 2012).

Wells (1999) summarizes aspects of the extended ZPD concept, which, while intended for classroom teaching, may apply to any learning scenario. ZPD can be used in any context when a person is building practical expertise while engaging in activities. Teaching in ZPD involves being sensitive to learners' current goals and stages of development and providing assistance that will help them achieve those goals and increase their potential for future participation.

Based on the review of critical theories, the theory has the potential to generate contextual language pedagogy and activities that can be modified and applied in other situations. The main characteristic of pedagogy based on socio-cultural theories is that they are student-centered and give students autonomy. As a result, students are able to argue, debate, and criticize, as well as build their own knowledge. Thus, socio-cultural theory influenced the development and implementation of constructivist and transactional courses.

Social constructivist theory

Social constructivism gives a psycholinguistic explanation for how interactive pedagogical techniques can effectively support learning. It emphasizes the importance of learning in a social context and sees students as "active constructors of their own learning environment" (Mitchell & Myles, 1988). We learn as engaged members of society, not as isolated people. What we learn and how we make sense of what we learn is affected by where and when we study, as well as the social context in which we learn.

The father of social constructivism, Lev Vygotsky, believed that learning occurs through discussion (Vygotsky, 1978). This discourse is originally intermental, which means it occurs between a teacher and a student, or between students, or even between text and reader (Wilson, 1999). However, internal or intramental conversation is used by the learner to make sense of what is spoken or written (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, learning is interactive in two ways: learners must connect with sources of ideas or knowledge in social settings, and they must actively participate in reconstructing ideas or knowledge within their own minds.

Furthermore, Vygotsky emphasizes that learning is dependent on the aim or reason for learning, which Lantolf (2000) refers to as "activity theory". What we choose to focus on in our learning, and how we go about it, is determined by the social aims of the activity. For example, students learn knowledge in quite different ways when studying irregular verbs, reading an email from a pen pal, or reading a magazine article about their favorite music. Teachers can play an important role in creating learning settings that serve various learning purposes, but what really matters is how students perceive the activity.

As Bringuier (1980) cites in Holzer (1994), the fundamental idea of constructivism is that knowledge must be created by the learner. Teachers cannot provide it. Knowledge production is a dynamic process that requires the active participation of learners to take responsibility for their own learning. According to Molenda (1991, cited in Yuan Feng, 1995), constructivism is generally considered a theoretical learning perspective, in which it is held that a person actively creates his own way of thinking as a result of his innate ability to interact with his/her experiences.

Susan Hanley (1994, as referenced in Murphy, 1997) gives an unusual view of behaviorism, stating that the classroom is often driven by behaviorism. "Teachers speak" and rely significantly on textbooks for curriculum structure. There is a belief that students must have restricted information. Knowledge is divided into pieces and makes up a complete concept. Teachers communicate their thoughts to students in a see-pass way. It is less likely that students will ask questions, think independently, or communicate with each other.

What Hanley describes is the same situation repeated over the years in a Thai classroom. The teacher simply lectures to make it through the class session. Students simply take notes from the board to receive information or texts, not to gain knowledge for exams, regardless of originality, synthesis of knowledge or originality. Sometimes students are ready to ask questions, but most of the time they do not because they fear criticism and humiliation from their teachers and peers. As a result, they conclude that they should be quiet and do what other students or teachers have instructed them to do. Unfortunately, this trend will cripple them in universities, where they will have to study mostly on their own. However, in some classes, especially language classes, students are required to participate and debate in class, where students find it difficult to succeed because they are never encouraged to develop creativity, problem-solving skills, and self-confidence.

Applications of constructivism

By utilizing this constructivism theory principle, language teachers can include constructivism theory into their classroom instruction. In order to optimize students' language learning and usage, educators can design resources that are suitable for each student's level and aptitude while also inspiring them to speak the language as much as feasible. Holzer (1994) also presented a concise overview of the transition from constructivism to active learning.

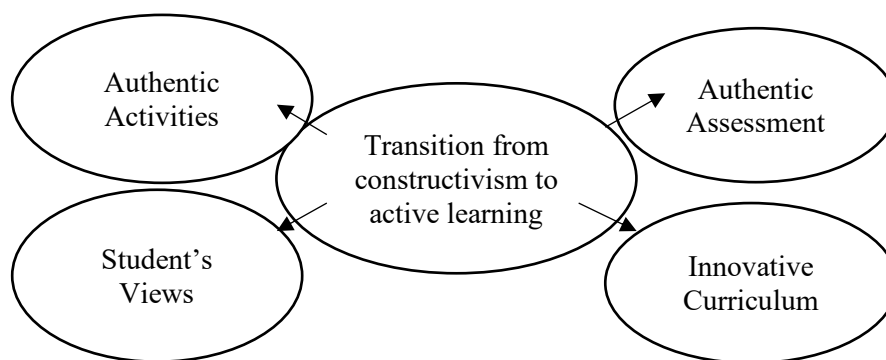


Figure 2. Overview of the transition from constructivism to active learning
Source: Holzer (1994)

Authentic activities

According to Harel and Papert (1991), learning 'knowledge structure' occurs with pleasure, especially when learners engage in meaningful activities that they can consciously share with others. DeCort (1991, as cited in Holzer, 1994) also states that these activities should be examples of future tasks and difficulties that may cause learners to socially interact and familiarize themselves with learning resources.

Students' views

Brooks (1993, as cited in Holzer, 1994) makes it clear that we want to seek and value students' perspectives because students are windows to their knowledge and reasoning. Recognizing students' perspectives allows us to improve learning. Learning is a process, not an end result. Each perspective is a temporary intellectual pause on the path to gradual increase and should be fostered by non-judgmental constructive and active learning feedback. On the contrary, questions that only require a single (right/wrong) answer hinder risk-taking and creativity.

Authentic assessment

Wiggins (1990) notes that assessments are genuine when we examine student performance directly on worthwhile intellectual work. In addition, according to Brooks (1993, as quoted by Holzer), learning continues because solving complex problems requires adapting knowledge to new situations. Teachers can distinguish between rote memorization and constructed knowledge, and many solutions are possible.

Innovative curriculum

Brooks states that to promote active learning, we need innovative curricula that allow students to inquire, explore, experiment, collaborate, and experience the joy of discovery. Moreover, according to Tobias and Wagoner (1991, as reported in Holzer, 1994), new learning environments based on the principles of active learning are being developed in many institutions.

Conclusion

In preparing English pre-service teachers to encounter professional fields in teacher education, it is important to consider the assumptions of the strategy and theories in order to train English pre-service teachers for both teaching and English language skills. Educators who specialize in second language acquisition offer advice on a range of language learning topics. These hypotheses are supported by observation, study, and language learning. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is credited with altering people's perspectives on language acquisition, which is one of his most significant theories.

This is also an attempt to explain concepts in terms of how they function in a child's language development. Important theoretical concepts including the zone of proximal development, mediation, scaffolding, internalization, and private speech were also highlighted by Vygotsky's research. However, he concentrates on historical, social, and cultural objects that have bearings on children's future academic achievement and intellectual development.

In addition, the psycholinguistic theory of social constructivism explains how interactive teaching methods can effectively promote learning. It highlights how crucial it is for kids to study in a social setting and views them as "active constructors of their own learning environment." Not as solitary individuals, but as active participants in society, we learn. When and where we study, as well as the social context in which we learn, all have an impact on what we learn and how we interpret what we learn.

Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in this work.

Funding acknowledgements

The research received funding from Mahasarakham University.

References

- Feng, Y. (1995). Some thoughts about applying constructivist theories of learning to guide instruction. In J. Willis, B. Robin & D. Willis (Eds.), *Proceedings of SITE 1995--Society for Information Technology & Teacher Education International Conference* (pp. 816-819). Waynesville, NC USA: Association for the Advancement of Computing in Education (AACE). Retrieved October 6, 2024 from <https://www.learntechlib.org/primary/p/46511/>.
- Hammond, J., & Gibbons, P. (2001). *What is scaffolding?* In J. Hammond (Ed.), *Scaffold: Teaching and learning in language and literacy education* (pp. 24-31). Sydney: Primary English Teaching Association
- Harel, I. and Papert S. 1991. *Constructionism*. Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation
- Holzer, S. (1994). From constructivism to active learning. *The innovator*, 2(2).
- Kongkerd, W. (2013). Teaching English in the era of English used as a lingua franca in Thailand. *Executive Journal*, 33(4). http://www.bu.ac.th/knowledgecenter/executive_journal/oct_dec_13/pdf/aw01.pdf
- Lamy, M., & Hampel, R. (2007). *Online communication in language learning and teaching*. Palgrave Macmillan. <http://doi.org/10.1057/9780230592681>
- Lantolf, J.P. (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Magnan, S. S. (2008). *The unqualified promise of teaching for communicative competence: Insights from sociocultural theory*. In: J.P. Lantolf & M.E. Poehner, eds., *Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages* (pp. 350-379). London: Equinox.
- Malik, S.A. (2017). Revisiting and re-representing scaffolding: The two gradient model, *Cogent Education*, 4(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2331186X.2017.1331533>
- Ministry of Education. (2017). *Education in Thailand*. Bangkok: Office of the Education Council. Retrieved from https://www.bic.moe.go.th/images/stories/pdf/EDUCATION_IN_THAILAND_2017.pdf
- Ministry of Education. (2019). *Undergraduate qualifications standard framework (MOE) for education program*. Retrieved from https://www.ratchakitcha.soc.go.th/DATA/PDF/2562/E/056/T_0012.PDF
- Mitchell, H., & Myles, F. (1988). *Second language learning theories*. London: Arnold.
- Murphy, E. (1997). *Constructivism...from philosophy to practice*, Retrieved from www.stemnet.nf.ca.
- Nomnian, S. (2002). Constructivism: Theory and its application to language teaching. *Studies in Language and Language Teaching*, 11, 62-71.
- Packer, M. J., & Goicoechea, J. (2000). Sociocultural and constructivist theories of learning: Ontology, not just epistemology. *Educational psychologist*, 35(4), 227-241.
- Rao, P. S. (2019). The role of English as a global language. *Research Journal of English*, 4(1), 65-79.

- Raymond, E. (2000). Cognitive characteristics. Learners with mild disabilities (pp. 169-201). Needham Heights, MA: Allyn & Bacon, Pearson Education Company.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Walqui, A. (2006). Scaffolding instruction for English language learners: A conceptual framework. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 9(2), 159-180. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050608668639>
- Wells, G., (1999). *Dialogic inquiry, toward a sociocultural practice and theory of education*, Cambridge University Press, UK.
- Wertsch, J. V. (1998). *Mind as action*. New York NY: Oxford University Press.
- Wilson, K. (1999). Note-taking in the academic writing process of non-native speaker students: Is it important as a process or a product? *Journal of College Reading and Learning*, 29(2), 166-179.
- Wood, D., Bruner, J. S., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Child Psychology & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines*. 17, 89-100.
- Yamagata-Lynch, L. C. (2010). Understanding cultural historical activity theory. *Activity systems analysis methods: Understanding complex learning environments*, 13-26.
- Yawiloeng, R. (2022). Using instructional scaffolding and multimodal texts to enhance reading comprehension: Perceptions and attitudes of EFL students. *Journal of Language and Linguistic Studies*, 18(2), 877-894.
- Zhang, M., & Quintana, C. (2012). Scaffolding strategies for supporting middle school students' online inquiry processes. *Computers and Education*, 58(1), 181-196. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2011.07.016>.