Implementing Sociocultural Approach in Teaching English as a Second Language in Pakistan: Challenges and Remedies

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Abstract
It has long been established that teaching of English in Pakistan, especially at school and college level, does not provide the learners with communicative competency generally, thus, the majority of our learners cannot speak English effectively. Sociocultural theory offers a radical perspective of teaching English as a second language, turning this whole teaching-learning process into a collaborative endeavor. This study aims at experimenting this innovative approach in our context to see if this approach is practical or not, and what are the challenges and their remedies in doing so. To carry out this study, experimental research was employed including pre and post-test design. The data collected quantitatively at first, was evaluated qualitatively, later. The findings of the study clearly demonstrate that speaking skill of learners improved significantly when English was taught under the sociocultural guidelines making the learners to reach to their maximum potential by learning and developing collaboratively. However, there were certain challenges in implementing sociocultural language teaching which need to be overcome to make this teaching learning process more effective and constructive. The study suggests that English language teaching approaches, textbooks and examination system should be language oriented and speaking skill enhancement supportive to enable the learners to perform as confident and efficient English speakers.

Keywords: sociocultural, implementation, challenges, remedies

1. Introduction
“English education cuts a sorry figure in Pakistani schools; it does not yield fluent speakers of the language, which should ideally be the primary goal of teaching a language” (Kiran, 2010). English, considered one of the most widely spoken languages of the world for the past many decades (Kitao, 1996; Wierzbicka, 2006), attains the status of official, educational, research and even court language in Pakistan, along with our national language, Urdu (Mehboob, 2009; Kiran, 2010). Despite its undisputed importance and function, regrettably, the teaching of English remains unsatisfactory as far as its communicative competency on the part of the learners is concerned. Majority of our learners remain unable to communicate well in English even though it is taught to them as compulsory subject from class one till graduation (Coleman, 2010). Though a number of factors have been accounted for this faulty English language teaching, such as unsupportive curriculum, over-crowded classrooms, obstructive examination system etc. (Kiran, 2010; Ahmad, 2004), yet the focal criticism is mostly laid on flawed language teaching approaches and methods. Within our context, English is treated as ‘subject’ not as a ‘language’ (Kiran, 2010) thus, no particular emphasis is given on enhancement of communicative skills of the learners. This negligence makes the learners suffer seriously when it comes to communicate and express themselves in the said language.

The past studies carried out in the area of ESL revealed that language cannot be learnt in isolation rather it is a social endeavour in its essence (Lantolf, 2003; Mendelson, 2010; Putman, 2011). The works of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) laid the foundation for this social nature of language learning in which the learners jointly work to achieve a goal (Lantolf & Poehner, 2008; Gibbons, 2002 & 2003). A meaningful context created within the sociocultural framework to support the learners towards taking turns, initiating discussion, developing ideas or thoughts leads them towards generating more complex discourse or “extended stretches of language” (Gibbons, 2002, p. 15). Based on this sociocultural notion of second language teaching and learning, this study aims to carry out experimental research in which 10th class students are provided with the collaborative language learning environment which would facilitate the enhancement of speaking skill of the learners. To measure the learners’ speaking proficiency at the beginning as well at the end of the experimental teaching pre and post-tests are conducted.
This study will be valuable for various stakeholders including textbook writers, teachers, and most importantly learners. The study results and findings will be a leading point for the teachers to implement sociocultural language learning within the classrooms to teach English effectively. It will also help the textbook writers to include language oriented activities. Finally, it will also support the learners to learn using English efficiently forcommunicative purpose, without any fear and hesitation.

The present study sets out to implement sociocultural framework of second language learning with an objective to enhance communicative competency, particularly speaking skill of school level students. To achieve the said purpose, scaffolding language teaching approach is opted as it is deeply appreciated when development of effective second language learning and teaching context is concerned (Wells, 2000; Gibbons, 2002). Moreover, speaking skill development is aimed for the fact that it generally remains the most neglected skill within our English language teaching context (Kausar; 2011, Akhtar, 1997; Amina, 2010), where learners are rarely guided and supported towards using this language for communicative purpose. Thus, the learners seriously lack at expressing themselves effectively in English even though they study it as a compulsory subject for many years during their educational career.

2. Objectives of the Study

As mentioned earlier, this study aimed to implement SLLA under the sociocultural framework of second language learning and teaching, within our context, mainly focussing on the following objectives:

1. To implement SLLA at school level in Pakistan to enhance the learners’ communicative competence as far as speaking skill is concerned
2. To analyze what challenges come up if SLLA is implemented within our contextual constraints
3. To suggest what remedies can be employed to meet the challenges of SLLA to produce substantial results

3. Literature Review

A child’s cognitive development or learning has long been a subject of debate among researchers and educationists (Gibbons, 2002). Mainly, the two major ideologies regarding the goals of education as well as the ways by which it could be accomplished existed side by side since the concept of public education was emerged (Wells, 2000). The first ideology considered the learners as the “empty vessels” in which the teachers were supposed to deposit the information or knowledge. Opposite to it, the second philosophy transformed the learners into the centre of learning process, where they construct knowledge individually (Gibbons, 2002, p. 6).

However, both these orientations have been criticised as far as the phenomenon of second language learning is concerned (Cummins, 2000). The basis of this criticism lies in the fact that whether learners are treated as empty vessels or as an individual-productive intellect; fundamentally, they are considered as “independent and self contained” entities constructing their own knowledge all by themselves (Gibbons, 2002, p. 7). Dissatisfied with this “individualistic notion of learning” (ibid), various researchers and educationists (Wertsch, Mercer, Wells) offered a radically different perspective of learning and cognitive development, called Sociocultural Framework of learning, originated by a Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky.

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934), a philosopher, educationist and psychologist, was mainly interested in the interpretation of human cognitive and learning in purely social terms (Ratner, 1991). In opposition to the contemporary philosophies which either focused on the external or internal experience, Vygotsky “conceptualized development as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized process” (Mahn & Holbrook, 1996, pp. 191-206). In other words, human development is regarded, as Gibbons (2002) perceives it, “intrinsic social rather than individualistic” – the result of one’s social and cultural experience (p. 8). Vygotsky claimed that cognitive development within individuals appears at two cultural levels “first, between people (inter-psychology) and then inside the child (intra-psychology)” (Vygotsky, 1978, p.75).

This implies that culture provides twofold contribution to learners’ intellectual development. Not only do the children acquire much of their thinking or gain knowledge from it, the tools of thinking are also derived from cultural settings. Such cultural and social settings provide the learners with the means of ‘what to think’ and ‘how to think’, firstly, depending on the more knowledgeable or experienced others around them, and then, gradually taking on the responsibility of their own learning (Lev & Wenger, 1990).

The sociocultural notion of human learning opened new horizons for researchers and educationists as “in the last few decades there has been increasing interest in this theory and its implications” for research on teaching and learning (Steiner & Mahn, 1996, pp. 191-206). And soon Vygotskian sociocultural theory started to appear in second language learning in the mid-1980’s (Frawley & Lantolf, 1984,1985 in Zuenger & Miller, 2006).
However, it quickly gained momentum when research in sociocultural language teaching was vibrantly focused during mid-90’s (Miller, 2006).

Keeping the social interaction at the heart/centre of the process of learning, SLLA maintains that through dialogical intercourse, developed during achieving some goal or task collaboratively, learners are led to “reach beyond what they are able to achieve alone” (Gibbons, 2002, p.8). This distance between what a learner can do unaided or what he or she can do with the support of a more knowledgeable or skilled expert is named as zone of proximal development (ZPD) by Vygotsky. He argued that learners can reach to their potential learning level if they were provided with the particular context created for the purpose.

Precisely, when a context requires the learners to initiate, develop and maintain the flow of discussion or task performance, they are naturally pushed “to produce more comprehensible, coherent, and grammatically improved discourse” (ibid, p.15). This social view of teaching-learning makes the learning process a collaborative endeavour in which both learners and teachers perform as active participants. However, the teachers’ role becomes crucial for they act as more knowledgeable others (MKO) who actually enhance the learners’ competence by working in the ZPD.

Sociocultural theory is an umbrella term which covers a number of language teaching techniques implemented in second language learning and teaching classrooms (Richards & Rodgers, 2001; Harmer, 2007). Scaffolding language learning is one of the highly appreciated approaches with respect to enhancing learners’ command in a second language, particularly English (Gibbons, 2002; Walqui, 2006). First coined by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1978), the term scaffolding refers to “temporary, but essential, nature of mentor’s assistance” (Maybin, Mercer, and Steirer, 1992, p.186) provided within a classroom to “help learners to move towards new skills, concepts, or levels of understanding” (Gibbons, 2002, p. 10).

Once the learners have acquired the skills or level of understanding, the teachers either gradually remove or reduce the supports provided. Fundamentally, scaffolding language teaching originated from two Vygotskian beliefs: first, that learning occurs through meaningful participation in social or collaborative experience; and that scaffolding can only occur within ZPD (Stuyf, 2002; Walqui, 2000). This collaborative-stimulating learning environment proves to be effective in multiple ways as far as the speaking skill enhancement is concerned. First, learners listen to a variety of language which increases input. Similarly, the learners are pushed to produce comprehensible and understandable stretches of speech and expressions, resulting in output. Lastly, language created during a meaningful activity is contextualized.

The teaching of English as a second language and its ineffectiveness in imparting speaking skill competency in learners has duly been criticised during the past few decades (Malik, 1996; Amina, 2010; Ahmad, 2004). Though a number of factors such as over-crowded classrooms and unsupportive curriculum are generally attributed towards this faulty language teaching, the major critique is particularly laid against unproductive teaching techniques (Malik, 1996 & Ahmad, 2004) as they seldom focus on the development and enhancement of speaking fluency of learners. As a result, the learners never gain the confidence and fluency to express themselves effectively in the same language which they have been studying for years.

Keeping in view the effectiveness of sociocultural L2 teaching, it is assumed that applicability of scaffolding collaborative approach within our context will provide the learners with such an environment which would facilitate the development of communicative competency and fluency among the learners. The study also aims to explore what are the challenges, if any, which may impede the successful implementation of this novel approach and how they can be addressed.

4. Research Methodology

To implement collaborative language learning approach, the experimental research including pre and post-tests with single subject design was employed in which performance of experimental group was assessed only. The pre-test was carried out at the beginning of the study to determine the participants’ current command on English for the purpose of communication. Then, experimental teaching was conducted for a period of one month, having six hour teaching plan each week. The experimental teaching session was followed by the post-test administrated to critically analyze the outcome of this experimental research.

The participants of the study were Secondary School Students of Class 10, with a total number of 30, comprising equal number of students from both the genders to address the issue of gender equity. Being single subject based research which is basically regarded as “a quantitative experimental research approach in which study participants serve as their own control” (Gast, 2010, p.13-14), the data produced in this study was first presented in tabular form and then was analyzed and interpreted qualitatively.

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The following activities, based on models presented by Gibbons (2002) in Scaffolding Language Scaffolding Learning: Teaching Second Language Learners in the Mainstream Classroom, were particularly designed to assess the learners’ communicative competence during pre and post-tests:

- Picture description
- Group discussion
- Dialogue presentation

Once, the learners’ current level of English communicative competence was analyzed through pre-test data analysis, one month experimental classes were conducted. The activities were very carefully and diligently planned for implementing sociocultural second language teaching to make the learning process a collaborative endeavour. To provide the learners with necessary scaffolds which could stimulate them towards learning how to work collaboratively and gain control on the learning situations, the clear demonstrations were offered and an extensive exposure to a variety of language was provided to serve as the basis for learning process. Furthermore, each and every participant was assigned with a specific role to ensure that all of the participants play their active part in the tasks and have an equal opportunity to learn how to use English for communicative purpose.

Language developing support, such as task related vocabulary and expressions; examples of asking and giving clarifications; and modelling of the steps involved in performing activities like dialogue presentation, were offered wherever these were felt essential to.

5. Pre-Test Results

A pre-test was designed and implemented at the beginning of the study, prior to the experimental teaching sessions so that the existing performance of the learners could be assessed. The results of this pre-test speaking skill activities and the performance of the learners are presented in tabular form (see Table 1 p. 11). The rubric, used to measure and evaluate learners speaking competency was adopted from Foreign Language Program of Studies, Fairfax County Public Schools (2004).

During pre-test, the overall responses of the learners towards speaking tasks were observed to be very limited and unsatisfactory. Most of the students were simply unable to complete the given tasks or express themselves fluently with appropriate and sufficient amount of communication. They were unnaturally hesitant and the language they produced was mostly difficult to comprehend.

For instance, picture description activity which comparatively proves to be easier to attempt as the learners have to describe the activity, people or objects presented in the picture only, appeared as difficult a task for the learners as any other task could be. Majority of the learners could neither describe the pictures completely nor were their expressions comprehensible. Moreover, the simple utterances like ‘The picture shows the picnic activity on the beach’ were full of many halts and long pauses which made it difficult to understand what the learners said or wanted to say. Similarly, not only that the learners’ pronunciation was very weak, the appropriate and sufficient amount of language and vocabulary was not offered as well. Ironically, despite the fact that most of the teaching learning time in our traditional classrooms is consumed in learning grammatical structures, learners did not have a control even on the basic structure of the language. Thus, the overall performance of the learners remained just 36% in this particular activity (see Table 1).

The next task was group discussion which required the learners to initiate, develop and maintain the flow and pace of discussion in order to complete the task successfully. However, the learners could not perform effectively in the task as they did not have any idea how to take turns and responsibility while working in a group. As is evident from the data given in Table 1, most of the times the learners lacked the command on the relevant expressions and language which could help them develop the ideas or thought, resulting in unsatisfactory performance.

The last activity included was dialogue presentation and the performance of the learners remained at its lowest point in the said activity as being only 31.8% (Table 1). The learners could not generate dialogical interactions which were essential for the task completion. They were unable to ask for or present clarifications, exchange opinions or develop the situational discourse coherently, fluently and effectively. They lacked at the logical beginning, development and appropriate ending or conclusion of the dialogical discussions as well.

It is evident that the learners performed comparatively better in the first activity i.e. picture description, as it required them to simply state whatever was presented in the pictures. However, in tasks where more specific language skills were required, the participants of the study appeared to be more confused and less interested and effective, as in the case of dialogue presentation and group discussions. These activities required the learners to develop the abstract ideas and generate more complex and extended stretches of speech in order to accomplish the tasks effectively, and most of the learners were even incapable of producing the simple sentences even. Thus, their responses were either irrelevant or very limited and inadequate.
6. Post-Test Results

At the end of this experimental study plan, the post-test was administrated with an objective to assess the results of this novel teaching approach within our context and the improvement, if any, in the speaking skill fluency of the learners. The Table 2 on (pp. 11-12), highlights the learners’ performance in the post-test activities.

Unlike pre-test performance, the learners appeared to be more confident and fluent during the post-test tasks completion. For example, almost 10 out of 30 participants were able to complete their tasks by providing elaborated and appropriate responses to the information presented in the tasks. Similarly, the language produced was also comprehensible carrying improved command on basic grammatical structures and pronunciation. The activities or the scenes given in the pictures were also described with relevant and suitable expressions and vocabulary by majority of the participants.

As far as the task of group discussion is concerned, it was observed that the learners were able to discuss the given tasks effectively among themselves as well as to present it jointly by taking responsibilities and turns. Though, the expressions and command on the relevant vocabulary were improved, yet they remained limited as compared to the required amount of discussions needed to perform and complete the group discussions more efficiently and coherently.

Similarly, the performance of the learners demonstrated an improvement towards generating and developing dialogues as they remained less hesitant in asking for and presenting clarifications; adding and leading the conversational discourse; and presenting suitable and relevant expressions during the task. Thus, their overall performance improved from 31.8% in the pre-test to 41.1% of the post-test (see Table 2, pp. 11-12).

When the performance of the learners is presented in graphical form comparatively, the difference between pre and post-test performances becomes evident. The figures presented in the graph (p. 12), for example, indicate that the highest percentage during pre-test activities remained as 36 percent which surged up to 45.6 percent in the post-test. Similarly, there is a significant difference of 9.3% between the least percentages of pre and post-test performance of the learners in dialogue presentation activity. This difference signifies the effectiveness of scaffolding language learning under the sociocultural theoretical framework of second language teaching, implemented within our own context.

Discussion of the Results

The results of this experimental study are quite imperative as they amplify the effectiveness of this novel approach and its practical execution within our contextual constraints. The first step of this study, as already explained, was the pre-test administration which brought to light the problematic areas and language deficiencies of the learners regarding speaking skill. The major incompetence, as highlighted by pre-test data analysis was that the learners seriously lacked at the spoken fluency for their utterances were full of unnatural pauses and halts. The learners did not know how to respond to the given tasks communicatively also as they lacked at the relevant and appropriate vocabulary which caused hindrance in the successful completion of the given tasks.

As, generally no emphasis is given on speaking skill enhancement of the learners within our traditional classes (Kiran, 2010), they appeared to be completely unaware of working in groups or pairs and engaging in fruitful, rich and meaningful interactions. Most of the participants could not present their ideas sufficiently and coherently as their speeches or expressions did not possess control on the basic structure of the language. In addition, the pronunciation of the words spoken by the learners was inappropriate as well which continuously interfered with the communication. The reason is probably the fact that learners are hardly made to read aloud in the class which can improve their command on English pronunciation. Taken as a whole, the learners’ performance in the pre-test speaking skill activities remained very limited and unsatisfactory.

Opposite to it, the performance of the learners with respect to post-test activities showed a considerable improvement. For instance, the learners were able to complete the given tasks with comprehensible vocabulary and expression, mostly. Similarly, their discussions and speeches had fewer unnatural pauses and halts which made their communication comparatively fluent and smooth. The post-test results (Table 2 & Figure 1, p. 12) also represent a noticeable improvement in the control over basic structures of language as well as pronunciation of the words. There was also an enhancement shown as far as the variables of fluency and relevant vocabulary are concerned, however, this improvement remained relatively less than the other variables, such as task completion and pronunciation.

The stimulating and cognitively motivating language learning environment created in the class made the learner engage in meaningful discussions by offering clarifications, agreement and disagreements, additions into others’ ideas and expressions and thus, acquiring the more complex language structures. The extensive exposure to a variety of language produced during the completion of the task, explicit instructions and task demonstrations also guided the learners to gain command on the spoken fluency by following the appropriate and suitable scaffolds provided by the researcher.
7. Challenges and Remedies

The present study implies that English language teaching under sociocultural framework is perfectly viable within our contextual constraints and limitations. However, there are certain challenges which need to be addressed and taken in consideration while implementing scaffolding language learning approach. Some of the most imperative challenges and their remedies are as follows:

7.1 Challenges for Teachers

As sociocultural language teaching is a collaborative venture in its essence, the role of teacher becomes very critical. It is the teacher who would facilitate the language learning process and push the learners to reach to their maximum potential. Thus, the teacher training as what to teach and how to teach is the primary challenge. If the teachers know how much scaffolds are necessary, only then they would be able to administrate “cognitively challenging learning tasks” (Gibbons, 2002, p.10) in order to make the learning process.

Social interactions are regarded as the heart of language learning process in Vygotskian theory (ibid, p.14), thus the basic step towards creating sociocultural language learning environment is to develop meaningful discussions and conversations. To achieve the said purpose, the tasks designed should have some definite or tangible outcome or results, such as coming to some solution, sharing or creating a body of knowledge/information. When the learners would have explicit instructions of what to do or how to do, they would be directed towards producing a variety of language and expressions in order to accomplish the given tasks (Gibbons, 2002, p.24).

Similarly, the activities designed to enhance speaking skill should be “cognitively appropriate to the learners” (ibid). They should neither be above learners’ cognitive level nor below the existing level. In both these conditions, learners’ zone of proximal development will not be challenged appropriately, and as a consequence, the teaching-learning process will not yield the desired results.

Another challenge of this innovative approach is that all the learners should participate in actively and vigorously in the completion of the activities given. As learning is considered a social enterprise, the more learners work collaboratively, the better they would learn how to engage and take part in language oriented environment. However, this task can be even more challenging within our classrooms which are usually overcrowded. But if the teachers plan the activities carefully and assign definite roles and responsibilities to each learner to perform, all the learners can be made to work attentively and seriously. Moreover, a continuous check and observation on the performance of each participant by the teacher can also be helpful in giving more vibrant and appropriate tasks to the passive learners.

One challenge that is specific to our context is that the textbooks do not support the teaching and learning of English for communicative purpose as they are no particular activities included which emphasize the development of speaking skill. In this regard, the teachers have to develop and design such activities which promote group and collaborative work and make learners to use and produce variety of language.

7.2 Challenges for Text-book Writers

During the study, it was observed (as stated above) that the current text-books of the learners do not support the development of speaking skill. There are rarely any activities included which focus on communicative enhancement. Until and unless language oriented activities are made the part of our English language text-books, the learning of English as a language cannot be emphasised systematically.

The text-books should not only have speaking targeted tasks, the guidelines and directions of how to implement these tasks effectively should also be given to assist the teachers who have no training to teach English communicatively.

7.3 Challenges for Policy Makers

The situation of English language teaching as a second language cannot be improved until its teaching is not transferred from a ‘subject’ to a ‘language’ and policy makers instruct/guide the other stake-holders, such as text-book writers, to take necessary measures to achieve the purpose.

Currently no speaking and listening skill assessment is included in the examination system as the major focus of this system remains the evaluation of reading and writing skills, merely. Thus, no particular emphasis is given on the enhancement of these two neglected skills during the course completion within our schools and colleges, resulting in communicative incompetency on the part of the learners. If equal attention is paid on the assessment of listening and speaking skills along with reading and writing, the teaching of English can systematically be shifted from teaching it as a “subject” to “language”.

8. Conclusion

The present study set out to implement sociocultural second language learning theory to teach English to Class 10 students in Pakistani Public School. The objective of introducing this untried approach was to see how effective sociocultural second language teaching will be in enhancing speaking skill of the learners. To achieve
the said purpose, experimental research with single subject design was employed, including pre-test, experimental teaching and the post-test. Similarly, the data was collected using quantitative approach and was presented in graphical as well as tabular forms. Finally, this collected data was discussed qualitatively. The pre-test analysis highlighted many deficiencies in the communicative ability of the learners. Their discussions and utterances were full of unnatural halts and pauses which seriously affected the flow of the discussion. In addition, the amount of language offered was very limited and most of the times the vocabulary or words used, were irrelevant or insufficient. The language produced during the pre-test lacked control on the basic grammatical structures also. Similarly, the natural and accurate pronunciation of the words was not provided as well. Overall, the performance of the learners, as far as speaking in English is concerned, remained far below the satisfactory level. Comparatively, post–test performance of the learners demonstrated better command and understanding of English. For example, unnatural pauses and halts, faulty grammatical structures and incomplete or inconsistent thoughts were visibly reduced. The speeches, sentences and language produced by the learners became fluent and comprehensible. In addition, the learners also offered relevant vocabulary and accurate pronunciation during the post-test activities.

It can be concluded that though sociocultural language teaching approach carries some challenges yet it can considerably enhance communicative skill of the learners, if its challenges are carefully dealt with. Similarly, within our sociocultural constraints, this novel approach can perfectly be implemented without bringing any major or substantial changes, as is evident from the post-test results and findings. Provided that the teachers know what to teach and how to make learners use English for communication purpose; text-books used contain language oriented tasks and activities; and listening and speaking skill evaluation is included in examination system, the learners speaking proficiency in English can positively be enhanced under the sociocultural framework of second language teaching and learning.

References


Stuyf, R. V. (2002). Scaffolding as a teaching strategy. Adolescent Learning and Development, Fall.


Table 1 Scores of Learners in Pre-Test Speaking Skill Activities

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Table 2 Scores of Learners in Post-Test Speaking Skill Activities

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Figure 1: Comparison Graph of Learners’ Performance in Pre & Post-Test Speaking Skill Activities