

Analyzing a language-driven content-based language teaching textbook using sociocultural theory

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Abstract

The Asian EFL (English as a foreign language) classroom is famous for its reliance on textbooks to prepare students for high-stakes examinations. It is therefore of importance to ensure the quality of EFL textbooks for quality learning and teaching. While much previous research has been done about pre-use, in-use, and post-use textbook evaluation, there has not been any study about how sociocultural theory may be used as an analytical tool to evaluate EFL textbooks at these different stages of evaluation. The teaching philosophies of different teachers can be rooted in different learning theories, such as constructivism and sociocultural theory. Teachers, thus, need to be sensitive to their own beliefs in terms of learning theories to choose textbooks in a theoretically principled way. This study aims at demonstrating how a Hong Kong high school language-driven content-based language teaching (CBLT) textbook can be analysed in terms of sociocultural theory. The study is guided by the following research question: What are the principles from sociocultural theory which echo the overall design of a Hong Kong CBLT textbook? CBLT is increasingly popular worldwide, especially in Southeast Asia; yet, there are few CBLT textbooks for the English subject in the Asian market. A required textbook of a Hong Kong high school was closely analyzed, with thematic analysis used for analysis. The results of this study show that this textbook exhibits many features of sociocultural theory, such as use of cognitive tools to help promote high-order thinking and use of collaborative talk and then private talk to promote internalization.

Keywords: EFL, sociocultural theory, content-based language teaching, textbook evaluation

Introduction

The demand for coursebooks has been always high in the field of English language teaching (Byrd, 2001; Cunningsworth, 1984, 1995; Harmer, 1991; Hutchinson & Torres, 1994; McDonough & Shaw, 1993). This is particularly true in the Asian context where coursebooks seem to be extremely pivotal in teacher-fronted classrooms. From the perspective of

Hutchinson and Waters (1993), materials evaluation is indispensable since it helps determine the suitability of the materials to teachers' particular purposes. Inappropriate textbook choices bring about negative effects (McDonough & Shaw, 2003). In reality, there has not been any comprehensive textbook evaluation studies using such learning theories as sociocultural theory and so on. Specifically, there has not been any textbook evaluation for language-driven CBLT, a language teaching approach gaining popularity in Asia in recent years (Lin, 2016), using learning theories, which results in the need for conducting this current study focusing on sociocultural theory.

This article to report the exploratory study consists of altogether six sections. It begins with this introduction, followed by a literature review about how EFL textbooks have been analysed and evaluated so far. The following section is an introduction to sociocultural theory, as the theoretical framework for this study. The next section is the methodology and the analytical framework. Also, there is a section for reporting the findings and discussing them in relation to the previous literature. The conclusion section summarizes the study.

Literature review

Lots of research into EFL textbooks is evident in the literature, such as that from Ait Bouzid (2016), Jebbour (2016, 2019) and Zhang (2017). Similarly, a number of studies have been conducted in Asia, such as the studies from Leung and Andrews (2012) and Litz (2005). Among the various ways of evaluating textbooks (see Ellis, 1998; McDonough & Shaw, 1993 for a review), EFL textbook evaluation can be categorized into pre-use, in-use and post-use evaluation (Ellis, 1997; Tomlinson, 2003). More specifically, pre-use evaluation evaluates the potential effects of ELT textbooks which are ready to be selected and used. In-use evaluation evaluates the actual effects of textbooks being used in the actual classroom. Post-use evaluation evaluates the effects of ELT textbooks that have been previously used. Despite the different methodological foci of these three types of evaluation, each type evaluates textbooks in terms of a particular purpose or framework, such as the effect on learners' literacy development, curriculum implementation, and test preparation.

However, no EFL textbooks in Asia or other parts of the world have been evaluated in terms of any specific learning theory, such as sociocultural theory. Moreover, no textbook evaluation in relation to such theory has been done for CBLT, a second language learning approach gaining increasing popularity today in Asia, such as Hong Kong, where language across the curriculum initiatives is prevalent in the local schools. Thus, questions such

as "Is the absence of productive tasks in this EFL CBLT coursebook a problem?" can be challenging to answer from the perspective of teachers who are unaware of the relationships between learning theories and their implications on materials design. Different theoretical underpinnings for language learning can give rise to different answers. For instance, while Krashen (1981, 1982), who believes in cognitive theory, agrees to use only receptive tasks in second language teaching and learning, Vygotskian principles do not suggest the same. They suggest that second language teaching involves both receptive and productive tasks. I am not persuading EFL teachers to rigidly follow the principles of any certain learning theory but I am reiterating that teachers, when analyzing, evaluating, and selecting coursebooks, should be sensitive to their own beliefs in learning theories so that they will not fall into the trap of selecting textbooks randomly.

Sociocultural Theory

This current study aims at showing how a CBLT coursebook from Asia can be examined using the lens of sociocultural theory. With significant differences from other theoretical perspectives regarding language learning, sociocultural theory emphasizes the integrated nature of both individual and social elements in the learning process. The importance of context in language learning is also emphasized (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006b; Mitchell & Myles, 2004). Cognitive and linguistic development, as an integrated entity, is possible only when the meaning contained in the sign system is interpreted by the individual.

Vygotsky (1978) emphasizes the importance of learning within the zone of proximal development (ZPD). It refers to the stage where the student cannot do a certain thing himself, but with more knowledgeable others (MKO), such as an academically stronger peer, students can complete the task. Everyday-life knowledge and prior learning experiences should be actively evoked so as to identify the ZPD accurately for the learning of new, abstract knowledge.

Mediation, as a core topic of sociocultural theory, can be defined as the process by which social activities, such as learning and teaching in class, transform unmediated behaviour into higher mental processes through tools (Minick, 1987). These tools include symbolic tools, material tools, and cognitive tools. All mediational means offer both affordances as well as constraints (Swain, Kinnear, and Steinman, 2010), and it is through such means that people can engage in high-order thinking activities. The target coursebook examined in this study is a mediation tool indeed for student learning and teacher teaching.

In sociocultural theory, internalization does not emerge without involvement of cognitive processing (Simister, 2004). As explained by

Tharp and Gallimore (1988), there are stages of learning related to the concept of internalization. Internationalization of learning is the outcome of learning at both the social level and the psychological level. The first step is when children employ cognitive tools, such as symbolic tools, and/or MKO, such as teachers and stronger peers, to help children engage in socially meaningful activities involving collaborative talk, which is followed by private talk for the same or similar task. Internalisation, or fossilization, automatically occurs afterward. What follows is deautomatization, after which the first step starts again.

To date, there has not been any research claiming the use of sociocultural theory to conduct any analysis about textbooks targeting second or foreign language learners. It is hoped that this current study can demonstrate how EFL textbooks can be analysed by a teacher who believes in sociocultural theory.

Methodology and analytical framework

This study is qualitative in nature. The research question of this current study is as below:

1. How do the principles of sociocultural theory echo the materials design in a Hong Kong high school CBLT textbook about sports communication designed with reference to the new senior secondary English curriculum of the territory?

This current study is an exploratory study analyzing a CBLT textbook for EFL using sociocultural theory. It was published by Longman Hong Kong Education in 2010 for students from Grade 10-12 in the English Language subject. This textbook is specifically chosen for this study because it is one of the few textbooks from Asia for language-driven CBLT for primary/ secondary students, which is increasingly popular in Southeast Asia. This coursebook has been approved by the Education Bureau of the territory for use in Hong Kong high school classrooms. All high school students of Hong Kong need to attend compulsory lessons focusing on language arts and non-language arts. In such lessons, both content and language are the teaching foci. There are a few other approved titles from the Education Bureau but Longman Hong Kong is the largest publisher in the school textbook market of the city.

The title is an easier version of the same textbook from the publisher, containing 71 pages divided into 3 parts. They include "Introduction to the website", "Producing website content" and "Preparing for a display". Most pages are devoted to the second part, which is organized into ten chapters. The textbook claims itself to be one featuring authentic contexts, clearly

defined products, and suitable scaffolding with lots of supporting resources. My thematic analysis focused specifically on the learning activities of the coursebook.

For the textbook to be comprehensively analyzed, the study systematically compared and contrasted the design of the materials in the coursebook in terms of sociocultural theory. The analytical method of thematic analysis was used. To be specific, a code book thematic analysis approach with themes derived from the principles of sociocultural theory Swain, Kinnear, and Steinman (2010) was used. The themes were as below:

Theme 1: Contexts in learning activities, tasks, or exercises

Theme 2: ZPD

Theme 3: Cognitive, symbolic, and/or material tools

Theme 4: Students going through the interpersonal plane with guidance from MKO and then the intrapersonal plane for the internalization of new learning

Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: contexts in learning activities, tasks, or exercises

There are contexts in all the learning activities of the textbook. All the receptive tasks involve contexts. In Chapter 8, there are two reviews together with the related worksheet focusing on two pieces of sports equipment. Opportunities for learning content and thinking skills simultaneously are rich. Although the worksheet is seemingly a traditional comprehension exercise, which is notorious for providing students with inauthentic learning, the design of the worksheet is in fact thoughtful and sophisticated. All the questions are meaning-based, asked from the perspective of the manufacturers to their potential customers. There are even two open-ended questions requiring learners to justify the decision of whether to buy each of the products. As compared with other traditional form-focused materials, this one does provide learners with more opportunities to use the language authentically.

As for productive tasks, the use of contexts to push learners to choose appropriate language and content to make meaning appropriate for different contexts is beneficial for second language learners in our constraint-filled world. Students in the learning task in Chapter 2 about discussing sports films orally are only allowed to work with peers having watched the same films, as stated in the teacher's notes. Instead of any type of films, only those with themes in relation to sports are allowed. The style

of language for the discussion must be informal or semi-formal to reflect the context where learners reflect upon their real-life experiences in front of their fellow classmates. As shown by the layout of the table to be submitted to teachers, students should talk about the various aspects of sports films, such as plot development, characters, and shooting styles, instead of only one particular aspect. Without all these requirements from the authors purposefully, the students' learning would not be parallel to how language was used outside the school environment. As reiterated by Wertsch (1998), human beings are not free in reality so the textbook is effective in providing opportunities for learners to learn how to cope with limitations created by the contexts of the tasks.

The design of the textbook with a concrete context for each task or activity echoes sociocultural theory. The core of the theory is that learning and cognitive development (which includes language as well) happen as a result of social interactions. Students of this textbook take up certain roles, such as potential buyers of sports equipment in society, in order to use language, i.e. English, to communicate with the audience, such as the manufacturers of the products, for achieving the purposes of real-life tasks, such as providing opinion on the products. Sociocultural theory argues that "the most important forms of human cognitive activity develop through interaction within social and material environments" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006a, p. 201). Such cultural and linguistic settings include family life, peer groups, schooling, and organized sports activities. In other words, students in each task of the textbook can interact with people and artifacts from the environment, which is essential in the development of thinking.

Theme 2: ZPD

There is a strong linkage among the tasks within each chapter, allowing students to relate learning from previous tasks to the following ones. In Chapter 4, students read a sports blog to identify the major characteristics of it, such as the use of informal language. Having learnt the features, students work in pairs to discuss possible topics for them to blog about. What follows is for each student to choose one of those possible ones to focus on, plan an entry, and write it. When students have completed their work, they read their partners' work for formative assessment purposes using a checklist. Based on the comments, each individual re-works on his/her draft and produces the final product. As can be seen, every single learning step in the chapter is sophisticatedly tied up, enabling students to use previous work to warm themselves up in terms of language, content, and/or organization for the following work. Instead of having tasks which are not well-tied, each chapter is characterized as having the previous task acting as the basis for the new stage of learning which is within the ZPD.

Opportunities for learners to activate their schemata at the very beginning of all the chapters are numerous. The reading task of identifying the features of a blog can be taken as an example again. Before the very first task of the whole chapter, some warm-up questions related to this task are included in the teacher's notes to encourage an integration of daily life and formal school learning, such as "What types of information do you put on your blog?", and the authors are so thought that there are even questions specifically prepared for students without blogging experience, such as "Are there any blogs that you like to visit when you go home? If so, which ones and why do you like them?". Likewise, in preparation for the very first task of Chapter 6 regarding the identification of major duties of quizmasters by viewing the short video clip of a competition, teachers are provided with similar types of personal involvement questions to ask their students. Although the authors could have considered varying the ways in which students' schemata are activated in each chapter, those suggested questions are indeed appropriate.

The ZPD is another core concept of sociocultural theory. It refers to the distance between the current developmental level of a student and his level of potential development (Vygotsky, 1978). In other words, the new tasks students expected to do are at just a level above the current ability of the student. The concept of ZPD can be seen as a metaphorical site where a learner and an MKO together construct new knowledge in order to have the task done. At the beginning of each chapter in the target textbook, students engage in interactive dialogic communication based on the guiding questions so that their prior schemata from their daily life experiences can be activated. Interactive dialogic communication is where students and teachers can freely discuss their daily life experiences, with no standard answers imposed. Daily life knowledge is what most students can easily bring to the learning of new content. Based on such daily life familiar content, students use the textbook to learn such new content as the type of language needed for writing a sports blog entry. From the perspective of the author, this learning involves learning at just a level up the current level of the students. With each task linked to the following task thoughtfully, students are gradually pushed to a higher and a higher level of learning. That is, students are moved up to a new ZPD in each new task.

Theme 3: Cognitive, symbolic, and/or material tools

Cognitive tools are widely adopted in the textbook to serve as mediational tools connecting learners and the products of each chapter; used in the coursebook are text structures and tables (>20 in total), mind maps, bar charts, and lists, to name a few. For instance, in preparation for the final task

in Chapter 5 of giving a group presentation regarding a less common sport, students are required to draw a mind map to brainstorm ideas based on the chosen topic, complete a 2 x 5 grid table showing their division of work, draw a KWL diagram which aims at helping students conduct some research online, fill in a text diagram to take notes for the final presentation of the chapter and engage in other activities through some other aids, such as checklists. All such cognitive tools help learners organize information during the time students are thinking.

Symbolic tools, unsurprisingly, are used in the textbook. All words in the textbook are in English, i.e. the target language, and students, when completing tasks, are expected to read, write, listen, and/or speak English. However, it is interesting to note that a glossary is attached to the coursebook, which targets lower achievers. The glossary, serving as a mini-bilingual dictionary, is especially suited to less capable students with low motivation as it provides them with access to the task input and the task requirements from the chapters. The Chinese used in the glossary shows the meaning of the target L2 words, bringing learners from their L1 mental world to the target language world, i.e. English. As Vygotsky believes, second or foreign language learning inevitably involves using "the native language as a mediator between the world of objects and the new language" (Vygotsky, 1986, p.161). Building upon this idea, Swain, Kirkpatrick & Cummins (2011) argues further that disallowing learners to use their L1 as a mediational tool means encouraging them to use it more covertly, which results in greater difficulty for teachers in understanding the needs of our learners. Thus, the use of L1 in the glossary is well-supported by key sociocultural theorists.

A wide array of symbolic tools is incorporated, and most of them repeatedly appear in various contexts in the textbook. Having said that, material tools play a significantly less important role in the coursebook. While material tools tend to be concrete physical objects theoretically, the following paragraphs attempt to analyze the use of pictures of material tools. They are used primarily for helping learners with the very basic level of foundational knowledge of topics.

While this textbook does not come with such material tools as card games and so on, which are commonly available in teaching and learning materials for very young kids, there are pictures in this target textbook to represent different entities. With the intention of helping students learn the names of six less common sports in Chapter 5, pictures of people playing such sports are shown with blanks underneath for students to write the names of the sports. By paying attention to the details in each picture, such as the person sitting on an elephant in one of the pictures, students choose from the word choices and write the answer "elephant polo" for the blank. In

another part of the same chapter, students learn how to be an effective quizmaster in a sports knowledge competition. The passage consists of a title, a picture of the quizmaster next to the introductory paragraph, and a few paragraphs followed by the picture of a buzzer. The picture of the quizmaster is used in helping learners with the meaning of the word "quizmaster", and, similarly, students finding the word "buzzer" challenges can be assisted through the appearance of the object shown in the passage. We can see that the pictures used in the whole textbook are mostly for showing the meaning of entities. The pictures serve the function of illustrating the meaning of some material tools.

Pictures can also serve as cognitive tools. Pictures have the power to help students with more than the literal meaning of words. If used tactically, pictures can provide students with opportunities to engage in learning at the higher levels of thinking as shown in Bloom's taxonomy. Take the above-mentioned passage about the sports knowledge competition as an example. The passage in the textbook mentions that a game player becomes so emotional that he loses his own control in the competition; the textbook author could have incorporated some pictures to encourage students to predict how the problem was finally eliminated by the thoughtfulness of the quizmaster. Alternatively, after reading the passage, students could have also been asked to draw themselves as professional quizmasters using creativity.

The concepts of cognitive tools, symbolic tools, and material tools are cornerstones of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of cognitive development. The cognitive tools used in the textbook help students to, for example, organize their thought by making it concrete visually. Using cognitive tools, psychological functions such as memory, perception, and attention can be mastered. Moreover, symbolic tools are essential to the mediation of thinking. Without verbal language as a symbolic tool, thinking becomes impossible. The content from the textbook provides opportunities for students to use English, as a symbolic tool, to communicate and think, allowing cognitive development (including English language development and content learning about sport) to take place. The use of Chinese in the glossary suggests the textbook writer believes in the role students' native language can play in the development of second language skills and acquisition of target sports knowledge. This belief echoes the sociocultural approach to utilizing students' first language for the learning and teaching of the target language. Regarding material tools, Kozulin (1998) claims that "they presuppose collective use, interpersonal communication, and symbolic representation" (p. 62). The invention and use of them can transform people's way of thinking. By presenting pictures of such tools to students through the textbook design, the textbook author introduces new entities in

the world to students. However, he could have used pictures further as cognitive tools to help students learn content in a more cognitive way. For example, pictures could have been used for learning at the levels of application, analysis, evaluation, and so on.

Theme 4: Students going through the interpersonal and intrapersonal planes

All the learning activities in the coursebook promote learning through the intrapersonal plane after the interpersonal plane involving MKO. The students' journal, consisting of questions to make students reflect upon their learning process, done by learners either after each activity or each chapter is important to successful internalisation. Based on their experience in the social plane, students can employ their analytical skills to think about areas for improvement on the intrapersonal plane.

In addition to the journal, activities fostering the learning on the intrapersonal plane are available in several tasks as well. In the task where students must research a less familiar sport in Chapter 5, students first conduct some research online individually. Following that, students discuss in groups based on each individual's previous work. Moving from the social plane where students interact with information online using the Internet as a mediational tool, students are then required to engage in the intrapersonal plane through collaborative speech where they analyze, choose and decide what ideas to present to the class. This is where MKO can play a role by making use of their stronger abilities to stretch the potential of the weaker peers. Additionally, at the end of every writing task of the book, students are required to exchange their work with other classmates for peer assessment based on prescribed checklists. The peer assessment, again, involves MKO. After the social plane, students are then required to make improvements based on their peers' remarks at the psychological plane, which forces students to analyze their own work in great detail at various levels, such as content, grammar and vocabulary, pronunciation, organization, and genre-related features.

Attempts to promote learning through the two planes of learning and MKO are evident. The textbook provides students with ample opportunities to learn from the MKO within the interpersonal plane. For instance, students can discuss in groups with MKO the less familiar sport in Chapter 5. This is where students can learn from stronger others to engage in the process of knowledge co-construction. Afterward, students can learn through the intrapersonal plane where students no longer work in groups but they work individually. Within the intrapersonal plane, students need to work on their own to prepare information on the less familiar sport to be presented to others. With opportunities to learn through the interpersonal plane with

MKO and the intrapersonal plane, the ultimate goal is internalization of knowledge about the sport.

Conclusion

This study aims at analyzing the design of a Hong Kong textbook targeting high school students learning English and sport communication in a CBLT program using sociocultural theory. Using thematic analysis, this study suggests that the overall design of this textbook echoes the major principles of the theory. Within the strong culture of reliance on textbooks for EFL, this Asian CBLT coursebook is potentially conducive to the learning of content and language from the perspective of a teacher believing in sociocultural theory.

Nonetheless, as mentioned, this exploratory study is just the first one in the academic field to use the lens of sociocultural theory to investigate the design of a textbook for second language learners. Much more future research work is needed. For example, researchers may later need to focus on how sociocultural theory can be used to analyse CBLT textbooks from Asia in terms of in-use and post-use textbook evaluation.

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