

# A Study on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Its Enlightenment to Students' English Acquisition in Garze Primary and Middle Schools

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## ABSTRACT

Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, featured by unique territoriality and ethnic characteristics, is a culturally-unique and regionally-desolated settlement for multiethnic groups. Both unique territoriality and ethnic characteristics, to some extent, hinder students' English acquisition in Garze primary and middle schools. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, especially such key terms of the theory as mediation, zone of proximal development, and internalization, can shed lights on students' English acquisition in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

**Keywords:** Vygotsky, Sociocultural theory, Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, English acquisition.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture is a prefecture-level administrative region in Sichuan Province with Tibetan as the main ethnic group, and is an important part of the Tibetan region in China. Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, with an average altitude of over 3,000 meters, remote geographical location, inconvenient transportation, and relatively isolated information, has the geographical characteristics commonly found in Tibetan regions; at the same time, as a Tibetan ethnic minority settlement, the language and culture of Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture are self-contained and have distinct ethnicity. The distinct regional and ethnic characteristics make it a relatively closed and homogeneous social and cultural entity, which largely restricts the English acquisition of Tibetan students in the region. Therefore, how to improve the English acquisition ability of Tibetan primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan area is an urgent problem to be considered and solved by the majority of educators. This paper intends to use Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory to explore how to break through the geographical and ethnic limitations of the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, so as to enhance students' English acquisition in Garze primary and middle schools.

## 2. SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY

Sociocultural theory originated in the twentieth century from Russian psychologist Lev S. Vygotsky's research on child development, which was translated into many languages and had a profound impact on psychology and linguistics worldwide. In the mid-1980s, American scholars Lantolf and Frawley introduced Vygotsky's sociocultural theory to the United States, which had an extremely important impact on second language acquisition in the United States and other countries, and later Professor Wertsch used the term sociocultural theory (SCT) for the first time in his work. The term SCT was first used by Professor Wertsch in his work. Sociocultural theory studies how humans react and act in the process of cultural transmission and innovation, and asserts that humans rely on cultural activities for self-mediation, and that language is an important mediator of this mediation. Vygotsky proposes that human cognition is based on physiological thought processes and that the formation of higher human thinking is influenced by the mediation of the socio-cultural environment (including socio-cultural activities, socio-cultural products, social relations, etc.), in other words, human thinking cannot be separated from social practices. For a

long time, psychologists have been devoted to exploring the relationship between the human brain, body, social practices and cognition, and in order to gain insight into this relationship, they believe that an ideal unit of analysis must be found. Vygotsky chooses language as the unit of analysis because Vygotsky believes that language is both material (material, existing in the form of sound waves and connected to the brain through neurons) and symbolic. Language is closely related to the human brain, the body, social practices, and cognition, and therefore, language is one of the main objects of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory research.

In a series of papers, Vygotsky hypothesizes that the development of language skills can facilitate the development of human self-cognition, which is based on the internalization of sociocultural learning. Thought or higher forms of consciousness do not exist in isolation; they are the result of the discursive interaction between the physical properties of the human brain and socio-cultural activity. Thus, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory treats human cognition and learning as social and cultural rather than individual phenomena. [1] Vygotsky's sociocultural theory consists of the following core concepts: mediation, zone of proximal development, and internalization.

## **2.1 Mediation**

Moderation (mediation) can facilitate children's language learning. In the past, there were misconceptions about children's learning, either that they could only receive knowledge passively or that they could learn completely independently. However, Vygotsky believes that children's higher-level cognitive development depends on the child's interactive mediation with the environment, and that mediation can be divided into human mediator, which studies what kinds of adult interventions are effective in improving children's behavior, and symbolic mediator, which focuses on what changes symbolic tools can bring to children's behavior. The latter is concerned with what changes symbolic tools can bring about in children's behavior. Vygotsky argues that human psychological functioning goes through two stages, the first stage is manifested in real interpersonal interactions, and the second stage is manifested in internalization after real interactions, so that the role of human mediation transitions from the interpersonal plane to the intrapersonal plane, i.e., children initially participate in adult-mediated activity, the interactive experience is internalized into the child's

cognition. In addition, Vygotsky argues that teachers and parents regulate children the most, although parental mediation of children differs significantly from teacher mediation of children in that parental mediation of children at home is relatively loose and casual, whereas teacher mediation of children in the classroom is more organized and constructed, making the formal educational environment the most important environment for children's socio-cultural activities.

Vygotsky makes an important distinction between human mediation and symbolic mediation, and Vygotsky specifically mentions early symbolic mediation, such as casting lots, tying knots, and counting fingers; in addition to these basic symbolic mediations, other symbolic mediations include signs, symbols, and formulas, and organizational charts (graphic organizer).[2] According to Vygotsky, children's cognitive development and language learning rely heavily on the extent to which children master symbolic mediation. Vygotsky's discussion of symbolic mediation is supported and complemented by other scholars, for example, Deloach, who argues that it cannot be assumed that children can detect symbolic relationships between objects as easily as adults can, and that children generally cannot identify symbolic relationships on their own and need guidance from adults. [3]

Therefore, not all objects can automatically become tools for children's psychological mediation; objects can play their symbolic regulatory role only if children understand the symbolic meanings they imply under adult guidance. Obviously, the primary issue of symbolic mediation is the child's mastery of the symbolic meaning embedded in the object, which depends to a large extent on the goals set for the child by the teacher or the parents using symbolic mediation tools in socio-cultural activities. For example, maps can be used as a symbolic conditioning tool to help students identify geographic entities, but teachers should not use maps only as a tool to help students understand a single piece of information about a country or region, such as its geographic location or area, but should set the goal of using maps as a tool to teach students how to use the scale, lines, symbols, colors, and written notations on maps to identify the surface of the earth. The goal of using maps is to teach students how to use the scale, lines, symbols, colors, text notations, etc. to identify the physical geography, administrative areas, social conditions, etc. of the earth's surface. The main role of symbolic conditioning is not only to help children

learn empirical content knowledge, but also to enable them to develop a learning paradigm that presupposes (a) that the learning process is deliberate rather than spontaneous; (b) that the use of symbolic conditioning tools is a systematic learning process; and (c) that the use of symbolic conditioning tools is a systematic learning process. The use of symbolic conditioning tools is a systematic learning process, and the universal features of symbolic conditioning tools and their use are the focus of learning. [2]

In conclusion, symbolic mediation tools have a specific symbolic meaning in a specific cultural context, and the purpose of symbolic mediation tool selection and use must be reasonable, otherwise, learners may not understand and use this tool correctly. Language is also a symbolic mediation tool, for language acquisition requires a certain learning paradigm, and a specific language must reflect a specific cultural symbolic meaning.

## **2.2 Zone of Proximal Development**

The concept of zone of proximal development is one of Vygotsky's most famous concepts, which first appeared in 1962 in *Thought and Language* and finally took shape in 1978 in *Mind in Society*. In 1978, the concept took shape in *Mind in Society*. Vygotsky defined the zone of most recent development as the gap between a child's actual level of development, which depended on the child's ability to solve problems independently, and the child's potential level of development, which depended on the child's ability to solve problems with adult guidance or in cooperation with more capable peers [2]. Later, the zone of most recent development was defined as the gap between the child's actual level of development and the child's potential level of development. [2] Later, Vygotsky reduced this concept to "the gap between the child's ability to solve problems only in collaboration with peers in the present and the child's ability to solve problems independently in the future. [4]

The zone of proximal development is based on the assumption that a learner of the more able and a learner of the less able interact synergistically on a task, with the expectation that the less able will be able to perform the task that they previously performed synergistically with the more able with skill and independence. The notion can be further derived from three assumptions: the generality assumption, the assistance assumption, and the potential assumption. The generality assumption assumes that individuals are capable of learning

everything that can be learned and can perform a certain number of tasks independently; the assistance assumption emphasizes how adults, teachers, or more capable individuals interact with children; and the potential assumption focuses on the potential of learners, including their potential and willingness to learn. [5] The three hypotheses of the zone of proximal development correspond to three different contexts: the developmental context corresponds to the general hypothesis, in which the zone of proximal development is used to explain the child's revealed mental functions; the applied context corresponds to the auxiliary hypothesis, in which the zone of proximal development explains the difference between the child's individual performance and the auxiliary performance; the metaphoric context corresponds to the underlying hypothesis, in which the zone of most recent development is used to reveal the extent to which the child's own internalized concepts fit with those of the science provided by the teacher or other moderator. [1]

The zone of proximal development has undoubtedly had a profound impact on language acquisition. Language learners have the potential to learn language, but they should not rely on self-learning in a closed and isolated environment, but rather learn language in an environment where teachers guide and collaborate with others. The zone of proximal development has important implications for the English acquisition of primary and secondary school students in the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, which is both ethnically and geographically prominent, as discussed below.

## **2.3 Internalization**

Inspired and influenced by the Soviet physiologist and psychologist Pavlov's idea of "conditioned reflex," Vygotsky proposes the concept of "internalization. Vygotsky proposes the concept of internalization. Pavlov's conditioned reflex is the basic form of human higher neural activity and one of the higher functions of the brain, which corresponds to the "unconditioned reflex". The unconditioned reflex is an innate reflex formed during the evolution of the race, while the conditioned reflex is an acquired reflex established by the individual in the course of life. Vygotsky defines "internalization" as "the reconstruction of the activity of the external world (objective) in the internal world (subjective)."[2] Vygotsky defines "internalization" as "the reconstruction of the activity of the external world (objective) in the

internal world (subjective). [Vygotsky's "internalization" is similar to Pavlov's "conditioned reflexes", both of which are acquired by individuals through social life and both of which require a constructive process. According to Vygotsky, the process of internalization consists of a series of transformations: (a) the reconstruction of an initial external (objective) world activity and the beginning of its appearance in the internal (subjective) world; (b) the transformation of the interpersonal (interaction) process into a personal (introspection) process; (c) the transformation of interpersonal (interaction) into personal (introspection) as a result of the long-term development of a series of socio-cultural activities. [2]

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory argues that culture is intertwined with individuals, society, biomes, and history, and therefore, individuals cannot develop without the influence of their sociocultural environment. Several of Vygotsky's core concepts, such as mediation, zone of proximal development, and internalization, emphasize the connections between individuals and others, individuals and tools, and individuals and the environment; moreover, these concepts are inextricably linked, and the mediation module, zone of proximal development module, and internalization module are interconnected and can be extrapolated downward as well as backward, i.e., the internalization link not only retraces the mediation link and the zone of proximal development link, but also the internalization link can be better understood. The internalization link can also better help and guide the mediation link and the zone of proximal development link.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory advocates that individuals interact with others in concert and considers learning as a communicative activity based on sociocultural contexts, which include school, family, peer groups, etc. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, especially the concepts of mediation, zone of recent development, and internalization, has had an important and profound impact on second language acquisition. The sociocultural theory integrates the social environment with the psycholinguistic process, and for second language learners, language development emerges from the process of social interaction, in which second language learners actively participate in the construction of linguistic meaning and eventually learn and master the second language.

### **3. IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY FOR ENGLISH ACQUISITION OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN THE GARZE TIBETAN AUTONOMOUS PREFECTURE**

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory can be adopted to shed light on primary and secondary school students in the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture; in particular, mediation, zone of proximal development, and internalization can inspire both teachers and students in primary and secondary schools in the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.

#### ***3.1 Inspiration of Mediation***

The mediation in Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory mainly includes human mediation and symbolic mediation, and the two main elements of human mediation that affect students' learning are teachers and parents. In Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, parents and teachers, as the two main elements of human mediation, are relatively limited in their influence on students' learning and need to be strengthened due to their geographical and ethnic characteristics. Due to historical and geographical reasons, the productivity of the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture is low, and "human resources present a low-level structure with manual laborers as the mainstay, supplemented by mechanized laborers and a few intelligent laborers. In general, parents of primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan area have a low level of education and are busy with production work, so they cannot exert a beneficial and effective influence on their children's learning, especially English learning. Currently, the special geographical and ethnic characteristics of the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture tend to make it difficult for most parents of primary and secondary school students to play a major role in mediating their children's English learning. In the long run, the local government should strengthen the education and training efforts of students' parents in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (especially remote farming and herding areas) so that they can better play their role in mediating and influencing their children's English learning.

Teachers in primary and secondary schools in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture also play a relatively weak role in mediating students' English

learning, and the mediating role of teachers must be effectively strengthened. Teachers in Garze Tibetan area are weak, the teaching force is unstable, generally young, inexperienced, and of low level. Therefore, the role of English teachers in mediating students' English acquisition in primary and secondary schools in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture needs to be strengthened: on the one hand, it is necessary to strengthen the training of local English teachers in primary and secondary schools in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, to implement a publicly funded teacher training program, to select outstanding local students who are willing to teach and suitable to teach to study English in teacher training programs at public expense, and to train primary and secondary school English teachers with high moral and professional standards for Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. On the other hand, we make full use of modern distance education technology, integrate excellent primary and secondary school teachers' resources inside and outside the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and provide guidance to remote primary and secondary school English teachers in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture by means of online teaching. On the other hand, we make full use of modern distance education technology to integrate excellent primary and secondary school teachers' resources from within and outside the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, and provide guidance to English teachers in remote primary and secondary schools in the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture through online classes to improve their English teaching skills.

Vygotsky's symbolic mediation is also an inspiration for English learning of primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. The inspiration of symbolic mediation in English acquisition of primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan area is mainly reflected in the following three aspects: First, teachers and students should update their concept of English acquisition. For teachers, they must understand that English is a symbolic tool for carrying the social culture of English-speaking countries, and they should master the English learning paradigm, reduce the influence of Chinese or Tibetan on the negative transfer of English acquisition, and focus on cultivating students' linguistic and cultural communication skills. For this reason, students must understand that English acquisition is a step-by-step learning process, and they should learn and master the basic

phonetic and grammatical features of the English language and improve their English application ability. Second, choose appropriate symbolic conditioning tools. Teachers can construct students' image cognition of these unfamiliar things with the help of symbolic adjustment tools such as pictures, models or videos, and then strengthen students' understanding and memorization of their English expressions. Finally, the cultural differences of symbolic conditioning tools are emphasized. Symbolic tools have specific symbolic meanings in specific cultural contexts, so the selection and use of symbolic tools should not be limited to helping students understand unfamiliar things visually, but should also be used to help students understand the different cultural meanings of symbolic tools in different social contexts, which is especially important for primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture to learn English.

### ***3.2 Insights from the Zone of proximal development***

The zone of proximal development is closely related to collaborative socio-cultural activities (contexts), and it is only in external activity contexts and in collaboration with others so that children can constantly contrast their goals with the goals set in the activity contexts, thus achieving growth from their original level to the possible level. However, some primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan areas (especially remote farming and herding areas) are deeply influenced by the geographical characteristics of Garze, growing up far away from their families, with a strong sense of self-containment and self-isolation, and relatively introverted and shy, with low initiative and synergy in English learning and poor English learning results.

Vygotsky's core concept of zone of proximal development also has important implications for the English acquisition of primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan area. First, it is important to reform the English classroom teaching model in primary and secondary schools. The concept of zone of proximal development suggests that learning is a collective interactive activity and that students' participation in various contexts and socio-cultural activities helps to achieve the transition from mutual and collaborative learning to self-learning. Based on the concept of the zone of most recent development, Vygotsky proposes the proposition of 'the leading role of teaching'-that

teaching that promotes children's development does not follow development after maturity, but leads the field of possibilities that are maturing. The only good teaching is that which precedes and leads development. At present, the English classroom teaching model in primary and secondary schools in Garze Tibetan area is still a one-way textbook-based knowledge teaching model centered on the teacher, while students passively memorize English (grammar) knowledge mechanically, and the English acquisition effect is extremely poor. According to Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development, teachers should reform the classroom teaching model, and must carry out grassroots reform from the English classroom, constructing a dialogue-centered classroom creation model in which teachers and students participate and share together, advocating task-based teaching method, situational teaching method, cooperative teaching method, etc. The task-based teaching method, situational teaching method, and cooperative teaching method are advocated to enhance communication and collaboration between students and teachers and other students through designing classroom situations and tasks, so that students can learn English knowledge collaboratively in interaction and realize the two-way transition between "inter-mental" and "intra-mental" English language learning.

Secondly, we build a problem-based practice model. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development reveals the gap between students' current learning level and their potential future learning level, and interactive and collaborative activities are one of the most effective ways to narrow the gap. Activities designed to bridge the gap between students' current and future learning abilities must meet two conditions: whether the hands-on activity contains a problem that requires students to solve it; and whether the problem level of the activity is set in a way that is relevant to individual experience. Given these two necessary conditions, a model of problem-based practical activities can be constructed, including three specific variants: demonstration-imitation, guided-experience, and task-inquiry. The problem-based practical activity model constructed based on Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development undoubtedly helps students' English learning in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. For example, due to geographical and ethnic factors in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, English phonetics is generally more problematic for primary and secondary school students, and the demonstration-

imitation style can improve students' phonetic outlook; specifically, teachers can demonstrate the specific parts and techniques of pronunciation of English phonemes through videos or pictures, and then guide students to imitate them. For example, when students in primary and secondary schools in Garze Tibetan area are praised in English as "You're clever" or "You're beautiful" in English, they will often be shy and speechless. According to this situation, teachers can design corresponding situations to guide students to experience how to communicate correctly in English conversation and understand the cultural differences embedded in the language.

### ***3.3 Insights from Internalization***

Vygotsky defined "internalization" as "the reconstruction of the external (objective) world activity in the internal (subjective) world", and internalization is the process by which individuals transform external social and cultural activities into internal mental functions. Vygotsky's concept of internalization is commonly applied to second language acquisition. One of the ways of internalizing second language acquisition is imitation, which can be divided into immediate imitation and delayed imitation; other ways of internalizing second language acquisition are private speech, after the communicative activity. A linguistic monologue is repeated or created when the child is alone after the communicative activity. [6] It is important to emphasize that although internalization manifests itself more as an individual internal mental activity of the child, this individual behavior is based on socio-cultural activities and cannot be achieved without the supervision and guidance of regulators such as parents or teachers.

Vygotsky's internalization may also have important implications for the English acquisition of primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. First, it improves the initiative of English learning of primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan area, strengthens the link between students' memory and digestion of English knowledge, and effectively internalizes the English learning paradigm. Second, it emphasizes the role played by imitation in students' English acquisition. Immediate imitation is similar to the above-mentioned demonstration-imitation activity practice model, which is mainly applied to classroom contextual English teaching in Garze Tibetan primary and secondary schools,

especially English phonetics, speaking and listening teaching, while delayed imitation can be done by students independently after the classroom teaching is completed, and the imitation content is mainly English phonetics, speaking and listening. Finally, we should pay attention to the important role played by private language in students' English learning, because primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan area are often reluctant to open their mouths to practice English. Teachers or parents should encourage students to use after-school or other leisure time to repeat or create their own English knowledge or the English texts they read. Imitation, especially delayed imitation, and private language help to strengthen the initiative of English learning among primary and secondary school students in Garze Tibetan area and are beneficial to improve students' English learning level.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture has unique ethnic and regional characteristics, forming a relatively closed and unique socio-cultural environment, which has a very negative impact on the English acquisition of primary and secondary school students in the region. Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, especially the concepts of mediation, zone of proximal development, and internalization, has important implications for overcoming the disadvantages of the Garze Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and improving the English language learning of primary and secondary school students. However, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory is an organic whole, and the concepts of mediation, zone of proximal development, and internalization are closely related and complementary to each other. The connotation and core concepts of socio-cultural theory should be comprehensively grasped and scientifically practiced in English teaching in primary and secondary schools so as to help students improve their English learning more effectively.

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