

Article

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Experiences of a Chinese English Learner in the Framework of Sociocultural Theory: An Autoethnography

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Abstract: This study explores the process of second language acquisition (SLA) among Chinese learners within the framework of sociocultural theory, particularly focusing on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Through an autoethnographic methodology, the author reflects on personal experiences of learning English in both China and abroad, aiming to fill a gap in SLA research by emphasizing localized Chinese contexts. The findings suggest that access to guidance from more capable individuals, whether teachers, peers, or others—plays a critical role in helping learners navigate their ZPD, thus enhancing their language acquisition. However, the study identifies that many Chinese learners underutilize their surrounding sociocultural environment, limiting their learning potential. This research not only underscores the role of ZPD in language learning but also offers practical insights for both students and educators, advocating for greater student agency in seeking help and for teachers to actively engage in fostering students' ZPD development. Despite its contributions, the study's autoethnographic approach introduces limitations in terms of subjectivity and sample size, highlighting the need for future research to incorporate diverse perspectives and larger datasets. This research offers a valuable perspective on how sociocultural theory can inform SLA practices in Chinese educational settings, contributing to improved pedagogical strategies.

Keywords: sociocultural theory; Zone of Proximal Development; second language acquisition; autoethnography

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1. Introduction

Second language acquisition has become an essential skill for students at all stages in China, which is still an issue worthy of attention in Chinese education. Second language acquisition is inseparable from a certain social and cultural environment. Therefore, sociocultural theory is closely related to the second language acquisition process. The sociocultural theory analyzes the psychological development of human beings based on the concept of development and history and guides the development of individual advanced psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1987). This theory occupies a place in the language field, especially Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which has played an enormous role and effect in second language acquisition and has provided greater help and support for second language learners. Some scholars have written autoethnographies within the framework of sociocultural theory, providing a reality and self-reflection of the identity of transnational intellectuals and professors.

However, previous studies have not explored the second language acquisition process of native Chinese learners, which may cause them to fail to make good use of the surrounding environment to help their learning. In this autoethnography, using sociocultural theory, I retrieved the formation and progress of the self-development zone during my growth through conversations and self-reflection to provide language learners with experience and offer advice to teachers. More specifically, I explore the following research questions:

- 1) How does the ZPD theory affect and apply to my English learning?
- 2) As a student and future teacher, how can I apply ZPD theory?

2. Literature Review

Nowadays, more and more people are learning a second language. Learning a second language has also become the focus of attention in recent years. The theoretical knowledge of a second language involves many aspects, such as innatism, behaviorism, structuralism, constructivism, etc. Although the research on second language acquisition has gradually developed from broad to deep, there still needs to be more research using the autoethnographic methodology, especially under the framework of sociocultural theory. Experience and insights from the studies confirm the effectiveness of sociocultural theory and give enlightenment to future English learning for young people.

Much research has focused on sociocultural theory and second language acquisition (SCT-SLA) for the research method. Research on sociocultural theory and second language acquisition is relatively mature. Firstly, Vygotsky (1987) proposed sociocultural theory, which regards language as a tool for thinking and believes that language is not only a tool for cognitive development but also an integral part of human thought. The core concepts of intermediation, internalization, and ZPD were proposed. He believed that human learning is based on interaction in social activities. Vygotsky's ZPD refers to the difference value between a child's actual developmental level of independent problem-solving and his potential developmental level of problem-solving under adult guidance or in cooperation with a more capable peer. He indicated that teaching should focus on students' ZPD, provide students with complex content, mobilize their enthusiasm, develop their potential and surpass their ZPD to reach the next stage of development. The ZPD foreboded the child's future ability to work independently and perform certain intellectual functions. Furthermore, many studies have discussed sociocultural theory's role and effect on second language acquisition. Lantolf (1994) elaborated on the findings on various aspects of second language learning provided by sociocultural theory developed by Vygotsky and his colleagues. Xi (2020) indicated that the SCT-SLA study proposed that school education is an essential social activity to promote individual development from the perspective of educational development and emphasized the dual tool attributes of language as an interpersonal tool and a thinking tool, paying attention to the development of individual second language learners in the classroom environment. Although these two studies promoted the development of SCT-SLA to a certain extent, the research types of these two did not reflect the standard views in the field and needed more empirical and practical research. They did not reflect the situation of individual second language learners under sociocultural theory.

In light of this, many scholars have used the method of autoethnographies to discuss, reflect and analyze their own experiences with second language learning, which makes them more credible. Zhang-Wu (2022) described her journey from an international student to an English teacher at a university in the United States using an autoethnographic method. Canagarajah (2012) drew on the autoethnographic methodology and argued for the importance of critically using multiple identities to express voices in broader professional discourse and practice, showing the importance of constructive relationships between different professional communities. Both articles provided good paradigms for autoethnographic research methods. Unfortunately, they were limited by their subjectivity,

small sample size, and highly contextualized nature. These two articles were also discussed under certain circumstances and did not consider many external factors, such as the time background and other external interference.

Due to the advantages of the autoethnographic method, some empirical studies about autoethnographies were launched with the guidance of sociocultural theory. For instance, Gao (2021) explored how transnationality, life experiences, and political and economic policies in higher education reshape the identity and mobility of transnational intellectuals, which filled a gap in the existing literature, informing that the development of transnational identities can serve as an analytical tool to advocate for social justice and train teachers. Howlett and Nguyen (2020) reflected on an international graduate teaching assistant's (IGTA) first collaboration with US undergraduates to teach. Cooperative teaching models provided a socially constructed environment that promoted reflective practice to improve lesson planning, observation, instructional delivery, and course outcomes. However, these large amounts of research are based on transnational backgrounds or identities. They are not fully applicable to local students in the Chinese context as a reference for learning English or becoming teachers. This study will use the autoethnographic method to explore the experience and reflection of learning English within the framework of sociocultural theory in the main Chinese background.

Existing research focuses on sociocultural autoethnography methods in the context of transnational identities. While they exemplify the role of sociocultural theory in some aspects, they do not provide strong evidence of the impact of learning in the context of sociocultural theory by indigenous Chinese second language learners.

3. Methodology

The autoethnographic approach effectively explores personal experience through a unique cultural lens (Ellis & Bochner, 2006). Autoethnography can be defined in three terms: *auto*, *ethno*, and *graph* (Canagarajah, 2012). *Auto* means that the research is carried out from the perspective of self, and this study is based on my experience of learning English in China from childhood to adulthood and my perspective to elaborate and reflect. *Ethno* represents the relationship between culture and the individual. Culture and individuals influence and shape each other. The localized English in China and English in English-speaking countries influence my English language learning differently. Individual learners also create the way Chinese people learn English. What *Graphy* shows is a creative ability to tell a story. Texts, articles, and books in research can all record data. The focus of this autoethnography is mainly based on the framework of sociocultural theory, from the perspective of ZPD theory, to study how I learned English as a student born and raised in China and how I chose to become an English teacher.

Data collection mainly comes from conversations and text materials. Conversations include talking with parents, teachers at various stages, classmates, and friends, while text materials include results and transcripts for each age group. To make all the data and experience more intuitive, the data is analyzed based on the objective learning situation in three stages and the individual's situation. After carefully observing my data, I found that each stage of learning English has different characteristics. Therefore, I divide my learning situation into the following three stages according to the learning characteristics and emphases of each age stage: Experiences of learning English as a child (from age 7 to 18), College Study and other related experiences (from age 18 to 22) and Graduate study and prepare to become an English teacher (after age 22).

4. Findings

According to the three stages I have divided, the preliminary investigation results show that although I have experience studying abroad and traveling, most of my 17-year English learning process was completed in China. The ZPD area has had a significant impact on me. With the help and guidance of wiser teachers and peers, my English ability

has gradually improved and reached my ZPD area. It is they who empower me. Meanwhile, these forces have provided excellent help and inspiration for my future English learning and English teaching.

4.1. Experiences of learning English as a child (from age 7 to 18)

At this stage, I was learning English more with the teachers' help to gain some progress and interest. Moreover, the environment for these 11 years was mainly under the traditional Chinese education system.

In elementary school, I started to learn English in the first grade, a relatively early age to learn English. In the first to third grades, I hated English very much. I could barely speak English, but I was unwilling to improve it. My teacher showed up and changed my view of English. Ms. Wang was a new teacher, and her way of teaching was different. She used an interesting way to teach the class and changed my view of English words and sentences. For instance, her class would have plenty of interesting English games to consolidate the previously learned words. With her help, I became interested in English, and my memory improved. There was also an experience that I remember very profoundly. Teacher Wang invited me to host the school's English Art Festival. I also supplemented this experience by talking with my parents and primary school classmates. Based on my original English, it was difficult to host in English, but Ms. Wang repeatedly taught me to read word by word and praised me as a genius in learning English with other teachers, which greatly enhanced my confidence. Later, I played very well in this host and reached a level of pronunciation that I had never thought of. With the teacher's help, I have made unprecedented progress and reached my ZPD. At this time, I began to fall in love with English.

Later, in the middle and high school stages, my English was further improved. English learning in elementary school has laid a foundation for the next study stage. Therefore, based on listening and speaking, I further systematically studied reading and writing in English. The length and difficulty of English articles in middle and high schools were much more complex than before. Learning to write challenged me a lot. From the conversations with my parents and high school classmates, I could confirm that I was very distressed by this. Because my writing skills and my vocabulary were limited, so I always repeatedly used these types of common words like "have", "take", and "make" in my composition. At that time, I was in high school and ashamed to ask questions. I just imitated excellent model essays by myself, but what I expressed without the model essays either had contextual problems or could not express the ideas. There was no progress at all. However, Mr. Lei found out that many students in the class had problems, so he held a class on writing skills. In class, I learned that when writing an English composition, I needed to change my Chinese thinking without more complicated and convoluted thoughts and be aware that not all advanced expressions were the best. Meanwhile, it was best to sort out your thinking before writing and pay attention to a certain degree of logic. Since then, whenever I started to write a composition, I would read and understand the topic's meaning and make a draft and an outline. However, this seemed a bit like a "waste of time"; it significantly improved the efficiency of my subsequent writing and my writing level. In addition, this experience taught me not to be complacent, not to be ashamed to express and ask questions and told me to learn some valuable and experienced knowledge from teachers and classmates.

The eleven years of study with the help of teachers have benefited me a lot, and I have gained a lot, which has increased my interest in English learning and improved my learning ability. It also laid a foundation for my choice of major in college and my future path.

4.2. College Study and other related experiences (from age 18 to 22)

During this period, I entered a new stage of my life. I majored in English, so my university life was inseparable from English. At this stage, I received help from all aspects, which improved my abilities in many fields. I have learned a lot of English professional knowledge and skills at the university. Through various related experiences outside the school, I have also expanded my English horizons and enlightened myself to become an English teacher.

In college, I studied all aspects of English courses, such as reading, listening, writing, speaking, English literature, Shakespeare plays, a second foreign language, etc., including the training of basic English skills and the enrichment of English or other cultural knowledge. Combined with the memories of my college classmates, our Shakespeare drama class was exciting. The task of this course was to perform drama in groups, and the students could direct the scripts and lines of the drama. I remember most of the scenes of Macbeth, and I played Lady Macbeth. Because I had no experience in acting the first time, especially in the last scene where Mrs. Macbeth jumped off the building. The group leader of our group guided me in this scene. She taught me the tone and movements when reading this dialogue, which made me more active in playing. My team members who played Macbeth also practiced and pondered with me repeatedly. We made the dialogue more natural and authentic. Finally, this scene was well received by the teacher and other students.

In addition to the usual classroom, I would participate in related internships, research, volunteer activities, social practice and study abroad, and other activities. What impressed me the most was the one-month exchange at the University of California in San Diego. There I felt a different environment, and every aspect of life was different. The conversation with my friend deepened my feelings about the experience. I learned many English words and daily expressions because they were necessary for our daily communication. Our teacher Ikenna taught a lot of business English-related knowledge in class, and I covered many new fields like venture capital information. After leaving the teacher's class, he invited many successful people in the industry to share their experiences so that we could experience the various types of life. Many local students also were invited to have group discussions with us. In discussions, I came into contact with many new viewpoints and ideas, and the dialogue with them also improved my speaking and pronunciation. Studying and living differently from China greatly expanded my horizons.

With the help of children, peers, and teachers, I have grown a lot in the past four years, which not only gave me a solid foundation in English but also helped me find the direction and goal of my future efforts. When I was about to finish college, I decided to continue studying for graduate school.

4.3. Graduate study and prepare to become an English teacher (after age 22)

This stage is exactly the stage I am in now. I have learned a lot from my postgraduate study at Wenzhou-Kean University (WKU). On the one hand, the courses have expanded my previous English skills like never before. English learning before the postgraduate stage paid more attention to basic English abilities and knowledge, while the course teachers in WKU teach more about the knowledge of English teaching, culture and linguistics, and the application of theories in real classroom. Under their guidance, my knowledge base has increased. Also, I found I have a relatively large problem with academic writing. Although I had specific ideas and content to express, the English language I used needed to be more formal and accurate. For example, in essay writing, I usually use "didn't", "doesn't", and "can't", but in formal expressions, I should write "did not", "does not", and "cannot". Under the network course recommended by the teacher, I was slowly correcting my bad habits and improving my academic writing ability. Thesis writing is also an essential part of my postgraduate studies. After class, we also had many lectures and seminars to provide us with experience and help for teacher examinations. On the other

hand, we also participated in many practical activities. For instance, I went to Ruian's primary school to volunteer and took a 45-minute class. Before class, I prepared to teach the children to sing "remember me" and read and interpreted the picture book to them. Nevertheless, singing English songs was difficult for me, for this song involved some Spanish content and difficult English pronunciation. Therefore, I asked my fellow volunteers who came with me for advice. She was more familiar with this song and could help me find resources for segmented exercises. With her help, I interpreted the song and sang it accurately. I taught the children word for word and let them practice in groups. The kids enjoyed the class to the fullest. This class was a great success, and it allowed me to improve my pronunciation.

WKU's learning environment and atmosphere deeply infect me and drive me to keep moving forward and learning. I love to ask questions and think more boldly than before. The hard work and excellence of my peers help me improve myself, and at the same time, I also learn to be willing to help others. I improved my English language proficiency by leaps and bounds, filling the vacancy in my English teaching experience. The experiences and thoughts of the professors have also profoundly affected me, making me determined to be an English teacher in the future to teach and infect more students.

5. Discussion

In the present study, by exploring the influence and application of ZPD on my English learning experience, ZPD has greatly improved my English learning ability at all stages. ZPD occurs in a certain social environment. The influence it brings is not limited to parents, peers, and teachers but also includes the guidance provided by all people who are more capable and knowledgeable. If I ask for help, I will gain valuable knowledge and wealth. Reflecting on my experience, I have gained some enlightenment on applying ZPD. Students need to dare to ask questions and ask for help, make good use of the resources around them, and try to challenge themselves, which can significantly improve their abilities. Teachers are supposed to accept other people's questions and encourage students to raise their confusion and difficulties. It is necessary to pay attention to the student's ability level and assign some slightly difficult tasks to the students to improve their abilities. At the same time, the teachers themselves must push themselves to make continuous progress to develop themselves. Like the articles of Gao (2021) and Howlett and Nguyen (2020), this paper also finds the value of the sociocultural theory, but in a certain sense, it broadens the applicable population and background of the theory in second language acquisition.

However, this paper does have some limitations. The autoethnography in this article is limited by its intense subjectivity and small sample size. I am not entirely learning English in a local Chinese environment (I also have a one-month study abroad experience). Nevertheless, the purpose of this study is more to provide some references for other native Chinese students who are learning English, encourage them to think and ask more questions, and develop their ZPD; it is also to give some suggestions to teachers to pay attention to the cultivation of students' ZPD, seeking their sense of identity. Therefore, future research can try to add other people's views and evaluations to reduce subjectivity or broaden the background of second language learners (not limited to the context of native China) and use the core of multiple sociocultural theories concepts for autoethnographic reflection and feedback.

6. Conclusion

Above all, based on the "Zone of Proximal Development" under sociocultural theory, this paper uses autoethnographic methods to demonstrate the difficulties encountered by Chinese second language learners in learning in China, foreign countries, and other different environments to fill research gaps in field. The processes for progress and develop-

ment with the help of competent people are also analyzed. This study, providing a demonstration for second language learners, encourages students and teachers to face difficulties and challenges bravely and strive to develop their ZPD to obtain their improvement. I also hope to use the theory of ZPD in my future experience in learning English and teaching English, and I can deepen my research in this area.

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