A SOCIOCULTURAL VIEW OF ENGAGEMENT IN THE MUSIC-BASED PRONUNCIATION CLASSROOM

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Recent advancements in second language research point to the role of social interaction as a key factor in L2 development. In an era where cognition is no longer understood as a phenomenon confined to the inside of the head, Sociocultural Theory (SCT) offers insights about the ways in which language is regulated interpersonally for the purposes of mediating cognition, and hence L2 development. In this paper, I analyze students' collective engagement around a word stress rap activity occurring in a college intensive English course. The results show that students use linguistic resources to collaboratively resolve and attend to discrepancies in their abilities during the music-based activity. I conclude by discussing how these socially-mediated student behaviors translate into instructional opportunities to build learner self-sufficiency in the second language pronunciation classroom.

INTRODUCTION

Pronunciation instructors intend to shape students' second language development by setting "performance" or "behavioral" objectives in the lesson plan. This is what we are trained to do. Embedded in these objectives are our expectations about what students will *do*, how they will *respond* to our lessons. Despite our best intentions, this method of instructional design is undermined, at times, by the delicate and contingent nature of engagement, or the idea that what students *think* of the elements present in the interactional context of the lesson impacts what they *actually* do.

One potentially fruitful way to attend to the complexity of engagement is to look to recent scholarship, which has begun to underscore the influence of social interaction as an additional factor in the outcomes of the second language classroom (Atkinson, 2011). Sociocultural Theory (SCT) is predicated on the notion that "developmental processes take place through participation in cultural, linguistic and historically formed settings such as . . . peer group interaction" (Lantolf, 2000, p. 197). Through these processes, an individual's engagement is *mediated* not only by what happens inside the head, but also through the iterative co-construction of social and linguistic facts with others.

This paper examines interaction within a music-based word stress activity occurring during a pronunciation course in a college intensive English program. A series of classroom interactions are analyzed through the lens of SCT in order to put forth the argument that students use linguistic resources to mediate their engagement with music-based pronunciation in ways that result in drastically different roles and learning experiences for each individual.

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Music and Second Language Pronunciation

At perhaps the most basic starting point, both music and language are universal to all human cultures. Both require and contribute to complex cognitive and motor processes (Vaneechoutte & Skoyles 1998). Additionally, duration, intensity (volume), pitch and tone are acoustic elements used in the production of both speech and music. The multifaceted connection between language and music has proven to be valuable in the ESL/EFL classroom. Our innate human affinity for music across linguistic borders has made it an accessible and inviting option for introducing learners to difficult or otherwise intimidating concepts (such as L2 pronunciation).

As it pertains to ESL pronunciation, numerous publications attest to the benefits of music-based pedagogy. Carolyn Graham's *Jazz Chants* (1978) popularized a musical approach to the teaching of communicative skills and prosody. Oftentimes, a chorus or other part of a song is repeated in such a way that reinforces language and aids in memorization (Mora, 2000). In an extensive teacher research dissertation, Terrell (2012) exploits the acoustic cues that are shared between language and music to teach pragmatic aspects of pronunciation to ELLs. These shared cues include: a high speech rate and intensity for anger; low voice intensity and rising pitch contour for fear; and slow speech rate and falling pitch contour for sadness. Additionally, Fischler (2009) noted intelligibility gains and increased metacognitive ability with respect to word stress placement among high school ESL students after they completed a series of rap activities from her *Stress Rulz* textbook. The results of these studies offer an added dimension of support for existing pronunciation research findings in favor of explicit prosodic instruction (Derwing and Rossiter, 2003).

Sociocultural Theory as a Lens for Student Engagement

Although, generally speaking, the literature on music-based approaches to second language instruction shows favorable results, these must be approached with caution as they are often aggregated and fail to reveal the nuance of individual student engagement. Moreover, the celebratory tone with which music pedagogies are often discussed could potentially obscure the struggles or divergent modes of engagement that lead students toward different learning paths, even as they seemingly pursue the same learning objective.

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) offers a set of principles that illuminate the relationship between differential modes of engagement in classroom interaction and associated cognitive processes. This is mainly because SCT posits that individual cognition is never simply relegated to the individual mind. Instead, cognition is primarily a *mediated* activity. That is to say that cultural and linguistic resources encountered in the social milieu function as tools that facilitate and iteratively re-shape the mental facilities, and from an L2 perspective, the linguistic development of the individual. Lantolf (2000), who has been a major champion of SCT in second language acquisition, maintains that *regulation* is one form of mediation. Regulation enables individuals to control resources (object regulation), their own behavior (self-regulation) and even the behavior of co-participants (other regulation) in order to achieve a goal. In a classroom context, the relevance of regulation quickly becomes apparent as individuals deploy language as a tool to make attempts to reach the learning objective collectively.

In this way, SCT presents an opportunity to capture the cognitive, affective and behavioral multidimensionality of second language classroom engagement (Fredricks and McColskey, 2012) in ways not possible through traditional, aggregated survey-based quantitative metrics. Tocalli-Beller and Swain (2007) emphasize this point. They analyze in-class student discourse and argue that adult ESL students "talk to learn" as they work on a task of interpreting riddles and puns. Likewise, Donato (1994) draws on SCT to demonstrate French learners' joint construction of a reflexive verb form, a task that neither participant was able to complete alone. The scholarly trajectory paved by SCT research holds great potential for second language pronunciation pedagogy. As pronunciation instruction increasingly incorporates communicative approaches, more sociocultural research is needed in order to aid our understanding of how communicative engagement in pronunciation tasks and subsequent "development [are] based on collaboration . . ." (Vygotsky, 1987, p.210).

Research Questions

- How do students use language during the music-based pronunciation activity to regulate their own behavior and that of others?
- What do these forms of engagement reveal about differences in development among the students participating in the interaction?

METHODS

Participants and Setting

This paper documents the results of an action research study in which I took on the role of teacher-researcher in an intensive English program at a university in a large northeastern U.S. city. The setting of this study responds to Derwing and Munro's (2005) observation of the need for "more classroom-relevant research" (p. 392) in the literature on second language pronunciation.   The course, Intermediate Pronunciation, met twice a week for 90 minutes over a span of seven weeks. At least once a week, students engaged with a music-based activity as a means of practicing a target skill. These music-based interventions included choral repetition of poetry, rap and music lyrics, round robin language drills over an instrumental, creation of rap lyrics and cloze activities for listening practice. The class consisted of eight students from Arabic, French, Korean and Chinese L1 backgrounds.

Data Analysis

 I conducted classroom discourse analysis on transcribed audio/video recordings of the music-based activities. This paper focuses interactions occurring during a particular word stress rap activity called "Change that Funktion" from Janelle Fischler's *Stress Rulz* textbook (2006). The text is intended to help students remember the rule for the case when two words have the same spelling, yet word stress production changes based on the part of speech (or "funktion" – e.g. OBject [noun] vs obJECT [verb]). Such pairs of words are embedded into rap stanzas for students to recite over a beat. Nonverbal communication such as gaze, posture and gesture are also taken into account during analysis. I qualitatively evaluate occurrences of core discourse analytic constructs (such as timing and turn taking patterns) to inform my reading of how

students collaboratively engaged with the music-based activity to mediate their learning.

RESULTS

The student discourse occurring during the *Stress Rulz* activity reveals diverse forms of behavioral *regulation* or interactional "process[es] that students use to initiate and direct their efforts to acquire knowledge and skill" (Zimmerman, 1989, p.329). The musical nature of the activity lead to a participation structure that centered around two main speech events, which will be covered below: rehearsal time and performance time. Students rehearsed the rap text in pairs (with one group of three) as the teacher (myself) rotated and coached; later, students performed their rap for the class, round robin style, while still seated in pairs.

Regulating to Find New Support during the "Rehearsal Time" Speech Event

There were times at the front of the room when the real-time demands of the activity prompted students to retreat or reposition their roles. Some students' post-activity self-reports confirmed that they faced challenges with the mechanics of the task. The speed of the beat and the instances when lines were overloaded with more syllables than the students could handle in time caused the most issues. This is not surprising, as the pace of rap is very uncompromising. It was precisely these challenges that revealed where students needed work with English prosody. In many cases their difficulties derived from not understanding how to shorten and reduce structure words and connect quickly across word boundaries. We later used activities to address these issues. However, to survive the moment of rehearsal time, students took some interactional liberties to gain a sense of self-efficacy with the rap task.

While seemingly simple on its surface, the task of repetitive listening and recitation of lyrics creates a cycle of engagement in which students constantly self-observe, self-judge and self-regulate (Zimmerman, 1989). Toward the goal of learner autonomy, such self-monitoring techniques are an encouraged component of contemporary pronunciation pedagogy (Miller, 2007). During the activity, some students could be observed regulating their own behavior through kinesthetic means such as tapping the desk, a foot or nodding their heads as they rehearsed. What the participation structure of pairwork added to this equation, however, is a layer that confirms the underpinnings of SCT; that is, that the language learning process occurs not merely inside the head, but it observably occupies the realm of social interaction as language mediates cognition. This happens as individuals' language use reflects their ability to observe, judge and regulate themselves and others simultaneously.

One very salient example of interactional improvisations in the regulation process was observed through the scaffolding procedure of the activity. Initially, students were introduced to the Stress Rulz rap by way of the model rapper provided with the materials. After identifying the key stress features (contrasts) and taking the song home to rehearse privately, the model was eliminated and students were asked to rehearse to an instrumental with their partner in class. The removal of this scaffold exposed students who, for whatever reason (i.e. insufficient practice, etc.), had not achieved the skill to recite the lyrics fluently. At this point, socially-mediated regulation took hold. Whether they were willing or not, proficient students replaced the model that had been removed for the less proficient students.

Jung was a young businessman from Korea, whose quiet yet jovial energy contributed to the collegial interactions that occurred at the front of the room during rehearsal time.   In his group of three, he seemed to be the most comfortable with reciting the rap lyrics. Mei, who was sitting next to Jung, clearly observed his skill and comfort with the lyrics, which differed drastically from her own. In response to what she noticed, she moved my audio recorder closer to Jung. Later, as Mei managed to recite a full line of the lyrics fluently, Jung reciprocated the appraisal of success by passing her the recorder (to which she laughed and pushed it away bashfully). Through this small playful form of object regulation, these two students are managing the interaction in a way that indicates their active observation and judgment of each other's progress with the task. Aside from indicating an awareness of being under the watchful eye/ear of a researcher, these pranks created a paradoxical space wherein play and laughter served to mitigate students' very palpable anxieties around the task of preparing to "perform."

Mei's estimation of Jung's skills contributed to her strategy of engagement in the interaction below. This was the second of three in-class rehearsals that the groups did without an explicit model (i.e. to the instrumental). Mei begins by confessing her trepidation to a nearby group member in Mandarin:

1   Mei: 我不知道是哪一句。
2   I don't know which sentence we're supposed to do.

3   Yixin：跟上口奏。
4   (swirls hands in a circular motion) *Follow the rhythm.*

5   Mei： 我只会第一句。
6   I can only do the first sentence.

7   Yixin：第一句?
8   (smiles) *The first sentence?*

The excerpt above begins with Mei regulating language by drawing on her L1, Mandarin. With this move, she has selectively enlisted the help of the only peer who shares her L1, Yixin. Simultaneously, she is engaging with affect by excluding Jung (a Korean speaker) from the participation framework. In other words, Mei's use of her L1 is significant in that it drastically reduces the number of listeners that can understand. Her inability to follow the task goes undetected thus saving face for her. Mei's comment also serves as a discursive indicator of low self-efficacy or "perceived capability to perform [an] activity" (Zimmerman, 2000, p.83). Self-efficacy, stemming from educational psychology, has traditionally been studied from a bounded, quantitative perspective. As can be seen here, however, a sociocultural approach to discourse analysis complements traditional approaches, as discourse also provides key insights into how Mei has covertly positioned herself as a struggling learner in this interaction. In the excerpt below, Mei seeks a suitable regulation strategy to overcome her struggles:

1   (♪♬ Music starts ♪♬)

2   (Jung raps alone and continues)
3   Jung: **[To proDUCE means]** we make a little more. But the **[PROduce]** is the
4   **[lettuce]** we buy at the store.
5   Mei: **[To proDUCE means]** (mumbles)   **[proDUCE]**
6   **[letter]** (mumbles)
7   Jung: **[To inSULT]** express words as cold as ice. But the **[INsult** is the comment that isn't
8   nice.]
9   Mei: **[To inSULT]** (mumbles)   **[inSULT** is the comment **that isn't**
10   **nice**]

It is evident in many ways that Jung's abilities provide much needed support for Mei. While she cannot keep pace with the full length of the rap at the sentence level, she is able to chime in with the key vocabulary (contrast) words that we covered previously. For example, on line (5), Mei raps a few of the first words of the line "To proDUCE means." Quickly, she loses the pace, which Jung continues to sustain, and her intelligible utterances are exchanged for mumbles. Even the mumbling is worth mentioning because Mei mumbles in time with the beat. Essentially, Mei has developed a strategy of imitation. Lantolf (2000) explains that, from a SCT perspective, imitation is developmentally relevant in the sense that "it involves goal directed cognitive activity that can result in transformations of the original [cognitive] model" (p.203). Mei has observed both herself and Jung and judged the amount of linguistic load – including the amount of imitation- that is reasonable for her abilities, given the timing demands. As a result of this, she has committed to a set of priorities as part of her self-regulation process. The pattern of her utterances suggests that her order of priorities would look something like this: articulate focal stress words; keep pace with the beat; and least importantly - articulate every word precisely.

Interestingly, even though Mei's discourse shows a strong commitment to the focal stress words, there are still issues with her production. The purpose of the activity was for students to note and produce the stress contrast between verbs and noun pairs that are spelled alike. While Mei was able to do this successfully when pronouncing the words in isolation (prior to rapping), she consistently applies the *same* stress (not a contrast) to the pair of words during the rap. (proDUCE twice on line 5 instead of proDUCE/PROduce and inSULT twice on line 9).   This corresponds to similar findings in second language pronunciation research in which scholars argue that correct pronunciation at a lower phonological level do not necessarily equate to success at a higher level (Celce-Murcia, Brinton & Goodwin, 2010).

Beyond discussing Mei's skill level, I am really seeking to emphasize the resourcefulness of her engagement process. Guided first by a plea for assistance in her L1 and later, by the more fluent discourse of Jung, she found a way to engage jointly with fellow students when the teacher removed support from the activity. In this way, she is able achieve a task that probably would have been impossible for her without the participation of others. Mei's engagement here shows that she is operating in her Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), or the distance between her current level and the level at which she is able to function with assistance (Vygotsky, 1978).

Regulating to Shift the Participation Structure in the Performance Time Speech Event

After three rounds of rehearsal, the students were faced with the task of sharing or "performing" their raps for the rest of the class. The performances were brief and informal, as each student remained in their original seated position and was assigned only a couple of lines from the lyrics. Despite the casual format of the task, students were not eager to be singled out as the star rapper of the class. This was understandable and expected, especially given their varied levels of familiarity with and interest in the genre. In addition to using play as a mechanism for responding to the demands of the activity, students used their agency to re-arrange the participation structure of the speech event. For the purposes of performance, I had assigned individual sections of the lyrics for the students to recite individually. At the moment of performance time, however, the students' preference for community and connection around the activity prevailed over my instructions:

1   Catrice: Now this is the instrumental. The guy [the model], he's not singing. It's just
2   us, okay?
3   (Yujia and Jung nod)
4   Catrice: You ready?
5   (silence)
6   (Jung scratches his head, chuckles and looks down)
7   (♪♫ Music starts ♪♫)
8   (Other students begin their turns)

9   Mei: (gestures to Jung and Yujia) Together! We together.
10   (Yujia looks toward Mei)
11   (Jung nods his head)

As with rehearsal time, I began the performance time speech event by reminding the students that we were no longer using a model. In retrospect, I realize that this may have only heightened their anxieties about performing, as evidenced by the silence on line 5 in response to my question "are you ready?" Despite what I read as initial trepidation by some students, many of them successfully recited their lyrics both in time with the beat and placing correct stress on the focal vocabulary words. Sahar and Yifei began, each reciting their lyrics separately. As Omar and Daniella picked up their respective turns, Mei decides to use language to regulate peer behavior. Essentially, she is reacting to her discomfort with the idea of performing solo. On line 9, as others are in the middle of their performance, she turns to her groupmates, in a somewhat panicked state and declares that they will perform together. Jung quickly consents nonverbally (line 11), and Yujia acknowledges the proposal with eye contact. Once the other students have finished their turns, Yujia, Mei and Jung jump right into the next section of lyrics, in unison:

1   Jung and Yujia: An [**OBject is something we can feel and see. To OBject expresses**]
2   a feeling that we don't agree
3   Mei: [**OBject is something we can feel and see. To obJECT expresses**]
4   (mumbles)
5   (Yifei, Yujia and Jung laugh, shift in their seats)
6   (the group finishes the remaining lyrics)
7   Yifei: [(laughs and gestures to Sahar) We should have sang together.]

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This group's deviation from the task instructions was evident, but so was their commitment to the task. Consistent with Wright's findings, the group "manipulate[d] the task process in order to make it manageable in their own terms" (as cited in Barkhuizen, 1998, p.87), which I certainly could appreciate. The decision to perform as a group was initiated by Mei, who, as noted previously, was a student who struggled the most with the activity. Although all of this would imply that Mei stands to benefit most from a group performance, something very unexpected happened. As line 1 shows, a slight divergence in stress production occurred as the group jointly recited the lyrics. This portion of the lyrics was supposed to highlight the stress contrast between OBject as a noun and obJECT as a verb. In actuality, Jung and Yujia misplaced stress on the verb, pronouncing it as OBject. Despite her earlier struggles and her characteristic mumbles that follow, Mei was the only member of her group that correctly pronounced obJECT, as shown on line 3. This outcome is certainly interesting as Mei's unassisted success may imply that in just a short amount of time, she is making strides toward moving to the next phase in her ZPD (i.e. being able to complete a task alone that was impossible for her previously). It is likely that the other students' blunder was attributable to the cognitive demand of keeping the quick pace of the beat while also needing to recall the stress rule. What is clear is that Jung and Yujia did not mispronounce the word due to a lack of knowledge. The regulation process of self/other observation and judgment was fully at work as several students (including Jung and Yujia) give a series of nonverbal cues on line 5 (laughter, etc.) to indicate that they noticed the mistake. Second language pronunciation research supports the idea that these moments of noticing one's own errors are a major prerequisite of development (Derwing & Munro, 2005; Smith & Beckmann, 2005).

DISCUSSION

Sociocultural Theory and other emerging social approaches to second language development (Atkinson, 2011) shed additional light on instances where a teacher's quick gaze might otherwise mislead him/her to believe that students in a group are participating fairly evenly. As the data show, even when there are discrepancies in student ability, some students are resourceful enough to regulate language in such a way that sustains their inclusion and progress toward the learning objective. To the extent that SCT illuminates differences in students' ability levels and resulting forms of engagement, it should equally inform pronunciation teaching and instructional design that move beyond a one-size-fits-all approach. A main lingering concern of this study, therefore, is the question of how to support and prioritize the individual needs of students.

Due to the fact that task observations in this study occurred during real-time, "survival mode" moments, student knowledge of their self-regulation strategies can only be assumed to be implicit, at best. Thus from a pedagogical perspective the insights of an SCT approach are only a first step, or a discovery phase of learner regulation strategies (such as prioritizing the production of prominence patterns over correct articulation of individual sounds). The major value of these insights is the potential they hold for iteratively shaping and reshaping the instructional materials (rubrics, reflection guides, etc.) provided to students. In order to optimize the value of these insights, they must combined with existing L2 pronunciation instructional models that turn implicit knowledge into actionable, explicit metacogntitive strategies (He, 2011). Toward this end, Sardegna and McGregor (2012) emphasize the need to

scaffold this process by providing "opportunities for students to monitor their performance during pronunciation practice and reflect on their outcomes" (p.183) following practice. Leading students toward their own awareness of regulation skills is the link that empowers them to function effectively, even when socially-mediated support is not present.

Methodologically, the application of SCT through classroom discourse analysis stands to contribute insight to existing (typically quantitative) measures of student engagement. If aggregated, the results of student assessment in this course might suggest steady upward progress for the entire class. The granular level of transparency made possible by through the SCT framework complicates the false positive of steady group progress, thus enhancing our ability to see the needs of individual students. Moreover, the qualitative findings of this data analysis can be used either in isolation or in triangulation with additional methods (i.e. self-reported survey data, etc.) to yield a more valid and robust portrait of classroom engagement. As pronunciation literature increasingly points to the importance of student perceptions about their behaviors and abilities (Derwing and Rossiter, 2002), SCT offers a means of comparing these perceptions with what students actually do in a classroom setting.

Although this study offers a valuable glimpse of the complexity behind students' differential engagement in the Stress Rulz rap it is admittedly limited in terms of what it can imply about the students' second language development in a more enduring sense. Toward this end, a more extended series of observations are offered in later chapters of the dissertation from which this paper was derived (Barrett, forthcoming). Nonetheless, the interactions presented in this paper serve to raise our awareness about the delicate relationship between our learning objectives and the many paths our learners may take to achieve them.

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