



# Oral language learning in a foreign language context: Constrained or constructed? A sociocultural perspective

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## ABSTRACT

This paper reports on an exploratory study which investigated English as a foreign language (EFL) learners' oral language learning experiences from a sociocultural perspective. The study involved four Chinese proficient English learners, and gathered data from interviews and written journals. With Activity Theory serving as the analytical framework, data analysis revealed that 13 sociocultural resources in relation to artifacts, rules, community, and roles mediated the participants' oral English learning by providing and actualizing learning affordances, serving as learning goals, and generating motivation for learning. The findings delineate a picture of the social context in which learners make use of sociocultural resources, both instructional and extracurricular, to seek opportunities for oral language learning. The study suggests that EFL contexts can afford learners with diverse potential learning resources, the usefulness of which depends on learners' agency in seeking and exploiting these resources.

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## 1. Introduction

As an integral component of second language (L2) learning, oral language learning has been researched extensively. Many studies have investigated the impact of various teaching and learning strategies such as communication strategy training (Cohen, Weaver, & Li, 1998; Dörnyei, 1995; Nakatani, 2005; Naughton, 2006) and communication guidance and assistance (Ahmadian, 2012; Yang, Gamble, & Tang, 2012) on the enhancement of learners' cognitive abilities as manifested in oral language proficiency, communication strategy use, and motivation for communication. These cognitively-oriented intervention studies are important but insufficient for portraying a comprehensive picture of oral language learning as not only a cognitive but also a social process (Block, 2003; Johnson, 2004; Lantolf, 2011). The social perspective implies that classroom instruction, as one critical factor influencing learners' oral language learning, should be understood and explored socially, an endeavor that requires more studies to take up. Further, with the advancement of technology and the increased mobility of people, language learning has gone beyond the classroom. L2 learners are able to gain better access to out-of-class learning resources, which has engendered studies on oral language learning in such situated contexts as English corners (e.g. Gao, 2009) and study-abroad programs (e.g. Conroy, 2016; Hern'andez, 2010). With the paradigm shift from cognitive

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explication to sociocultural interpretation of SLA (Block, 2003; Lantolf, 2006; van Lier, 2004), there is a paucity of research particularly examining oral language learning from the sociocultural perspective. To fill this gap, this paper reports on a study which, adopting a sociocultural Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999; Lantolf, 2011) as its analytical framework, explored Chinese EFL learners' oral language learning with a focus on capturing the sociocultural resources that mediate learning. Such a study is of necessity and significant because oral language learning places a greater demand on context than writing competence development; oral English learning is becoming increasingly important in China due to its opening up to the world; and although the Chinese EFL context is input-impoverished (Oxford, 2003) and seldom provides real-life opportunities for using and learning English (Gao, 2009), some proficient English speakers have been produced, and lessons learned about their successful learning experiences can benefit less proficient learners and learners in other EFL environments.

## 2. Context and oral language learning

With the advent of the social turn in L2 learning research (Block, 2003; Johnson, 2004), context has received increasing scholarly attention and been reconceptualized. Traditional psychologically-oriented theories construe learning as being confined within the mind, being an individual accomplishment achieved through environmental stimuli; that is, context and cognition are regarded dichotomous (Ortega, 2011). However, socially-oriented SLA theories “view learning as a social accomplishment, have social histories, and are only possible through sociality” (Ortega, 2011, p. 168). Learning should be construed as taking place in various contexts ranging from the micro family, school context to the macro society with different factors involved (Palfreyman, 2006). Context is no longer taken as a backdrop for explaining individual variations, but viewed as shaping all aspect of learning such as learners' strategy use (e.g. Gao, 2006b) and the development of learner identity (Norton, 2000). The learner and the environment influence and change each other, leading to dynamic variability in language development (Verspoor, Lowie, & Van Dijk, 2008).

Learning contexts, including foreign language and target-language environments, both constrain and facilitate language learning depending on how learners access and utilize resources. For one thing, context is often depicted as setting constraints on learning. EFL contexts, like that in China, are said to constrain language learning for providing no natural environments of using English (Gao, 2009; Oxford, 2003; Palfreyman, 2006). Early studies in the Chinese context surveyed the social constraints on English learners', especially non-English-majors', oral language learning (e.g. Jin, Dai, Liu, Zhao, & Wu, 2004; Zeng, 2002; Zhang, Yang, & Li, 2004). However, with the technological, political, economic, and social advancement in China, Chinese EFL learners especially “those who have” (Nunan, 2003, p. 605) could access more resources for English learning. This being the case, it is worthwhile to explore the resources that proficient Chinese learners resort to for oral English learning.

For another, learning context can be viewed as providing learners with capital, both cultural capital (i.e. benefits gained from accessing particular skills or understanding) (Bourdieu, 1986) and social capital (i.e. connections among individuals) (Putnam, 2000). In order to capture the positive features of context, Palfreyman (2006) adopted the term “resource” and distinguished material resources (including authentic materials, teaching materials, equipment, or funds) and social resources (i.e. networks of other people), which provide different “affordances” for language learning and act as models for learners or sources of support and feedback. The realization of the learning potential of both material and social resources can be explained by the distinction of arena and setting in social context (Lave, 1988). Arena is defined as the “objective” social context for social events (e.g. material resources), whereas setting refers to the particular social context experienced by participants (e.g. learners' different interpretations and uses of material resources in different situations) (Lave, 1988; Palfreyman, 2006).

Empirical studies have focused on both foreign language and target-language contexts. Those on target-language contexts have mainly addressed how study-abroad programs frame language learning (Conroy, 2016; Llanes, 2011). They generally observe that studying in target-language contexts can benefit learners' language development and cultural understanding as such contexts provide learners with immersion environments where they are exposed to rich L2 input and can maximize language use (Conroy, 2016). It is found that such contextual factors as learners' close relationships with other speakers and the English proficiency of learners' interlocutors (Baker-Smemoe, Dewey, Brown, & Martinsen, 2014), time spent with native speakers (Dewey et al., 2014), as well as quality of homestays and interactions (Conroy, 2016) would affect oral language learning.

Some studies concerned oral language learning in L2 contexts other than study-abroad programs. For instance, Newcombe (2007) noted through examining L2 Welsh learners' experiences that learning a language requires not only overcoming obstacles (e.g. anxiety and lack of confidence) but also resorting to various resources to approach the interactional competence and enter the social network of a community. Kurata (2010) discovered that an Australian Japanese learner's access to L2 learning opportunities was enabled by his indication of preference for L2 and his proactive move to initiate conversations with native Japanese speakers.

Studies conducted in EFL settings also examined the connections between context and language learning. For instance, Palfreyman (2006) found that female university students in the United Arab Emirates utilized such material and social resources as entertainment and information technology, travel experiences, and family members to practice English in off-campus settings, and social networks influenced their access to and use of these resources. Gao (e.g. 2006a, 2006b, 2009), employing sociocultural perspectives, documented the out-of-class resources that Chinese EFL learners access for oral English learning. Particularly, Gao (2006a) examined Chinese parents' involvement in their children's language learning as language

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