A Case Study of L2 Chinese Development under Systemic-theoretical Instruction

Systemic-theoretical Instruction (STI), which is originated from Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory, has been employed in studies in second language (L2) teaching and learning for decades. The effects of STI on L2 learner’s internalization of various grammatical features of different languages are widely investigated. Though several researchers conducted case studies concerning L2 learner’s construction of Spanish grammatical concepts guided by STI. The qualitative stance to examine the development process of grammatical concepts of other languages during L2 teaching guided by STI remains to be explored. By examining how a L2 Chinese learner’s understanding of the Chinese spatial temporal relations and aspect markers develop over time guided by STI, this study enables the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of the learner’s development of the grammatical concepts under STI.

In the sociocultural perspective, L2 development, as the awareness and self-regulation over higher forms of human cognition, is fostered through the internalization of the theoretical concepts (grammatical concepts) behind the linguistic features. STI, an instruction program proposed by Gal’perin, employs state-by-stage teaching procedures to foster the internalization of the theoretical concept. There are three main principles emphasized in the stages: theoretical concept as the unit of instruction; materialization of the theoretical concept as a mediational tool; verbalization activities to enhance internalization. The theoretical concept is materialized into specific material object or a materialized representation which offers a visualization of the theoretical knowledge that helps learners to regulate their actions. Verbalization is the action of mastering the theoretical knowledge by speaking to oneself.

The participant of this study is one adult Chinese L2 learner at XXX Confucius Institute in USA. Data from this study was collected over eleven-week individual tutoring sessions guided by STI. Two research questions raised in this study are whether STI fosters the learner’s conceptual development of the target Chinese grammatical concepts and how the learner’s understandings of the target theoretical concepts develop over time guided by STI. Inspired by Negueruela, four types of data were collected to address the research questions. Definition data, as the learner’s explanations of target theoretical concepts, investigate the mediating quality of these concepts as cognitive tools. Discourse data, consisting of several journals the learner wrote by employing linguistic features related to the target concepts, examine the action execution of the mediation
tools. Verbalization data, as the learner’s explanations of the way he uses the target theoretical concepts, capture conceptual development in its formation. Personal data, including interviews and learner’s reflections during the instruction, contribute to capturing a whole picture of the complexity of development.

The findings show that STI fosters learner’s conceptual development as the learner was more aware of the semantic meanings of target theoretical concepts and gained better control of these concepts in constructing related linguistic features. However, the conceptual development of aspect marker “le” is considerably slow, which suggests that sufficient instruction time is required to enhance the development of more complicated concept. The learner’s understandings of the target Chinese theoretical concepts develop as a conceptual process, where semantic meanings and linguistic forms develop dependently as the development of learner’s semantic understandings of the target theoretical concepts parallels his improvements in relevant linguistic performance. During the process of development, the theoretical concepts, proposed by STI as the mediational tool, plays an important mediational role in orienting the learner’s actions in language tasks.

References


Zhang, J. (2003). Conceptualization and expression of *qian* and *hou* in Chinese temporal system. *Journal of Zhejiang University (Humanities and Social Sciences)*, No. 5, 84-91. (张建理，《汉语时间系统中的“前”、“后”认知和表达》，《浙江大学学报 (人文社会科学版)》，2003年第5期。)

