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Abstract

This paper aims to show how English learners exert control over the factors intervening in their learning process while they are working in groups. This study was undertaken in a self-access centre (SAC) at a government-funded university in Mexico. It looks at self-regulation in beginner English language learners while completing a learning task. We conducted an analysis of learners' discourses during their interactions in triads in order to present several salient features of self-regulatory activity. The study is framed within Sociocultural Theory (SCT) since SCT outlines interaction and collaboration as fundamental for becoming independent language learners. The findings support the idea that students' development or activation of self-regulatory mechanisms is tightly intertwined with social and affective factors. Collaboration through group work provides the opportunity for regulating the self-and foster learners' autonomy through social activity.

Keywords: Self-regulation, Sociocultural Theory, self-access centers, discourse in group work.

Sociocultural Theory, Language Learning and Mediation

In recent decades, Sociocultural Theory (hereafter SCT) has been of great interest in the discipline of applied linguistics, offering a means of understanding language learning in social interaction (Lantolf & Beckett, 2009). This theory, developed out of the work of Lev Vygotsky (1980), and is founded on the following principles: a) individual cognition is developed in social and cultural contexts, b) human activity is mediated by symbolic tools, such as language, and c) these two—cognition and behavior—are best studied through developmental analysis (Mahn & Reiersen, 2012).

Vygotsky, a Russian developmental psychologist, studied the complexity of the functions of mental activity and classified them into two categories: 1) the *elemental functions* such as involuntary, automatic reactions that humans share with other living organisms and 2) the *higher forms of thinking*, which require self control and conscious awareness. Examples of the latter are the use of critical skills in problem solving and the process of making decisions (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Naturally, one of the major objects of study of SCT is the

development from elementary to higher mental functions (Wertsch, 1985); this transition always involves social activity (Vygotsky, 1980). Thus, individual cognition is mediated through the use of external artifacts—culturally shared tools or symbols—such as numbers, art, music, language or technology (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Of all the existing artifacts, language is considered the most significant mediational tool contributing to the development of higher order mental functions.

The individual organizes and exerts control over both social and cognitive activity through the use of language, while engaging in tasks to appropriate his/her understanding of the world (Appel & Lantolf, 1994). Language is acknowledged to fluctuate within a dialectic nature—a dynamic bidirectional relation—between the social (intermental) and the individual (intramental) activity (Vygotsky, 1980). That is, personal activity occurs in social, functional meaningful engagement through the mediation of language. Since learning occurs in the intermental plane through social interaction, verbalization is what evidences the intramental activity that the language learner can experience, for example, in a problem-solving task.

To illustrate how language works as a mediating tool to transfer control from the environment to the individual in a language learning setting, it is necessary to create opportunities for collaboration. When the learners are given the conditions to talk in provisional, exploratory ways, through negotiation, explanation, and discussion with their peers, they acquire new practices and knowledge. Thus, it is through collaboration that learners become actively involved in their learning process while providing assistance to their peers by encouraging each other, prompting, discussing, and/or trying to solve and construct the knowledge required for the task (Pifarre & Cobos, 2010). As a result, students are able to develop their language abilities.

The process of learning implies change, which is evident once the individual becomes independent enough to exert control over his or her higher mental functioning. At this stage, the learner then starts self-regulating his or her cognition, emotions and behaviour (Wertsch, 1985).

Self-Regulation

The wealth of research on *self-regulation* has attempted to understand how learners take control of the factors intervening in the learning process. Differing theoretical

perspectives bring different research approaches: cognitive, sociocognitive and sociocultural. All of them share some commonalities, but they also differ in the way they approach accounts of learning.

Self-regulation has been related to the manifestations of control learners exert over their behaviour, motivation and cognition in terms of the learning process (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2011). Within cognitive and sociocognitive approaches, this construct has been studied as an individual process. The cognitive approach is based on an individualistic view in which the learners discover their own process of learning. The social cognitive approach adds the role of self-efficacy as an individualised form to manage affectivity in learning. Sociocultural approaches emphasize both the role of the social environment and interaction in the process of developing self-regulation.

In order to understand self-regulation as theorized in SCT, we first need to understand the role of interaction and mediation in the development of higher mental functions. Self-regulation implies the exercise of these functions in interaction since people internalize what others say and as a consequence, can gain control over their own mental processes (Lightbown & Spada, 2006). The internalization of knowledge occurs by means of an individual cognitive process, namely 'inner speech', which is unobservable but made visible and researchable by the use of 'private speech'. Private speech is the dialogue addressed to the self in order to self-regulate, rather than communicate with others (De Guerrero, 2012). Besides private speech, self-regulatory activity becomes observable through behavior; for example, when learners interact with objects (such as books, dictionaries, computers, recorders, among others) within a given environment (for instance, in self-access centres). This is what is called object regulation; individuals are mediated by the use of learning objects and physical arrangement or macrostructure of the space where learning takes place.

Once learners set goals, monitor, and regulate and control their cognition, motivation and behaviour within the contextual opportunities afforded by the environment, self-regulation becomes an active process whereby the learner is able to take control over his or her learning (Dinsmore, Alexander, & Loughlin, 2008). On the grounds that learning occurs through social mediation, it subsequently entails the involvement of other regulation (co-regulation). This means that through the offering of support via action and dialogue, learning is mediated, and this social dialogue also provides others with opportunities to use language and reflect on

meaning and form.

In this article, we present three short segments of conversation to illustrate in a simple form how learners interact and then self-regulate themselves in collaboration with others.

The Study

This is an interpretive and descriptive study carried out in a self access centre at a Mexican university, looking at language learners' self-regulation while engaged in a conversational task. The main interest of the study was to trace evidence of self-regulatory activity of English learners at a beginner level. The discursive resources from the group interactions (spoken) were explored through qualitative analysis.

Data was collected through observations, video and audio recordings. The participants' interactions were interpreted based on sociocultural discourse analysis (Mercer, 2004). The focus is on the analysis of the speech to identify salient features of self-regulation.

The study was designed with the aim to explore some features of self-regulatory activity in spoken discourse through collaborative work, and as an attempt to help learners become more independent in the self- access centre. These centres represent an ideal setting for the implementation of collaborative activities so learners can exercise control of their own learning in social interaction and not in isolation.

Participants

The self-access centre put out a call for the voluntary participation of basic-level English learners who wanted to practice their English speaking skills in conversation sessions within a group for an hour a week. The students' participation was voluntary, and a self-selected, random sample of nine learners volunteered to take part in the project. Reasons given in their diaries for participating in the sessions suggested an eagerness to communicate with other students and improve speaking skills. The participants consisted of 3 males and 6 females aged between 18 and 24. All of them were English learners at the beginner level in a context where English is considered a foreign language. They were all taking a course consisting of 5 hours of English per week. In addition to the time spent on the course, these learners were required to have spent at least one hour per week undertaking independent study in the SAC as part of the course requirements.

For the analysis of the interactions, the students were given letters and numbers such as

MS1, (Male Student 1) or FS2, (Female Student 2).

The Task

The participants were asked to join in teams freely, forming three groups of three participants each. They were given a task sheet with the instructions they were expected to follow. The task selected for the purposes of this study, 'Reporting the Best News', took them three sessions to complete. It consisted of a series of activities described as follows:

- 1) First, the learners were given the following instructions: each team would publish an article in the newsletter of the SAC, so they needed to search for the best piece of information, selected from a set of magazines with the aim to have it included in the following issue.
- 2) To do so, they were asked to choose one of the magazines displayed on the tables in the room, flip through it, and select and read the article that they thought was worth including.
- 3) Then, they identified and highlighted the main information to report it to their peers.
- 4) Finally, as a team they discussed and decided the information they wanted to include in the students' newsletter.

The conversations were recorded and filmed while they were completing the task.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of talk can serve as a tool to understand how people "think collectively" or "interthink" in the pursuit of the solution of a problem or the completion of an activity (Mercer, 2004, p. 138). According to Mercer, sociocultural discourse analysis focuses on the functions of language when used in the "pursuit of intellectual activity" (Mercer, 2004, p. 141). Therefore, keeping this in mind, we extracted three segments of conversation from the student dialogues to illustrate some aspects of self-regulatory behaviour. As an overview, Table 1 summarizes several features of self-regulation, looking at various functions and examples from the three segments presented in the appendix. We will focus on these in the discussion that follows.

First, learners engage in the task, appropriating it for themselves, as can be seen in the case of MS1 (line 1). Here the statements "*I choose...*" and "*my article...*" express an action

taken, with the speaker assuming the role of an empowered decision-taker. The use of space deixis such as “here” (in lines 17, 22, 23, 25, 36 and 38) or “this” and in “in this moment” (line 27), is also common. This perhaps indicates the intention of the learners in the task to reassert their role as a main participant.

Interaction in a foreign language forces the learners to express their ideas, but emotional stress may raise barriers to communication. However, when others intervene by asking questions and complementing ideas, affective regulation happens in the communication between second language learners. To illustrate the aforementioned, let us have a look at the first segment, in line 1. The discourse becomes vague and confusing, the anxiety is manifested with the emergence of isolated elliptical phrases “*I... talk about her... his autobiography because it's not general because talks about Tour de France... Because, he's very Mmm*”. MS1 tries to find the best way to express ideas and be understood. The intervention of FS2 and FS3 (line 2 and 4) helped regulate the tension and MS1 (line 3) regains his confidence because he has been understood as he continues explaining.

Table 1: Self-Regulation in Learner's Dialogues

Self-regulation category	Explanation	Samples	Lines
Student's involvement	The student uses deitics to show he/she is part of the conversation and positions him/herself in the story.	I choose... article talks about... this moment.... Here My In	1, 11, 17, 22, 23,25,27, 36, 38, 39,43, 46, 51
Student's fluency	Student attempts to keep coherent and fluent, so he/she uses some phrases even if there are errors in usage to keep the attention of the listener and not to lose continuity.	<i>For example</i> <i>because</i>	1, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 25, 31, 36, 33, 36, 38
Information backup	The student gives some information and looks for some resources to support what he/she is saying	Signaling at the references where they obtained the information	8, 13, 22, 24, 36, 65
Self-correction	The student corrects him/herself after having said something grammatically wrong and he /she identifies the mistake	<i>"the girls is twins, are twins"</i> <i>"this is, this is, this was..."</i> ; <i>"her... his autobiography"</i>	1, 19, 43, 63
Self clarification	Students use repetition, questions or self-explanation to verify meaning and comprehension	<i>"In France? He live in France No? "</i> <i>"ah, his mom? Is his mom? is a woman?"</i> <i>"baby, a real baby, that is a baby Jesus"</i>	12, 43
Recalling and memorizing information	Students use repetition to try to memorize some specific information consciously	<i>Lance Armstrong, this is his name? Lance Armstrong</i> <i>Lance Armstrong</i> <i>Lance Armstrong</i>	28-31, 31-32, 56-58
Student's thoughts organization	Students use silence, pauses and fillers to take some time to organize their ideas	<i>"I think it's the best article, for... it's easy and the time"</i> <i>"mmmmm"</i>	1, 12, 13, 15, 32, 33, 39, 46, 51, 55 and 61.
Focus	Students use repetition of words or phrases to focus on the task or to keep away from distraction	<i>"the topic is about the, the.. in Italy,.."</i> <i>"her, her name..."</i>	39, 51, 55

The repeated use of the discourse markers such as *"because"* (lines 1, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 25, 31, 36) and *"for example"* (lines 5, 36, 33, 38), even when they are misused, helps the learner MS1 to explain and justify his explanations, as if the use of these markers provide confidence to continue. The use of these words indicates an effort by the learner to maintain fluency and not to lose the attention of the listener.

In addition to discourse, it is important to highlight the importance of the use of pictures, magazines and dictionaries to regulate learning, also known as object regulation (Frawley & Lantolf, 1985). The learners try other methods to get their point across, such as indicating a page of the magazine (line 22), referring to a picture (line 24) to make sure they have understood. Objects can also lead learners to discover incidentally learning strategies in practice; for instance, in line 38, MS1 quickly reads the article to find specific information and makes use of complementary visual aids for an explanation and as a form to back up the information he is giving.

Repetition and rephrasing are both also commonly present at beginner English learners' level. These verbal re-occurrences of sentences or phrases might indicate regulation: a) in self-awareness of mistakes and self-correction as in interactions such as "*the girls is twins, are twins*" and "*this is, this is, this was...*", b) to clarify knowledge and comprehension such as "*his mom? Is his mom? is a woman?*" and "*a baby, a real baby, that is a baby Jesus...*" where the speaker is attempting to make content clear, and c) as a strategy to help commit information to memory such as in the dialogue from lines 28-32, where the speakers repeat the name of the cyclist several times. Here the intention of FS3 is to memorize the information; we can see something similar in intervention 32 when the learner repeated "*the Tour of France*".

Another characteristic of self-regulation is the use of pauses and fillers (Centeno-Cortés & Jiménez-Jiménez, 2004) especially at the elementary stage of language learning. According to some researchers, learners use pauses as a strategy to plan what they will say. Fillers, sounds with no meaning, such as "*mmmm*", and silences such as in "*I think it's the best article, for... it's easy and the time*" (line 46) are used to plan language before saying something and monitor how one is expressing him/herself (lines 1, 12, 13, 15, 32, 33, 39, 51, 55 and 61).

Furthermore, the use of new vocabulary also shows self-regulatory behaviour since the learners are taking the risk of using what they have learned during their reading. This is demonstrated in line 17 with the use of "*fruitful*", and line 41 with "*he set up a crib, crib is a pesebre*". In this last line of the segment, FS1 uses Spanish to explain the meaning of "*crib*" as a form to scaffold and regulate the learning.

Some studies have concluded that repetition of words or phrases serve as a form of

self-regulation (DiCamilla & Antón, 2004) in that they are meant to focus the speaker on the problem or the task, as illustrated in line 39 *“the topic is about the, the...in Italy...”*, line 51 *“her, her name...”*, line 55 *“for she, for she...”*. According to DiCamilla and Anton, repetition also serves as a social and cognitive mediator to complete a task.

The first language plays a prime role in the process of self-regulation, since our thinking processes are supported by what was constructed originally in the L1 (Ushakova, 1994). Learners tend to repeat to themselves, or others, difficult forms in the L2 and translate them to the L1 for a better understanding (Donato, 1994), as in the intervention *“for cure herself, para una cura para ella misma”* (line 58). The use of L1 or cognates when the learners do not know a word (such as in *“padre”*, instead of *“priest”* in line 39) can be considered a compensatory communicative strategy that leads to self-regulation in their social participation. Learners become engaged in the activity and suddenly code-switch from L2 to L1 without noticing, especially with words that seem very similar to the L1, as in the case of the use of *“carrera”* instead of *“career”* (line 53).

In addition to the features mentioned before, private speech is one of the major signs of self-regulation. Learners whisper or talk to themselves; for example, in line 61, FS2 produces private speech in self-correction *“she was...no, no, no, she was...”*; in between the pause, she had an idea, but reconsidered, expressing that by saying to herself *“no, no, no”*. Similarly, at the end of intervention 61, FS2 starts having trouble with dates *“...in Spring Break in one thousand este, ninety hundred, no, one thousand nine hundred three no, este, (laughs) como digo noventa?”* She twice tries to say the date correctly, but finally asks for help using L1. In her effort, she notices she is not doing it right, so in discourse she uses the corrective *“no”* to herself as a manifestation of private speech. Subsequently MS3 replies (line 62) and tries the same correction to himself by using *“nineteen, no, ninety”*.

Not all the language produced in the context of EFL is intended for exchanging information or for the purpose of communicating, rather some is used for strategic purposes and to mediate the learning process (Donato, 1994). Regulation is also provided by others as co-regulation, when learners support each other affectively, such as in lines 44: *“It’s fine!”* and 67: *“oh, really? Very beautiful, good”*, both give a positive assessment to their partner’s participation. In a sense, it is a manifestation of involvement in the task and regulation.

In summary, the preceding examples present illustrations of how beginners use a variety of strategic actions to self-regulate their interactions. This is something they will not achieve in isolation, thus the necessity to provide them with opportunities to socialize and interact in their learning.

Conclusions

The data presented in this article are framed in reference to self-regulation. That is to say, the discursive linguistic elements are important not just in the process of language learning, but also in the way they mediate learners' interactions so self-regulation can take place. Furthermore, the findings of the discourse analysis also show evidence of regulation of the self through the learner's performance in the activity. Regulation is present in the engagement, the focus, and the organization of knowledge while the learners are doing the tasks (see Table 1).

The study analysed meaning of the content of the discourse in terms of regulatory functions as expressed by the three groups of beginner-level language learners eager to practice their English. We argue that the task the learners engaged in fostered their willingness to communicate, so they could interact with each other. The data analysis supports this claim in showing how learners took risks and controlled themselves in the cognitive, affective and social aspects in order to carry out the task. At this level of language development, regulation is oriented to the objective of performing the task, so students use a series of communication strategies to express themselves, negotiating meaning to overcome miscommunication. It seems reasonable to assume that this particular task gave learners a sense of what they were able to do with the language.

Learners working in collaboration with others regulate their knowledge in many different ways. In this particular study, it could be observed that most learners actively participated in the discussion and were engaged in their language learning process by using magazines and pictures, utilizing the new vocabulary, using repetition focusing on specific information, and using L1 as a tool to clarify concepts.

Making decisions about their own learning and the kind of activities they wish to engage in helps learners move from other-regulation to self-regulation because this is an essential element of the self-regulatory development. Therefore, it should be considered and

encouraged through activities that promote social interaction.

Since their foundation, self-access centres have aimed to support individual learning. Nevertheless, trends have changed and research has demonstrated that it is not only in isolation that students can develop their cognitive abilities, but also through collaborative work. These centres are an ideal space to provide learners with opportunities to interact in such a way. Therefore, our self-access centres should promote the development of self-regulation by implementing activities for language learners to socialize and learn with and from others.

Notes on the contributors

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Appendix

Transcriptions of Conversations

Conversation segment 1 Team 1

(Learners talked about Lance Armstrong, a professional cyclist).

- 1 **MS1:** I choose the magazine about the sports.
 My article talks about one cyclist, but it's Lance Armstrong.
 I... talk about her... his autobiography because it's not general because talks about Tour
 de France... Because, he's very Mmm and, the year is not specific because it's talks
 about what he was doing.
- 2 **FS2:** Is about his life?
- 3 **MS1:** aha, for his life, talks about his family, his job, all that.
- 4 **FS3:** correct me, he has bad siblings no?
- 5 **MS1:** yes, but it's, for example... this magazine is older.
- 6 **FS3:** ah, ok
- 7 **MS1:** and no
- 8 **FS2:** and he doesn't know about this (pointing at the magazine to S1)?.
- 9 **MS1:** aha, he doesn't know
 What else? Yes because later, he told about...
- 10 **FS2:** his records
- 11 **MS1:** In this moment, he said the Tour de France was the best because he has seven
 Tour de France.
- 12 **FS2:** Mmmm. Where he live? In France? He live in France? No?
- 13 **MS1:** No, it's no say..... (checking and fast reading the article) because, only says
 that...
- 14 **FS3:** Yes, he's from France, no?
- 15 **MS1:** yes, yes, because... only talks about France and the tour of France, Lance
 Armstrong and his family.
- 16 **FS2.** Ok
- 17 **MS1:** because here it says it's a ...(inaudible)... and fruitful player and talks about his
 kids that are three, two is twins
- 18 **FS3:** Three? Ok two kids? Two are twins?
- 19 **MS1:** aha, it's a boy and two girls, the girls is twins, are twins.
- 20 **FS3:** Ah, ok

- 21 **MS1:** and that's all.
- 22 **FS3:** He came here for cancer cure, no? maybe I saw a picture here, this, no? (pointing at the page where there is a picture)
- 23 **MS1:** here, well, here says that his mom has cancer
- 24 **FS2:** ah, his mom? Is his mom? is a woman? (looking at the picture in the magazine)?
No, It's a men, no?
- 25 **MS1:** it's a men, oh, yes, Lance Armstrong has cancer because here it says "with mom Linda - said the patient".
- 26 **FS2:** Is he at home or he's at...(hospital is omitted)?
- 27 **MS1:** In this moment, I don't know..... That's all.
- 28 **FS3:** Lance Armstrong, this is his name?
- 29 **MS1:** Lance Armstrong
- 30 **FS3:** Lance Armstrong
- 31 **MS1:** Lance Armstrong.
Yes, because the focus of this article is more Lance Armstrong and the Tour de France.
- 32 **FS2:** The Tour of France, yes
And... it's not talking about any years?
- 33 **MS1:** No. Well, for example....
- 35 **FS2:** yes, it's like a history.
- 36 **MS1:** yes, it's like a autobiography? Because, here, for example, in ninety nine, he stops and for example, here, it's other, it's other (signaling at a list of dates when Armstrong won the Tour de France)
- 37 **FS2:** he's the winner
- 38 **MS1:** For example, here, in one thousand ninety (sic) eighty six, at the age of fifteen turned (inaudible) the area. Talks about general, it's not specific time.

Conversation segment 2, Team 2

(Learners talked about the representation of Jesus birth at Christmas).

- 39 **FS1:** This was in... Italy. It's a mmm, the topic is about the, the.. in Italy,.. the people doesn't know what happened in Christmas Day.
Saint Francis of Asis, maybe is a... padre? He want to find the way to say to other

people the Christmas history.

40 **FS2:** How?

41 **FS1:** He set up a crib, crib is a pesebre.

42 **FS3:** (nodded without saying a word)

43 **FS1:** In a mountain with live animals with people acts about the kids, about the angels, about the something... person real.

It was a hit in this time and he had to repeat every year the Christmas representation with the animals and people live (...) how is the history for the Christmas for the kids, he decide to bring a one actor more, that it was .. a baby, a real baby, that is a baby Jesus at this time. This is, this is, this was the way to find how is Christmas Day. This is what, this happened in Italy.

44 **FS2:** It's fine!

45 **FS1:** For me it's interesting.

46 **FS3:** I think it's the best article, for... it's easy and the time. What you think?

47 **FS2:** Yes, it's the best, December and Christmas, it's good

Conversation segment 3, Team 3

(the learners talked about a famous artist who had got health problems)

48 **MS1:** will you? (looking at S2)

49 **FS2:** I?

50 **MS1:** uhum (nodding)

51 **FS2:** My article talks about this girl (showing the picture in the magazine), her, her name is Lewis, mmmm..., she's a singer of pop

52 **MS1:** uhum

53 **FS2:** and when she was about, about five years, she was three times in a hotel because she... was a part of his (sic) carrera.

54 **FS2:** His (sic) mother looks for her.

55 **FS2:** (it is) a very place for she, for she... para que ella se curara...

56 **MS3:** for cure herself

57 **FS2:** ¿Qué? (looking puzzled at MS1)

58 **MS1:** for cure herself, para una cura para ella misma

59 **FS2:** ah.

60 **MS1:** what for?

- 61** **FS2:** when she be health, she was
no, no, no , she was..... ahhh, music and drawing, ammm, but before this situation she
can practice sports and arts, but, however, she has moved from Michigan to San Diego
in Spring Break in one thousand este, ninety hundred, no, one thousand nine hundred
three no, este, (laughs) como digo noventa?
- 62** **MS3:** nineteen, no, ninety
- 63** **FS2:** ok, ninety three after she was in a program of singing... singers.
- 64** **FS2:** In February she lograr?
- 65** **MS3:** (looks up in a dictionary) ...lograr, achieve?
- 66** **FS2:** She achieve ten, five hundred, five hundred copies of discs, in this moment she
was a famous singer pop.
- 67** **MS1:** oh, really? Very beautiful, good.