Theatre Production as a Language Learning Environment for Chinese Students

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Abstract

Research has shown that theatre can be used as a tool for English as a second language (ESL) learning in various contexts. However, ESL studies done in Hong Kong have shown that sociocultural factors impact on language learning. I argue that this implies that sociocultural factors could also have a significant impact on language learning in the context of the process of rehearsal for a theatre production. This paper reports the results of a pilot study on Chinese tertiary students involved in preparing a theatre production. Adopting a Vygotskian sociocultural perspective, the study draws on analysis of qualitative data. It aims to answer two research questions: (1) What sociocultural factors shape the experience of English theatre productions in Hong Kong as a language learning environment?; and (2) Are theatre productions good language learning environments in Hong Kong? The results revealed that prior to production, students’ sociocultural background were similar to what other studies have already concluded. This sociocultural background has had an impact on the learning environment in that students were predisposed to explicit instruction in the environment.
as learning outcomes of the experience. These indicate that theatre productions provided students with multiple learning opportunities, which makes it an appropriate language learning environment.

**Keywords:** Theatre Production; Hong Kong Context; ESL Learning

**Introduction**

Second language (L2) learning viewed from a sociocultural perspective implies that L2 learning will differ across contexts because sociocultural factors influence teaching and learning experiences (Lantolf, 2000). This theory suggests that, in the use of theatre productions for L2 learning, different contexts will produce different outcomes. Although theatre productions have been claimed to be successful language learning environments in Western contexts because the environment focuses students on authentic language use, and because theatre activities parallel language learning and teaching activities (Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004; Smith, 1984), the effectiveness of this type of learning environment in the Hong Kong context has yet to be investigated. This study aims to identify sociocultural factors that affect activities in a theatre production as a language learning environment. This aim facilitates the investigation as to whether students have, in the rehearsal process, opportunities to learn English in this specific context.

**L2 Learning Context**

From a sociocultural perspective, language is a psychological and cultural tool that mediates thinking and learning through social interactions with others in an environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Language is, hence, both the medium and the process by which learning happens within a social setting (Lave & Wenger, 2005). It has a semiotic function whereby it represents sociocultural meanings/ideology as a product of interactions of people in activity (Rogoff,
This supposition means that language learning, in particular L2, is a holistic process; it involves: (1) the social context which refers to cultural, historical and institutional elements that influence the nature of interaction between the learner and the expert; (2) the socio-cultural characteristics of the expert and the learner, and (3) the interactions between them (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

L2 learning first starts when learners are exposed to social speech (language of the environment), which is then internalised as egocentric speech (speech used to internalise social speech). This process of internalisation extracts the essence of social speech and restructures their inner speech (the first language). When this reorganised inner speech is externalised, it is called private speech, which is now used both as a tool to regulate one's thinking and as the means to communicate with others in the environment. Central to the theme of learning in sociocultural theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is the distance between a learner's potential attainment and actual attainment in L2. Within the distance or gap of learning potential is the mediation process that happens when the expert and novice interact through collaborative dialogue to achieve a task or solve a problem. In the ZPD, imitation, scaffolding, feedback, and collaborative dialogue are considered the main mediation processes of L2 learning. Successful language learning occurs because the experience within the ZPD allows the learner to internalise and utilise language for the learner's benefit (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; McCafferty, 2002).

Sociocultural theory also implies that language learning is a relational process of the learner constantly interacting with and on its environment (Van Lier, 2000). This ecological perspective implies that learning contexts immerses learners with multitudes of opportunities to learn (i.e. ZPDs), however, it is the learner's actions that determine successful learning. Do learners take advantage of these occasions for learning? Conversely, do learning contexts provide learners with access to these opportunities? Thus, in order to identify successful L2 learning, an understanding of the activities in the learning context is imperative.
L2 learning contexts in a theatre production

Studies on full-scale productions used for L2 learning have been successful because product-oriented theatre activities allow students to use the target language in meaningful communicative situations (Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004; Smith, 1984; Via, 1987). Activities within a theatre production such as studying the script, memorising lines, learning characterisation, rehearsal, collaborative work, and finally performance immerses learners in the target language in two learning contexts – the text (script) and the production environment – which allows students to acquire and learn the target language implicitly (Wessels, 1987).
The script serves as a learning context in that the script provides learners with a model of authentic spoken text in the target language that allows them to focus on language use instead of language form (Hayati, 2006; Nolan & Patterson, 2000). Since play scripts are usually written in spoken grammar, this gives students an example of how native speakers would use the target language in interactions to manipulate dramatic situations (Kempe, 2003). They also expose learners to contextualised vocabulary, idioms, and grammatical structures (Dodson, 2002; O’ Gara, 2008).

On the other hand, the production environment functions as a learning environment in two ways. First, in the process of studying the script for performance, students are given the opportunity to internalise and utilise the target language as they read, understand, interpret, memorise, and finally, perform (Dodson, 2002; Heldenbrand, 2003). Rehearsals require students to constantly repeat dialogues and scenes until actors/learners reach an acceptable level of accuracy, and this activity builds not only their dramatic performance but also oral proficiency skills such as pronunciation, stress and intonation (Hardison & Sonchaeng, 2005; Miccoli, 2003). Rehearsals also involve activities that will develop students’ performance skills and so theatre activities such as warm-ups, require learners to use and develop physical movement, facial expressions, gestures and body language (Maley & Duff, 2005; Schewe, 2002) which allow learners to develop self-confidence and motivation (Moody, 2002).

Second, the process of creating the production for performance require students to interact with their peers, teachers, and perhaps even native speakers, in an intensive and goal-oriented period which provides learners an immersion experience in the target language (Dodson, 2002). As learners engage in production activities such as construction and/or procurement of sets, costumes, and properties, the activities have been found to improve their communicative-expressive ability (Hui & Lau, 2006). These activities involve the whole personality of the student (emotions and character) making L2 learning not only a cognitive activity but also a social, personal and meaningful one.
These studies have demonstrated how activities in a theatre production provide learners with a number of opportunities to improve L2 proficiency. However, studies on L2 learning in other learning contexts have illustrated that difference in the sociocultural background of L2 learners result in significant changes in the learning context that ultimately impacts on L2 proficiency gains (e.g. Charlesworth, 2008; Grimshaw, 2007). It seems that studies on theatre productions as a learning context to date, have not investigated the impact of a learners’ sociocultural background on theatre productions as a learning context. Hence, the aim of this study is to investigate whether learners’ sociocultural background alter the L2 learning experience in a theatre production. I will examine this phenomenon through the case of a theatre production by staff and students of a tertiary institution in Hong Kong.

**Sociocultural Background of Hong Kong Chinese English Language Learners**

Hong Kong Chinese learners are most often described as learners who have developed learning styles heavily influenced by traditional cultural values (Biggs, 1996; Biggs & Watkins, 2001; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; W. O. Lee, 1996). Cultural values that have been examined to have had substantial influence include: the *concept of a collective society* where people must first consider the well being of family and society before their own (Sun, 2008); the *importance of harmony to society* which inhibit individual creativity (Salili, 1996); and the *concept of face* (person’s dignity and reputation) that has discouraged questioning or challenging peers and authority (Bond, 1991, 1996). These beliefs and values have influenced English language teaching and learning in Hong Kong (Wannagat, 2007) in that English language classrooms are competitive classroom environments that have 40 or more students (Du-Babcock, 2002), and follow a curriculum that focuses students only on passing examinations (Watkins, 1996) because good examination results are perceived to lead to upward mobility in society (Lai, 2009). These factors have produced a teacher-centred language learning environment (S.
Chan, 1999) where students are passive (Salili, 1996), lack critical thinking (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), and are intrinsically unmotivated to learn English (V. Chan, Spratt, & Humphreys, 2002; Littlewood, Liu, & Yu, 1996).

Other studies however, have challenged these propositions. Shi (2006) administered a questionnaire to 400 Chinese secondary school students and discovered that, while students still see examinations as the strongest motivation to learn English, they would also prefer to be in learning environments where they are given opportunities to be interactive learners. Gan’s (2009) study examined Hong Kong and Mainland Chinese students through interviews and a survey, and concluded that situational and social factors were more dominant than cultural factors in influencing English learning attitudes, strategies and motivation. However, I argue that since culture permeates every aspect of human activity (Vygotsky, 1978), attitudes to language learning in Gan’s (2009) study are still influenced by culture.

To sum up, these studies have identified that both traditional and contemporary values have an impact on English language learning in Hong Kong. The question is whether these same sociocultural factors affect language learning of Hong Kong Chinese students in an unconventional learning environment - a theatre production.

The Study

This pilot study explored the influence of students’ sociocultural factors on theatre productions as a language learning environment. It aimed to identify fundamental sociocultural constructs that influenced interactions within this learning environment, and eventually to create a profile of a Hong Kong Chinese English language learner in a theatre production. To facilitate this exploration, I examined a case study of a theatre production created by staff and students of a tertiary institution in Hong Kong. A case study is used because an in-depth inquiry allowed me to more completely understand complex and concurrent interactions of phenomenon, events and people in the learning
The study aimed to answer two research questions: (1) What sociocultural factors shape the experience of English theatre productions in Hong Kong as a language learning environment?; and (2) are theatre productions good language learning environments in Hong Kong? The results of this study were intended to justify a larger investigation of the effectiveness of theatre productions as a language learning environment.

**The Case: Theatre Production of a Hong Kong tertiary institution**

Curriculum reform since 1997 has aimed to address to moderate Hong Kong’s examination-driven culture by emphasising the role of creative arts in fostering ‘whole person’ development (Kennedy, Fok, & Chan, 2006). It has initiated several experimental drama projects and programmes that aim to enhance students’ English proficiency and to cultivate student’s generic skills (critical thinking and creativity). These projects include annual drama festivals, government support of local theatre groups touring secondary schools, and the hiring of theatre professionals to implement school drama clubs (Wong & Chan, 2007).

In line with the trend of promoting creative arts, a tertiary institution in Hong Kong provided funding for a theatre production to be produced by staff and students. The school is a teacher-education institution that offers undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate education programmes to local and international students. Most of the staff and students are Hong Kong locals with a few mainland Chinese and Western expatriates. The medium of instruction in this institution is mostly Cantonese, the local dialect, with the exception of classes mandated to be delivered in English medium. Regardless of the programme enrolled, however, all students are required to be trilingual (Cantonese, English and Mandarin) and biliterate (English and Chinese) by the time they graduate, and so, are required to take 120 hours of English and Mandarin classes in their first year of schooling at the institution.
To support students in their language proficiency development and to foster whole person development, the institution funded theatrical productions as an extra-curricular activity for the students. The production in this study, *Disney’s Aladdin Jr.*, is the first musical produced and was chosen because it was an opportunity for interdisciplinary departments at the institution to collaborate on a project.

The production involved 42 participants (28 actors and 14 crew). 25 students volunteered as either actor or production team member and they came from various programmes. These students were a mix of Hong Kong locals and mainland Chinese, and so students mostly used Putonghua (Mandarin) or Cantonese to communicate with each other. There were also 12 staff involved coming from various countries: US, UK, Canada, Australia, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Turkey. This mix of nationalities brought about a combination of English and non-English speaking people. However, because the directors (the researcher and an English professor) and choreographers were English speakers, the official language of the production was English.

The production took seven months of preparation. The cast had rehearsals twice a week for three hours each while the production crew met thrice a week for three hours each. Each rehearsal always started with a 30 minute warm-up activity that developed students’ voice, body movement and acting skills. After the warm-ups, the director gave the agenda for the day’s rehearsal and students got into groups to do specific tasks. The groups were determined by the characters or roles that students portrayed and, in this production, the students were divided into main characters (protagonists vs. antagonists), chorus members, dancers and the production crew.

The script and the music were protected by copyright and this meant that directors’ efforts were focused on representation and not interpretation. Because only a third of the students had had experience in theatre, the directors controlled the schedule and activities of rehearsals. Main characters and chorus members were given one task before they came to rehearsals -
learn lines and lyrics of songs. Students were expected to come to rehearsal with lines and lyrics memorised because rehearsal time was dedicated to fine-tuning singing with the voice coach, learning dance choreography, developing character, and working out blocking under the supervision of the directors. The production crew, under the supervision of the artistic director and the set builder, spent their time buying/making costumes and properties, constructing the sets, and acting as stage hands. As the performance date drew closer, the small groups would work in bigger groups and eventually, the whole cast worked together as a whole. A month before the performance, the director, choreographer, and music coach were focused only on pointing out errors to attain accuracy. The play ran for five consecutive days and had an audience of over 600 people each night.

**Instruments**

Director and student reflective journals together with pre- and post-production in-depth interviews and questionnaires were used to collect data for the study. The journals were completed by the two directors and four students (two from the cast and two from the production team). Consistent with research ethics, all participation was on the basis of voluntary and informed consent. The directors’ journals presented the teacher-director perspective of rehearsal activities and language learning activities within rehearsals while students’ journals gave the learner’s perspective. A coding system of recurring themes in the data was developed for analysis. The journals were read once for an overview of the data and then a second time for coding and analysis.

A pre-production questionnaire was given to all the students in the production that asked two open-ended questions on students’ motivations and expectations in joining the production. Open-ended questions were used so as not to prompt student responses. Then, a pre-production interview was conducted to enrich the results of the questionnaire by asking similar questions and a detailed description of their previous and current L2 learning experiences. The semi-structured pre-production interview aimed to get
background information about students in the production and so asked for information regarding their previous and current second language learning experiences, motivations, and attitudes before exposure to the learning environment. To get a representative of varying experiences in the cast, the pre-production interviews were of two members of the production staff (the assistant director and the music coach) and two members of the cast (an experienced actor and an inexperienced actor). The interviews were conducted a week before rehearsals and each lasted for twenty minutes. The transcription of the interviews and questionnaire results were analysed via the same codes as used in the journals.

The post-production interview aimed to determine students’ attitude towards the learning environment. A one-hour group interview was arranged instead of individual interviews due to scheduling problems. This arrangement proved to be more suitable because peers supported each other when questioned on difficult subjects. There were four students in the group - one production team member and three actors. The post-production interview transcriptions were also coded similar to the pre-production ones.

Results and Discussion

Sociocultural background of students

The pre-production interviews provided insight into students’ previous learning experiences in primary and secondary school, and preferred learning strategies and motivations for English language learning.

First of all I think English learning is positive. I can use language to talk to people from all of the world, because everybody just uses English when I was little. In the class, the negative thing is I hate English. I really do hate it. My test result is low. I hate my English teacher and, I don’t really understand all those grammatical things
like vocabulary and why you should do exercise all that. The turning point is when I have a really good tutor, because that time my English is so bad that my mum has to find another tutor for me around, primary six. That tutor, he explained things very clearly he didn’t really force me to do things. He just go over again, again and again some of the things that I don’t understand and I got better.

Student 1

This narrative illustrates student 1’s feelings and experiences towards English learning in the past. Her negative feelings towards English are attributed to her teacher’s focus on grammar rules and exercises. Positive attitudes, on the other hand, are attributed to her improved language proficiency after the assistance of a private tutor hired by her mother. Although the private tutor’s methods were similar to the classroom teachers’, the tutor’s patience and clarity of explanation helped to improve student 1’s English proficiency and altered her attitudes towards English itself.

Students were also asked to describe their language learning experiences and their motivations for joining the theatre production. The narrative below describes a student’s learning experiences in tertiary level and its influence on her motivations to participate in a theatre production.

One of the reasons is that I join this is I can have fun. That’s one of the most important reasons... and I really do enjoy drama as I can meet a lot of people from different programmes and different people from other countries as well. And the second reason is that I can keep on practising my English cause you know if you, if you don’t speak, in school, that’s the situation. Even in the English programme. People don’t speak English. They do occasionally, when they’re in class, when they are under supervision of the lecturer like how to use English when you are doing group discussions. Other than that, people don’t talk in English. So, the
reason why I join the drama is I can keep on reading and practising
and speaking and communicating in English.

Student 2

When asked to explain her motivation for participating in the musical production, student 2 emphasised her desire to simply enjoy in an academic environment. She expanded on this motivation by explaining her love for drama and its benefits on her language proficiency. Because the school does not provide her enough opportunities to speak English outside the classroom, she makes an effort to find an environment that will allow her to continue developing and she prefers methods that will allow her to enjoy and learn at the same time such as watching television and theatre.

The pre-production questionnaire showed two motivations for students’ participation in a musical production. The chief factor was interest in theatre itself (17 out of 23 students) followed by an interest to improve their English proficiency (6 out of 23 students). Students interested in theatre viewed the experience as an opportunity to have fun, to display their skills (singing, acting or dancing) or to learn more about the process of creating a theatre production. This result seemed to be independent of their programme of study or their previous drama experience because 17 out of the 23 students were English majors and the 6 students who indicated desire to improve their English were a mix of English and music majors.

The narratives indicate how traditional educational background influences students’ learning motivations (Wannagat, 2007). Unpleasant learning experiences in primary and secondary school have prompted students to seek and value different learning environments such as a theatre production. These students have survived competitive English language that have 40 or more students (Du-Babcock, 2002), and have followed a curriculum that focuses students only on passing examinations (Watkins, 1996) because family and society value good examination results as indicators of success (Kennedy et al., 2006; Mee-ling, 2009). Students come from teacher-centred language
learning environment (S. Chan, 1999) where students are passive (Salili, 1996), lack critical thinking (Kumaravadivelu, 2003), and mostly extrinsically motivated to learn (V. Chan et al., 2002; Littlewood et al., 1996). However, they are also motivated by intrinsic factors such as interest and self-actualisation (Shi, 2006).

Twelve years of academic studies and achievement motivation (i.e. pressure to please parents and pass examinations) has had students seeking for opportunities to enjoy learning for themselves (Gan, 2009). Because there are limited opportunities for students’ to communicate in English outside the classroom in their tertiary environment, students are willing to try something new for personal development.

This profile of Hong Kong Chinese learners is similar to what other studies have already concluded. Given a new learning environment, the theatre production, the discussion below outlines how these sociocultural factors shape language learning experiences in the theatre production.

**Learning context of the script**

The script of *Disney’s Aladdin Jr.* is a shortened version of the original Broadway musical written to be performed by American secondary school students. It is mainly about a street boy, Aladdin, who struggles to discover himself as he fights to win the love of Princess Jasmine. In the process, he must defeat the evil Prime Minister with the help of a powerful Genie. Like any fairy tale, the story ends with a happy ending. The directors chose this particular musical because they thought familiarity with the characters and songs from the Disney cartoon movie would appeal to students and the target audience (i.e. Hong Kong primary and secondary school students). The plot was very simple, had opportunities for spectacle, and had very catchy songs which would keep the audience entertained. In addition, the language in the script used fairly simple vocabulary and grammatical structures, making it easy for ESL students to cope with the language.
The directors’ journals described how students were given opportunities to exploit the target language through the script.

*Everyone got a copy of the script [on the first day of rehearsal] and I emphasised the need to read and memorise their lines before they come to rehearsal. We did a read-through. This is our normal routine so that students can get a sense of the kind of production we are trying to put up. The read-through seemed ok. They struggled with foreign words like Agrabah, riff raff, Ababuwa… funny how they tried to read the words. Hmm… need to set aside time to explain vocab. I can see a lot of them can’t even get the correct way to say some expressions. Need to work on that too. Singing was next. The music director just wanted to have them sing along with the music while reading the music sheets. Again, vocabulary is a problem. They also don’t seem to understand the meaning to of the lyrics at all. I have to tell them to study before next rehearsal.*

Director A

The director’s journal entry outlines students’ first encounter with the script. At the beginning, students were given an overall picture of the narrative they will perform through the read-through exercise. The task allowed the director to see what skills students can achieve. Sensing that vocabulary was going to be a problem, the director made a note to set aside time to explain difficult vocabulary words, expressions, idiomatic expressions, and interactions between characters.

*The music coach was very pleased with the commitment of the students. They didn’t understand all the words they sang, though… after the musical director left, I decided to go over the lyrics with them. I made sure they understood the words they are singing and pronunciation too. I think it was pretty helpful. I was really amazed most of them still didn’t understand what they were saying.*

Director A
This director journal entry illustrates students’ enthusiasm in learning how to sing however, despite having had the script and music sheets with them since the first week of rehearsal, students still needed instruction on vocabulary and pronunciation on a regular basis. Furthermore, instead of looking up vocabulary definitions themselves, they relied on the director to do the work for them. This example illustrates how students are eager to learn skills such as singing and dancing, but ignore language learning altogether. This observation is supported in the post-production interview.

R: What did you learn in this experience?
S1: Dancing! Acting!
S2: Singing… I liked singing.
R: What about English? Did you learn any English?
S1: speaking I guess… word stress and intonation.
S2: yeah… intonation and pronunciation.

When asked what skills were learnt through the theatre experience, students emphasised enjoying to learn singing, dancing and acting. Language learning was not even mentioned. The researcher had to probe to see if English was a learning outcome of this experience. Even then, students’ responses were limited to speaking skills. Vocabulary and grammatical structures were not perceived learning outcomes of this activity. The directors however, noted otherwise.

It’s day 2 of performance. Cast is hyped up from yesterday’s performance. That’s good. They’re having fun now. It’s funny to see how students play around with the songs and lines from the script. The narrators have just made a rap song of their lines. In the dressing room they’re pretending to hide their things from each other and accuse each other by saying ‘someone stole my bread!’.

Director A
This journal entry describes the mood of the actors as they prepare for another performance. The success of the previous performance has considerably lightened the tension that performance usually brings, and this has significantly altered students’ attitudes to English speaking. Backstage antics such as creating a rap song or playing around with lines from the script clearly indicate feelings of confidence and boldness that they have never exhibited before. Although the extent of this knowledge is not evident, these actions show how despite students’ denial of vocabulary English learning, they have learnt some vocabulary as evidenced by their efforts to appropriately use the words in other situations.

Activities in the learning environment indicate that the learning context of the script was only minimally utilised. This lack of effort to exploit learning opportunities through the script is not surprising given that learning activities in the production are not explicitly about English language learning. Students are supposed to learn English through theatre in an implicit manner (Wessels, 1987) and clearly, Hong Kong Chinese students do not perceive implicit learning as a favourable learning outcome. Students’ attention was focused only on what was explicitly taught – singing, dancing, and, English speaking skills probably because previous learning experiences neglected to develop these skills. While the script did provide learners with a model of authentic spoken text in the target language that allowed them to focus on language use instead of language form (Hayati, 2006; Kempe, 2003; Nolan & Patterson, 2000), learners seemed to ignore other English learning opportunities such as learning idiomatic expressions and grammatical structures (Dodson, 2002; O’ Gara, 2008).

**Learning context of the production process:**

**performance**

Oral speaking skills proficiency development is justified by a closer look at the learning environment during rehearsals.
I worked with Alan and Alice on their scene. It’s supposed to be the “getting to know you” scene. It went well I think. Alan and Alice understand immediately what I want. The problem is that Alan forgets what emotion he’s supposed to portray and Alice’s intonation is off even after I’ve corrected it several times. While Alan thinks about how he should react to the situation, sometimes what he thinks and what he does isn’t that same. For example, he knows he has to be sarcastic but he starts sounding angry. I model how to say the line myself. He copies it. Then next time around, forgets it.

Director A

Last Thursday I had to learn how to express “horror” feelings through my voice and actions. The director said my positions and movements lacked of changes. Thus I had to vary my gestures and exaggerate facial expression more.

Student 4

The journal entries reveal how activities in rehearsals provide an intensive environment for students to attain a higher level of English oral proficiency. The director journal entry shows how students are aware of what emotion to express, but they lack the knowledge to express the emotion appropriately through intonation and stress patterns. To assist students, the director models a couple of times in the hope that students will imitate and eventually do the dialogue more naturally. Student 4’s experience showed the success of this method of learning. At first, she had no knowledge of how to make her character scary through her voice. By varying word stress and intonation under the guidance of the director, the student was able to become very frightening when she performed.

These examples are evidence that students’ seem to lack understanding of the connection between lexis and paralinguistic features of speech. Directors have to dedicate substantial time to teach students how to deliver appropriate expression by varying stress and intonation. Under the tutelage of the director,
students repeated dialogue over and over again, until the students had delivered a convincing performance. This process of modelling, repetition and precision had allowed students to become fully aware of the importance of stress and intonation in expressing emotion.

The conditions and activities in the environment offered students opportunities to develop oral skills of pronunciation, stress and intonation (Hardison & Sonchaeng, 2005; Miccoli, 2003). Again, previous learning experiences of examination pressure and focus on language form seemed to be emphasised as students first struggled to apply language skills they have already internalised. Students also enter university with limited experience of speaking in English (Littlewood et al., 1996). The theatre production process magnified that gap that existed in students’ understanding of language for communication. It allowed them to realise connections between language, thought and emotion. The students were challenged to extend their current knowledge of English by learning its cultural nuances and norms in the form of intonation and words stress for accurate communication. As opposed to English classes that focus on form, theatre productions heightened students’ awareness of speaking skills neglected in their educational background. Furthermore, rehearsals activities not only developed students’ oral skills but also learnt to use and develop physical movement, facial expressions, gestures and body language (Maley & Duff, 2005; Schewe, 2002) for communication in the target language. This confirms how theatre productions provide students with an authentic environment that focuses students on thought and expression in a second language (Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004; Smith, 1984).

Apart from developing oral speaking proficiency, the production process also served to create a learning environment where students can reach their goals as language learners implicitly. One of the goals of theatre is to create reality on stage through the performance of the script. When a script is performed, it includes the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of the actor, the director, and the ensemble (Smith, 1984). During rehearsals, a significant amount of time is dedicated to the process of taking on a character where
the actor, under the guidance of the director. The data reveals how actors internalise the written dialogue. They first understand the written text, and then think of the variety of ways the character can be represented through voice and body language. Then, the director steps in to fine tune performances. These moments when directors are working with students to achieve this goal are considered occasions of learning where the ‘expert’ assists the learner to attain his true potential (Dodson, 2002; Heldenbrand, 2003). The act of performance becomes the moment when the learner has reached his potential to become an expert in the target language (O’Toole & Stinson, 2009). This environment of ‘experts’ and ‘learners’ provides opportunities for mediation in the zone of proximal development that allows language to be internalised through inner speech and verbalised through external speech and physical movement (Vygotsky, 1978).

**Learning context of the production process:**

**Immersion Experience**

Activities in rehearsals are both formal and informal. The interviews and journals revealed how the theatre production had given students an opportunity to be immersed in the target language because of informal elements in the learning environment.

*Today [second month of rehearsals], I noticed that the cast still seemed to be divided. English students stick together and music students stick together. The kids [native speakers] seemed also to have a world of their own. I guess that can’t be helped. Perhaps it’s time to have a cast party.*

Director A

At the beginning of rehearsals, the director observed that because the cast and crew were a mix of students from different backgrounds, the group was very divided between English major students, music major students, and native speakers. Those who were not part of these groups would hang
back or would be excluded from the group. This is possibly because of the
task arrangements that the director assigned. As previously described, each
rehearsal required students to work in groups depending on their roles in the
production; main characters worked together, dancers, guards, chorus, etc.
This caused a division in the cast where students would only focus on their own
task groups and seldom spoke to the native speaker cast and crew members
unless absolutely necessary. As performance date drew closer however, the
situation changed.

I think is the, the most challenging... the challenge thing is not only
in the play, because I think if you work hard enough you, you can do
it, you can. But because I think because some, some of the actors
not a Chinese, they are foreigners, and our director is foreigners,
and this is a challenge for us, yes because, because we have to
speak English to them in normal conversation or in some serious
discussion, we have to discuss in English, but we seldom do that
in daily life or in the three years of life in IEd, yeah? For example,
whenever we make jokes in Cantonese, Ben always bugs us to say
it again in English because he wants to understand the joke. That
forced us to speak English. But I think after this production I want to
improve my English because I want to communicate with others.

Student 5

Student 5, a senior music student, explains in the post-production
interview how the lack of opportunities to use English at school emphasised
the challenge that this learning environment presented due to the presence
of non-Chinese speakers. She explained that necessary communication with
non-Chinese speakers such as directors and actors in formal and informal
conversation compelled her to recall English skills she had learnt years
ago. Despite having studied the language since primary school, the biggest
challenge was communicating with the language to express her thoughts
and intentions. The social environment where students joke and interact
with non-Chinese speakers pressured students to speak English so as not to
exclude members of the group. She concludes by expressing her appreciation for the experience and how it has motivated her to continue to use English after the production to communicate with her new non-Chinese speaking friends. The student even felt the need to extend this experience by seeking for other learning opportunities after the production.

Clearly, the significant number of non-Chinese speakers who were distributed among different functions was a significant factor in using English as the common language. This relaxed, non-academic learning environment seemed to have altered students’ attitudes towards English learning. The students’ original intention of joining the theatre production was mainly encouraged by the excitement of a theatre performance and the prospect of learning English – showing an element of personal interest and the openness to new modes of learning (C-Y. J. Lee, 2002; Shi, 2006). The theatre production became a low stakes and highly sociable (fun and relaxed) learning environment that gave students the opportunity to maximise the collaborative learning environment. It also motivated students in an exciting manner to learn and use the target language to improve their communicative-expressive ability (Hui & Lau, 2006; Ryan-Scheutz & Colangelo, 2004). Informal activities such as giving instructions, listening to directions, etc, involved the whole personality of the student (emotions and character) making L2 learning not only a cognitive activity but also a social, personal and meaningful one. This study exhibits how an immersion experience encourages students to enjoy learning for themselves.

To sum up, prior to production, students’ sociocultural background were similar to what other studies have already concluded. They were averse to English learning due to teacher-centred and grammar-focused approaches in their secondary schools. Some had positive attitudes because of their exposure to new learning environments that are student-centred and focused on practical use of English for communication. All the students, however, were motivated to participate in the theatre production because they had the desire to know more about theatre, an art form they had not had opportunity to explore in their academic life. This sociocultural background has had an impact
on the learning environment in that students were predisposed to explicit instruction in the environment as learning outcomes of the experience. The script focused students’ attention on vocabulary and language use. Repetition was recognised as a requirement for improved oral proficiency. Finally, immersion in an informal, social environment of the target language altered their attitudes to English language learning.

These learning outcomes indicate that the theatre production provided students with multiple learning opportunities. Each of these ‘occasions for learning’ is social contexts where cultural, historical, and institutional elements influenced the nature of the interaction between the learners and the expert; they provided opportunities for the target language to be imparted to learners. In each of the moments, students had opportunities to internalise and externalise the target language. They also had opportunities to imitate experts and work on tasks in the target language. In addition, experts had opportunities to scaffold learning of learners. This study hence, showed that theatre productions provided the context for multiple zones of proximal development to exist where learners and experts engaged in social interaction.

Conclusion

The sociocultural perspective of L2 learning identifies the ZPD as the interaction between the learner and the expert where a learner’s actual L2 proficiency level and potential L2 proficiency level becomes observable (Thorne & Lantolf, 2006). The learning environment plays a critical role in successful L2 learning because it provides opportunities for learners’ ZPDs to be activated. Learners’ sociocultural background has been recognised to be a significant factor influencing interactions within a learning environment. This study investigated the impact of Hong Kong Chinese tertiary students’ sociocultural background on a new learning environment – a theatre production. As in any theatre production, learners involved in the theatre production are engaged in two interrelated learning contexts: the context of the text and the context of the production process. These learning contexts offer a myriad of L2 learning
opportunities, however in this case, learners’ sociocultural background, together with the activities in the learning environment, has had them predisposed to favour some learning opportunities more than others. In spite of this, students claimed to have had positive gains in English oral proficiency, increased awareness of language use, and more positive attitudes to English learning. These results indicate that this theatre production provided students with multiple learning opportunities, making it an appropriate language learning environment.

Limitations of the study

Dynamics within a theatre production are mostly dependent on the director’s craft – his/her vision, management style, teaching technique, and so on. This study is limited in that the impact of the director’s craft on the production is not taken into account in the analysis of learning opportunities. Also, as this is only a pilot study, a small amount of data was collected and analysed. A full study could include identifying embedded cases within the whole case or the use of a questionnaire administered to all students to explore the experience of students before and after the production. Further research on the process of L2 learning during the production process would also be informative and useful. Such a study would allow for a closer examination of the impact that theatre has on students’ acquisition of a second language.

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此為上文摘要中譯

戲劇製作如何為香港華語學生建立語言學習環境

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摘要

有研究指出戲劇可以用作第二語言的學習工具，同時，根據香港的語言教學研究，社群文化背景對英語為第二語言的教學影響不輕。因此，筆者以為如果以戲劇排演作為非母語英語教程時，教學的成效亦可能須要考慮社區文化的因素。

這論文總結一項語言學習試點研究的結果，以維高斯基（Vygotsky）的認知發展論為基礎，這研究以定性數據，分析一班香港大專生製作英語戲劇的過程。研究是要解答以下兩個問題：首先，在香港以戲劇作為教授英語學習工具是否取決於某些社群文化因素？此外，在香港英語戲劇又是否一個有效的非母語學習工具呢？

在這研究中，目標學生的社群文化背景與以往的相若，而實驗環境裏，即是戲劇排練，製作過程中，全部以英語溝通。結果，學生的語言能力有顯著的進步，因此，可以說戲劇活動不外是語言教學另一有效而適當的渠道。

關鍵詞：戲劇製作、香港文化背景、以英語作為第二語言的學習