A Sociocultural Perspective of Formal and Informal Language Learning in Pakistan

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ABSTRACT

The study aims at investigating the role of culture in formal and informal language learning in the perspective of Sociocultural Theory (SCT) of learning. More precisely, the study has analyzed the two main aspects of sociocultural theory of learning i.e. mediation and zone of proximal development in the light of formal and informal language learning. The study has been conducted through a questionnaire based on a five-point frequency scale in order to know how often the learners make use of resources concerning formal and informal language learning. A total number of 275 second language learners from three main universities of Pakistan (National University of Modern Languages, Islamabad, International Islamic University, Islamabad, National University of Modern Languages (Peshawar Branch)) participated in the study. The results lead to the conclusion that the aspect of mediation is limited in formal language learning as compared to informal language learning. Moreover, there is also a variation in zone of proximal development.

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Introduction

In the process of second language learning, it is important to consider the resources of second language learning in both formal and informal contexts. L2 learning both in formal and informal contexts is resource-based, which is usually referred to as "independent interaction with learning materials."[1] It is important to be seen in the perspective of both formal and informal language learning as it gives an overall viewpoint of a learning context.[2] Moreover, the study of formal and informal language learning also reveals information about cultural aspects related to language learning.[3]

The present study relates the concept of learning to the learners' socio-cultural aspects within their society by investigating the role of culture in formal and informal language learning. In this perspective, formal and informal language learning has been investigated in relation to the sociocultural theory of learning.[4] Sociocultural theory of language learning relies on three main aspects: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD i.e. learners' exposure of second language), mediation (i.e. learners' communication with other people), regulation (i.e. learners' awareness of language governing principles).

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1   Phil Benson, *Teaching and Researching: Autonomy in Language Learning* (London: Longman, 2001): 12.

2   David Palfreyman, "Social Context and Resources for Language Learning", *System* 34, no. 3 (2006): 352-370.

3   D. B. Kronenfeld, "Formal Rules, Cognitive Representations and Learning in Language and other Cultural Systems", *Language Sciences* 28, no. 4 (2006): 424-35.

4   L. Vygotsky, *Mind in Society: Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 85, 291; Palfreyman, "Social Context and Resources for Language Learning", 352-70; Kronenfeld, "Formal Rules, Cognitive Representations and Learning", 424-35; Dale T, Griffe and David Nunan, *Classroom Teachers and Classroom Research: JALT Applied Materials Series* (Tokyo: Japanese Association of Language Teaching, 1997); R. Ellis, *Instructed Second Language Acquisition: Learning in the Classroom* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990); R. Batstone and R. Ellis, "Principled Grammar Teaching", *System* 37, no. 2 (2009): 194-204.

Many studies have been conducted concerning formal and informal language learning.[5] A few studies relate formal and informal language learning to the sociocultural aspects, which play an important role in language learning. Moreover, most of these studies relate to the language learning contexts, which are quite different from the language learning contexts in Pakistan. To the best of the authors' knowledge, the present study is the first one to relate formal and informal language learning in the perspective of sociocultural theory of learning with respect to second language learning context in Pakistan.

The study focuses on these questions: What aspects of mediation are used by learners in formal language learning? What aspects of mediation are used by learners in informal language learning? What is the difference in zone of proximal development in respect of formal and informal language learning in Pakistan?

Formal Language Learning

Formal language learning is referred to as an attempt to learn about the language by obtaining information about explicit rules of grammar.[6] Formal language learning is a type of learning that takes place in an organized and structured context, and that is designed as learning. In addition, it may lead to a formal recognition (diploma, certificate). It is also intentional from the learners' perspective.[7] Another research study state formal learning as an organized learning which follows a curriculum often led by experts and trained professionals and it is also recorded or grades are granted.[8]

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5   Tariq Rahman, *Language-teaching and Power in Pakistan* (Islamabad: NIPS, 2003), 1-18; Joan L. G. Barrt, Ghulam Hyder Sindhi, *Pakistani Languages and Society: Problems and Prospects* (Islamabad: NIPS, 2003).

6   Ellis, "Instructed Second Language Acquisition".

7   D. Colardyn, and J. Bjornavold, "Validation of Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning: Policy and Practices in EU Member States", *European Journal of Education* 39, no. 1 (2004): 69-89.

8   Sarah Elaine Eaton and H. L. Ainsworth, "Formal, non-formal and informal learning in the Sciences" (Eaton International Consulting Inc., 2010).

The above explanation concerning formal language learning can be summed up in a way that it is a type of learning, which involves organized and structured settings, and, which follows a curriculum, and it also leads to a formal recognition. Moreover, it is intentional on the part of learners or in other words, it involves conscious learning.

Formal language learning has been studied from various perspectives. Collentine and Freed's research reveals that formal language learning is a type of communicative context where learners use L2 as a tool for exchanging information and participating in social and interpersonal functions.[9] Although, Collentine and Freed's research work highlights the importance of formal language learning but they do not explain as to what extent formal language learning provides freedom for participating in social and interpersonal functions. Ellis' research on formal language learning focuses on the mechanism of language learning. In this regard, he has proposed principles for formal language learning.[10] These principles highlight the importance of excessive input and output, which should mainly focus on form and function. Robinson's research relating to formal language learning in the case of adult learners reveals that learning must address the details and specificity of learners' local factors. According to him, formal language learning must consider learners' first cultural values so that the learning can be facilitated for L2 learners.[11] Ellis' research work based on formal language learning focuses on grammar pedagogy. Moreover, his research concludes with the idea that the grammar should be taught in implicit way by facilitating the natural use of language for learners.[12]

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9   J. Collentine and B.F*. Freed, Learning Context and its Effects on Second Language Acquisition* (SECOND, I.T.S.E.O.N., 2004).

10   R. Ellis, "Principles of Instructed Language Learning", *System* 33, no. (2005): 209-24.

11   C. Robinson, "Context or Key? Language in four Adult Learning Programmes", *International Journal of Educational Development* 27, no. 5 (2007): 542-51.

12   R. Ellis, "Current Issues in the Teaching of Grammar: An SLA Perspective", *Tesol Quarterly,* 40, no. 1 (2006): 83-107.

Although Ellis's research work highlights the real form of grammar teaching but he does not explain the possibility of training teachers and modifying teaching materials to adopt this methodology.

Informal Language Learning

Informal language learning, in comparison to formal language learning, is described as a type of 'natural learning'.[13] It is a type of learning that takes place in natural setting and that results from daily life activities related to work, family, or leisure. Moreover it does not lead to any certification.[14] Another aspect of informal language learning is that in most cases it is unintentional on the part of learners.[15] In the light of above explanations, informal learning can be characterized as a type of learning that involves natural learning process and that results from social life activities.

Informal language learning has also been studied from various perspectives. Palfreyman through his research on social contexts reveals that second language learning needs to be seen as a process of occurring not simply in an individual but through the interconnected parts of class, family, and social group.[16] Hoff's research work on informal language learning reveals that social contexts support and shape language development. Her research work concludes that all human environments support language acquisition and provide opportunities for communicative experience.[17] Her research is related to the L2 learning context where learners learn a second language in a social context where L2 is spoken as a native language but in other contexts like Pakistan L2 is not spoken as a first language in social

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13   Ellis, "Instructed Second Language Acquisition".

14   P. Tissot, *Terminology of Vocational Training Policy* (Office for Official Publication of the European Communities, 2004).

15   Colardyn, and Bjornavold, "Validation of Formal, Non-Formal and Informal Learning".

16   Palfreyman, "Social Context and Resources for Language Learning".

17   Erika Hoff, "How Social Contexts Support and Shape Language Development", *Developmental Review* 26, no. 1 (2006): 55-88.

settings. Hoff's research does not provide ample solutions concerning these learning contexts. Tarone's research on second language acquisition reveals that social and linguistic context affect language use, choice and development and that learners intentionally assert social identities through their L2 in communicating in social contexts.[18] The review of literature based on informal language learning suggests that it plays a positive role in language development of learners.

Sociocultural Theory in Perspective of Second Language Learning

It is important to review sociocultural theory in relation to formal and informal language learning. Sociocultural theory of second language learning implies that learning is first social then individual.[19] Vygotsky's sociocultural theory has three main aspects: mediation, Zone of Proximal Development, regulation.[20] Mediation refers to tools which facilitate language learning whereas zone of proximal development is understood as "the difference between what an individual can do independently and what he or she is able to do with mediation".[21] Lastly, regulation is referred to as the internalization process of mastering the language development.

Sociocultural theory has been investigated from various perspectives in relation to formal and informal language learning. According to Kao, LEE, SCT offers researchers a theoretical perspective with which to examine language learning as a social practice, consider students as active participants in constructing language processes and

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18   E. Tarone, "Sociolinguistic Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Research, 1997-2007", *The Modern Language Journal* 91 (2007): 837-48.

19   A. Kozulin, *Psychological Tools and Mediated Learning: Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 15-38.

20   Vygotsky, *Mind in Society,* 85, 291.

21   J. P. Lantolf and S. L. Thorne, "Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning" in *Theories in Second Language Acquisition: An introduction*, ed., B. Van Pattern and J. Williams (Manwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates 2007), 201-24.

investigate the interaction between different social factors.[22] Lantolf and Thorne redefining the sociocultural theory in the context of L2 learning, explain, "The most important form of human cognitive activity develops through interaction within social and material environments".[23] Kozulin regards, SCT as "mediation through another human being and mediation in the form of organized activity".[24] According to Lantolf and Thorne, "Developmental process takes place through participation in cultural, linguistics, and historically formed settings such as family, life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organized sport activities, and work places".[25] In this way, sociocultural theory is concerned with both formal and informal language learning. It involves both organized learning in classroom setting as well as the social interaction that takes place in informal setting. It also highlights the role of culture *vis-à-vis* both types of learning.

Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky, the main founder of ZPD, explains ZPD through the following lines:

> ...the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.[26]

Basically, ZPD is the difference in learning as compared to another individual and this difference is balanced through interaction and learning with another individual. It can also be called the sharing of knowledge between two individuals where one is more competent as compared to the other. Chaiklin elaborates the zone of proximal development as "an

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22 P. Kao, *et. al.*, "Examining Second Language Learning: Taking A Sociocultural Stance", *Annual Review of Education, Communication and Language Sciences* (ARECLS) 7, (2010): 113-31.

23 Lantolf and Thorne, "Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning".

24 Kozulin, *Psychological Tools and Mediated Learning.*

25 Lantolf and Thorne, "Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Learning in Theories".

26 Vygotsky, *Mind in Society.*

interaction on a task between a more and a less competent person, such that less competent person becomes independently proficient at what was initially a jointly accomplished task."[27] Therefore, social interaction between a more and a less competent learner results in language development of both of them. The more competent learner is able to reinforce his existing knowledge whereas the less competent learner is able to learn new rules.

According to Kao, "the interaction between people and their environments and peers helps activate students' learning in the ZPD, internalizes the learning process and then eventually constructs development."[28] Therefore, in mediation, social factors are crucial, as these stimulate learning in the ZPD. Mitchell and Myles focus on language learning with a socio-cultural view where social comes before individual and, then learning occurs. They explain learning as "Learning is seen as first social, then individual, first inter-mental, then intra-mental. Thus, learners are seen as active constructors of their own learning environment, which they shape through their choice of goals and operations".[29]

Research Methodology

The study has been conducted through a questionnaire based on a five-point frequency scale. The questionnaire construction has been done through focused group discussion. A focused group discussion with eight adult learners was arranged to know about formal and informal language learning. The purpose of focus group interview was to know about the use of resources concerning formal and informal language learning.

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27 Seth Chaiklin, "The Zone of Proximal Development in Vygotsky's Analysis of Learning and Instruction", *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in Cultural Context* 1 (2003): 39-64.

28 Kao, *et. al.*, "Examining Second Language Learning", 120.

29 Rosamond Mitchell, Florence Myles, and Emma Marsden, *Second Language Learning Theories* (London: Routledge, 2004).

In the second phase of questionnaire development, field testing was conducted. The main purpose of field testing was to "bring the social and cultural differences between the researcher and the target population".[30] Field pretesting of the present questionnaire focused on the following points concerning the questionnaire development:

1. The respondents understand the questions in a consistent way.
2. The questions are asking for information that respondents have and can retrieve.
3. The wording of questions provides respondents with all the necessary information.
4. The respondents interpret the questions as the researcher intends.
5. A level of variation among responses is acceptable.[31]

The questionnaire was pretested with the respondents that had shared similar characteristics with the target population. Initially, 30 respondents were asked to fill out the questionnaire. The respondents were asked to give their suggestions and to explain briefly the problematic areas concerning the questionnaire construction. They were also asked to rephrase a question in their own words if it seemed ambiguous to them.

After the field-testing process, the data were collected from second language learners enrolled at university level. A total number of 275 learners participated in the study. The data were collected from three main universities of Pakistan. These three universities were selected randomly out of nine universities situated in the main cities of the country.

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30   Naresh K. Malhotra, *Marketing Research: An Applied Orientation* (Pearson Education India, 2007).

31   D. Collins, "Pretesting Survey Instruments: An Overview of Cognitive Methods", *Quality of Life Research* 12, no. 3 (2003): 229-238; R. Czaja, "Questionnaire Pretesting Comes of Age", *Marketing Bulletin*, 9 (1998): 52-66.

Demographic Information

The demographic questions were based on gender, age, and educational level of participants. A paper-pencil method has been used to collect the data from adult L2 learners from three universities. A total number of 275 adult learners participated in the study. The data based on demographic information of learners is as follows.

TABLE 1: DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Gender	
Male	53%
Female	47%
Age Groups	
16-20 years	55%
21-25 years	31%
26-30 years	14%
Educational Level	
Intermediate	39%
Bachelor	61%

SOURCE: Field Data

Reliability and Validity of the Scale

The reliability statistics concerning the scale have been shown in the Table 2.

TABLE 2: RELIABILITY STATISTICS

Cronbach's Alpha	Cronbach's Alpha Based on Standardized Items	No. of Items
719	717	18

SOURCE: SPSS Data Analysis

The value of Cronbach's Alpha is 0.71, which is well above the recommended value.

DATA ANALYSIS

Results Based on Formal Contexts

The analysis concerning formal contexts has been made on the basis of results obtained through empirical data through questionnaires. Concerning learners' participation, results based on questionnaire data reveal that they mostly

participate in language learning activities in the classroom. The mean value (Q1=1.75) in Table 3 indicates learners' participation in the classroom activities.

TABLE 3 : RESULTS BASED ON FORMAL CONTEXTS

S.No	Questions	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q1	How often do you participate in the classroom?	275	1	5	1.75	0.970
Q2	How often do you practice activities based on speaking skills?	275	1	5	2.12	.950
Q3	How often do you practice activities based on writing skills?	275	1	5	1.84	1.038
Q4	How often do you practice activities based on listening materials?	275	1	5	2.47	1.202
Q5	How often do you practice language-learning activities with the help of computer?	275	1	5	4.26	1.210
Q6	How often do you work in a group or pairs to complete the activities in the classroom?	275	1	5	2.76	1.005
Q7	How often do you practice the activities on your own?	275	1	5	2.03	0.982
Q8	How often do you ask your teacher for help to complete an activity in the classroom?	275	1	5	2.65	1.099

SOURCE: Data Obtained Through Questionnaire

These activities are based on integrative language learning skills (such as speaking, writing, and listening). The mean values (Q2=2.1, Q3=1.8, Q4=2.4) show that learners often practice these activities. Figure below provides information concerning activities based on language learning skills concerning speaking, writing and listening.
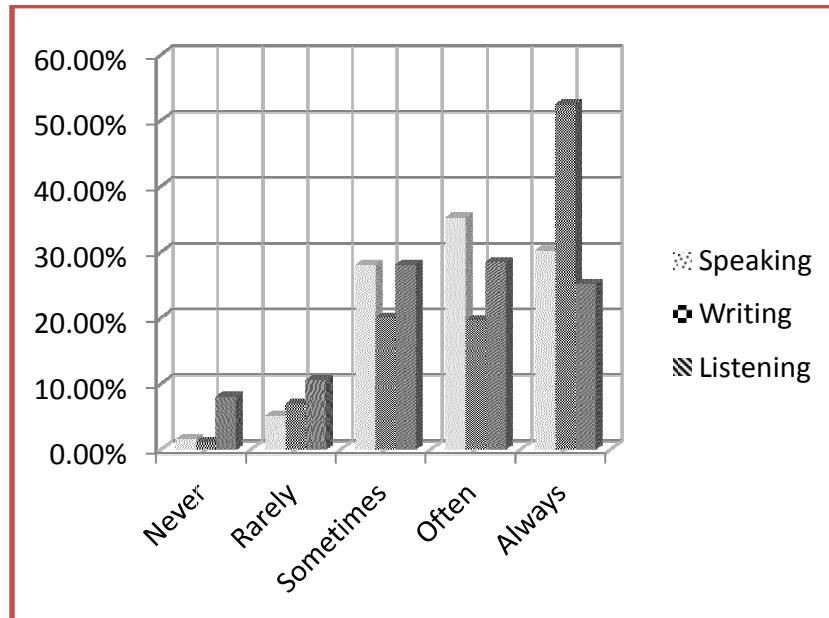
Figure 1: Activities Concerning Speaking, Writing and Listening

Figure 1 shows that activities based on writing skills have higher percent values as compared to the other related skills. On the other hand, activities based on spoken language have also higher percent values as shown in the Figure 1. It is also important to analyze how the learners complete these activities as it will help us to analyze the results in the light of SCT.

The research study has also investigated the use of computer-related activities for language learning and cultural awareness.
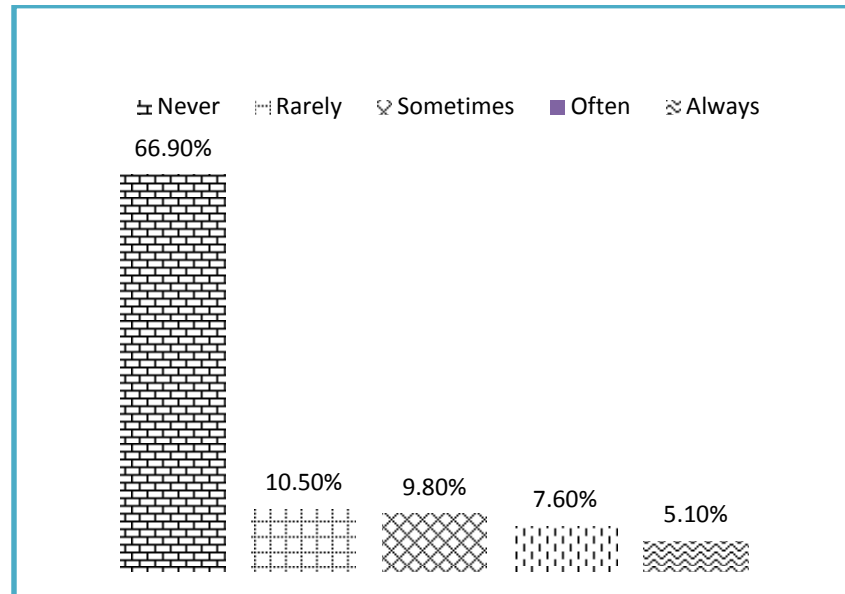
Figure 2:   The Use of Computer Related Activities in Formal Language Learning

Analysis based on five-point frequency scale (Always-often-sometimes-rarely-never) reveals that L2 learners say they rarely use a computer in the classroom as a source for second language learning and cultural awareness. The reason to investigate about the use of computer was to know about tools which learners use as mediation for learning language. Mediation is an important factor in SCT. Results reveal that learners rarely mediate learning through the use of computer.

The other aspect concerning formal learning is about group work or individual work in order to complete a task in the classroom. The purpose was to know whether the learners make use of their ZPD or not. Figure 3 shows the percentage graph concerning the results.
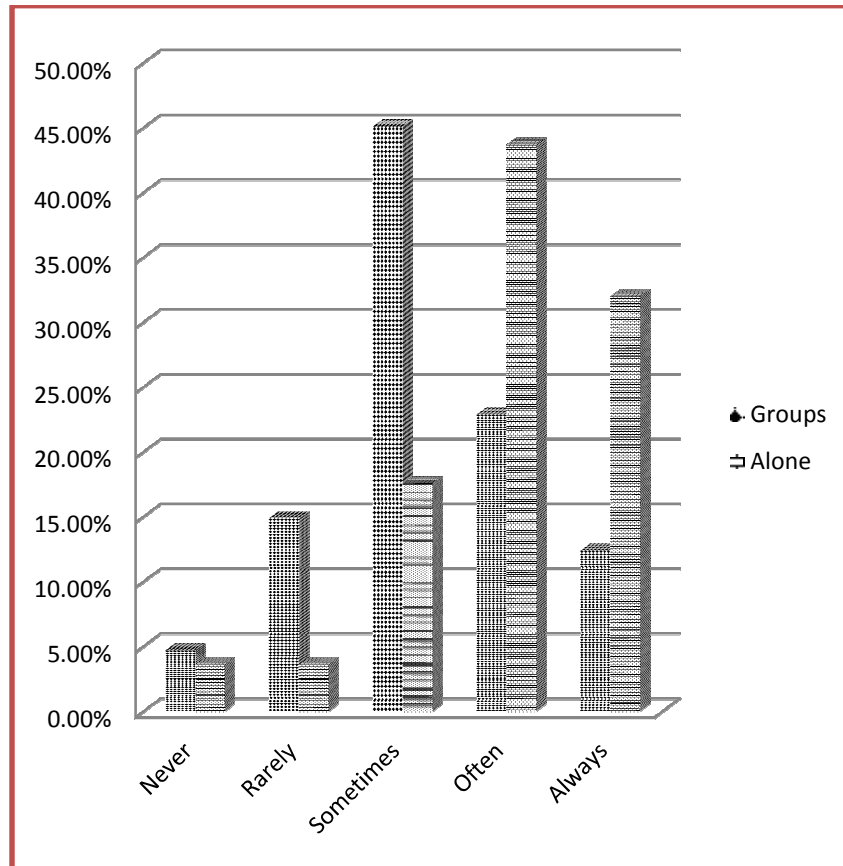
Figure 3: Activities Related to Group Work or Individual Work

Figure 3 shows that learners participate in the classroom activities on individual basis.

Results Based on Informal Contexts

The data analysis part concerning the informal contexts has been divided into two subparts. The first part discusses resources, which are used by adult learners to improve their language learning and the second part is about learners' communication with other people. Table 4 consists of the research findings concerning informal contexts along with their mean values and standard deviation values.

TABLE 4: RESULTS BASED ON INFORMAL CONTEXTS

S.No	Questions	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Q1	How often do you read an English newspaper?	275	1	5	2.98	1.14
Q2	How often do you watch English programmes on TV?	275	1	5	2.82	1.07
Q3	How often you try to remember English words that you find in advertisements?	275	1	5	2.29	1.18
Q4	How often do you watch English films?	275	1	5	2.83	1.10
Q5	How often do you consult English websites?	275	1	5	3.06	1.32
Q6	How often do you send e-mails in English to other people (friends & families)?	275	1	5	3.04	1.38
Q7	How often do you send SMS in English to other people (friends & families)?	275	1	5	2.29	1.10
Q8	How often do you communicate with native speakers of English?	275	1	5	3.42	1.15
Q9	How often do you communicate in English with your family members?	275	1	5	3.43	1.08
Q10	How often do you communicate in English with your friends?	275	1	5	2.58	0.89

SOURCE: Data Obtained through Questionnaire

Table 4 shows mean values. Items with mean values lower than midpoint 3, indicate the frequent use of resources, while items greater than midpoint exhibit rare use of resources. Using this as a measure, the resources with values (Q1=2.9, Q2=2.8, Q3=2.2, Q4=2.8, Q7=2.2, Q10=2.5) indicate that learners make use of these resources on a regular basis.

As can be seen from Table 4 most of the mean values lie between 2 and 3, which implies that learners often make use of these resources (i.e. newspapers=2.9, TV programs=2.8, Advertisements=2.2, Films=2.8). The mean values in table 4 show learners' tendency on a five-point frequency scale concerning these resources. These results have been verified through percent values.
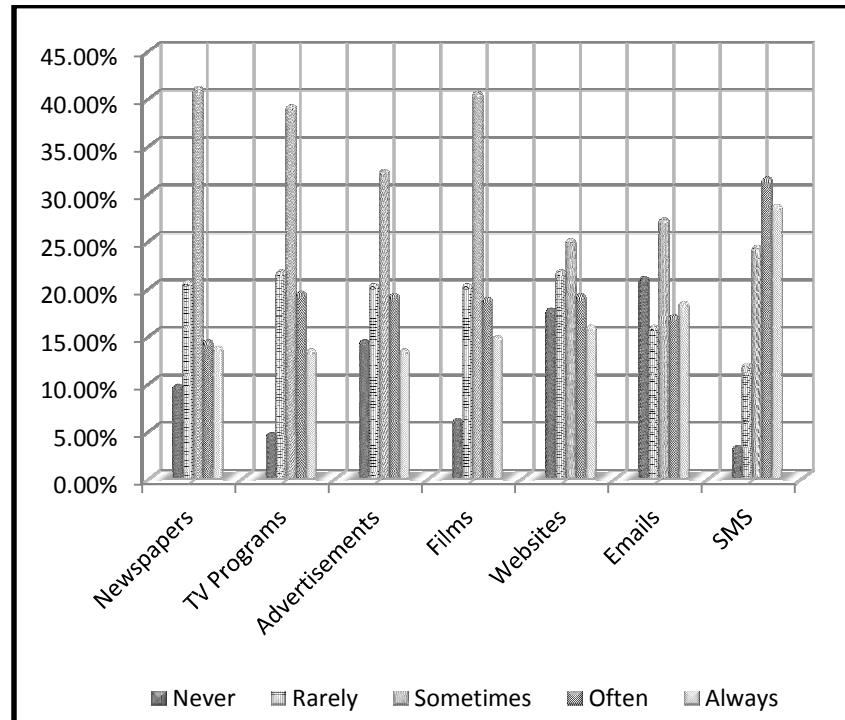
Figure 4: Percent Values Concerning the Use of Social Resources about Informal

Figure 4 is about the graphical representation of social resources with respect to their percentage values. Figure 4 shows that the bars concerning social resources (i.e. websites, e-mails) have higher percentage values, which implies that learners rarely make use of these resources. The two resources on the right side are about e-mails and text messages sent through mobiles. In these cases, green and yellow bars have high values, which imply that learners often make use of these resources. In the perspective of SCT, the frequent uses of the above resources indicate that learners mediate these resources to improve their language. Moreover, learners ZPD enhances through these resources.

Learners' Communication Based on Informal Contexts

The second aspect of informal language learning was learners' communication. In this perspective, the research study focused on three main aspects: which were based on

communication with native speakers, family members, and friends. L2 learners' communication concerning native speakers reveals that 48 percent of the learners communicated rarely or never with the native speakers of the target language. The mean value concerning communication with native speakers is 3.4 (see Q.8, Table 4), which is in accordance with the percent values shown in figure below. The bars in figure 5 represent the learners who never or rarely communicate with native speakers, family members and friends.
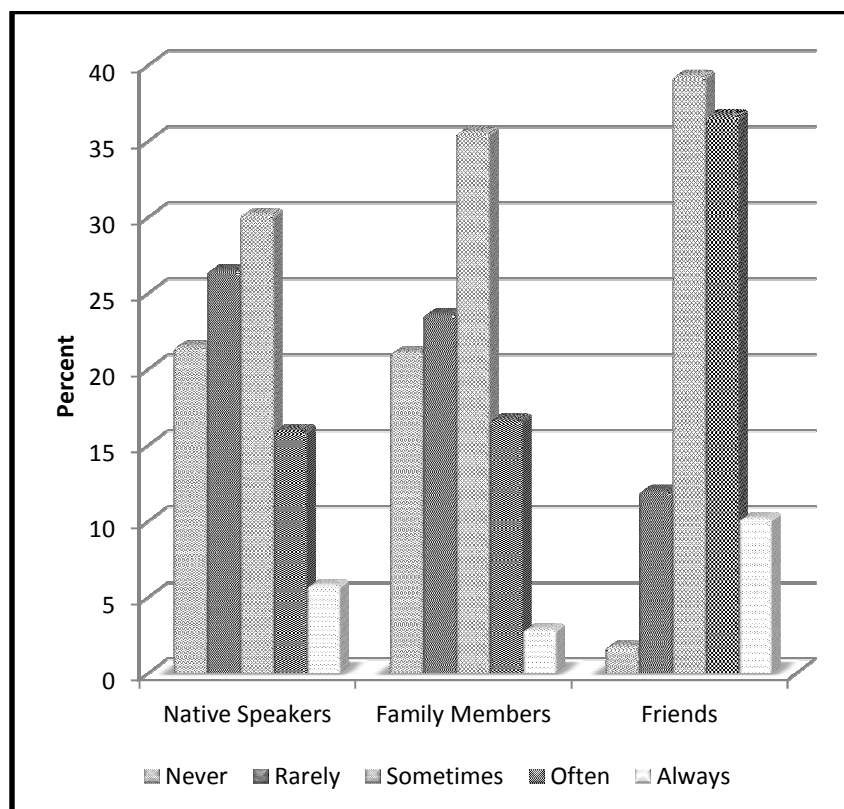

Figure 5: Learners' Communication in Informal Settings

The analysis reveals that 44.7 percent of the respondents communicated rarely or never with the members from their family. Only 2.7 percent of the respondents were those who communicated with their family members on a regular basis. The mean value is 3.4 (see

Table 4, Q.9), which implies that respondents rarely communicated in English with their family members. The analysis also reveals that 46.9 percent of the respondents communicated in English with their friends on a regular basis. Figure 5 also shows that only 1.8 percent of the learners were those who communicated rarely in English with their friends.

Results based on learners' communication in the perspective of SCT reveal that learners' ZPD in term of their communication with their family members and native speakers of English is limited. However, their zone of proximal development in terms of their communication with their friends is higher as compared to other two factors.

Discussion

Findings concerning formal language learning also reveal that the learners mostly practice their language learning activities on individual basis. Guk and Kellogg's research work suggests, "learner-to-learner mediation is important and closer to what Vygotsky termed 'internalization'".[32] For language learning, mediation in the classroom should not be limited to teacher-student interaction. Rather it should include learner-to-learner interaction in the ZPD. Moreover, the results also reveal that learners rarely use computer related activities as a tool of mediation for learning second language in Pakistan.

Results concerning informal contexts reveal that L2 learners make use of social resources like newspapers, television programmes, and advertisements, which reflect the learners' native culture. The study results concerning informal contexts are in line with Palfreyman's research work, which concludes that learners in informal contexts make use of a rich variety of materials and social resources to practice English

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32   Guk and D. Kellogg, "The ZPD and Whole Class Teaching: Teacher-led and Student-led Interactional Mediation of Tasks", *Language Teaching Research* 11, no. 3 (2007): 281-99.

and to attempt to clarify their understanding of the language[33]. Moreover, the results concerning informal contexts also reveal that L2 learners' communication concerning informal contexts mostly takes place with the members of their own culture and rarely takes place with the members of the target language culture. Learners' limited interaction in informal setting also implies that they have few opportunities for immediate language use. As a result, their L2 acquisition is likely to be much slower than in a context where learners have to use English on daily basis. The results based on learners' communication can be seen in the perspective of sociocultural theory of learning. In the light of SCT, L2 learners' ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) is influenced by their own culture. Moreover, their process of mediation takes place mainly with the members of their own culture. As the results reveal that L2 communication in English takes place with the members of their own society.

Comparing language learning with respect to formal and informal settings in the light of SCT, it can be concluded that learners' mediation and ZPD are limited in formal settings as compared to the informal language learning process where learners have more opportunities to consult resources and to practice language. According to Ellis, informal contexts possess greater range in terms of participants, location, and topics as compared to formal contexts.[34] As a result culture practiced through informal contexts possesses a greater influence on L2 learners as well.

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33   Palfreyman, *Social Context and Resources for Language Learning*.
34   Ellis, *Instructed Second Language Acquisition*.

Conclusion

The study concludes that learners' resources of mediation in formal settings are limited and this limitation also affects learners' ZPD. Moreover, learners' mediation in informal setting is higher as they have more resources to consult newspapers, television programmes, radio programs etc. The study also concludes that there is a difference in learners' ZPD with respect to formal and informal settings. Moreover, their ZPD is limited in formal settings as compared to informal language learning process.