CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

In the introductory chapter, a discussion of appropriate paradigms for evaluating the evidence in this investigation was broached. It was suggested that an appropriate epistemological model would be the legal case, borrowed from jurisprudence. To review, in jurisprudence, the standard for plausible explanations is measured by a weighing of the preponderance of the evidence. Strong cases are formed from strands of evidence, woven together to tell plausible and coherent stories. This model is especially appropriate for this investigation since sociocultural theory relies heavily on narrativity theory in the presentation of evidence. Jerome Bruner (cited in Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000) asserts that people do not make sense of their experiences through "testable propositions" (p.158) and therefore the "logico-scientific mode of conducting research requires a complementary mode – a mode that searches for *reasons* (italics in original) rather than causes" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, p. 158). The narrative mode to explain reasons for human understanding and learning grew out of such criticisms. "When people tell stories, anecdotes and other kinds of narratives, they organize data into special patterns which represent and explain experience" (Cortazzi, 1994, citing Hymes, Gee, Mishler, and Branigan). This does not mean that sociocultural theory does not still rely on the observational/experimental paradigm of the traditional natural and social sciences. Just as legal cases will cite statistical evidence and other forms of quanta, sociocultural theory continues to utilize evidence collected from these traditional methodological designs. Narrativity is not meant to "replace experimental/observational research" (ibid.,p.158) but to complement it as narratives "bring to the surface aspects of human activity,

including SLA, that cannot be captured in the more traditional approach to research" (ibid.).

Appropriately, the quantitative and qualitative evidence presented in this investigation tells a story. The verdict that can be drawn from the evidence the story presents is that success in the language learning process cannot be attributed to cognitive factors alone; indeed, the evidence presented here suggests that sociocultural factors are primary to the language learning process. The pieces of evidence from the quantitative results in this story included the changes the learners made to their language, the extent to which self-regulation was achieved, and the extent to which it was retained in a delayed story telling performance. The qualitative pieces of evidence presented in this story contained the plausible and varied explanations for why the learners made the changes that they did. In examining the quantitative results, the evidence pointed towards Pen's improvement in modifying her verb errors, from the first performance to the final, delayed story-telling performance. Having participated in collaborative dialogue, the evidence is suggestive that she also improved her degree of self-regulation in correcting verb errors. Moreover, the degree that she improved in self-regulation is plausibly a contributing factor towards her improvement in the final delayed performance. Likewise for Aum, the evidence points towards improvement in both the percentage of changes that were noticed and made as well as the degree of self-regulation that was achieved. Moreover, the degree that Aum moved towards self-regulation is plausibly a contributing factor towards her modest improvement on her final, delayed, oral performance. Her improvement was only marginal which correlates to her marginal improvement in self-regulation.

These results are in answers to the first three research questions, which are restated with the answers summarized below:

1   "To what extent do learners modify their ill-formed verb structures in repeat task performances, having participated in collaborative dialog?"

From the first to the third story-telling session, Pen improved in her ability to use correct verb structures by 8 percent. On the surface, Aum's improvement looks more dramatic as she improved by 18 percent. However, her starting point for use of correct structures was much lower than Pen's, and furthermore she did not improve from the second to the third session. When we examine the answer to question 2 below we start to get a clearer picture that Pen was actually making more progress than Aum, after having participated in collaborative dialogue.

2   "To what extent do learners move towards self-regulation in noticing and correcting ill-formed verb structures in repeat task performances?"

In the first session, Pen was able to notice and correct her errors on the transcript 61 percent of the time. In the second session she was able to notice and correct errors 62 percent of the time. But in the third session she improves to 77 percent, overall a 16 percent increase. This result can be correlated to her ability to notice and correct errors in negotiation. She improves in the three sessions from a score of 4.3 in the first session to 4. 4 and 4.7 in the second and third sessions, respectively. The increase from sessions 2 to 3

show a more noticeable increase than the increase from sessions 1 to 2, correlating with the results in noticing her errors on the transcript.

Aum's results here can be similarly correlated. Overall, in the three sessions, she improves by only 1 percentage point in her ability to notice and correct errors from the transcript. Similarly in the negotiation sessions, her improvement is marginal, moving just .1 point from session to session - 4.3 to 4.4 to 4.5. While Pen's negotiation session improvement is also slight, it is important to note that both learners started out at a high level of ability to self-regulate. Secondly, Aum's change in self-regulatory scores from sessions 2 to 3 is no different from her change in scores from sessions 1 to 2, while Pen's change in self-regulatory scores from sessions 2 to 3, although not greatly different from Aum's, is nevertheless marked.

These results can also be correlated to the results from the final, delayed, story-telling session, which took place a month after the last negotiation session. These results from the delayed story-telling session are in response to research question three, which is restated, with the answers summarized below:

3 "To what extent is self-regulation of well-formed verb structures

   maintained after a delay in task performances of one month?"

As we saw in the last negotiation session, Pen was able to improve in her ability to notice and correct errors on the transcript by 15 percentage points from the 2nd to the 3rd session, which was more marked than her improvement from the 1st to the 2nd session. Likewise, her ability to notice and correct errors in negotiation also improved from the

2nd to the 3rd session, more markedly than from the 1st to the 2nd session. These self-regulatory results are likely contributing factors to her improvement in use of correct verb structures in the delayed session. Here she improved by 24 percentage points from the last story-telling performance, and 16 percentage points overall. Theses results provide evidence that she was not only maintaining her ability to self-regulate, after a month's delay, but was continuing to improve as well.

Aum's results in the delayed story-telling session can also be correlated to her results from the negotiation sessions. As noted, she only made marginal improvement in her ability to notice and correct errors on the transcript as well as in collaborative dialogue. In her delayed session, she only improves 2 percentage points in use of correct verb structures, which can be correlated to the fact that her ability to notice errors on the transcript only improved by 1 percentage point from sessions 1 to 3. Similarly, her ability to self-regulate in collaborative dialogue also only improved marginally.

To understand the reasons for the extent to which learners made progress as well as the discrepancy in their scores it is necessary to turn to the final research question, restated below:

4 "What plausible sociocultural reasons can be found to explain the extent to which learners move towards self-regulation?"

The preponderance of the qualitative evidence suggests a number of plausible reasons for why the learners made the degree of progress in self-regulation that they did. Pen's success rested on a number of factors: the increasing familiarity of the structures, the items, the tutor's methods, and the shifting role relationship with the tutor. Scaffolding was finely-tuned to her needs and where appropriate helped to maintain focus, control frustration, and redirect her attention. Face and sense of confidence were supported as well. Finally, she reported that she had taken an English conversation class on the month long break, which likely also contributed towards her final delayed performance results. Even though she reportedly did not do story-telling activities in this class, the taking of the class alone suggests high motivation.

The degree of Aum's success can also be indexed to these features. The preponderance of the evidence suggests that the scaffolding help provided for Aum was not as finely-tuned as it was for Pen. Scaffolding, as the sessions and episodes progressed, could have been more implicit than it was, with the attention to problems not so narrowed down. Moreover, on the break she did not take the opportunity as Pen did to participate in other English conversation classes, which likely was a contributing factor in her modest, delayed performance improvement. Additionally, some of the structures for Aum might have been less familiar to her than they were to Pen. Despite these issues, she still exhibited some progress, modest as it was. Large changes rarely happen overnight in any type of learning and some back sliding is even considered developmentally normal. The

fact that she made a small amount of progress in the few negotiation sessions that were offered is still encouraging.

The range and role of sociocultural factors influential to the results of this study help to fill a gap in earlier second language research studies. In these studies, mixed results in the usefulness of teacher interventions to language learning were found, but the results rested on tacit assumptions governing cognitive/computational models of language learning. Lyster and Ranta (1997) found that recasts, for example, had little effect on learners' ability to notice errors, while the studies undertaken by Han (2002) and Philp (20003) found that teacher recasts of student ill-formed utterances, if constrained by certain conditions, had some effect on student ability to notice and correct their errors. While the mixed results can partially be explained by the presence or absence of these constraining conditions, they fail to address explanatory possibilities lying outside the framework of the computational model; the findings are necessarily constrained by the imagery conjured up by the cognitive/computational model, the language choices used in the model, as well as by the assumptions underlying these choices. Under the computational model, words such as *feedback, input, output, uptake,* are dominant. The imagery is suggestive of how a computer responds to programming directions from a programmer. Secondly, the imagery is flat, static, and linear. Feedback is offered as input, the student receives and computes it, and delivers output; then the degree of successful output is measured and recorded as uptake. The story ends there. To finish the story and to fill in a number of the gaps, this sociocultural study sought to investigate teacher – student interactions from a framework not limited by computational metaphors. Therefore, this study also found that the dynamic role of graduated help - the ways that learners reacted

to this help and engaged in co-construction of the target structures as well as the meaning and direction of the dialogues – were important factors. Moreover, earlier studies were limited in that they failed to address issues of face, motivation, role relationships, and other miscellaneous sociocultural factors. This study opened a window into these various sociocultural phenomena, previously under-investigated in earlier second language learning and teaching studies, shedding light on their importance to language learning and teaching.

Implications for the Classroom

Some teachers reading this study might wonder how fruitfully the pedagogical procedures can be applied to the classroom, since the interactions involved only a tutor and learners in dyadic dialogues. The specific use of scaffolding in this study – the use of regulatory scales created by Aljaahfreh and Lantolf, especially the 13 point scale has some limitations for classroom use. One limitation is that the scales were designed to provide help, finely-tuned to the learners needs, so that help was graded from the implicit to the explicit. The obvious problem for classroom use is that learners will have different needs from each other – some will need more scaffolding, some less, some more explicit help, some more implicit help, at various points in the negotiation process. In a classroom of many learners, it might not be possible to fully overcome this limitation. Nevertheless perhaps certain mitigating steps can be taken to, if not completely overcome this limitation, still make the procedures viable. For example, even if help cannot be finely tuned to each learner, the teacher can still start with the assistance on the most implicit end of the scale and attempt to gradually provide more explicit assistance if needed to the

whole class. For example, in a picture story telling task, the teacher could have learners work in groups to tell the story. Then he or she could have group leaders come to the white board and write up their versions of the story, if not too long, or select passages of the story – with each group writing up one part of the story to make a cohesive whole (or even if the stories are interpreted differently then another avenue of discussion can be opened up). The teacher could then have the groups walk around and make notes about changes they think need making. After this procedure, the teacher could then ask the whole class for their suggestions for changes. If the teacher judges that not enough or important enough problems are noticed, he or she can narrow down what is to be noticed to the sentence level and progressively to narrower areas of focus if learners do not notice the changes they need to make. Of course, the problem comes in when some learners will notice problems with less explicit assistance than others and will likely, if not shy, answer quickly, obviating the need for more assistance for the whole class. Perhaps one possible approach to this problem would be to ask learners to write down, rather than speak out on, what changes they think need to be made, as they notice them in accordance with the level of assistance being offered. Then at the end of the activity the teacher could once again ask the learners for all the changes they thought needed to be made, either in small groups, pairs, or as a whole class. Another possibility would be to train learners to provide scaffolds for each other. In the latter case, they would probably need to be at least upper intermediate learners or the class would need to be from the same language background and the teacher would need to be fluent in their language. These are only tentative proposals. Innovative teachers are sure to think of more creative approaches and

suggestions for the use of sociocultural scaffolding in the classroom than the ones mentioned above.

Another challenge to providing help on language issues is in deciding which, as well as how many, language issues to focus on. Choosing too many could overwhelm learners. Choosing too few could lead to boredom or to feelings that the language input is impoverished. For the purposes of performing this study, the researcher made a decision to narrow his focus to the first problems with verb structures that appeared. However, as we saw, the learners at least some of the time, made efforts to improve the complexity and lexical richness of their language. For the purposes of classroom practice, it might be better in such cases to let the learners take the lead earlier on and attend to language issues that they themselves appear extra motivated to change or enrich. Allwright (2005), Bailey (1994), and Crabbe (2005) all make suggestions that it might be better, instead of starting with explicit "teaching points" (Allwright, 2005, p.9) or "plans" (Bailey, p.15), to focus on the "quality of language learning opportunities" (Crabbe, p. 9) that arise naturally in the course of the lesson, stimulated by learner interest and motivation. Learners might even choose to focus on negotiation of meaning over form, which is another option to take, if that focus can be balanced with other institutional goals.

This study used a 5-point regulatory scale created by Aljaahfreh and Lantolf to measure learner growth but even if teachers do not choose to experiment with this specific regulatory scale, or the one the 13 point scale, they nevertheless can glean other useful sociocultural information from this study. As mentioned in the opening chapter, examining sample exchanges of teachers and learners in interaction can stimulate teachers to reflect on their own classroom teaching environments. In reflecting on these

commentaries, they might be stimulated to consider questions such as these: What kinds, amount, and quality of scaffolding am I offering to my learners? Am I offering too much or too little help? Is the help too explicit, too implicit, or about right? What other sorts of sociocultural issues arise in my classroom? How well is face being supported? How do issues of face interact with the learning of English or specific linguistic features of English? How do the role relationships between the learners and each other or between the learners and the teacher affect their learning – do these role relationships ever shift in terms of equality or mutuality? How do the learners perceive the use of English in their world – what forms of English are important for them to learn or seem prestigious and how do those factors interface with specific classroom tasks, lexical items, structures, discourse issues, and so forth. Finally, to what degree do learners form another cultural self when learning English – can this process be nurtured by the teacher? Should it? To what extent would scaffolding in this concept present challenges or dangers? What sorts of challenges or dangers could arise?

Another path to take would be a deeper exploration of the relationship between language, culture, and self. Pavlenko & Lantolf (2000) assert that second language acquisition is not just about "the acquisition of a new set of grammatical, lexical, and phonological forms,"(p.155) but a "struggle of concrete socially constituted and always situated beings to participate in the mediated life-world of another culture" (ibid.). One approach to explore this relationship is through the telling of stories with the emphasis on meaning. Moran (2001) suggests using stories for classroom discussion that involve an "unraveling of hidden perspectives and values" (p. 32). This use of stories draws to the surface tacit beliefs and attitudes and in so doing provides an avenue for reflecting on

views of self, culture, language, and comparative and contrastive views of the cultures of other students or the teacher.

No doubt, thoughtful and innovative teachers will find many more ways to apply sociocultural theory in their own teaching and classrooms. Thoughtful teachers will take the seeds that have been planted here and in earlier studies to cultivate their own innovative pedagogical practices.

Limitations and Suggestions for Further Research

While this investigation presented a body of evidence suggestive of a verdict in favor of the importance of sociocultural factors to language learning, there are a few cracks in the case. As mentioned in chapter 3, a methodological limitation involves the inexact nature of rating episodes according to Aljaahfreh and Lantolf's 5 point regulatory scale. Inevitably, decisions governing notions of 'obvious' and 'minimal' are going to be somewhat arbitrary as they are not binary concepts; they can be plotted on a continuum. Therefore, cut-off points are always going to be somewhat subjective. Aljaahfreh and Lantolf's 13 point scale is designed to offer protocols in finer detail to describe how quality of help is to be judged in terms of explicitness and implicitness. Nassaji and Swain (2000) used this scale to judge the quality of help they gave to their learners and to divide help into either an explicit or implicit camp. 1-5 was judged as implicit and 6-12 was judged as explicit. But there were a couple of problems with using this scale and those guidelines for this particular study As mentioned in chapter 3, the scale was designed to evaluate writing problems of learners so it is not always well-matched to the kinds of feedback teachers give to learners who are working on oral tasks. Feedback in

this study sometimes used analogy or vowel elongation, kinds of help not included in this 13-point scale. Secondly, while 6 does appear to be more explicit than 5 on Lantolf's scale (6 narrows down the location of the error and 5 points out that something is wrong with item being pointed out) it implies that concepts of 'explicitness/implicitness' are binary, when in fact they are graduated, which is the whole point of creating a 13-point graduated scale in the first place. For these reasons, the 13-point scale was not utilized for grading in this study, but only as an extra reference of guidelines for offering help. Yet, the 5-point scale is also not entirely satisfactory in that the guidelines are very broad; they do not offer very explicit definitions of quality or quantity of help. This was the reason that the researcher here occasionally added a .5 to the rating of some episodes as some episodes more than others seem to fall between grades in terms of the quantity or quality of help that was offered. One other solution would be the creation of scales that would more adequately match the needs of researchers investigating oral interactions. This would be a serious challenge, for some of the reasons mentioned earlier. Decisions governing grades of explicitness/implicitness are always going to be inexact. Decisions of where to exactly plot grades of help are always going to be somewhat arbitrary. Nevertheless, the notion 'inexact' does not equate to the notion 'arbitrary.' If researchers rely on the criteria for proof utilized in the reasoning in jurisprudence instead of the natural sciences then at least they will be able to conclude that the evidence for implicitness/explicitness and less/more help points in one direction more so than in another direction. Therefore, considering these issues, it would be useful for future studies if another scale was created for oral interactions that employed the most appropriate aspects of the 5 point scale and the most appropriate aspects of the 13 point

scale. Perhaps this scale would include more and finer grades of help, somewhere between 7 and 9 grades. Ideally, it would also incorporate other sorts of feedback commonly used in oral interactions, such as recasting or vowel elongation.

Another drawback in this study was that the verb structures that were investigated were not narrowed down to very specific types of verb structures, making it difficult to draw universal and watertight conclusions about how well the learners advanced in the self-regulatory progress. Additionally, the fact that some structures were more familiar to the learners, or more difficult, than others limited the strength of the verdict that could be reached. One possibility for further research would be to focus only on a specific type of verbal structure -- such as irregular verbs or the past copula.

A related point mentioned in the results section is that certain verb endings are problematic for Thais, such as verbs that end in /kt/. Speaking these verbs softly, quickly, or avoiding them altogether might be one way learners avoid embarrassment and save face. Self-regulation therefore might occasionally hinge on how phonetic issues interface with other sociocultural factors, such as the need to save face. Researchers wanting to look further into these issues could examine structures in the target language not present in the native language of learners and look to see what sorts of sociocultural factors interface with the acquisition of these new structures. Another avenue of exploration would be to examine what other types of sociocultural factors interface with the structures, lexical items, or accent choices that learners acquire easily, readily, or enthusiastically. Sociocultural factors such as perceptions of prestige of accents, lexical choices, regional varieties of target languages, and how these factors synergize with the acquisition of target languages offer rich possibilities for research explorations.

The focus on form in this research was restricted to verb structures. Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to other grammatical features. If researchers intend to work with more Thai learners, and to also focus on form, they might consider working with some of the other linguistic structures of English that Thais normally struggle with. Auxiliary verbs, articles, plurals, adjective/adverb placement, verb + preposition combinations, and adjective + preposition combinations are some of these structures (Smyth, 2001).

An additional area of limitation involves the concept of 'internalization.' "Levels of internalization from interpsychological to intrapsychological functioning" has been the label for the 5-point scale suggested by Aljaahfreh and Lantolf (1994) and described by Ohta (2000). But when it comes to second language learners, especially those learning the language in an EFL context, it is not clear that real 'internalization' is taking place. While these levels might suggests stops along the road towards internalization, we cannot be sure, without more longitudinal studies the degree real internalization is taking place. It is encouraging, however, that the interlanguage of both learners included overgeneralized linguistic structures, one sign of acquisition. It is also encouraging that both learners improved, at least modestly, in their ability to self-regulate. However, we cannot be certain that self-regulation can be conceptualized as a process that is synonymous with internalization. Future research might want to investigate further the relationships between interlanguage, self-regulation, and internalization and perhaps provide a more apt metaphor for the processes involved in socioculturally inspired investigations, especially those in an EFL context.

One methodological limitation involving research instruments was the fact that video-taping did not supplement the audio-taping process. Video tapes of the interactions could have more accurately and fully recorded learner and tutor gestures, facial expressions, and other sorts of body language, which are important signs or paralinguistic elements. It is recommended that future research employ video-taping to supplement audio-recordings. Ideally, more than one camera should be employed and they should be placed in different areas of the research setting to be able to capture all the body language of all the participants.

This research focused on the negotiation of form but another path to take would be to focus on how sociocultural factors influence the process of negotiating meaning. The picture stories offered different possibilities for interpretation but gaps in interpretation were not explored. Secondly, the negotiations were between a tutor of the target language, English, and Thai learners of English. An interesting alternative to this dyadic exchange could be a multicultural and multilingual classroom, where differing story interpretations could offer multiple windows into an investigation of how meaning is negotiated and inspired by sociocultural factors. Moreover, it could be fruitful to investigate to what extent a negotiation of meaning, from a sociocultural perspective, bears on the acquisition of the target language.

One additional factor not very well covered in this investigation is how the learners view themselves as speakers of another language. Some research in the sociocultural field has suggested that how well speakers learn another language can be indexed to the degree they take on another cultural self or persona. In other words, it is not enough to simply acquire the linguistic system, the lexis, or even the slang of the target language. In the

words of Pavenlenko & Lantolf (2000) second language acquisition also involves, perhaps primarily demands, "the participation and reconstruction of selves" (p.155). Research in this area then could co-evolve with classroom practices engaged with story-telling events that bring to light implied values of persons or cultures. It was beyond the scope of this study to explore this concept of the second or hybrid self and questions of the role cultural identity plays in the learning of English. Nevertheless, mining such questions and concepts in sociocultural investigations is bound to lead to rich rewards.

Finally, this was a case study only involving two learners so the results cannot be generalized. Further research is needed to support the results of this study.

Summary

In summary, the investigation of this study involved a quantitative, but primarily a qualitative and heuristic examination of teacher and learner interactions from a sociocultural perspective. The research tools involved sociocultural methods and devices that would not only measure learner growth but tell a story, make a case, explain reasons for progress or regress, and shed light on various relevant sociocultural factors that interface with language learning. The quantitative evidence cannot be generalized as it only tells us about two case stories. Nevertheless, these case stories are open-ended - as we do not know where the learners who participated in this study will go from here. We also can expect more evidence to be added to the body of evidence in future studies. Tentatively, we can conclude that sociocultural factors were important to the outcome of the story – that the evidence presented, points more towards greater learner self-regulation for both learners. However, we also saw reasons for regress, within sessions,

and for evidence that points towards one learner making more progress than another. These reasons were also explored in this story and a case was made for them as well. Nevertheless not everything can always be explained so readily or certainly. We are left in the end with not "certainty" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, p.155) but "likelihood" (ibid.) in the evaluation of our case/story. Exploring some of the suggestions presented in this last chapter will perhaps shed more light on some of the more uncertain issues in this story, leading to even more likely and plausible explanations than the ones offered here. From those future studies, new insights will emerge, leading to unexpected results, in turn inspiring new directions for research into sociocultural perspectives.