

SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY IN SECOND LANGUAGE EDUCATION: AN INTRODUCTION THROUGH NARRATIVES

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The study of second language acquisition has historically given much more importance to the individual, as an isolated subject, than to the social elements of learning; with SLA researchers being “restrictively preoccupied with the space between the speaker and his grammar, rather than with the relationship between speakers and the world around them” (Rampton, 1987, p. 49). This stance in research has given us concepts such as input/intake/output which can be thought of as a ‘computational’ understanding of language learning. More recently, on the other hand, there has been increasing acknowledgement of the social and cultural aspects of language education. Most notably, in this aspect, has been the adherence and expansion of the theory initiated by L.S. Vygotsky (1978, 1986), now referred to as Sociocultural Theory.

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) in language education positions the individual within his/her history and context not to have these elements as background information only, but to bring them as an essential part of the analysis; reinforcing the idea that language acquisition is mediated by social activity. i.e. ‘not that social activity [merely] influences cognition... but that social activity is the process through which human cognition is formed’ (Lantolf & Johnson, 2007: 878).

This paradigm is at the core of Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education by Swain, Kinnear and Steinman, who found in narratives the ideal springboard from which to introduce SCT concepts such as mediation and zone of proximal development. “Narratives and SCT are natural partners” as the authors state. The narratives consist of data from authors’ previous research and class assignments. They represent different languages being learned in a variety of contexts. There are eight chapters in the book; seven each built around one major SCT tenet, and a concluding case study for reflection. Each chapter starts with a brief introduction to an SCT concept, followed by a narrative, and an elaboration of the concept with the narrative as the background. Each chapter also includes a section on relevant research; one on ‘current controversy’, which invites the reader to critically evaluate the validity of the concepts; and finally, questions to explore for research and pedagogy.

Chapter 1 seeks to introduce the concept of mediation as articulated by Vygotsky and in SCT. Lantolf and Thorne (2006) explain:

“mediation is the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts, and activities to regulate (i.e. gain voluntary control over and transform) the material world or their own and each other’s social and mental activity.”

(p. 79)

The discussion develops around some mediational means central to the language development of an English teacher and learner, such as the grammar book used by her father and the dialogues she had with her students. The main message of this chapter is that in order to understand someone’s behavior, one needs to understand their history (social and cultural) and its affordances; hence, putting a strong emphasis on the process rather than on the product of development.

Chapter 2 presents the much discussed idea of ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development). The authors also take into account the potential of gesture and play/drama in learning, and link them well with SCT’s premise that emotion and cognition are inseparable.

Chapter 3 introduces ‘languaging’ – language as a cognitive tool to mediate thinking. The first narrative shows an example of learning mediated by private speech, i.e. speech that has its origin in social activity, like when we reconstruct in our heads a dialogue we have had with someone and ‘carry on’ the conversation alone after it has finished. The second narrative is one of the authors’ account of how her interpretation of data on students learning French changed between a first analysis guided by the Output Hypothesis and a later look at the same data from an SCT perspective.

Chapter 4 presents the interplay between ‘everyday concepts’ (tacit knowledge) and ‘scientific concepts’ (academic/formalized knowledge). It was not clear how much the student’s narrative served its purpose though, since many of the conclusions are drawn from his teacher’s (the author) representation of his concept development, which includes elements not ‘seen’ in the narrative.

Chapter 5 explores the emotion/affect as emerging in the social plane, and reinforces Vygotsky’s notion that intellect and affect are inseparable. It also points out trajectory from other-regulation to self-regulation, and the co-construction of identity.

Chapter 6 gives us a thought-provoking narrative about a teacher and a student who engaged in out-of-class communication, which in turn sparked the teacher's thoughts about Critical Pedagogy and Learner Identity. The introduction to Activity Theory is very well staged with each element of the theory (rules, division of labor, community and outcome) explained one by one as they are added to the triangle which is characteristic of this theory.

Chapter 7 outlines dynamic assessment, which projects learner's potential and future development, in contrast to summative assessment which only measures past learning in present performance. There is a strong argument in this chapter that if we understand learning to be socially constructed, then the most valid form of assessment is that which is also socially constructed.

Finally, in chapter 8 the authors offer readers two narratives without analyses or interpretations so they can "think across all the concepts, as doing so deepens the understanding of learning-teaching phenomena" (p. 138).

Since SCT concepts are all closely interconnected, this volume presents the challenge of discussing the concepts in relatively isolation. The sensible sequencing of the concepts, however, systematically takes the reader through the building blocks of SCT, and presents them with questions that trigger further reflection and discussion. In this sense, the annotated reference at the end of each chapter is indeed very helpful.

On the whole, this book is a welcome addition to the increasing body of knowledge crossing over second language education and SCT, which nonetheless lacks in introductory texts. As such, this light textbook, which is dynamic and consistent throughout, fills an important gap in this area.



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Biodata

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