Sociocultural theory and the language classroom

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Introduction

The present chapter reviews theoretical and pedagogical insights in the field of ELT inspired by Vygotsky’s (1986) research on the relationship between thinking and speaking and by consequent research into second language acquisition (SLA) from a sociocultural theory (SCT) perspective (Negueruela-Azarola, 2003; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006). From this, we examine the teaching of conceptual thinking in the ELT classroom, grounded in the idea that language learning is a transformative activity.

The chapter begins by situating the historical origins of SCT in the work of Vygotsky and his colleagues. Next, we briefly explain the SCT constructs relevant to language teaching: monism, dialectics, cultural mediation, verbal thinking internalisation. Then, we focus on a key area of debate for ELT: teaching language as a transformative activity grounded in the notion of pedagogical praxis. From this perspective, teaching communities are prompted to consider communication not only as a source of meaning exchange and learning but also as a source of personal transformation and development. This requires us to understand a relatively complex theoretical issue: the dialectical (contradictory) unity formed by language learning and conceptual development. We conclude the chapter by focusing on two applications inspired by SCT principles: concept-based teaching (CBT) and dynamic assessment (DA).

Historical origins and central constructs of SCT

During the 1920s and 1930s, Vygotsky’s research group began working on a socio-historical approach to human thinking, also known as sociocultural theory. Their objective was to understand the unique cultural nature of human activity when compared to other species. The underlying principle was recognising that human beings act upon and interact with the world using cultural artefacts and means, chief among them language.

Monism: unity of cognitive and social activity

Vygotsky’s research group proposed that focusing only on private cognition through introspection or only on social activity through description was a reductionist way of understanding our unique
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relationship with the world (Van de Veer and Valsiner, 1991). In other words, the human mind
and social activity can be seen as a unified whole (perceiving reality as a single entity is termed
monism). Vygotsky’s research programme was based on (1) constructing a comprehensive psycho-
logical theory that recognised the centrality of cultural activity in human psychological and social
functioning and (2) offering a theoretical framework applicable and relevant to real and pressing
world challenges in fields such as education and clinical psychology, in which a theory of human
consciousness, learning and development was unavoidable. Consequently, a sociocultural approach
based on a Vygotskian framework to the study of human thinking, learning and development
highlights how the social and the cognitive are culturally interrelated and form a ‘dialectic’.

Dialectics

Dialectics is the logic used within a SCT perspective to describe how apparently opposed processes
or phenomena can function together, forming a more complex unity (Novack, 1971: 17). In
dialectical logic, defining complex phenomena implies studying contradictory relationships with-
out separating objects of study. Of course, separating the cognitive, the cultural and the social in
human beings is a convenient epistemological move: it is easier to study the social, the cultural and
the psychological in three separate disciplines (e.g. sociology, anthropology and psychology). This,
however, is an ontological mistake, as human beings are social and private at the same time. In other
words, it is misleading to see people as only social since we are also private beings in social settings
who think through cultural artefacts such as language; conversely, we are social and public even
in private settings. For instance, reading a book alone is a social activity where a text ‘talks’ to us in
a private context. Our identities are social, psychological, historical and cultural at the same time.

Cultural mediation

The key to finding the connection between the social and the private is cultural mediation, as
humans do not interact directly with their environment but through the mediation of physical
and psychological tools. ‘Mediation’ implies that conscious human activity is guided, shaped and
transformed by material (e.g. a screwdriver, a computer, a pencil) and psychological tools
and artefacts (e.g. speech, literacy, logic, geometry). These psychological tools in turn change
our environment through human activity, as well as affect how we think and orient our lives. In
other words, the origin and essence of human thinking is participation in culturally mediated
human activity. Mediation in human activity becomes the key principle to understand the cul-
tural origins of human thinking.

As a consequence, SCT proposes that social context and cultural tools mediate thinking. They
not only influence or guide it, but also – and mainly – transform and shape human activity. SCT
approaches the study of human thinking by focusing on the emergence of higher forms of human
consciousness (e.g. intentional memory, voluntary attention, categorisation and organised plan-
ning). These social forms of thinking are social activity mediated by symbolic cultural artefacts,
which become tools for thinking, learning and communicating (Kozulin, 1998). Languages such
as English or Spanish, as well as any other symbolic system (such as mathematics and music), are
symbolic cultural artefacts; they are both content and tools for thinking processes in human beings.

Intermental functioning, transformation, verbal thinking and internalisation

For SCT, any psychological function begins intermentally in communicative activity (for instance
between caregiver and infant or between expert and novice) and is transformed intramentally
(Vygotsky, 1978). This transformation implies changing social communicative activity into personal inner dialogue. In formal educational settings, communicative development could originate, for example, from meaningful dialogical interaction between instructor and learners or among the learners themselves (Swain et al., 2015), who then make these communicative interactions their own (intramental), thereby transforming them (i.e. understanding them in their own way, that is, from interaction and explanation to internal conceptual understanding). The centrality of languages as key meditational means in sociocultural functioning in the world (as well as in the classroom) and their dual quality (both social/communicative and private/cognitive) explain the transformation of social activity and experiences into verbal thinking (Vygotsky, 1986).

Verbal thinking originates in cultural social activity through shared intentionality and social collaboration (Tomasello, 2014). This is the theoretical basis for understanding internalisation as the process of transforming ideas from others into ideas for the self. The learner is also transformed when developing new ideas about language. In the field of instructed SLA, and applicable to ELT, internalisation is directly connected with the notion of mindful conceptual engagement, which is the transformative process taking place when learners focus and engage on ‘conceptual categories’ as tools for understanding and reflection (Negueruela-Azarola, 2013b), for instance, when learners develop a conceptual understanding of the language necessary to construct their grammatical choices. Conceptual categories that learners might focus on in an ELT classroom include grammatical concepts such as verbal tense, verbal aspect, motion and directionality; textual concepts such as coherence in texts; or pragmatic notions such as intentionality, normativity, solidarity or refusal.

Key insights for language teaching from a SCT perspective

Objectivist, interactionist and transformative language teaching

From a SCT perspective, language teaching may generally be interpreted through three basic approaches: objectivist, interactionist and transformative. An objectivist approach is based on the implicit or explicit idea that teaching a language such as English is the teaching and learning of a static systematic object, an empty structure that has morphology, syntax and a lexicon. This systematic object needs to be presented, described, explained and mastered by learners through understanding and practising. In other words, in this approach, explaining forms is explaining language.

This objectivist study and teaching frames language as an object to be placed in the ‘container-mind’ of learners. Indeed, the very phrase ‘second language acquisition’ leads to thinking about language as if it were an object that can be acquired, placed and stored somewhere in our minds as if they were containers (van Lier, 2000). We are also drawing here on Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) suggestion that metaphor is not just a linguistic phenomenon – it reveals the fundamentals ways in which people understand the world around them. The ‘mind-as-container’ is a metaphor which conveys a particular view of the mind, and also of language.

The objectivist approach constructs language as a system and foregrounds its formal properties. Logically, linguistic subfields based on form (morphology and syntax) are concrete and easier to systematise for teaching when compared to profiling other areas based on meaning, such as semantics (meaning and interpretation) and pragmatics (intentionality and context). Objectivist understandings may be linked to form-focused and structure-based approaches to language teaching.

Alternatively, an interactionist approach to language teaching highlights interaction in communication. Language as interaction may be taught through promoting communicative transactions
where meaning is central. This is the approach followed in conventional communicative classrooms where a fluency approach to teaching (Omaggio, 2001) is foregrounded (i.e. teachers devising pedagogical tasks, which are conducive to interaction). Considerable advances in L2 pedagogy began to be made when scholars and language teachers realised that teaching a language was not about teaching a code or a systematic object but about teaching communication (Widdowson, 1978; see also Thornbury, this volume). In other words, language learners need to engage in meaning-making communicative activity to develop communicative abilities. A strong view of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Howatt, 1984; Howatt with Widdowson 2004), based on the idea that ‘communication leads to learning’ rather than ‘learning leads to communication’, precisely addresses the issue of language as meaning-making activity. Thus, although CLT did not originate from SCT, SCT thinking overlaps and develops communicative language teaching. For SCT, communicative approaches are needed in the classroom – participation in communicative events is critical to develop proficiency in a second language (Hall, 2002).

Finally, a transformative approach is inspired by SCT principles. Teaching does not just imply acquiring an object that is systematic or even promoting communicative transactions in the classroom: SCT-inspired transformative teaching is the activity of promoting conceptual reflection (i.e. the internalisation and thus transformation of new ideas through thinking on and about these new ideas) through communicative activity. ELT as transformative participation is about mediation, as mediation by language in social communicative activity promotes understanding. Consequently, learners themselves are also transformed as they internalise new ideas and knowledge.

The key in the classroom, therefore, is to promote strategic social interaction (DiPietro, 1987) and meaningful significant intra-action in which learners make new knowledge ‘their own’ (Negueruela-Azarola, 2003). ELT teachers should promote systematic conceptual communication, that is, reflection using concepts (ideas with functional relevance in concrete tasks). This also promotes the internalisation of new ideas. As will be illustrated below, transformative pedagogies for the ELT classroom are about engaging and contributing with others in social interaction. This is the origin of conceptual intra-action in L2 learning and development (Negueruela-Azarola et al., 2015). From this perspective, language teaching is essentially about personal transformation (defined as change based on conceptual development) both for learners and teachers.

**Educational praxis and transformative pedagogies**

An SCT-inspired pedagogical approach to language learning and conceptual development as a transformative practice does not ‘understand’ theoretical research as a separate process from pedagogical practices. There is nothing as practical as a good theory of L2 learning and development, and there is nothing as theoretical as the effective practice of L2 teaching and testing. This is the basis for educational praxis. In Vygotsky’s SCT, theory and practice are interconnected in a dialectical relationship, in which theory guides practice and practice feeds theory, fostering change in both when needed in a bi-directional fashion (Lantolf and Poehner, 2014).

SCT, therefore, views research and practice as interdependent, paying special attention to actual classroom activity and its impact on learning and development (Lantolf, 2011). On the one hand, ELT researchers in classrooms need also to be practitioners whose role is not only observing development but additionally trying to foster it through direct instruction. On the other, ELT teachers need to become researchers in a transformative sense. From this perspective, the goal of a transformative approach to teaching as culturally mediated activity is to apply sociocultural theory to facilitate learning and to promote critical conceptual development, rather than just observing language learning processes. A transformative approach also aims to document and explain not only learners’ behaviour (i.e. their performance) but also, and more
importantly, to capture the dynamics of their conceptual development as mediated through language in reflective activity. For instance, L2 learners as sense-making beings should engage in reflective conceptual tasks where they are pushed to discover and find contradictions between their communicative choices and how they make sense of them. Reflecting on the conceptual reasons for our communicative choices, for instance, implies thinking about why we use a certain preposition in a specific utterance by constructing a model of motion events (Aguiló-Mora and Negueruela-Azarola, 2015), or reflecting on why we begin a paragraph with a specific thematic sentence by applying the notion of genre (Ferreira and Lantolf, 2008). Further examples of conceptual models follow later in the chapter.

In sum, a conceptual approach to ELT based on mindful-conceptual engagement has implications not only for communicative development but also for the internalisation of new thinking frames through which learners think about communication in new ways. This transformative perspective requires creating a classroom dynamic and tasks that promote both communication and conceptual reflection. Meanwhile, from a research perspective, data collection is a teaching process. In the ELT classroom, teachers must become investigators in the most applied sense of the word. A first step for transformative pedagogies, therefore, is to frame ELT classes both as a conceptual and a communicative environment. In this sense, we need to develop appropriate pedagogical explanations and materials for complex conceptual notions such as tense, aspect, mood, sarcasm, social distance, genre and text, which are directly relevant to communication in the ELT classroom.

The zone of potential development (ZPOD)

A transformative approach to teaching as a culturally-mediated activity is based on potential development. This is grounded in the Vygotskian distinction between learning and development. ‘Learning’ is about knowledge and skills, for example knowing verbal morphology or recognising a lexical item and using them appropriately in a text. ‘Development’ is defined here as the internalisation of functional conceptual meanings through which we orient concrete oral and written communicative activity. For example, development implies that a learner is morphologically accurate when speaking or writing not because they ‘just’ know the forms or they have the skill to deploy endings, but because they understand and are able to apply the notion of tense and aspect to orient their communicative choices. The key is to promote conceptual development and not only language learning as a skill or knowledge.

Such a stance is the basis for transformative pedagogies: to focus on ‘the future in the making’ or on the zone of potential development (ZPOD). The ZPOD is inspired by Vygotsky’s original proposal on the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD as defined by Vygotsky (1978) was an alternative to IQ testing (i.e. ‘intelligence quotient’ – a standardised test to assess human intelligence). The ZPD is the difference between solo and assisted performance, i.e. it is the ‘place’ where, working with peers and ‘better others’, learners can work at a level that would otherwise be beyond their reach. In Vygotskian psychology, it is understood as a key element for assessing development in children. (For further elaborations which discuss how the ZPD fits with the teaching of second languages, see, for example, Mahn, 2015; Thorne and Hellermann, 2015.)

In the same way, the ZPOD is used specifically for second language development and emerges when learners consciously apply concepts (pragmatic, textual, grammatical) that they do not possess – and by using these meditational tools, they begin to master and internalise them (Negueruela-Azarola, 2008). By using the ZPOD concept, we understand language development to be the result of a process of appropriation and internalisation of concepts mediated by social and interpersonal activities (García, 2012). More importantly, by shifting from
proximal (ZPD) to potential (ZPOD) development, we imply that “there is a potential for the internalization of a given concept” (ibid.:16), but that this does not necessarily lead to language development in all cases. In this sense, the ZPOD is the activity created by teachers/learners to explore potential areas of conceptual development by engaging in mediated thinking through conceptual engagement. The key to the ZPOD in ELT is in understanding that conceptual meanings are also the critical components to be presented and manipulated by learners in a coherent, organised and complete manner. However, not all reflections create new systematic and functional ideas or concepts as tools for thinking. There is a potentiality for development, but not a guarantee.

**Ways ahead in ELT classroom practice**

Classrooms are social contexts in which the aim is to organise learning in the most productive and significant way, and they are the ideal setting for promoting personal transformations (Kozulin, 1998). SCT scholars are beginning to explore a transformative stance in language learning for the ELT classroom. In what follows, we focus on two areas of interest: concept-based teaching (CBT) and dynamic assessment (DA).

**Concept-based teaching in the ELT classroom**

Using concepts as tools for understanding (Vygotsky, 1986) is the critical process for promoting conceptual development and language learning (Negueruela-Azarola, 2003). In CBT, teaching conceptual thinking in the ELT classroom is thus about promoting the emergence of categories of meaning to orient and facilitate communicative performance. In CBT, language is not only a tool used for communicative purposes (a ‘tool for results’), but rather is a ‘tool and result’ in concept formation, as it is both the content and the tool that mediates thinking (Negueruela-Azarola, 2008; García, 2012). Thus, the key to promoting conceptual development becomes pedagogical tasks that facilitate and promote learner engagement by exploring concepts. Such pedagogical tasks include, for example, asking learners to reflect on a specific grammatical issue using a concept (we shall shortly see how this might take place).

From an SCT perspective, in many L2 classrooms, the learning of a new language is not constructed as the internalisation of conceptual tools (i.e. as a transformative approach, see earlier in the chapter) but as the acquisition of forms and basic interactional abilities (i.e. an objective or interactionist approach, see earlier in the chapter). Teaching and learning based on incomplete presentations or explanations of language, unsystematic representations of grammatical, textual and communicative knowledge, or a lack of effectively organised and guided conceptual reflection by learners does not lead to the growth of coherent and complete communicative development in learners (Negueruela-Azarola, 2003). This is a problem for classroom learners because they are not able to develop a coherent understanding of complex conceptual meanings, especially grammatical meanings, which may be typologically different between English and the learners’ first language. For instance, in the case of learners of English whose first language is Spanish, this would include grammatical meanings such as tense, aspect and modality.

Internalising complex ideas with functional significance in communicative activity is challenging, but it is a developmental and transformative activity that is part of learning. As such, CBT focuses on learners’ mindful engagement with grammatical, textual and pragmatic concepts as tools for thinking in meaningful reflective activities (Negueruela-Azarola, 2013a). To pursue a CBT approach in the L2 classroom, teachers need to apply three basic principles: (1) develop a complete and pedagogically adequate explanation of the point to be taught based on a
conceptual category of meaning; (2) present a concise visual representation of the targeted concept; (3) and finally – and most importantly – the learner needs to engage in social interaction with the self that leads to intra-action, i.e. conceptualisation: a dynamic process where learners represent ideas to the self and others through creating representations (written and oral verbalisations). We shall now expand on these three points.

The first step to implement CBT is therefore to develop better pedagogical explanations and materials for complex conceptual notions such as tense, aspect, mood, sarcasm, social distance, genre and text. These explanations need to be coherent, complete and pedagogically feasible so learners can assign the notions a functional value that should allow them to understand and create meaningful utterances through them. Negueruela-Azarola (2013a) observes that many of the explanations found in textbooks are lists of simple uses in very concrete contexts for basic intermediate language courses, or are too long and cumbersome in advanced courses.

For instance, teaching a grammatical point such as tense and aspect in the ELT classroom based on a list of rules generally oversimplifies the grammatical issues and provides the learners with structures that can only be used in specific and constrained contexts. Similarly, describing all possible contexts of use is too cumbersome and prevents learners from assigning functional value to the concept as a whole. In the case of teaching grammar conceptually, the argument is that explanations for grammatical use should be based on categories of meaning. For instance, tense might be explained looking at the relative distance between the speaker and the event (Fauconnier, 1998), and aspect may be explained based on the notion of ‘boundness’ vs. ‘unboundness’ (Gánem-Gutiérrez and Harun, 2011: 102–103). Developing conceptual explanations of communicative issues is a research task for teaching communities, as not only learners but also teachers need to transform their understandings of language and communication.

Second, appropriate explanations of challenging communicative issues need to be introduced to language learners through concrete graphic representations, to aid learners in constructing functional understandings. These graphic representations as pedagogical aids for learners may be given to or developed by students in the form of diagrams, outlines, schemas or flow charts. The key to developing these material graphic representations is to capture, at a glance, basic meanings in a grammatical, textual or pragmatic way. Examples of these types of pedagogical and graphic tools for learners in an ELT context can be found in Gánem-Gutiérrez and Harun (2011), Lee (2012), White (2012) and Kim (2013). For example, Figure 21.1 (adapted from Gánem-Gutiérrez and Harun, 2011: 111) represents a pedagogical representation of the notions of tense and aspect. Understanding of how to mark tense appropriately is based on relative distance from the event, and each tense is represented by a ‘mental space’ (Fauconnier, 1998) encapsulated within the temporal line. Aspect, on the other hand, is based on the notions of boundness and unboundness and whether an action can be encapsulated (i.e. Event 1: Yesterday, David studied for two hours) or not (i.e. Event 2: Yesterday David was studying when Mary called).

Notwithstanding, these learning aids need to become thinking devices for learners, and, in this respect, the third step becomes critical in a CBT approach to ELT: learners need to start using language as a tool for internalising complex L2 categories of meaning. These categories of meaning, i.e. concepts, include grammatical (tense, aspect and modality), rhetorical (text, metaphor) and pragmatic (intentionality, voice) categories. Learners need to engage in conceptual tasks where they are pushed to reflect on communicative issues in conceptual ways, that is, using the concept to consciously guide their linguistic choices. For example, Figure 21.2 shows how this would be operationalised as a basic activity for an intermediate ELT classroom, developing the focus on tense and aspect outlined in Figure 21.1. In this basic task, learners are expected to consciously manipulate the concept of aspect in oral and written communication.
to justify their aspectual choices, as a tool for internalisation. And other pedagogical tasks are of course possible.

When learners are not pushed to conceptualise communicative issues through concepts, they tend to provide simplistic explanations of linguistic and conceptual challenges based on rules of thumb or quick and superficial reasoning (Negueruela-Azarola, 2003; García-Frazier, 2013; Polizzi, 2013; García, 2014). Avoiding simplistic explanations through mindful conceptual engagement (the pedagogical process of constructing, explaining and using conceptual representations to think through communicative choices, i.e. explicitly explaining their own language choices to others) is the key to internalisation in CBT. Although different types of reflective practices abound in language classrooms, explicit conceptual reflection of the type advocated in this chapter is, for the most part, absent in ELT classrooms (see White, 2012 on the teaching of English prepositions from a conceptual perspective). The place where a more reflective conceptual approach seems to emerge in language classroom is in writing instruction in intermediate and advanced courses. In these ELT writing courses, sentence-level grammar generally fails learners and teachers when they want to address the meaning and intentionality that learners want to capture in their texts (see Ferreira and Lantolf, 2008, on the teaching of writing through the notion of genre).
Dynamic assessment (DA) is the direct application of Vygotsky’s ZPD to the language classroom. DA uses assessment procedures that take into account the learner’s ZPD as a dynamic and collaborative ‘place’ for learning. Thus, assessment in a SCT-inspired ELT classroom should not be understood only in terms of ‘testing’ but also as a process through which dynamic, fluid and collaborative intervention by peers and teachers opens, ascertains and promotes learners’ development. While static and individualist (i.e. non-dynamic) assessment is found in classrooms when learners are asked to complete tasks that focus both on the ‘here and now’ and on what students have already learned (for example, via a grammar cloze test), DA, by contrast, explores learners’ potential and fosters future L2 development as a collaborative process. It allows for interaction and offers mediation aimed at the learner’s ZPD.

DA places assessment at the centre of teaching/learning activity, whilst teaching/learning activity becomes a critical part of assessment procedures. Active and dynamic intervention, mediation and help, which are all elements of everyday teaching and learning activity (and are thus not just ‘testing’), are integrated during the DA process, both to diagnose learning success and to promote transformative language development in learners. DA is thus an evaluative procedure that considers learning and assessment as two sides of the same coin.

Collaborative dynamic mediation provided during DA allows the teacher to: (1) examine the reasons why students are – or are not – able to successfully complete a language task independently; and (2) establish how much and what type of help (i.e. external mediation) is needed to complete a task successfully, hence establishing learners’ potential development. DA provides the instructor with a better idea of the type and amount of instruction and mediation that learners need in order to function independently.

I. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATION
Tell a personal and interesting anecdote about something that happened to you this last year. Use past tenses for your narrative.

Steps:
(A) First, record yourself telling your story to your teacher. Improvise from your memories. Do not write your story.
(B) Listen to your own recording.
(C) Write down your story for analysis.

II. CONCEPTUALISATION TASK
Reflect on the meaning that you construct by using different tenses in English using the notion of verbal tense and aspect. Use the diagram to help you.

(A) Analyse five of your utterances. Explain each utterance and your use of tense/aspect using an abstract conceptual category. Use the ABSTRACT reasons studied so far. These reasons need to be based on abstract grammatical meaning (e.g. I present the action as completed because . . . ). Do not use simple grammatical rules to justify your linguistic choices, such as an expression like ‘Suddenly’ requires simple past.

(B) Explain why for you a particular form is appropriate and meaningful in each context. Are other options coherent or appropriate for the meaning you want to convey?
(C) Point out how you use each verb to either set the background of the story or the foreground.

Figure 21.2 A conceptualisation task for an intermediate ELT classroom
In the context of ELT and L2 instruction, DA focuses on promoting significant interactions that lead to transformative intra-action (i.e. noticing of complex language features in collaborative interactions so as to develop linguistic abilities). The implementation of DA in the language classroom allows the instructor to offer mediation tuned to the learners’ needs, creating a space where independent problem solving becomes the goal rather than the means of the evaluative process. Even though co-construction of knowledge among its participants plays a fundamental role in DA, mediation tuned to the ZPD “necessarily entails a level of challenge to learners, as they strive to push beyond what they are capable of achieving comfortably” (Lantolf and Poehner, 2014: 159). Learners are not provided with the ‘right answer’ to a particular task, but they are not expected to achieve it on their own, either. Rather, when engaged in DA, the learner and teacher work together towards a common objective in an activity where their “forms of participation and contribution may shift as new capabilities are formed” (Lantolf and Poehner, 2014: 158). This is precisely because the ultimate goal in DA is promoting learners’ agentive development and self-regulation (García, 2014). Mediation in DA is a tool that aims at fostering self-regulation and learners’ language development through and during pedagogical activity.

Research on DA in L2 and ELT learning and teaching has focused on issues such as establishing a prognosis of L2 development or exploring how mediation is internalised by the learner; that is, whether the mediation provided during DA has been effectively appropriated by the learner. Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994), Antón (2009) and García (2011), among others, have focused on reporting the implementation of DA as a tool to establish a prognosis of language learning and potential development.

In their pioneering study, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) illustrated how the development and use of English tense, articles, prepositions and modal verbs by three adult ESL learners could be documented through shifts in the type of mediation (in this case corrective feedback) offered by the practitioner while co-constructing knowledge with the learners. As illustrated in Figure 21.3, this mediation was organised from the most implicit (point 0) to the most explicit (point 12), and the more we move down the scale, the more teacher mediation is needed (hence mediation

| 0. Tutor asks the learner to read, find the errors and correct them independently, prior to the tutorial. |
|---|---|
| 1. Construction of a ‘collaborative frame’ prompted by the presence of the tutor as a potential dialogic partner. |
| 2. Prompted or focused reading of the sentence that contains the error by the learner or the tutor. |
| 3. Tutor indicates explicitly that something may be wrong in a segment. |
| 4. Tutor rejects unsuccessful attempts at recognising the error. |
| 5. Tutor narrows down the location of the error. |
| 6. Tutor indicates the nature of the error, but does not identify the error. |
| 7. Tutor identifies the error. |
| 8. Tutor rejects learner’s unsuccessful attempts at correcting error. |
| 9. Tutor provides clues to help the learner arrive at the correct form. |
| 10. Tutor provides the correct form. |
| 11. Tutor provides some explanation for use of the correct form. |
| 12. Tutor provides examples of the correct pattern when other forms of help fail to produce an appropriate responsive action. |

Figure 21.3 Regulatory scale of implicit (strategic) to explicit mediation


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becomes more explicit). Teacher mediation is aimed towards the learners’ ZPD, with the instructor adjusting this mediation according to the learners’ responses and uptake over a period, in this particular example, of two months.

With respect to the regulatory scale in Figure 21.3, Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994) observed that learner development could be traced by analyzing shifts from explicit to more implicit mediation. Although similar types of feedback may happen in many classrooms, the point of DA is to expand this type of feedback not only to teaching but also to testing and assessment. In Excerpt 1 below, we find an interaction with a learner (F) struggling with the notion of tense in English. He is working with his instructor (T) on the modal sentence ‘I called other friends who can’t went to the party.’

**Excerpt 1**

1 T: Okay what else? What about the verb and the tense? the verb and the tense ...
2 F: Could
3 T: Okay, here.
4 F: Past tense.
5 T: Alright, okay, ‘who [alright] could not.’ Alright? And? ...
6 F: To.
7 T: Here [points to the verb phrase], what is the right form?
8 F: I ... go.
9 T: Go. Okay, ‘could not go to [that’s right] to the party ...’

*(Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994: 479; reproduced with permission of John Wiley & Sons)*

In the second excerpt, we can observe a similar situation arising a week later with the same learner. However, the type of mediation needed appears to have changed:

**Excerpt 2**

9 T: Is there anything wrong here in this sentence? ‘I took only Ani because I
10 couldn’t took both’... Do you see anything wrong? ... Particularly here
11 ‘because I couldn’t took both’
12 F: Or Maki?
13 T: What the verb, verb ... something wrong with the verb ...
14 F: Ah, yes ...
15 T: That you used. Okay, where? Do you see it?
16 F: (points to the verb)
17 T: Took? okay.
18 F: Take.
19 T: Alright, take.

*(Aljaafreh and Lantolf, 1994: 479; reproduced with permission of John Wiley & Sons)*

The learner’s response to mediation in Excerpt 2 in relation to Excerpt 1 shows a different degree of control over the corrective feedback: the learner needs less mediation (both in terms of quantity and quality). The locus of control in the second session seems to be moving gradually from the teacher to the learner, who points to the incorrect verb and provides an appropriate verb form with less mediation (lines 15–19).

In addition to establishing a prognosis of conceptual language development, Kozulin and Garb (2001) implemented DA for a group of adult learners in an EFL context, exploring ways to foster their abilities to learn and use reading comprehension techniques. Their investigation
showed critical differences between students who had not experienced a DA type of assessment and those who had been exposed to DA. Kozulin and Garb’s (2001) study indicated that learners’ with a similar performance level demonstrate different, and in some cases dramatically different, reactions to mediation when co-constructing new knowledge related to new EFL text comprehension strategies.

Researchers have also pursued DA as a tool for diagnosing and promoting learning in the classroom and creating a collective ZPD. Davin (2013) proposes combining a model of standardised DA (i.e. the mediation provided comes from a set of limited scripted forms planned before the DA session is conducted) with instructional conversation (IC). IC, according to Goldenberg (1991: 1), is discussion-based lessons in which the instructor promotes students’ participation and encourages them to use their own ideas so they can build new notions with the teacher’s guidance and arrive at deeper and more sophisticated levels of understanding. Although framed within the construct of the ZPD as a way to foster conceptual and linguistic development, instructional conversations focus on teaching rather than assessment. Notwithstanding, both IC and DA are characterised by the use of mediation – offered by the instructor or a more skilled peer – to achieve higher levels of performance that will lead to learners’ development.

Davin (2013) suggests that his DA-IC model should be staged in a predetermined order whereby the instructor would receive a learner request for clarification on a given topic and identify whether or not the scripted forms would provide the necessary support; if they did not, the instructor would then engage students in conversation, address the whole class and co-construct the new knowledge together. Davin (2013: 318–319) thus implies that instructors should use the IC framework to introduce novel concepts and DA to review notions that have already been covered. The unique contribution of DA as a transformative approach to the ELT classroom is to highlight that interaction is a critical part of not only teaching but of testing and assessment. This is critical to provide a more realistic picture of language learners’ development. DA in the ELT classroom has the potential to break the instruction-evaluation dichotomy and provide learners with the mediation needed to realise their true potential.

Conclusion

Sociocultural theory is a psychological approach that studies human thinking, learning and development in social activity through cultural mediation. When thinking about ELT, SCT-inspired transformative pedagogies focus on conceptual development. Language learning in the ELT classroom has the potential to promote development of the socially mediated mind. In this sense, L2 development is about internalising conceptual meanings with functional relevance in communicative contexts.

The development of teaching practices in concept-based teaching and dynamic assessment for the ELT classroom is still a work in progress. In this chapter, we have proposed teaching/testing conceptual thinking in the ELT classroom through mindful conceptual engagement activity, a dynamic and conscious process by which learners reflect on their communicative choices by using concepts with the intent of constructing new understandings. We have provided three principles to implement a mindful conceptual approach in the ELT classroom. We have also included examples of dynamic assessment procedures based on collaboration and interaction, which need to be a source of learning and development, rather than a technique for testing. ELT practitioners interested in developing transformative pedagogies and assessment procedures might start from the principles outlined in this chapter and find feasible applications in their own teaching contexts.
To conclude, therefore, ELT teachers/researchers working from a sociocultural theory perspective aim to create, develop and adapt pedagogical tools that allow learners to engage in sense-making activity with grammatical, rhetorical and pragmatic categories of meaning. Ultimately, a mindful conceptual engagement approach to language teaching and testing challenges teaching communities to start thinking about communication not only as a source of meaning exchange but also as a source of personal transformation.

Discussion questions

• Can you give examples of specific teaching and testing practices in the ELT classroom that illustrate objectivist, interactionist and transformative approaches to language teaching? Which of those most closely corresponds to your own teaching approach?

• What is unique about SCT perspective and transformative pedagogies when applied to the ELT classroom? What does it offer you that may be new? How does it challenge you to change or adapt your current teaching and testing practices? How do you understand the notion of transformation or transformative practices for ELT in your own teaching context?

• Some of the concepts explored in the ELT and second language teaching/learning literature have included tense, mood, aspect, voice, social distance and sarcasm. How would you approach the design and instruction of one of these concepts from a CBT perspective? How would you apply the idea of mindful conceptual engagement in your own teaching of concepts?

• In your opinion, are assessment instruments static or dynamic in the ELT classroom? Do they appropriately capture the distinction between actual and potential development? What are some of the consequences of applying DA to testing and assessment of communicative development in your own teaching context?

Related topics

Cognitive perspectives on classroom language learning; Communicative language teaching in theory and practice.

Further reading

Lantolf, J. P. and Poehner, M. E. (eds) (2008) Sociocultural theory and the teaching of second languages. London: Equinox. (Aimed at both researchers and practitioners, this volume offers fourteen original studies reporting the implementation of pedagogical and assessment approaches rooted in Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory in the second language classroom.)


Note

1 In this chapter, we have already argued that the ZPD is also a potentiality: a zone of potential development or ZPOD. The ZPD becomes the ZPOD – and it is transformative in nature – when the learning process focuses on conceptual categories that become significant for the learner. In the case of DA and second language instruction, there has been a primary focus on collaborative activity for promoting learning through interaction, hence creating a ZPD.

References


