

# **SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY AND THE LANGUAGE CLASSROOM**

## **Introduction**

This chapter highlights 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. This idea builds conceptual thinking in the ELT meaning that language learning is a transformative activity.

## **Historical Origins and Central Constructs of SCT**

### **1) Monism : perceiving reality as a single entity.**

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.

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'.

### **2) 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).

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)

### **3) 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). Mediation in human activity becomes the key principle to understand the cultural origins of human thinking. Mediation in human activity becomes **the key principle** to understand the cultural origins of human thinking.

### **4) Intermental functioning, transformation, verbal thinking and**

## **internalisation**

Intermentally in communicative activity (expert vs novice) and intramentally. Changing social communicative activity into personal inner dialogue such as interaction between instructor and learners among the learners themselves, who make these communicative interaction their own (intramentality). **Verbal thinking** originates in cultural social activity through shared intentionality and social collaborations. **Internalisation** means the process of transforming ideas from others into ideas for the self. in SLA, **internalisation** is relevant to 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 reflections. **Conceptual categories** includes grammatical concepts (i.e., verbal tense, verbal aspects, motion, and directionality) and textual concepts (e.g., coherence in texts, pragmatic notions including intentionality, normatively, solidarity or refusal)

## **Key insights for language teaching from a SCT perspective**

Objectivist, interactionist and transformative language teaching

SCT based on three approaches: 1) objectivist, 2) interactionist, and 3) transformative.

**An objective approach** is based on the implicit or explicit idea that teaching a language such as English is the teaching and learning of as a static systematic object, an empty structure that has morphology, syntax, and lexicon. Meaning explaining forms is explaining language.

Metaphor is not just a linguistic phenomenon - it reveals the fundamentals ways in which people understand the world around them.

The mind-as-container means particular view of the mind and language. The **objectivist** approach deals with language as a system and foregrounds its formal properties. Syntax and morphology are concrete and easy to teach due to its forms compare semantics (meaning and interpretation) and pragmatics (intentionality and context). **Objectivist links to form-focused and structured based approaches to language teaching.**

**Interactionist focuses** on interactions in communications through promotion such as transactions where meaning is central — a fluency approach to teaching e.g., pedagogical tasks from conducive to interactive. Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) creates Language as meaning-making activity tends to apply communication leads to learning compared learning leads to communication. SCT develops proficiency in a second language.

**Transformative** is the activity of promoting conceptual reflection (i.e., the internalization and thus transformation of new ideas through thinking on and about these new ideas) through communicative activity. ELT as transformative

means language in social communicative activity promoting understanding and transforming new ideas and knowledge. ELT teachers should promote **systematic conceptual communication which means** reflections using concepts (ideas with functional relevance in concrete tasks). Engaging and contributing with others in social interaction is the origin of conceptual interaction in L2 learning and development. Therefore, personal transformation means a change based on conceptual development both for learners and teachers.

### **Educational Praxis and transformative pedagogies**

Educational praxis means there is nothing as practical as a good theory of L2 learning and development, and there is nothing as theoretical as the effectiveness of L2 teaching and testing.

SCT links to actual classroom activity and its impact on learning and development.

**The goal of 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 explains learners' behaviours (performance) and the dynamics of their conceptual development as mediated through language in reflective activity.

A conceptual approach to ELT based on mindful-conceptual engagement has implications for communicative development and the internalisation of new thinking frames through which learners think about communicative in a new ways.

Transformative pedagogies is to frame ELT classes both as a conceptual and a communicative environment such as complex materials such as tense, aspect, mood, sarcasm, social distance, genre and text which are relevant to communication in the ELT classroom.

### **The zone of potential development (ZPOD)**

A transformative approach is based on Vygotsky's learning and development distinction. Learning is about knowledge and skills. Development is the internalisation of functional conceptual meanings through which we orient concrete oral and written communicative activity.

Zone of Potential Development (ZPOD) is inspired by Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). ZPD defined by Vygotsky (1987) referred to an alternative to IQ testing (i.e, intelligence quotient – a standardised test to assess human intelligence). ZPD discrete solo and assisted performance where learners can work at a level that would otherwise be beyond their reach. This is a key element for assess the development in children.

ZPOD is used to assess second language (L2) development to conceptualise something that they do not possess to master and internalize the application. ZPOD is the activity created by teachers/learners to explore potential areas of

conceptual development by engaging in mediated thinking through conceptual engagement.

### **Ways ahead in ELT classroom practice**

Class as social contexts to promote personal transformations. Promotion in SCT is based on Concept-based teaching (CBT) and Dynamic Assessment (DA).

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

In CBT, language is a tool for communicative purposes and a tool and result in concept formation. CBT focuses on learners' mindful engagement with grammatical, textual and pragmatic concepts as told for thinking in meaningful reflective activities. To pursue a CBT approach, teacher needs 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. **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. 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.

**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.

DA explores learners' potentials and fosters future L2 development as a collaborative process.

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.

**Sociocultural theory** is a psychological approach that studies human thinking,

learning and development in social activity through cultural mediation.