

Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education

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Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education

An Introduction through Narratives

Second Edition

Merrill Swain, Penny Kinnear and Linda Steinman

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Finally, we wish to thank Grace, Jody, Mona, Sandra, Sarah, Sophie, Rachel, Thaya, and Yang. Most of these names are pseudonyms but behind these pseudonyms breathe real people who were generous in sharing their personal stories with us.

A note from the authors on the publication of this second edition

Dear Readers,

When asked by Multilingual Matters, at the end of 2013, if we simply wanted to print more copies of the 2011 edition or whether we wanted to make some changes, we chose the latter. Fortuitously, from the January to April semester of 2014, **Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education: An Introduction through Narratives** was being used as a graduate course textbook at both York University in Toronto and at OISE/University of Toronto. We listened carefully to students in these courses and have therefore made improvements to the ‘Questions to explore for research and pedagogy’ section at the end of each chapter. We read widely from recent relevant articles, including those that Juliana Seriani (our Graduate Assistant from York University) found, that had been published in 2010 and later. From those we selected ones that further illuminated the concepts central to each chapter. We found it difficult to remove any of the original studies included across the ‘Key Research Relevant to (concept)’ sections of the book as their importance remained. So this second edition includes most of the original references as well as more recent studies that provide important instantiations of Vygotskian sociocultural theory in second language education and research. All urls have been checked for vitality and some edits have been made (thanks to our sharp-eyed students). We have included the DOI where appropriate. In the first edition of this textbook, we did not include all of the Collected Works of Vygotsky. In this edition, we have done so in the Bibliography.

We continue to receive positive messages from those who have used this textbook to teach with, from students around the world who have referred to this textbook for their own research, and from our own students who have used this textbook as an accessible yet compelling entry into concepts central to Vygotskian sociocultural theory as it applies to second language education.

We hope that you too will find what you need in this revised textbook.

Sincerely,
Merrill, Penny and Linda

Vygotsky's story in brief

A man with a passion for remaking the world



Source: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/images/>

Lev Semenovich Vygotsky was born in 1896 and died of tuberculosis in 1934 at the age of 37. Although his life was short, it was remarkably full and prolific.

The second child of eight in a middle-class Russian-Jewish family, he was educated by a tutor at home, in a public gymnasium, in a private Jewish school, at the University of Moscow (medicine and law) and at Shaniavsky People's University where his passions included philosophy, history, psychology and literature.

Vygotsky married at age 28 and had two daughters. Gita became an educational psychologist and Aysa, a specialist in biophysics. (Gita is a major narrator of the film listed in the references on the next page.)

Vygotsky's impressive range of interests included theatre, literature, philosophy, psychology, linguistics and neurology. He had careers as a literary and theatre critic, teacher, developmental psychologist and researcher. Vygotsky spoke Russian, English, German, Hebrew and French. He also studied Latin, Greek and Esperanto.

The political climate of Vygotsky's youth influenced his work. WWI led to chaos and deprivation in Russian society, and eventually the Russian Revolution. An outcome of the Russian Revolution was that 'Whole new realms of inquiry were opened, and

opportunities for younger scholars, were greater than had previously been imaginable' (Wertsch, 1985, p. 7).

However, the political climate after Vygotsky's death resulted in efforts to destroy his writings. Stalin ruled, and there was political repression and persecution of revolutionaries.

After Stalin died, Vygotsky's work was again published, thanks to his colleague Luria. English translations became available in the West in the 1960s.

Below are some of the resources that chronicle the life and work of Lev Vygotsky.

Moll, L.C. (2014). *L.S. Vygotsky and education*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Wertsch, J.V. (1985). *Vygotsky and the social formation of mind* (pp. 1–16). Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Gajdamaschko, N. (1999). Lev Semenovich Vygotsky. In M.A. Runco & S.R. Pritker (Eds), *The encyclopedia of creativity* (pp. 601–697). San Diego, CA: Academic Press.

van der Veer, R. (2007). Vygotsky in context: 1900–1935. In H. Daniels, M. Cole & J.V. Wertsch (Eds), *The Cambridge companion to Vygotsky* (pp. 21–49). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lev Vygotsky Documentary. Film produced by Valerie Lowe (2008). <http://www.vygotskydocumentary.com/>

The Vygotsky online archive: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/vygotsky/>.

Introduction

Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education: An Introduction Through Narratives

This textbook is designed to introduce you to the concepts of sociocultural theory (SCT). You may not be familiar with SCT but you certainly are familiar with stories. This textbook is, in some respects, a story book. You will read stories narrated by people who learn and teach second languages, people who research second language learning and teaching, and people who have their language learning assessed. Each story will then be interpreted through the lens of SCT. That is, you will discover how each story illustrates one or more SCT concepts. What may seem daunting (SCT) will become clearer as you meet the various characters and contexts in the chapters of this textbook. We feel confident that by the time you have finished reading the chapters, you will be ready to interpret the last two stories with others or on your own.

'I don't know anything about sociocultural theory. What would you recommend I read?' Each of the authors of this textbook has been asked this question many times as we have talked about or used the terminology and concepts of SCT. Each of us has paused, considered various available book chapters, books, and journal articles only to sigh and wish for a solid, accessible *introductory text* that addresses sociocultural theory and second language learning and teaching for teachers and researchers. These questions gave shape to this project. We would write the introductory textbook we wanted to use. Furthermore, we would use narratives of second language learning, teaching, testing and research to illuminate the concepts that are integral to an understanding of SCT. Narratives and SCT are natural partners as we will demonstrate later in this introduction.

There is a range of SCT-related courses and collaborations in the field of applied linguistics. SCT-related courses are taught at universities around the world at both graduate and undergraduate levels. It is interesting to note that SCT courses appear in departments of Literacy, English, Second Language Education, Linguistics, Applied Linguistics, Anthropology and Psychology. Of note, is the increasing number of colloquia, research lectures and presentations grounded in SCT at diverse conferences. There is an active study group 'SCOLAR' (sociocultural orientation to language acquisition research) in Toronto, as well as an SCT research-oriented working group that has been holding annual meetings since 1993. Furthermore, a valuable tool, the searchable online SCT/SLA bibliography, has been set up by Pennsylvania State University: <http://language.la.psu.edu/pages/sct-l2-learning-searchable-bibliography-pdf>. In addition, as of 2014, a new journal *Language and Sociocultural Theory* is being published by Equinox.

We see an enormous growth potential as the field of second language acquisition (SLA) continues to explore the difference between the social as an influence on learning and the social as the source of learning itself. This growing interest in SCT confirms the need for an

accessible introductory textbook. The audience for this textbook includes students, teachers and researchers who are new to SCT; those who are familiar with the concepts but are looking for examples/referents; those who are familiar with cognitive/individual theories of SLA and want to explore other ways of knowing; and those with data who are looking for a theory that helps them to understand their data. In the chapters of this introductory textbook, we will direct you to the work of others who have addressed SCT at more advanced levels.

Sociocultural theory is simultaneously new and old. It is a theory about how humans think through the creation and use of mediating tools. It is a theory that has been extended to a wide number of domains including second language learning and teaching.

Because context is integral in sociocultural theory, we began with a brief overview of Lev Vygotsky, the ‘father’ of SCT and the times in which he lived, thought and wrote. (See *Vygotsky’s story in brief*.) A literary critic, psychologist and educator, Vygotsky wrote that the source of learning and development is found in social interaction rather than solely in the mind of an individual. The West, however, heard little of Vygotsky’s work until it was translated into English in the 1960s. Scholars across many disciplines continue to draw on and develop ideas from Vygotsky’s short but prolific intellectual life. Those working in psychology, anthropology, sociology, education, and second language learning and teaching have found relevance in what is perhaps the most basic concept of Vygotsky’s work: the individual cannot be studied or understood in isolation but only as part of a history, of a culture and of a society. The theories of the time involved separation of thought and emotion. Vygotsky rejected this Cartesian dualism and other dualisms and argued for interrelatedness, for contextualization, and for non-atomistic examination of people and activities. ‘Snapshot’-style analyses cannot result in the types of understanding that studying people over time can.

The authors of this textbook are educators and researchers in second language learning and teaching. We do not argue that SCT supersedes all other theories that can be used to explicate second language acquisition. We *do* intend to show how SCT enriches the understanding of SLA and second language education in important ways.

Like so many fields, SLA has taken a social turn (Block, 2003). Our textbook explores language learning and teaching through the metaphor of ‘meaning-making’ rather than ‘information-processing’ (Bruner, 1990). We introduce readers to key concepts of SCT as they arise in narrative contexts. The concepts, embedded in these narratives, do ‘make meaning’ of language learning and teaching, and of the concepts themselves. Why narratives? Which concepts? We will discuss the rationale behind our narrative approach first.

The narrative turn

Recent turns have been not only social, but also narrative. Narrative turns have taken place across such diverse disciplines as economics, anthropology, psychotherapy, psychiatry, health sciences, business, law, divinity, education and applied linguistics. Papers from all of these fields (and others) are presented at the biannual conferences of Narrative Matters

(<http://w3.stu.ca/stu/sites/cirn/conference.aspx>). Even science has been characterized as connected closely to narrative. Lyotard (1984) equated scientists to storytellers who follow master narratives of their own. Postmodernism favors personal stories; it waves aside the claims of master narratives and proposes that we have only our own local stories and we construct our own realities which change from moment to moment. The authors of this textbook are cautious in this regard and believe that while the local is important, our cultural and historical past are very much present in the present. That is, stories of the past, with their embedded cultural, social and historical events, both affect and effect stories of the present and future (Bakhtin, 1981; Cole, 1995; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1998).

Our task in this book is not to make a theoretical case or even an interpretive one for the value of narratives. If you are not already convinced that we *are* our stories, that we organize our minds through stories (Bruner, 1990), that the world is made up not only of atoms but also of stories, then you can find eloquent and provocative statements about the primacy of story among humans in the books on narrative that we list in the next section. Using current and popular terminology, stories have the quality of ‘stickiness’ that lasts after discrete bits of information are forgotten (Heath & Heath, 2007). Here is how one advocate of learning through stories expressed their value to her:

I think I am an example of why Jesus talked in parables because without story, I can't learn a damned thing. Give me philosophy, psychology, spirituality and mortality – just give it to me with somebody's voice behind it and I'll re-tell it to you in 50 years. . . .
(Schalm, 2009)

Narrative and education

Narrative inquiry and narrative analysis have vigorous roles in education generally. Storying the experience of teaching, particularly novice teaching, and of learning has become an accepted method of research. Learners and teachers maintain reflective journals and participate in interviews and in focus group discussions. As well, published narratives authored by those who have crossed languages and cultures are rich sources of data for applied linguistics. Some examples of narrative research from education in general and second language education in particular are listed in the box below. It is intriguing to note the titles themselves as they illustrate how educators have viewed narrative. Here are some titles:

Bailey, K. & Nunan, D. (1996). *Voices from the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Barkhuizen, G. (Ed.). (2011). Narrative Research in TESOL. [Special issue]. *TESOL Quarterly*, 45(3).

Bell, J. (2002). Narrative inquiry: More than just telling stories. *TESOL Quarterly*, 36(2), 207–213.

Benson, P. & Nunan, D. (2004). *Learner stories: Difference and diversity in language learning*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Campbell, E. (2008). Teaching and learning through lived experience. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 38(1), 1–5.
- Carter, K. (1993). The place of story in teaching and teacher education. *Educational Researcher*, 22(1), 5–12.
- Casey, K. (1996). The new narrative research in education. *Review of Research in Education*, 21, 211–253.
- Colter, C., Michael, C. & Poynor, L. (2007). Storytelling as pedagogy: An unexpected outcome of narrative inquiry. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 37(2), 103–122.
- Nunan, D. & Choi, J. (Eds) (2010). *Language and culture: Reflective narratives and the emergence of identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Pavlenko, A. (1998). Second language learning by adults: Testimonies of bilingual writers. *Issues in Applied Linguistics*, 9(1), 3–19.
- Thomas, U., Tiplady, L. & Wall, K. (2014). Stories of practitioner enquiry: Using narrative interviews to explore teachers' perspectives of learning to learn. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 27(3), 397–411.

Narratives serve SCT concepts

Stories and SCT are natural partners (Taniguchi, 2009). SCT seeks to understand mental development and learning by considering not only the contextual specifics but also the process over time, rather than focusing only on a particular moment of spoken or written production. SCT glasses are designed for both breadth and depth. They look back and forward in time, that is they *track development* (genetic method) and they look widely at the context in which the individual and the activity are situated as the source of development. These lenses encourage as much of the story as possible to be sought, observed, recorded and listened to when trying to understand phenomena like language learning and teaching. Stories told by language learners and teachers provide many of these dimensions which are not apparent (and not sought) in traditional experimental research.

Narrative tellings not only track development, but are sites of development themselves. According to Daiute and Lightfoot (2004), the imagination required for narrating stimulates complexities of memory, points out errors, transforms psychological and physical states, and often provides an opportunity for challenging mores. We move from telling stories in repetition in childhood to narrating new scripts during the process of becoming individuals. As a cultural tool, narrating is developmental.

In this textbook, SCT leads and the stories serve. That is, while invaluable, the stories are not the primary units of analysis in this book. We believe that the stories *mediate* particular SCT concepts which *are* the units of analysis in this textbook.

Narrative study

The use made of narratives in this textbook does not fit neatly under the heading of narrative analysis during which issues of form and of discourse are related, nor does it fit neatly under the heading of narrative inquiry, whereby narratives are created and listened to in order to explain and understand a phenomenon better. We elicited/solicited the narratives in circumstances separate from the conception of this textbook, and then studied these narratives to demonstrate particular SCT concepts-in-context. On the continuum of narratives-in-use that Georgakopoulou (2008) suggested, our work with narrative in this textbook may be described as closer to narrative inquiry or perhaps somewhere in the 'intermittent position'. Georgakopoulou observed

...an increasingly apparent need for the two camps of narrative analysis and narrative inquiry that have more or less happily lived apart to work together and cross-talk. The latter, in Freeman's terms (2003, p. 338), the expressivists (in my terms, the *narrative inquiry* scholars), use narrative as a means to an end (in my terms as a *method*) and on that basis their interest lies in the about, the what and the who of narrative: what stories tell us about the teller's self. Freeman reserves a rather (unfavorably) biased term (the productivists) for the other camp, the *narrative analysts* (in my terms), those who prioritise the how of narrative tellings and for whom the study of narrative can be an end in itself. But he [Freeman] is right to point out that this distinction should not be seen as a dichotomy that obscures any intermittent positions (2008, p. 1).

It could be said that for this textbook we use narrative as a heuristic. A heuristic is a device or a method that allows one to proceed fruitfully in finding information. Heuristics speaks of search spaces, i.e. how to locate or narrow down the space where a solution will be found. Our search space for *compelling, lived instantiations of SCT concepts* is narratives of language learning and teaching. In other words, this is not research *on* narrative; rather it is achieving/seeking understanding of phenomena (SCT concepts) *via* narratives.

SCT is a theory of mind

Sociocultural theory emphasizes Vygotsky's insistent focus on the *relationships* between the individual's physiological aspects and the social and culturally produced artifacts that transform the individual's cognitive or mental functions. Language is one such culturally developed artifact. According to Kozulin in his introduction to *Thought and Language*, 'Language and speech occupy a special place in Vygotsky's psychological system because they play a double role. On the one hand, they are a psychological tool that helps to form other mental functions; on the other hand they are one of the functions, which means that they also undergo a cultural development' (Kozulin, 1986, p. xi-lvi). This relationship between socially and culturally produced artifacts and the transformation of individual psychological systems continues to fascinate current scholars and thinkers.

The chapters

For this concept-based textbook, we have selected as primary some of the concepts that Vygotsky introduced as part of his theoretical thinking. Although they are introduced

separately, the concepts are interconnected in principled ways, one flowing from the other. Our coverage of concepts is by no means exhaustive and we direct you, wherever appropriate, to sources that delve into Vygotsky's work more comprehensively and at a more advanced level. However, the concepts we have selected are central to SCT and are of particular import to those who learn and teach languages. These primary concepts are mediation; zone of proximal development; languaging through private and collaborative speech; everyday concepts and scientific concepts; interrelatedness of cognition and emotion; Activity theory; and assessment. In each chapter, we typically add one or more concepts that are allied to SCT such as identity, scaffolding, dynamic assessment, and others. The allied concepts may not have been named by Vygotsky but are historically related to his theorizing.

Each story has a story: Data collection and analysis

Where do our stories come from and how do we treat them? Each chapter relates a story. Some are accounts from our own data from previous research (Grace; Sophie and Rachel; Mona) or from the data of others (Yang¹). Other stories have come our way in the form of class assignments (Madame Tremblay; Jody; Thaya; Sandra; Second Life; Beatles). The stories represent a variety of languages; language learning, teaching and using sites; people of different ages and at different stages of L2 development; and learners, teachers and researchers.

Each narrative was selected for inclusion in this textbook because it seemed to illustrate a particular SCT concept in a vivid way. Mona, for example, in *Mona: Across time and geography*, makes use of the affordances offered by a variety of people and artifacts to learn English in China, the USA and Canada, and this spoke to us of mediation. In *Sandra: a teacher's dilemma*, you will meet a language teacher and graduate student of applied linguistics who needs to make sense of her interactions with a particular Francophone student; her quandary brought to mind Activity theory. In *Grace: The effect of affect*, the author relates her story in which emotions and their contribution to cognition and identity are poignant. *Thaya*, *Jody* and *Madame Tremblay* each first appeared as an assignment in an expressive writing class. *Thaya: Writing across languages* illuminates a distinction made by Vygotsky between scientific and everyday (spontaneous) concepts. Jody talks to herself using private speech to sort out her dilemma, while in *Madame Tremblay*, a French immersion teacher and her student, Sarah, prompted us to examine the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Sophie and Rachel's interaction was extracted from a set of data that were re-interpreted as a dance of sorts between private speech and collaborative dialogue. Yang, a participant in Brook's (2009) study, reflected on his experience of being assessed in two different contexts. Two final narratives are included without our interpretation. They are ready for your SCT interpretation. We assure you that there are no perfect interpretations or analyses and we are confident that you will be ready to engage in the process of examining phenomena through an SCT lens.

The individuals behind these stories are important to us and their larger stories would make valuable reading. Keeping in mind the affordances and constraints of this introductory