

Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Acquisition: A Synthesis of Praxis, Genetic Methodology, and Empirical Research

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Abstract: This paper provides a survey of praxis-informed SLA research in Sociocultural Theory (SCT) by discussing how theory and methodology evolved through the years, emphasizing its move away from observation towards more transformative and practice-oriented research methods reflecting a Vygotskyan requirement for theory to be validated by practice. This paper is organized from the three main perspectives: (i) major research strands, such as concept-based teaching, dynamic assessment, and the study of private speech/gesture to show how they can act as mediators for L2 development as a psychological tool; (2) the genetic approach, which is considered to be a main model for developmental analysis; and (3) the formulation of praxis, where theory informs teaching and learning. The paper discusses in a dialectical way the interaction between theory and practice by describing how theoretical constructs, such as the Zone of Proximal Development or mediation, are operationalized through interventionist DA approaches. Finally, it focuses on the new trends and potential future directions in SCT-SLA studies, highlighting its increasingly expanding global relevance and potential for promoting L2 instruction.

Keywords: Sociocultural Theory (SCT); Second Language Acquisition (SLA); Praxis; Genetic Methodology; Concept-Based Instruction (CBI); Dynamic Assessment (DA)

Online publication: February 9, 2026

1. SCT-informed L2 practice

Negueruelas first introduced the systemic-theoretical instruction into the language classroom settings ^[1]. Meanwhile, Lantolf et al. pointed the significance of a new assessment approach: dynamic assessment ^[2]. Both articles guided the SCT-informed L2 research into a novel direction. Not just observing how social interactions shape language development both inside and outside of the classroom, researchers started practice-based approaches to test learners' abilities. The move pulled SCT-L2 work closer to what Vygotsky actually meant, who established the rule that a theory must prove itself in real use ^[3].

Researchers who are working on second-language acquisition have rolled out STI, also tagged concept-

based instruction, or CBI. They treat it as a broad-brush version of what Piotr Gal'perin first sketched ^[4]. Concept-based pedagogy is proven to be the best approach to growth in class, which aims to hand students insightful and explicit knowledge. Next, teachers integrate the acquired knowledge into macro language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Most of the linguistic ideas in CBI derive from cognitive linguistics. Another thing worth mentioning is that it also tracks how learners put the same concept to work in everyday tasks. Negueruela argues that each side feeds the other in a dialectical loop ^[5]. For example, conceptual engagement clicks when learners stop treating the concept as a model to copy. Instead, they grab it as a psychological tool and start making fresh meaning on their own.

Vygotsky pointed out that picking up a second language isn't about gears turning silently inside your head ^[6]. It's about what the world around you offers and how you click with those surroundings. Zhang et al. conducted a study to see what happens when they teach Chinese that way ^[7]. Learners ended up juggling word order on their own, spitting out patterns nobody had scripted for them. The twist came from concept-based pedagogy-basically, the teacher spelled out the idea first, then let them play with it.

Another branch of L2 research informed by SCT is what Luria called Dynamic Assessment (DA), a form of assessment based on Vygotsky's notion of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) to diagnose, besides abilities which were already completely formed in the learner, others which were still being matured ^[8]. The former emerged from observation of the learner's autonomous performance, whereas the latter surfaced through mediated interaction within an assessment task. The first comprehensive DA study on L2 learners' control of verbal tense and aspect in oral narration was carried out by Poehner ^[9]. Other DA studies have focused on additional areas of L2 knowledge or ability: DA has been applied in classrooms where the learners ranged from children to adults, and over a variety of second languages. Lantolf et al. have successfully expanded DA into group and whole class settings ^[10]. To date, the most extensive DA study with L2 learners was conducted by Levi ^[11], who implemented DA within a standardized national oral proficiency examination in Israel and showed that it could be applied outside of instruction as well. DA in the classroom has commonly been seen to share key tenets of formative assessment or assessment for learning.

2. Research methods in SCT-SLA: The genetic method

As Vygotsky pointed out, the proper object of study for psychology is higher mental functions, whose unit of analysis is word meaning ^[8]. As the latter can only be understood by paying close attention to its developmental trajectory, the genealogical way - which assumes a historical and developmental view of things - is the main one to analyse their formation. The genetic method was categorized by Wertsch ^[12] in four ways: (1) phylogenesis, (2) sociocultural history, (3) ontogenesis, and (4) microgenesis. In SCT-SLA studies, particularly in the field of education, ontogenesis and microgenesis were popularly used to study individuals' development. Aljaafreh et al. ^[13], for instance, showed that individual development could be seen by observing the change of learners' thinking and behaviour to solve a problem on their own. The genetic approach, therefore, offers us a dialectical and historical view of the development of the language capacity, in which we are concerned not only with the results of acquisition but with the dynamic process of its development and relations between different factors affecting L2 development.

3. Research on SCT-informed L2 practice

Empirical research within the SCT-SLA framework can be broadly categorized into the following strands: private

speech and gesture, dynamic assessment, concept-based instruction, and teacher development.

3.1. Studies in private speech and gesture

The term private speech denotes a subvocal/self-directed speech phenomenon; whereas the word gesture is used for visible, meaningful body movement which serves a communicative or cognitive purpose. Both private speech and gesture, as argued by McNeill are external manifestations of thinking and can be considered an important unit of analysis in understanding the relation between language and thought ^[14]. In SCT-SLA, research on learners' private speech and gestures aims at clarifying how an additional language is internalized as a psychological instrument.

The current studies mostly focus on analyzing the process of internalization through categorizing and coding learners' private speech data (from audio/video recording) according to its content, frequency and type, thus providing evidence of "double-stimulation response" mechanism in an individual's development ^[15]. As shown by, for example, McCafferty et al. ^[17] and Stam ^[18], research on gesture has established that it plays a part in individuals' own language acquisition and is closely associated with their L2 thinking process. Nevertheless, empirical studies of private speech and gesture are still underdeveloped because of problems like a long time span and the complexity of data collection and analysis. As both private speech and gesture are externalized forms of thoughts and meanings, respectively, the integration between their data might provide an auspicious route to explore the L2 developmental process.

3.2. Dynamic assessment

DA uses an L2 task as a tool for assessing not only the developing skills of the learner, but also mediating them in such a way that can lead to the development of his or her linguistic competencies. DA relies on two concepts developed by Vygotsky, namely ZPD and mediation. Vygotsky pictured the ZPD as the gap between what a learner can do on his own and what he can pull off once an adult jumps in or when sharper classmates tag along ^[15]. Teachers map that gap. They size up the learner's actual level and then peek at the next reachable rung. Another thing worth mentioning: mediation sits right at the heart of DA.

Whereas the ZPD is concerned with a person's potential for growth, it is mediation that provides the means of realizing such potential. By mediation, we understand the process through which people make use of "cultural artifacts, ideas, and actions" to control how they interacted with the material world, each other, and their own mental functioning ^[19]. Looking through a sociocultural lens, every bit of human activity gets shaped by something in between. Higher mental functions, for instance, lean on tools like computers, on texts that act as psychological props, or simply on other people ^[20].

In the context of DA, mediation refers to the deliberate engagement by a mediator with a learner that is targeted at the specific difficulties experienced by the learner. A mediator adapts constantly the content and the degree of assistance according to the ZPD of the learner as well as his/her responses throughout the assessment process. Hence, mediation that involves close, interactive collaboration with the mediator and the learner during the assessment task in order to scaffold the learner's progress towards the next level of performance within their ZPD.

DA stresses "facilitating development by means of assessment", integrating in this evaluation not only the ZPD of a person (or group), but also his or her sensitivity towards mediation. In contrast with static assessment, DA is not concerned with capabilities that have already matured in full; instead, DA pays attention to capabilities that continue to develop inside the ZPD, reflecting the future-oriented nature of growth. In other words, DA is

a development-oriented assessment procedure aiming at realizing learners' potential through diagnosing their present ability and helping them overcome the difficulties they have met with when acquiring knowledge or skills.

According to Lantolf et al., there are basically two modes of DA-interventionist and interactionist, whose implementation usually consists of four steps, namely pretest, enrichment/mediation, posttest, and transfer tasks. In a full DA procedure, learners first perform a pretest. Results are analyzed in order to diagnose difficulties met by the learner while performing the task, and so on, to inform a later mediation process. In the enrichment period, mediation serves two purposes: (a) assessing students' potentials that are considered in terms of Zone of Proximal Development, and (b) developing their L2 capabilities. Mediation could be an interventionist or interactionist type. The former is marked with standardization and a pre-determined mediation script. If the student responds incorrectly, then the mediator presents a series of pre-determined prompts in some order, usually from more implicit to more explicit ^[21]. By contrast, interactionist DA involves fluid, dialogic interaction between the mediator and the learner whereby mediation is co-constructed and dynamically adjusted in light of the learner's emergent needs and responsiveness during the interaction ^[22].

Researchers can run both formats with one learner or with a whole group ^[23]. After the mediation wraps up, the teacher gives a post-test, which is similar in format and content to the pretest, so any jump in scores is easy to spot. Next, transfer tasks are introduced, which include near and far transfer tasks. The point is to see if the learners have really taken the mediation in. Near-transfer tasks are administered soon after mediation, checking if new skills stick right away. Far-transfer tasks, asking students to rebuild those skills in brand-new settings, are conducted. Lately, computerized dynamic assessment (C-DA) keeps popping up in DA studies. Another thing worth mentioning is that integrating dynamic assessment with cognitive diagnostic modeling could give a sharper picture of what's still developing ^[24].

3.3. Concept-based instruction

Concept-based instruction (CBI) refers to an instructional approach that aims at facilitating the communicative and cognitive L2 development of learners through mediating them via systematic, scientific linguistic notions. Based on the work by Gal'perin, who conceptualized a theory and practice for systemic theoretical teaching, CBI can be broadly divided into three main stages: introduction, execution, and control, designed to make manifest abstract conceptual knowledge in such a manner as to support learner understanding and use of concepts, thus leading to the internalization of language as a psychological instrument. As it is known that word meaning plays an essential role for any kind of meaningful use of language as a mediational means the choice of linguistic notions in CBI follows the line of their connection with meaningful language usage ^[15].

4. Conclusion

Negueruela has shown that CBI may help to improve highly proficient learners' metalinguistic knowledge as well as their productive skills. In recent years, research on CBI has been growing ^[25,26] and its use is broadening in terms of both target languages and teaching contents. But choice and ordering of linguistic notions requires knowledge of linguistic theory itself, which presents perpetual problems for pedagogy. Present cutting-edge issues in SCT-SLA that seek to promote pedagogy are cross-contrastive analyses of pedagogy guided by divergent theories ^[7], integrating CBI with Dynamic Assessment as a systemic "assessment-for-learning" pedagogy, and technology-enhanced CBI research ^[27].

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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