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Second Language Teacher Education

A Sociocultural Perspective

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ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series

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Preface

In my many years of working with second language (L2) teachers and teacher educators, I have often been asked about my approach to L2 teacher education. By “approach” I assume they mean not only what I *do* as a teacher educator to prepare L2 teachers for their work, but also the core epistemological underpinnings that shape what I do. I use the term “epistemology” rather than “beliefs” because the foundation of what I do as a teacher educator is built on the epistemological stance I embrace; in other words, how I have come to understand the origins and nature of knowledge, knowing, and coming to know. My short answer is that over the years I have come to embrace the epistemological underpinnings of a more general sociocultural turn in the human sciences, which in turn has influenced how I have come to understand teacher learning and the entire enterprise of L2 teacher education. This book is my long answer to the question. However, it is not a book about *how to do L2 teacher education*. It is a book about *how to think about what we do in L2 teacher education*. And, as I argue, how we think about what we do in L2 teacher education changes dramatically when we think about knowledge, knowing, and coming to know from a sociocultural perspective.

In this book I present a comprehensive overview of the epistemological underpinnings of a sociocultural perspective on human learning, and address in detail what this perspective has to offer the field of L2 teacher education. Representing a coherent “theory of mind” that recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of the cognitive and the social, a sociocultural perspective assumes that the way in which human consciousness develops depends on the specific social activities in which we engage and the culturally constructed materials and semiotic artifacts or tools, the most important of which is language, which we use to participate in those activities. Examining the topic through five *changing points of view*, I argue that a sociocultural perspective on human learning changes the way we think about: (1) L2 teacher learning; (2) language; (3) L2 teaching; (4) the broader social, cultural, and historical macro-structures that are ever present and ever changing in the L2 teaching profession; and (5) what

constitutes L2 teacher professional development. Overall, I argue that a sociocultural perspective on human learning reorients how the field of L2 teacher education understands and supports the professional development of L2 teachers.

The target audience for this book is teacher educators like me, who direct and/or teach in L2 teacher education programs as well as those of us who conduct research on the content, activities, and outcomes of L2 teacher education. Additionally, this book is intended for students of L2 teacher education; that is, graduate students who are preparing to enter the academy as L2 teacher educators as well as seasoned L2 teachers who find themselves in L2 teacher educator roles with little or no background in the theory and research that informs the field.

The field of L2 teacher education, I believe, can benefit significantly from a sociocultural perspective on human learning upon which to ground both our scholarly research and our pedagogical activities with L2 teachers. And while I have written about teacher learning and L2 teacher education from a sociocultural perspective before, this work represents a book-length examination of the explanatory powers that a sociocultural perspective offers the field of L2 teacher education. As I argue throughout this book, a sociocultural perspective can enable our field to trace the inherent complexities that make up the sum of L2 teachers' learning and teaching experiences, and make visible what those experiences ultimately lead to. And by capturing this transformative process, we can expose the rich details of how L2 teacher learning emerges out of, can be supported by, and is co-constructed among, L2 teachers and L2 teacher educators within the settings and circumstances of their work.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge my colleague Jim Lantolf whose scholarly expertise in Vygotskian sociocultural theory has enriched my own understanding of this extremely compelling theory. I thank him for his willingness to share his expertise with me and for his careful reading and insightful feedback on several chapters in this book. I also wish to acknowledge my doctoral students, Kyungja Ahn, Sharon Childs, Eun-ju Kim, Elizabeth Smolcic, and Davi Reis, who were, at the time when I was writing this book, willing to learn with me as we sought to use a sociocultural perspective to inform our research. In true sociocultural fashion, my interactions with them mediated not only their learning but my own as well. Finally, I wish to thank the reviewers commissioned by Routledge for their support of and feedback on earlier versions of this book and the acquisitions editor Naomi Silverman and series editor Eli Hinkel for recognizing this book's potential contribution to the ESL and Applied Linguistics Professional Series.

Defining a Sociocultural Perspective

Converging research from anthropology, applied linguistics, psychology, and education has taken up the term *sociocultural*, often using it with slightly different meanings and sometimes with very different applications. At its core, however, the epistemological stance of a sociocultural perspective defines human learning as a dynamic social activity that is situated in physical and social contexts, and is distributed across persons, tools, and activities (Rogoff, 2003; Salomon, 1993; Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991). This is significant because, unlike behavioral or cognitive theories of human learning, a sociocultural perspective argues that higher-level human cognition in the individual has its origins in social life. That is, instead of assuming that there are universal features of human cognition that can be separated from the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which they emerged and are used, a sociocultural perspective focuses on sociocultural activities as the essential processes through which human cognition is formed. Ultimately, a sociocultural perspective seeks “to explicate the relationship between human mental functioning, on the one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and historical situations in which this functioning occurs, on the other” (Wertsch, 1995, p. 3).

The epistemological tenets of a sociocultural perspective are drawn largely from the seminal work of Lev Vygotsky (1978, 1986), the Russian psychologist and educator, and his followers Leont’ev (1981) and Luria (1982), and more recently those who have extended his theories, including Cole (1996), John-Steiner (1997), Kozulin (1998), Lantolf (2000, 2006a), Wells (1999), and Wertsch (1991). A sociocultural perspective assumes that human cognition is formed through engagement in social activities, and that it is the social relationships and the culturally constructed materials, signs, and symbols, referred to as *semiotic artifacts*, that mediate those relationships that create uniquely human forms of higher-level thinking. Consequently, cognitive development is an interactive process, mediated by culture, context, language, and social interaction. Knowledge of the world is mediated by virtue of being situated in a cultural environment and it is from this cultural environment

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that humans acquire the representational systems that ultimately become the medium, mediator, and tools of thought. This suggests that meaning does not reside in language itself, but instead in the social group's use of language, and therefore cognitive development is characterized as the acquisition and manipulation of cultural tools and knowledge, the most powerful of which is language. According to Wertsch (1995), "individuals have access to psychological tools and practices by virtue of being part of a sociocultural milieu in which those tools and practices have been and continue to be culturally transmitted" (p. 141).

A sociocultural perspective also emphasizes the role of human agency in this developmental process. It recognizes that learning is not the straightforward appropriation of skills or knowledge from the outside in, but the progressive movement from external, socially mediated activity to internal mediational control by individual learners, which results in the transformation of both the self and the activity. Thus, cognitive development is not simply a matter of enculturation or even appropriation of existing sociocultural resources and practices, but the reconstruction and transformation of those resources and practices in ways that are responsive to both individual and local needs. How an individual learns something, what is learned, and how it is used will depend on the sum of the individual's prior experiences, the sociocultural contexts in which the learning takes place, and what the individual wants, needs, and/or is expected to do with that knowledge.

Likewise, a sociocultural perspective positions social activities and the language used to regulate those activities as being structured and gaining meaning in historically and culturally situated ways. Thus both the physical tools and the language practices used by communities of practice gain their meaning from those who have come before. Ultimately, a sociocultural perspective argues that human cognitive "development can be understood only in light of the cultural practices and circumstances of their communities—which also change" (Rogoff, 2003, pp. 3–4).

What does a sociocultural perspective have to offer L2 teacher education? The professional education of teachers is, at its core, about *teachers as learners of teaching*. And if the learning of teaching constitutes the central mission of L2 teacher education, then as a field we must articulate an epistemological stance that enables us to justify the content, structure, and processes that constitute L2 teacher education. In essence, this is the central goal of this book: to articulate the various ways in which a sociocultural perspective on human learning transforms how we understand teacher learning, language, language teaching, and the enterprise of L2 teacher education.

Changing Points of View

Building on this epistemological stance, the central question I address in this book is: What does a sociocultural perspective on human learning have to offer the enterprise of L2 teacher education? I answer this question from five *changing points of view*.

Teachers as Learners of Teaching

First, I argue that a sociocultural perspective *changes the way we think about teacher learning*. Since L2 teacher education is, at its core, about teachers as learners of teaching, understanding the cognitive and social processes that teachers go through as they learn to teach is foundational to informing what we do in L2 teacher education. In Chapter 2: Shifting Epistemologies in Teacher Education, I trace the epistemological shifts that have influenced the way in which we have traditionally thought about teacher learning. I argue that the research on teacher cognition carried out over the past 30 years has solidified our understanding of the sociocultural processes that are involved in teacher learning. In Chapter 3: Teachers as Learners of Teaching, I examine teacher learning from a sociocultural perspective, arguing that it provides us with a *theory of mind* that recognizes the inherent interconnectedness of the cognitive and social, and allows us to see the rich details of how teacher learning emerges out of and is constructed by teachers within the settings and circumstances of their work. I illustrate what these sociocultural processes look like by exploring teachers' narrative accounts of their own professional development. These accounts illustrate how teachers, through different mediational means, come to know what they know, how different concepts in their thinking develop, and how this internal activity transforms their understandings of themselves as teachers, their teaching practices, and the opportunities they create for student learning.

Language as Social Practice

Second, I argue that a sociocultural perspective *changes the way we think about language*. From a sociocultural perspective, language functions as a psychological tool that is used to make sense of experience, but also as a cultural tool in that it is used to share experiences and to make sense of those experiences with others, thus transforming experience into cultural knowledge and understandings. Since all social activities are structured and gain meaning in historically and culturally situated ways, the language used to describe an activity gains its meaning from concrete communicative activity in specific sociocultural contexts. In Chapter 4: Language as Social Practice, I argue that while a sociocultural perspective represents a *theory of mind* rather than a *theory of language*, it aligns well

with theories of language that emphasize the fundamentally social nature of language and conceptualize language as a constellation of social practices. I critique the traditional theories of language that have dominated the fields of linguistics and second language acquisition, and consequently permeated the content of L2 teacher education, as having failed to provide L2 teachers with a conceptualization of language that is amenable to L2 instruction. I propose that preparing professionals who embrace a *language as social practice* stance requires that L2 teachers become consciously aware of the underlying concepts that are embedded in how language use expresses meaning. They should also recognize that meaning is situated in specific social and cultural practices which are continually being transformed. Finally understanding language as fluid, dynamic, and unstable is as fundamental as conceptualizing language use as accessing resources and making choices about how to be in the L2 world.

Teaching as Dialogic Mediation

Third, I argue that a sociocultural perspective *changes the way we think about language teaching*. When teaching creates learning opportunities in which individuals can participate in activities that provide them with direct experiences in the use of new psychological tools, such tools have the potential to function as powerful instruments for human learning. In Chapter 5: Teaching as Dialogic Mediation, I argue that teaching within the context of formal schooling is best characterized as integrating a student-centered approach with deliberate teaching. From this perspective, dialogic mediation, or the character and quality of interaction between learners, teachers, and the objects in their learning environments, is paramount. Such interaction has the potential to create opportunities for development because this arises in the specific social activities learners engage in, the resources they use to do so, and what is accomplished by engaging in those activities. Tracing such development requires examining the processes in which learners' activities are initially mediated by other people or cultural artifacts but later come under their own control as they appropriate certain resources to regulate their own activities. Therefore, when teaching is conceptualized as dialogic mediation, the character and quality of interaction in terms of its communicative functions, the consequences for the social construction of meaning, and cognitive development are central.

Additionally, from a sociocultural perspective a fundamental goal of formal schooling is concept development. Within the context of the professional development of teachers, it is the emergence of true concepts (fully formed higher-level psychological tools) that enables teachers to make substantive and significant changes in the ways in which they engage in the activities associated with teaching and learning. And for true concepts to emerge, teachers must have multiple and sustained opportunities

for dialogic mediation, scaffolded learning, and assisted performance as they participate in and learn about relevant aspects of their professional worlds. When teachers' concept development leads to changes in the ways in which they think about and engage in instructional activities, a sociocultural perspective allows us to turn our attention to the relation between teacher learning and student learning. That is, when teachers have truly reconceptualized some aspect of their teaching, when they have come to think about and organize activities in the classroom in fundamentally different ways, this creates enormous potential to see changes in how students engage in learning activities, which can, in turn, lead to changes in both what and how students learn.

Macro-Structures and the L2 Teaching Profession

Fourth, I argue that a sociocultural perspective *changes the way we think about the broader social, cultural, and historical macro-structures* that are ever present and ever changing in the L2 teaching profession. In Chapter 6: Macro-Structures and the Second Language Teaching Profession, I use the analytical framework of Activity Theory (Engeström, 1987, 1999; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006; Thorne, 2004) to map the social influences and relationships involved in networks of human activity, or, in the case of L2 teacher education, to account for how an individual teacher's activities shape and are shaped by the social, cultural, and historical macro-structures that constitute his/her professional world. I review recent research that exposes how educational reform policies and high-stakes tests affect the ways in which teachers and their students are positioned, how teachers enact their teaching practices, and, more importantly, the kinds of learning environments teachers are willing and able to create for their students. I then argue that it is the responsibility of L2 teacher education to make teachers aware of the sanctioned policies, curricular mandates, and high-stakes assessment practices that can and will shape their work if they are to work with and against the consequences that these macro-structures may have on their instructional practices and, in turn, on their students' opportunities for L2 learning.

Inquiry-Based Approaches to Professional Development

Fifth, I argue that a sociocultural perspective *changes the way we think about what constitutes professional development*. In particular, I argue that if we embrace the notion that teacher learning is social, situated in physical and social contexts, and distributed across persons, tools, and activities, then L2 teacher education needs to redraw the boundaries that have typically defined professional development. This, I argue, involves looking at sites of teacher learning beyond visible professional

development activities such as coursework, workshops, and seminars, to include teachers' informal social and professional networks and the extent to which their classrooms are sites for professional learning. In Chapter 7: Inquiry-Based Approaches to Professional Development, I describe how the underlying assumptions of inquiry-based approaches to professional development are aligned with a sociocultural perspective and the potential these approaches create for productive teacher learning and improvements in teaching practice. I then describe various models of inquiry-based professional development, all of which, at their core, are designed to support teachers' concept development, create alternative structural arrangements that support sustained dialogic mediation between and among teachers and teacher educators, and provide assisted performance as teachers struggle through issues that are directly relevant to their professional worlds. Finally, I illustrate how inquiry-based approaches to professional development encourage teachers to engage in on-going, in-depth, and reflective examinations of their teaching practices and their students' learning, while embracing the processes of teacher socialization that occur in classrooms, schools, and wider professional communities.

Future Challenges for L2 Teacher Education

I conclude, in Chapter 8: Future Challenges for Second Language Teacher Education, by proposing several challenges that a sociocultural perspective poses for the field of L2 teacher education. The first challenge is to recognize that both the content and activities of L2 teacher education must take into account the social, political, economic, and cultural histories that are located in the contexts where L2 teachers live, learn, and work. Creating locally appropriate responses to support the preparation and professionalism of L2 teachers will entail recognizing how changing sociopolitical and socioeconomic contexts impact upon the ways in which teachers are positioned, how they enact their teaching practices, and, most importantly, the kinds of learning environments they are willing and able to create for their L2 students. A second challenge is to explore more fully the complex relationship between teacher professional learning and student L2 learning. A comprehensive understanding of this relationship will be essential if policy makers and other educational stakeholders are to recognize that time, attention, and support for professional development can and in fact do lead to greater gains in student L2 achievement. And finally, a third challenge for L2 teacher education is to equip teachers with the intellectual tools of inquiry that will enable them to resist the politics of accountability that are rapidly shaping global educational policies and national curricular mandates. This would enable teachers to create educationally sound, contextually appropriate, and socially equitable learning opportunities for the L2 students they teach.

"... a beautifully written, articulate and compelling argument for a sociocultural perspective on second language teacher education.... [This book] is a must-read for all who wish to understand this perspective."

David Nunan, University of Hong Kong

"... a superb addition to the field... significant and timely. Johnson is masterful at writing in an engaging, transparent prose about complex concepts that allows her work to be accessible to a wide audience—from beginning teachers and those learning to teach to scholars in the field of language teacher education. It's a rare scholar who can write prose like this. Throughout my reading I wanted to engage in dialogue with her—this is a sure sign of a great book."

Diane Tedick, University of Minnesota

Filling a gap in the literature, this book presents a comprehensive overview of the epistemological underpinnings of a sociocultural perspective on human learning and addresses in detail what this perspective has to offer the field of second language teacher education. Captured through five changing points of view, it argues that a sociocultural perspective on human learning changes the way we think about (1) how teachers learn to teach, (2) how teachers think about language, (3) how teachers teach second languages, (4) the broader social, cultural, and historical macro-structures that are ever present and ever changing in the second language teaching profession, and (5) what constitutes second language teacher professional development.

Directed to language teacher educators; those who conduct research on the content, activities, and outcomes of language teacher education; and seasoned language teachers who often move into teacher training roles with little or no background in the theory and research that informs language teacher education, this is not a book about *how to do L2 teacher education*, but rather, *how to think about what we do in L2 teacher education*. Overall, it clearly and accessibly makes the case that a sociocultural perspective on human learning reorients how the field understands and supports the professional development of second language teachers.

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