Sociocultural Theory and the Pedagogical Imperative in L2 Education

Vygotskian Praxis and the Research/Practice Divide

James P. Lantolf and
Matthew E. Poehner

ESL & Applied Linguistics Professional Series

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Matthew E. Poehner

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SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY AND THE PEDAGOGICAL IMPERATIVE IN L2 EDUCATION

From its inception in the early 1970s the field of second language acquisition (SLA) has struggled to overcome the dichotomy between theory/research and classroom practice. Explicating clearly and concisely the full implication of a praxis-oriented language pedagogy, this book argues for an approach to language teaching grounded in a significant scientific theory of human learning—a stance that rejects the consumer approach to theory and the dichotomy between theory and practice that dominates SLA and language teaching. This approach is based on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, according to which the two activities are inherently connected so that each is necessarily rooted in the other; practice is the research laboratory where the theory is tested. From the perspective of language education, this is what is meant by the "pedagogical imperative."

Sociocultural Theory and the Pedagogical Imperative in L2 Education:

- Elaborates a new approach to dealing with the relationship between theory and practice—an approach grounded in praxis—the dialectical unity of theory and practice
- Presents an analysis of empirical research illustrating praxis-based principles in real language classrooms
- Brings together cognitive linguistics and sociocultural theory—the former provides the theoretical knowledge of language required of praxis and the latter furnishes the theoretical principles of learning and development also called for in a praxis approach
- Offers recommendations for redesigning teacher education programs.

Its timely focus on the theory–practice gap in language education and its original approach to bridging it put this book at the cutting edge of thinking about Vygotskian sociocultural theory in applied linguistics and SLA.

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DEDICATION

Jim Lantolf to my grandchildren: Harrison, Henry, Jackson, Samson.

Matt Poehner to my extraordinary wife, Priya, and to our two little treasures, Bella and Leo.

PREFACE

The primary goal of this volume is to address what many in second language acquisition (SLA) research perceive as the problematic gap between theory/research on the one hand and classroom practice on the other. SLA researchers such as R. Ellis (2005b, 2010), Erlam (2008), and Long (2009), among others, propose to find ways of bridging this gap, which means, in large measure, translating the implications of the findings of SLA research in ways that are useful for teachers. The proposal the authors of the present volume offer is to argue, on the basis of sociocultural theory (SCT) as formulated by L. S. Vygotsky and his colleagues, that a theory/research–practice gap need not exist in the first place and to explore the research that has been carried out to date on L2 teaching and learning in the classroom setting that supports the "non-gap" position. To achieve this goal, we first discuss the foundations of SCT in the critical writings of Vygotsky as well as in the writings of contemporary neo-Vygotskian scholars, in particular, Carl Ratner (2012). We then consider how the current version of the theory has been extended to L2 educational practice, with specific attention to Gal'perin's (1992) theory of developmental education known as Systemic Theoretical Instruction (STI) and the concrete realization of Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as Dynamic Assessment (DA) (Luria, 1961).

The Intended Audience

The primary audience for this book is all those in the field of applied linguistics directly or indirectly concerned with understanding language development in the educational setting. This includes researchers, teachers, teacher educators, as well as those preparing to join the professional and academic communities,

including graduate students interested in pursuing a career in applied linguistics or language education. The book is also intended for those working in Vygotskian psychology, and in particular those concerned with language and education.

Overview

The book comprises nine chapters in total. The goal is to present our argument for the pedagogical imperative as it relates to L2 development in educational settings.

Chapter 1 outlines the nature of the theory/research–practice gap and briefly traces its history. It also initiates the discussion of a dialectical and praxis-based approach to overcoming the gap, not by bridging it but by eliminating it. Finally, it reviews the major relevant concepts and principles of sociocultural theory.

Chapter 2 fleshes out Vygotsky's theory of psychology, with specific focus on its grounding in materialist dialectical philosophy. In Chapter 2, we argue that to fully appreciate the significance of Vygotsky's theory necessitates recognizing that he was first and foremost a dialectical thinker and that as a consequence the principles and concepts of the theory he proposed are dialectical in nature. Thus, while we do not present an in-depth analysis of Marxist theory, we maintain that it is difficult to fully apprehend the unified nature of Vygotsky's proposals without some consideration of dialectical materialism. We are especially concerned with *praxis*, or the dialectical unity of theory and practice, which Vygotsky argued forms the basis of developmental education. As we explain in Chapter 2, it is important to keep in mind that SCT is not a theory restricted to explaining L2 development, as such. Rather, SCT is a general psychological theory that attempts to account for higher order consciousness, and, as Vygotsky himself (1987) pointed out, this includes language development. Therefore, the same principles and concepts that account for the development of memory, perception, attention, planning, and rational thought should also account for language development, and, most immediately, L2 development.

Chapter 2 also includes a discussion of the research methodology proposed by Vygotsky. His overall approach is often referred to as the *genetic method*, the goal of which is to understand and explain development by tracing its formation, or history, over time. A component of his general program is what he called the *experimental-developmental* method (Vygotsky, 1978), which is normally conducted in laboratory settings and involves observing the effect of introducing a mediational artifact into a task at the point where the task becomes difficult for the participants to complete. This is done on the theoretical grounds that higher forms of human development (i.e., cultural development) are mediated by tools and social interaction. An essential feature of Vygotsky's research program is to connect the findings of laboratory work to research in real-world settings, including schools. This approach to research forms the basis for the L2 studies considered in Chapters 5 through 8.

Chapter 3 continues this discussion and brings into focus a central tenet of Vygotsky's theory, namely his position that the sociocultural environment is the primary source of human development. Chapter 4 then connects this understanding of the relationship between the environment and development back to education. The logic is that if the sociocultural environment shapes development then intentionally and systematically organizing educational praxis in specific ways creates the conditions for development to take place rather than waiting for it to arise spontaneously as in the everyday world.

Arguably the two most important pedagogical frameworks derived from Vygotsky's theory are Gal'perin's (1992) *Systemic Theoretical Instruction* (STI) and Davydov's (2004) *developmental instruction*. Beginning from Vygotsky's contention that effective developmental education entails presentation of well-organized conceptual knowledge of the object of study linked to concrete practices, both approaches propose ways of materializing conceptual knowledge so that it can be appropriated by learners and used to mediate their performance in goal-directed activity. To date, most of the L2 research on developmental instruction has been informed by Gal'perin's approach (Ferreira, 2005 is a notable exception). Consequently, our major focus, beginning in Chapter 4, is on Gal'perin's educational model. A central theme of the chapter concerns how scientific knowledge, connected to everyday knowledge, may be effectively introduced into educational activity. In the case of L2 education, we make the case for cognitive linguistic research as a source of high quality scientific knowledge of language. We also consider neuroscience models that support a central role of explicit knowledge in developmental education.

Chapters 5 and 6 explore research that implements STI in L2 educational environments. In Chapter 5 we discuss three studies carried out that adopt an experimental-developmental approach, which involved engaging volunteer adult L2 learners in instruction carried out in accordance with principles of STI. One study addressed French negation (*pas*, *ne* ... *pas*), 1st person plural pronouns *on* and *nous*, and 2nd person formal and informal pronouns *tu* and *vous*. The second study focused on teaching learners of L2 English how to identify and interpret spoken sarcasm. The third study was the pilot for an in-progress study on topicalization in L2 Chinese. The study was designed to test the Teachability Hypothesis of Pienemann's Processability Theory. Chapter 6 moves to research conducted in intact classrooms. Again it focuses on three studies: one dealing with STI and L2 Spanish verbal aspect, another that examines the effects of STI on development of L2 Chinese temporal grammar, and the third reports on an STI instructional program designed to develop learner ability with English phrasal verbs formed with the particles *over*, *out*, and *up*.

Chapters 7 and 8 shift focus to another, and equally important, aspect of Vygotsky's theory—the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)—and how it has been brought into education through Dynamic Assessment (DA). Chapter 7 essentially complements Chapter 4 in that its focus is on the social interaction

between instructors and learners aimed at promoting development, whereas Chapter 4 is more concerned with the role of conceptual knowledge in language development. We argue that the ZPD may be appropriately understood as cooperative activity undertaken by teachers and learners that allows individuals to function beyond their actual capabilities. From this perspective, the quality of mediation during such interactions performs a dual function by promoting learner development and providing insights into abilities that have not yet fully emerged but are in the process of forming. The chapter includes discussion of the Mediated Learning Experience approach to DA proposed by Reuven Feuerstein (Feuerstein, Feuerstein, & Falik, 2010; Feuerstein, Rand, & Hoffman, 1979), whose work with learners with special needs bears striking similarities to Vygotsky's approach to "defectology." Moreover, Feuerstein's DA framework has strongly influenced L2 DA research in that he eschews the standardization required for producing test scores that adhere to traditional psychometric criteria in favor of open-ended dialogue between mediators and learners that allows for joint regulation as they cooperatively complete tasks, explore questions, reflect on performances, and consider problems.

Chapter 8 surveys recent L2 DA studies that illustrate how Vygotsky's conceptualization of ZPD activity and Feuerstein's elaboration of DA have been pursued in L2 educational contexts. Although numerous studies of L2 DA have appeared over the last several years, we limit our discussion to representative projects that reflect collaborations with L2 classroom teachers and that afford insights into processes of L2 development that help to further refine our understanding of the underlying theoretical concept (i.e., the ZPD). The selected DA projects may be understood as instantiations of Vygotskian praxis. Similar to the organization of studies in Chapters 5 and 6, the DA research reported on in Chapter 8 includes one project conducted in an intact classroom and another project carried out in an experimental-developmental setting. The classroom study documents how a teacher adapted DA to meet the needs and constraints of her unique environment without compromising the principles of the theory. The experimental-developmental study included university learners and its focus was on L2 French listening comprehension, a component often overlooked in L2 instructional programs.

The third study examined in Chapter 8 was a project that developed listening and reading comprehension DA tests in Chinese, French, and Russian delivered in an on-line format. An innovative feature of this project is the introduction of a *learning potential score* that takes account of differences between mediated and non-mediated learner performance. Part of this study included a series of one-on-one DA interactions between mediators and learners aimed at developing the prompts used in the on-line tests. One of these interactions revealed insights that enhanced our understanding of DA. We therefore include a discussion of this component of the broader project in the chapter.

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Chapter 9 concludes the book with discussion of the implications of the theory/research–practice dialectic for L2 teacher education. The chapter pays special attention to the forms of expertise required of L2 teachers if they are to undertake praxis activities such as STI and DA. We argue that teachers need to have in-depth and systematic knowledge of a coherent theory of development, such as SCT, in order to understand the potential for their practices to intervene in and indeed shape learner L2 development. Equally important, high quality linguistic knowledge is required if teachers are to move beyond rule-of-thumb accounts of language grammar in favor of organizing their L2 curriculum around abstract or scientific conceptual knowledge of language. This is an aspect of teacher preparation that has been, in our view, neglected, particularly in programs that prepare teachers of languages other than English. As part of this discussion, the chapter surveys a number of current L2 teacher education programs in the US with regard to course requirements relating to language knowledge for teachers. Together, expert knowledge of a theory of development and their object of study (i.e., language) positions L2 teachers to overcome the theory/research–practice divide by engaging in praxis, that is, theoretically guided, practical activity that elaborates and refines our understanding of the processes of L2 development. In our view, the L2 field has reached a turning point wherein praxis is imperative both for researchers as well as educators.

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1

THEORY/RESEARCH–PRACTICE GAP IN APPLIED LINGUISTICS

Before second language acquisition (SLA) was recognized as an independent field, scholars such as S. Pit Corder (1973, 1978) argued that applied linguistics, as the field most directly concerned with the teaching of second and foreign languages, was a consumer, rather than generator, of theories. In other words, applied linguists assumed the task of bringing into relevance theories of language for the purpose of improving intentional language instruction. This ranged from first-order application that entailed descriptions of a particular language (Corder, 1973, p. 145); to second-order application, whereby material from first-order description was selected for inclusion in a pedagogical syllabus (p. 150); to third-order application where specific instructional techniques and materials were implemented relative to the second-order syllabus (p. 155). Researchers soon began to ask questions about the nature of L2 acquisition that were not directly related to classroom instruction. Long (2009, p. 376, italics in original), for instance, described the separation between SLA and language teaching, as follows: "the goal of a theory of language teaching is a maximally *efficient* approach, not, as in the case of a theory of SLA, one which is primarily concerned with what is *necessary* and *sufficient* for language acquisition to occur."

The SLA branch of applied linguistics began to grow its own theories and eventually emerged as a discipline without direct connections or interests in classroom instructional practice. Even though SLA emerged as an independent field, researchers continued to cast an eye toward the classroom setting and to wonder if and how the findings of their work might be relevant for teachers. Indeed, Crookes (1998, p. 6) noted that "If the relationship [between research and practice] were simple, or not a source of concern, I do not think it would come up so often." Bygate (2005, p. 568) captured the ambivalence of the field when he noted that although by the 1980s SLA had established itself as an independent

"academic discipline in its own right," many continued to view SLA "as synonymous with an approach to language teaching." R. Ellis (2010, p. 183), for example, commented that despite its interest in language acquisition as such, SLA is "still at its heart an applied rather than a pure discipline."

One of the recurring worries regarding the relationship of SLA and language pedagogy has been the perception among some researchers that the field has not yet reached the level of maturity where it can with confidence make recommendations to language teaching. For example, Tarone, Swain, and Fathman (1976, p. 19) remarked that "second language acquisition research is still in an infancy stage, and hence cannot yet provide the classroom teacher with the kind of valid and reliable guidelines needed to effect curriculum change." At about the same time, Hatch (1978, p. 140) made her famous comment that the findings of research either should not be applied at all, or if they are to be applied, we should do so "with caution." About a decade later, Lightbown (1985, p. 173) expressed the belief that SLA was still not in a position to offer teachers concrete guidance on what should be done in classrooms, although the field might be in a position to highlight some expectations for what teachers and learners can achieve through classroom instruction. Fifteen years later, Lightbown (2000, p. 452) noted that SLA research had established a robust compilation of findings that not only offered teachers guidance on what was achievable in classrooms but that the field could also "provide valuable clues to effective pedagogical practice." However, she once again echoed Hatch's admonition to apply with "caution." Even more recently Gass and Mackey (2007, p. 190) continued to worry about the application of the findings of research on the interactionist hypothesis to the classroom as potentially "premature."

A particularly revealing manifestation of the ambivalence toward the application of SLA research to classroom practice is documented in *TESOL Quarterly* (2007) where five SLA researchers debated the merits of the editorial policy of the journal at the time whereby its aim was to publish papers that contribute to bridging the theory and practice gap to the extent that practical submissions must be grounded in theory and theoretical articles much show their relevance for practice. Magnan (2007), then outgoing editor of the *Modern Language Journal*, remarked that she had revised the journal's editorial policy to encourage submissions that did not avow any "immediate pedagogical applications" (p. 401). Chapelle (2007) adopted the alternative view that strongly supported the stated policy of *TESOL Quarterly* (p. 405). Han (2007, p. 391) argued that "excessive concern" with trying to force a connection between empirical research and classroom practice when one is not clearly present could result in misplaced applications as well as failure to pursue interesting research because it does not have clear practical implications. For her part, Belcher (2007) adopted a more neutral stance that pointed to the theory and practice gap as reflected in the pedagogically oriented programs of the annual TESOL Convention (we would include the annual ACTFL Convention) and the strongly theory/research bias of AAAL

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