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# Socio-cultural perspectives on 2<sup>nd</sup> Language Learning

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# Introduction

In sociocultural theory learning is thought of as a social event taking place as a result of interaction between the learner and the environment.

Sociocultural theory has its origins in the writings of the Russian Psychologist L.S. Vygotsky and his colleagues. SCT considers human mental functioning as essentially a mediated process organized by cultural artifacts, activities and concepts . Language is also believed to be the primary means of mediation.

Developmental processes occur as the outcome of child's participation in cultural, linguistic and historical settings such as getting involved in interactions within families, peer groups, educational institutions, workplaces, sport activities, etc.

# THE THEORY AND ITS CONSTRUCT

★ Sociocultural theory has a holistic approach towards learning. The theory emphasizes meaning as the central aspect of any teaching and holds that skills or knowledge must be taught in all its complex forms, rather than presented as isolated, discrete concepts . Learners are thought to be active meaning-makers and problem-solvers in their learning process.

The theory also lays great stress on the dynamic nature of interconnections among teachers, learners and tasks and advocates concept of learning which stems from interactions among individuals.



## • Zone of Proximal Development

The dissatisfaction with two practical issues in educational psychology prompted Vygotsky to introduce the concept of ZPD.

These issues included the assessment of a child's intellectual abilities and the evaluation of instructional practices .

Regarding the first issue, Vygotsky argues that the testing techniques used only assessed the actual level of development, yet ignored the potential abilities of the child.



He maintained that psychology should be more concerned with the potential abilities of a child, i.e. what a child will be to accomplish in the future but

he/she has not achieved yet. In order to predict the future abilities of children and the importance of it, he defined the concept of ZPD as —the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers|| . ZPD contributes to shaping the mental functions of a child which has not become mature yet, but will develop in future.





# Internalization theory



*Another sociocultural theory concept* is the notion of internalization, that is, the process by which intermental functioning in the form of social relations among individuals and interaction with socially constructed artifacts is turned inwards and transformed into intramental functioning.

Over the years of studying at schools, there are various concepts that have been internalized for them.

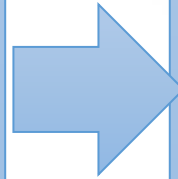
These issues include the role of the teachers, the roles of the learners, how classes should be handled and how instruction should take place. Therefore, it may seem to be hard for them to change their conception regarding the role of the teacher. Thus, when they are asked to have a learner-centered approach in their instruction or incorporate reciprocal teaching, it may conflict with their own internalized notions of the roles of teacher and student.

# MEDIATION THEORY

One of the most important aspects of sociocultural theory is the concept of mediation. As human beings use physical tools to make changes in their environment, and consequently upgrade the conditions of their lives, they also use symbolic tools, or signs, to mediate and regulate their relationships with the people in their surroundings and thus change the nature of their relations with them.

Williams and Burden (1997) point out that .

For Vygotsky and his followers, mediation refers to the use of tools. Tools in this sense refer to anything that is used in order to help solve a problem or achieve a goal. The most important of these tools is symbolic language, the use of meditational language to help learners move into and through their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is of particular significance.



An example clarifying the psychological mediation is the effectiveness of the use of a tool, such as a shovel or a backhoe to dig a hole in the ground in comparison with the use of bare hands without the use of a tool for the same purpose. Because the above mentioned tools (a backhoe or a shovel) are culturally constructed, they give more power to the human beings to act more effectively and make changes in their lives. Likewise, we use symbolic artifacts to establish an indirect or mediated relationship with the world.

# • Activity Theory



Activity theory, as one of the components of SCT, was developed by one of Vygotsky's student, A. Leontev. It deals with the unified nature of human behavior, which is considered to be the result of the integration of social and cultural mediations. Lauria believes that mind is not the result of the activity occurring in the brain but a functional system shaped as the brain's electro-chemical processes come under control of our cultural artifacts, the most important of which is language.

To explore the implications of activity theory for second/foreign language acquisitions, and to find out how activity theory brings new insights for language development, several studies have been conducted. Coghlan and Duff contended that scholars always view tasks as being scientifically controllable and measurable, yet they argued that tasks are quite variable, different people react differently to the same task. They proposed an active role for the learners and maintained that learners are active agents who, according to their own objectives, give specific directions to the activities and even different times and conditions have different impacts on their performance on the same task.



# INNER SPEECH

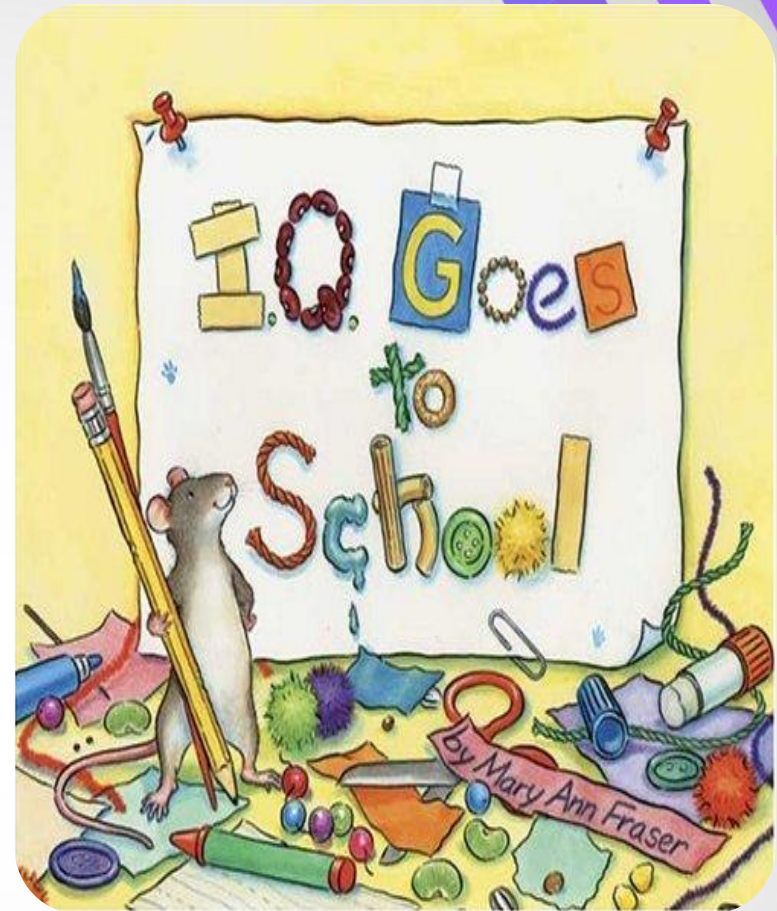


# INSTRUCTION

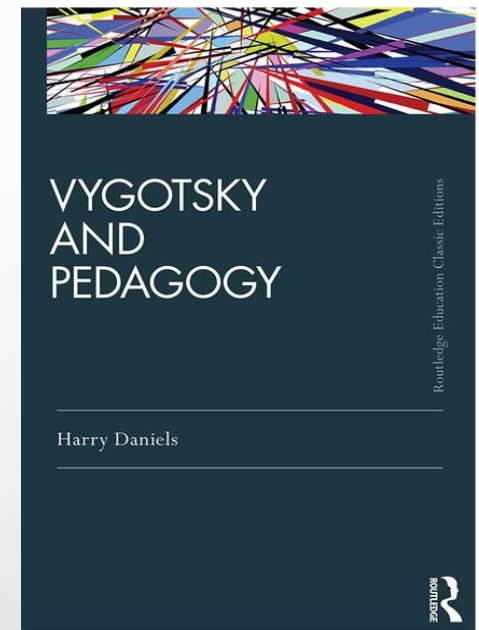
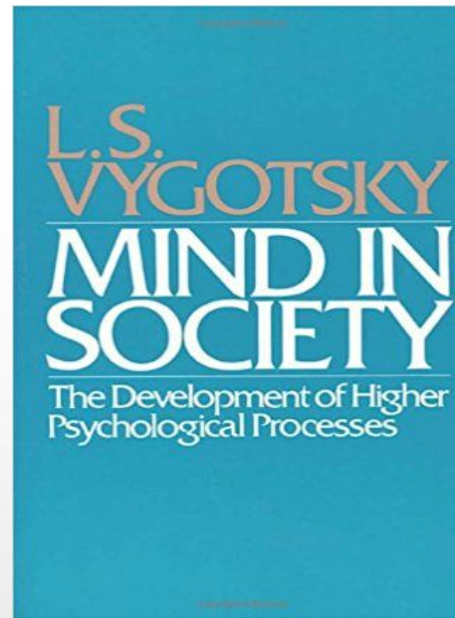


Vygotsky had observed that children entering school with low *intelligence quotient* , in comparison with those having a high intelligence quotient , generally had a significant increase in their scores as a result of instruction, while children that entered the same institution with high IQs usually did not show a remarkable progress.

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**Vygotsky** in his sociocultural theory considered human beings as social beings whose formation as humans depends necessarily and dialectically on joint social activity, as well as on careful empirical observation of the link between *intelligence quotient* and schooling.



Vygotsky they did not assume classroom activities as discrete ones as in standard classroom practice, but viewed them as the same activity. To Vygotsky, it is not enough to know what an individual can do alone without assistance, as reflected in traditional approaches to testing: it is necessary to discover what the person can do through scaffolding (i.e., instruction), because it portrays what the person will eventually be able to do when that help has been internalized.



**Learning, development,  
and assessment**

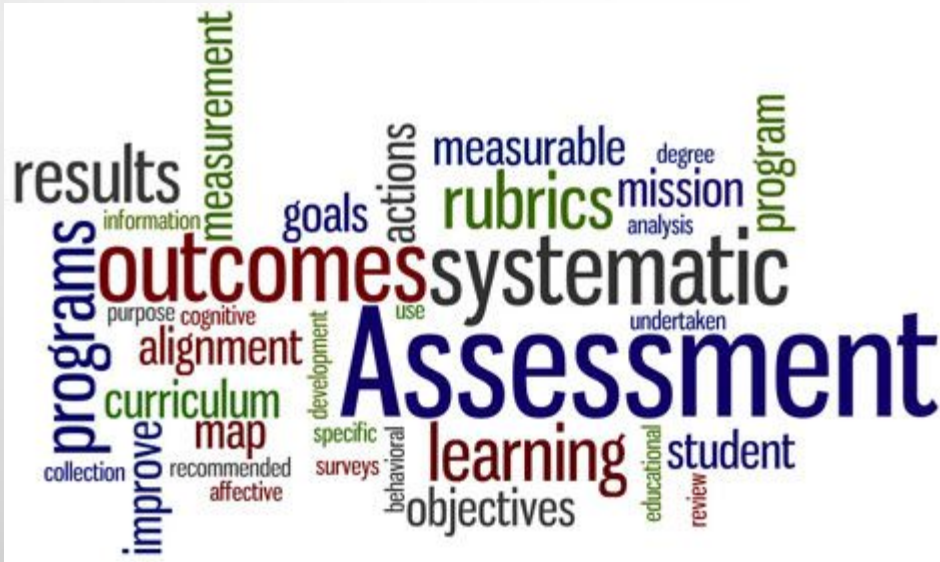


Two individuals, who score the same on a traditional test without overt assistance, may well perform completely differently when assistance is offered. One person may be able to do much more with help, while the other may not. That is why Vygotsky laid emphasis on a kind of instruction which was aimed at the future, at what the person cannot yet do.



# Learning, development, and assessment

- Recently, the new type of assessment instrument, dynamic assessment works within the framework of Vygotsky's claim on the dialectic unity of instruction, development, and assessment. Dynamic assessment suggests that both rate and pathway of development are likely to be different for different individuals. This claim from Vygotsky's standpoint presents a challenge to the current way of thinking about L2 learning—that there is a common route and rate at which acquisition takes place.



# Conclusion

Learning, in Vygotsky's view, can be defined as what an individual is able to do with assistance of another person or an artifact created by others. Assistance can be offered in the form of direct and explicit instructions, such as those happening in schools or educational institutes; or indirect and implicit instruction, such as those occurring in the case of everyday unreflective activity. On the other hand, development can take place only when that assistance is adopted and internalized, which enables individuals to function independently and apply and extend what they have acquired to broader contexts.

Another area that is especially exciting and relevant for L2 pedagogy is that which deals with dynamic assessment. Unlike the traditional assessment which focuses on the final product of what learners have achieved, dynamic assessment seeks to find out how internalization takes place when the assistance is provided.

Hence, it holds that the rate and route of the learning for different individuals might differ.

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