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Second Language Teacher Education: Sociocultural directions for the future

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Abstract

This paper reviews the field of second language teacher education and identifies a need for future research to include a sociocultural perspective on issues affecting teacher preparation. Schulz (2000) laments that progress in the field of second language teacher education as a whole has been surprisingly small, adding it is still "long on rhetoric, opinions, and traditional dogma, and short on empirical research that attempts to verify those opinions or traditional practice" (pp. 516-517). First providing a survey of the field with a particular emphasis on developments that have influenced second language teacher education in Australia, the paper then outlines the nature of a Vygotskian sociocultural framework for analysis. It concludes by describing one possibility of how such a framework might be applied to issues affecting second language teacher education.

Keywords
sociocultural theory, activity theory, second language education, teacher education, methodology, Vygotsky

Second language teacher education: International and Australian context

The field of second language teacher education, whether focussing on pre-service or in-service training, has a broad and chequered history. Pedagogy has tended to be driven by the linguistic theories of the day rather than educational research into second language teaching itself as it occurs in natural, realistic settings. Notable exceptions are

the areas of teacher talk and classroom interaction but, even then, the focus has always remained on learners and language acquisition rather than in-depth empirical studies of teacher practice and pedagogy for its own sake. Our argument is that, by and large, second language teacher education is driven by what we know about language learning – not language *teaching*.

From an international perspective, it is teachers of English as a second language for whom most research has been undertaken (Allwright, 1988; Fanselow, 1987; Freeman & Richards, 1996; Richards & Nunan, 1991). Research into the training of teachers of other languages, in particular the European languages such as French, German and Italian, has been conducted in universities in these countries, with some also coming from the University of Stirling in Great Britain (Johnstone, 1992; Mitchell, 1988).

In Australia, the majority of pre-service teacher education courses focus on basic strategies for developing and monitoring progress in the four macro-skills and incorporating elements of culture (both capital and small "c" – "high" and "low" – culture). This format became typical of Australian second language teacher education programs during the mid-1990s following reforms that aimed to redress the inadequate number of qualified teachers of "Languages Other Than English" (LOTE). After LOTE was prioritised as a key learning area by the Commonwealth Government in the late 1980s, it was soon realised that implementation of the initiative was problematic either because teachers had insufficient second language competence, or second language speakers were not qualified to teach.

In 1993, the Nicholas, Moore, Clyne and Pauwels enquiry into the supply of second language teachers reported that the main issues affecting second language teacher education at that time were language competence, sociocultural and other background knowledge, and language pedagogy. However, when it comes to elaborating on the nature of what language pedagogy specifically refers to, the report is somewhat vague:

> our orientation is to pedagogies that promote practical, useable competence in Languages other than English, while not ignoring areas of knowledge that give this competence greater substance in various ways. These pedagogies are now

generally known as "communicative", although the precise details of how communicative methodologies are implemented vary widely and are also often the subject of debate, disagreements and misunderstanding. [….] We do not propose to enter the details of this debate. (p.91)

The only substantial research addressing second language teacher practice and pedagogy over the last three decades tends to fall into either of two main categories: teacher talk (Chaudron, 1979, 1982, 1988; Dahl, 1981; Downes, 1981; Gaies, 1977; Hakansson, 1986; Henzel, 1973, 1979a, 1979b; Ishiguro, 1986; Kliefgen, 1985; Long & Sato, 1983; Milk, 1985; Mizon, 1981; Mannon, 1986; Wesche & Ready, 1985) or classroom interaction (i.e., task types and modes of organisation) (Long et al 1976; Martyn, 1996; Nunan, 1991; Pica, 1987; Porter, 1983). Both, however, still ultimately focus on the relationship of these issues within a framework of understanding language acquisition and learning – the affect of instruction on acquisition more generally (Ellis, 1984; Mollering & Nunan, 1994; Montgomery & Eisenstien, 1985; Pienemann, 1989; Swain, 1985; Zhou, 1991) – rather than an appreciation of focusing on teaching for the sake attempting to understand the nature and practice of second language teaching itself.

Two years after the Nicholas et al. (1993) report, the *Minimum Skills/Competencies Standards for LOTE Teaching* (Commins, 1995) went some way towards determining more clearly what was required of LOTE teachers in terms a competency based framework. However, the framework describes what teachers should know about in broad generic terms rather than addressing the content or nature of second language education programs specifically; for example, "has some understanding of the traditional and lesson [sic] common language teaching methodological approaches and their strengths and weaknesses" and "articulates his/her beliefs about how language learning takes place and implications of this for the methodological approaches s/he draws upon", as indicators of "The teacher has some understanding of the principles of language teaching methodological approaches and uses language teaching processes appropriate to the learning goals" (p. 64). Furthermore, the basis for the framework relied upon survey responses from sixty-five "experts", not an empirical investigation of actual classroom practice, perpetuating further what Schulz (2000) argues as a

knowledge base "long on rhetoric, opinions, and traditional dogma, and short on empirical research that attempts to verify those opinions or traditional practice" (pp. 516-517).

Indeed, *Language Teachers: The pivot of policy (*Australian Language and Literacy Council & National Board of Employment Education and Training, 1996), an influential and extensive volume on the supply and quality of LOTE teachers published the year after the release of the *Minimum Skills/Competencies Standards for LOTE Teaching*, argues that while such outlines of "teacher competencies are essential, […] it is also necessary to go further to consider what happens once suitably proficient and qualified teachers enter the classroom" (p. 156). The report goes on to contest:

> it is useful to consider why it is that teachers with similar levels of language proficiency and similar backgrounds in language teaching methodology often produce widely differing outcomes. Language programs in a school can flourish under one teacher and wither under another […] Examining such situations and *focusing on the activity of teaching* [italics added] can yield insights that enhance the quality of language programs and learner outcomes. (pp. 156-157)

This concurs with Freeman and Johnson's (1998a) observation that "teacher education has been a much done but relatively little studied in the field" (p. 398), asserting that research into second language teacher education lags a decade behind other areas of teacher education in general. Our discipline, as Velez-Rendon (2002) puts it in her analysis of second language teacher education over the past decade (with particular reference to Freeman & Johnson, 1998b; Freeman & Richards, 1996: Richards & Nunan, 1991 and Schulz, 2000), has reached a juncture where understanding how language teachers actually learn the "how to" of teaching and their evolution into language teaching professionals requires us to "inquire into their cognitive worlds and personal teaching practices" (p. 457).

Velez-Rendon's (2002) critique of the field is a convincing (and somewhat condemning) argument that, on the whole, research into our understanding how second language teachers learn how to teach, develop their teaching skills and link theory to

practice, as well as the influence of their own experiences and belief systems their classroom practices, is woefully inadequate. She concludes, and we agree,

> we need to know more about language teachers: what they do, how they think, what they know, and how they learn. Specifically, we need to understand more about how language teachers conceive of what they do: what they know about language teaching, how they think about their classroom practices, and how that knowledge and those thinking processes are learned through formal teacher and education and informal experience on the job (citing Freeman & Richards, 1996, p. 1) [….] Also needed is further research into contextual factors influencing second language teachers' ongoing professional development, such as school culture, cooperating teachers, university supervisors, parents, and students. (p. 465)

Sociocultural directions for the future

Having now broadly considered the history of research into second language education in Australia over the past few decades, we have identified that the nature of language *teaching* itself is still in need of specific attention. We have seen that until very recently, the focus of second language teacher education has been almost exclusively on the nature of language acquisition and language learning, without systematic empirical research into the way teachers actually go about carrying out this work in real-life contexts and the influence of such contexts on second language teaching practice. The remainder of this paper outlines one possibility to move future research forward in this area by providing a framework that allows us to critically examine and account for the practice of second language *teaching*[1].

The framework we propose draws on sociocultural theory and its associated theory of activity. "Sociocultural" appears frequently within our field and the other social sciences with the pervasion of postmodernity and its assertion that truth is only relative to the thoughts, practices, values and ideology of any one particular people, time or

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[1] It should be emphasised for clarity's sake that we are referring to sociocultural theory in relation to 'teaching' in this paper as a means to *understand teaching*, not as a "method of teaching" (i.e., not as a pedagogical approach (to teach a language using Vygotskian principals, for example)).

place: the social and cultural milieu within which the foci of our studies occur (Kumar, 1995). It has therefore become a convenient term of general reference to a range of issues that affect and somehow bear influence upon the subjects of our research. "Sociocultural theory" has begun to refer in more recent times, however, to a specific body of literature which draws on the ideas of Soviet psychologist Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1978; 1987). Although the bulk of Vygotsky's work was originally written in Russian during the 1920s and 1930s, reliable translations of his texts in English have only become readily available since the 1980s and the application of his ideas in mainstream Western social science is still only embryonic – as Chaiklin (2001) jokes, "What is over 75 years old, but still a baby? Sociocultural theory[2]" (p. 15).

Sociocultural theory

The central idea of sociocultural theory is that development depends on interaction with others and the world around us (Vygotsky, 1987). Dialectic materialist in nature with its origins in the philosophies of Kant, Fichte, Hegel and Marx (Tolman, 2001), Vygotsky's posits that humans use tools and other cultural artefacts to act upon the world to satisfy needs and achieve goals which, in turn, transforms our psychological being which, then in turn yet again, affects how we develop as individuals, a society (culture) and, ultimately, a species (Scribner, 1985).

Tools and artefacts not only refer to obvious items such as hammers, automobiles, and computers, but also to what Vygotsky considered the most powerful one of all: language and its associated semiotic system of signs and symbols, "language [includes …] various systems for counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps, and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs; etc." (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 137).

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[2] Chaiklin's actual reference to sociocultural theory is "cultural-historical psychology", acknowledging that they refer to the same general orientation (p. 24).

Vygotsky (1981) represents this key aspect of his theory diagrammatically in the form of a triangle that describes the association between a simple response and stimuli mediated with the assistance of a tool:
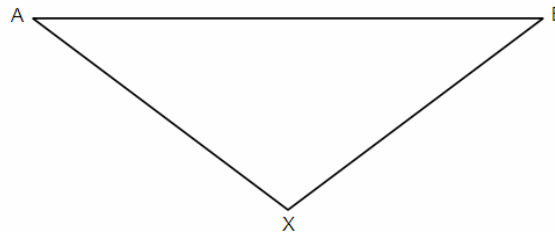
<div align="right">(p. 138)</div>

In this example, A represents the subject (i.e., a person), B the object of their activity (e.g., remember a list of items for shopping), and X the tools required to fulfill that activity (e.g., pen, paper and the words for the names of various items).

**Teaching as a social "activity"**

For Vygotsky, it was the tool which became the unit of analysis in this model – the "word". From it, he formulated his thesis that thinking and speech (that is, thought and language) are *inter*dependent in the development of higher mental processes in humans. This contrasts with Piaget's (1953) notion that cognitive development is a precursor for language, or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Sapir, 1966; Whorf, 1956) (in its strongest form): that language determines thought.

Leont'ev (1981) shifted Vygotsky's emphasis on the tool as a unit of analysis to the activity itself within which the tools and artefacts are deployed – effectively moving from a "world of objects" (Lantolf & Appel, 1994, p. 16) to one more better understood as a collective of relationships and communities. Leont'ev's contribution is distinguished from Vygotsky's original thesis as "activity theory", although it has been described less a theory per se and more a philosophical framework to approach the investigation of social activity (Thorne, in press).

Early activity theorists formulated a three-tiered explanatory framework for the analysis of activity that considered *activity*, *actions* and *operations* (Jonassen, 2000). The highest of these levels, activity, is oriented towards the object (or motive) of the whole community and not is generally not the focus of conscious awareness. At the level of action, however, conduct is conscious and goal-orientated towards the motive, and carried out by individuals or smaller groups from the larger community. Operations are routine behaviours executed with little, if any, conscious awareness of the act itself to fulfil a goal. An example of this in everyday life might be as follows:

Activity (Motive)	Earning money
Action (Goal)	Driving to work
Operation (Conditions)	Using the breaks

Contemporary reformulations of Leont'ev's earlier work has structured activity into "systems", accentuating the idea of the community influence over the relationship between subject and object thus:
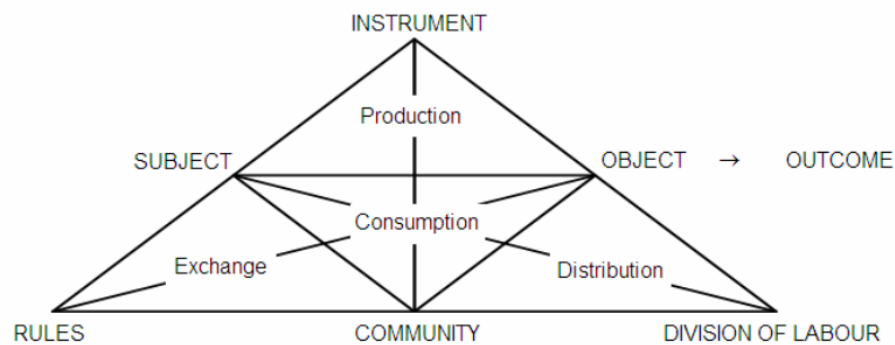
(Engestrom, 1987, p. 47)

Activity systems provide an opportunity to build upon the ideas of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in a way that is both systematic and analytical. The top half of the diagram ("production": subject/instrument/outcome) mirrors the idea central to Vygotsky's model described earlier: the *subject* oriented towards its *object* achieves the desired *outcome* through the application of *tools*. The exchange, consumption and distribution subsystems below highlight the elements of the sociocultural setting within

which production occurs described just above: the specific *division of labour* and *rules* that exist within that specific *community*.

Community situates activity within a wider context by recognising that it only has meaning as part of a larger social setting. As Leont'ev (1981) states, "the human individual's activity is a system of social relations. It does not exist without those social relations" (pp. 46-47). As one of the authors (Cross, 2004) has argued elsewhere:

> 'Teaching' has no meaning in and by itself, and there is no 'one teacher' that has sole authority over absolutely everything related to the act of teaching. Teachers, their work (goals, activities) and how they do their work is derived from where they are situated within a wider social, cultural and historical context. (p. 34)

Rules regulate activity by defining acceptable expectations of behaviour according to the community in which it occurs. Certain rules might be quite explicit (laws which state how many hours a student must study a foreign language, for example), while others are consistent with social norms (say, remaining quite while the teacher addresses the class). *Division of labour* recognises different members of the community contribute towards obtaining the overriding goal in different ways. Teaching assistants, for instance, might be required to prepare various materials for use in the class that teachers would find otherwise find carrying their primary activity of teaching difficult without.

For the purpose of studying activity system of second language teaching, the generic representation above would translate into something along the lines of:
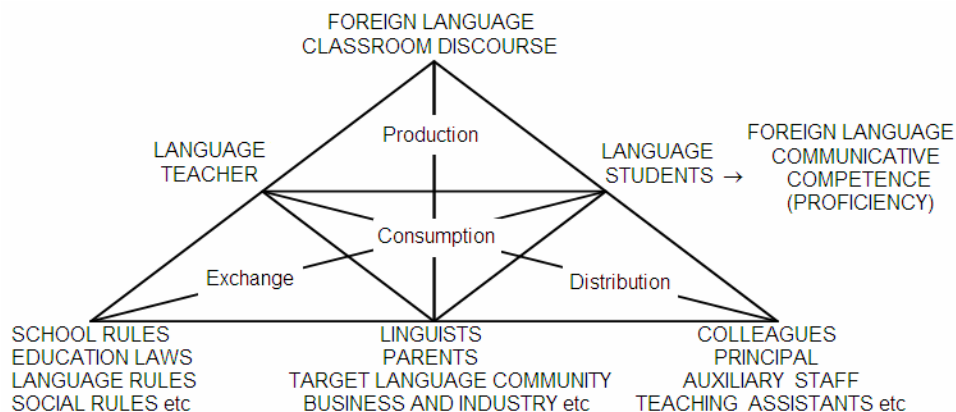
(Cross, 2004, p. 35)

The teacher is presumed to have in this particular model (for the sake of an illustrative example) a very specific outcome: improving the communicative competence of the students' target language. This outcome was chosen since it is an idealised vision of language learning outcomes under a communicative language teaching approach – the dominant orientation of contemporary foreign language education (Gass, 2000; Macaro, 1997). In real-life teaching situations, however, the teacher's outcome might not obvious and should never be taken for granted – in a test preparation cohort, for example, the teachers actual outcome might be on improving grammatical competence, learning specialised vocabulary or even becoming familiar with the test-taking format itself. In any case, regardless of the overarching activity system at work (eg, to achieve communicative competence), it must also be remembered that these larger activities are only achieved through the execution of conscious actions and their corresponding operations, so some – to name but just a few – of the possible actions that might be apparent in the activity of teaching in a second language classroom could be as follows:

Activity: Teach Year 8 Japanese

Action	Maintain classroom management
Operations	Routines (opening/closing class, quiz, etc)
	Take down names of students not working
	Cue students to speak/respond

Action	Provide opportunities for comprehensible input
Operations	Modelling language in use
	Asking questions for clarification
	Using props and realia

Action	Incorporate other areas of curriculum
Operations	Use thinking-skills games
	Provide access to library resources/internet

(and so on …)

Wells (1999) uses an adaptation of Halliday's systemic-functional approach (1985) to organise discourse (conceptualising the classroom "language" as a tool mediating the social activity of "teaching") to interpret practice from the viewpoint of the subject's goals and objectives in relation to activity, action and operations:

Episode

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                    Episode
                    |------------------|
            Sequence              Sequence n
      |------------------|-------|-----------------|
(Preparatory Ex.)   Nuclear Exchange   (Dependant Ex.)   (Embedded Ex.)
              |_____|-------------|
          Initiate         Respond        (Follow-up)
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(p. 239)

The familiar IRF *moves* (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975) at the lowest level in this representation combine to make an *exchange (operation)* which could be either nuclear (stand alone) or bound (reliant upon a nuclear exchange). Bound exchanges include preparatory (such as a bid nomination exchange prior to the teacher asking a question), dependent (where the nuclear exchange gets further developed) and embedded exchanges (instances within exchanges that deal with the problem of uptake or moving the exchange along, such as a request for repetition). *Sequence (action)* refers to a cluster of exchanges that go together to form an identifiable "chunk", and *episodes* relate these functions together that make up an actual "*activity*" (i.e., the overall task).

At this point, what we are describing might appear similar to typical observation schedule inventories or rank classification schema already used in standard classroom discourse analysis, but there are a number of significant, critical differences. First, this framework relies solely upon the orientating objectives (motives and goals) of the *subject* themselves. Observation schedules and standard discourse analysis work primarily from the perspective of the outsider (researcher) who interprets classroom behaviour (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975). Second, the basis of the observations made lies not on observation alone, but in concrete manifestations by way of tools use (primarily language, but this also includes paralanguage and all cultural artefacts used to mediate a situation – in more general terms, "classroom discourse") to mediate activity, with the

concept of "activity" being the primary unit of analysis. Third, "sociocultural" (that is, the context) and its relationship and influence upon the use of tool use (the classroom discourse) is stated as an explicit and systematic framework within "activity systems", with a sound and well-defined theoretical foundation rather than being factored into the discussion ad hoc during the later stages of analysis and/or interpretation as it appears relevant from the perspective of the researcher.

Conclusion

Issues around foreign language teacher education has come to the fore in the past decade given the need to develop a quality second language teacher workforce in Australia with changes to its economic, social and geo-political environment. We have argued, however, that research into second language teaching itself is still vastly inadequate with the emphasis remaining largely on how languages are learned, rather than critical, empirical studies of how such training translates to how languages are taught in real-life teaching environments.

The proposition put forward in this paper is that a sociocultural theoretical framework be adopted with the "activity" of foreign language teaching itself becoming the chief unit of analysis. In so doing, we are able to see how teachers, through the manifestation of classroom discourse to achieve goals and meet motives, go about managing the "activity" of teaching and nature of their jobs as teachers in real-life classroom communities.

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