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Research Methods and Sociocultural Approaches in Second Language Acquisition

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Since the publication of Frawley and Lantolf's 1985 study, there has been a significant increase in second language acquisition (SLA) research using sociocultural approaches that draw from Vygotsky's theoretical framework and methodological approach. Researchers interested in diverse facets of SLA both in and out of educational contexts have utilized sociocultural theory in a variety of ways. Some have focused more on the internal aspects of language, the mental processes involved in making and communicating meaning through language activities, while others have focused more on the social, cultural, physical, and historical contexts of second language (L2) learning and acquisition. While researchers have relied on different interpretations and aspects of sociocultural theory, they all strive to understand second language learning and acquisition considering the role of sociocultural *context* as a mediating force in language development and use. They also recognize the essential role of semiotic mediation—making meaning through signs—in the development of the internal meaning-making processes.

Lantolf (2000, p. 18) draws on the memoir of one of Vygotsky's closest collaborators, Alexander Luria's *The Making of Mind: A Personal Account of Soviet Psychology*, to describe sociocultural approaches:

Because sociocultural research seeks to study mediated mind in the various sites where people engage in the normal activities affiliated with living, it undertakes to maintain the richness and complexity of "living reality" rather than distilling it "into its elementary components" for the purpose of constructing "abstract models that lose the properties of the phenomena themselves" . . . On this account, explanation of human activities is about observation, description, and interpretation guided by a theory that is careful not to compromise "the manifold richness of the subject." (Luria, 1979, pp. 174, 178)

The subject of Vygotsky's work was analyzing the development of internal systems within systems in the human brain/mind in complex, dialectical interactions with the "living reality" in which it exists. He advocated methods that were appropriate to the matter being studied—the unification of thinking and speaking processes—and not just methods borrowed from the natural sciences, which is what psychology had done in an effort to be recognized as an authentic field of science. He saw a dialectical relationship between theory and praxis in which testing theory in practice influenced the development of methodology, which in turn influenced the development of a theoretical framework.

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The challenge faced by researchers developing sociocultural approaches to SLA research is similar to the one Vygotsky faced, since SLA research, in order to be accepted as a field, has also relied on methods developed by the natural sciences. In a special edition of the *Modern Language Journal*, Alan Firth and Johannes Wagner (2007) reflect on their call 10 years earlier for a reconceptualization of SLA, “for a theoretical, methodological, and epistemological broadening of SLA” to create “an SLA that was more interactionally sensitive, that also made room for an emic stance towards fundamental concepts, and that took seriously the theoretical and methodological consequences of a social view of learning and language” (2007, p. 804). They called for developing a perspective that includes language users in their social, cultural, and historical contexts.

In this retrospective, Firth and Wagner also reiterated their position that sociocultural approaches should be included in SLA, but distanced themselves from the use of the term *sociocultural* to describe their own work, as the “sociocultural approach has already established itself within SLA and is associated with the work of Lantolf and others” (Firth & Wagner, 2007, p. 814). They describe the theoretical foundation that Lantolf developed as he and “several collaborators ... engaged in SLA theory-building in the Vygotskian tradition, producing what has become known as the sociocultural approach to SLA” (p. 805). The range of sociocultural SLA studies available today is a testament to James Lantolf’s efforts in organizing and conducting research with students and colleagues and in developing collaborative efforts to disseminate, discuss, and analyze this important application of Vygotsky’s work. These approaches seek to understand language development in its manifold richness and draw on the experiences and introspections of second language learners, who learn language in very different contexts and situations of development.

The following overview does not attempt to give a comprehensive account of all of the work that has been done using Vygotsky’s core concepts to investigate second language learning, teaching, and acquisition from a sociocultural perspective, but instead focuses on primary research that Lantolf and Beckett (2009) have highlighted, along with more recent work, and draws on the edited volumes of sociocultural research in SLA that Lantolf and his colleagues have compiled (Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Poehner, 2008), as well as books and articles that construct the theoretical framework that has guided sociocultural approaches to SLA (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

A challenge for sociocultural SLA research in constructing a methodological approach based on Vygotsky’s theoretical framework is to recapture essential aspects of Vygotsky’s overarching theory and methodological approach. A number of factors make this difficult, including (a) Vygotsky’s use of a dialectical approach based on the method of analysis developed by Marx and Engels; (b) the fact that his work was banned by the Soviet bureaucracy for 20 years, and that when it was “rehabilitated,” interpretations of his work missed essential aspects; and (c) translation issues involving key concepts that are difficult to translate from Russian to English. Vygotsky examined the interconnectedness of all phenomena, “based on the concept that human activities take place in cultural contexts, are mediated by language and other symbol systems, and can be best understood when investigated in their historical development” (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 191). The studies described below draw on these central concepts of Vygotsky to guide research and to study second language learning through an examination of language use in different social and cultural contexts using a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods, including experimental, discourse analysis, self-report, text recall, case study, classroom based, longitudinal, historical/theoretical analysis, and others.

These methods reflect the wide array used in the broad range of studies investigating both L1 (first language) and L2 language acquisition. These methods are touched on in the descriptions of the sociocultural studies below. The focus, however, is on two aspects that



make sociocultural approaches unique: first, the nature of the concepts being investigated, and second, the emphasis placed on the role of the context in which language learning is taking place. Lantolf (2000) has described how sociocultural approaches investigating SLA have focused on the main aspects/concepts of Vygotsky's work, including mediation; inner speech, private speech, and internalization; the regulatory function of language; the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding; testing, including dynamic assessment; and research methodology and theory. These concepts are used to organize an overview of sociocultural approaches to SLA research, starting with the concept of the ZPD.

Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky used the concept of the ZPD, for which he is best known, in three different contexts: first, to critique intelligence and diagnostic tests; second, to analyze children's development and the transitions that mark their different age levels; and third, to analyze concept development and particularly the relationships between everyday concepts and academic concepts (Mahn, 2015). Best known is Vygotsky's critique of diagnostic tests because they focused on children's actual development measured in individual problem solving but not their potential development when enhanced by more expert help. He included peers as problem-solving collaborators in constructing meaning in the ZPD, but he did not investigate its relationship to adult learners. Vygotsky focused on analyzing the cultural development of children, looking particularly at the role that language played in the development of human consciousness. Therefore, his analysis did not go beyond the young adult, as he considered it beyond the scope of child development. Sociocultural approaches to SLA research have expanded the application of this concept and shown its utility in analyzing the development of language learning and acquisition for adults.

For instance, Mirzaei and Eslami (2015) investigated whether L2 students' engagement in dialogic exchanges in their ZPDs influenced their learning processes and, particularly, their utilization of metadiscourse to address substance, association, and interlocutors' issues in composing. Their study showed that engagement in language activities in their ZPD are essential for L2 students' specific learning processes and to their long-term cognitive development.

Khaliliaqdam (2014) investigated the role of scaffolding through informative exercises to improve fundamental discourse among EFL (English as a foreign language) adult students. Initially, learners were given the primary words of the sentences, and they were required to make sentences. Each time, the quantity of primary words of the sentence was decreased, and subsequently, the learners made sentences with the assistance of the teachers. At that point, a progression of pictures was provided to the students, and they needed to create a story based on these photos. If needed, the instructor furnished them with a few guiding words. Toward the end of the course, the students' discourse level had been enhanced dramatically. The outcomes suggest that this sort of support in the ZPD plays a significant role in student's language development.

Sociocultural researchers have also studied how other methods/techniques used in SLA can be improved when incorporating the concept of ZPD. For example, Sideeg (2016) describes how Bloom's taxonomy, when coupled with ZPD and backward design, brings better learning results. He concludes, "Bloom's taxonomy could provide an invaluable and indispensable roadmap for crafting effective learning outcomes that drive the whole process of course design" (p. 158).

In the same fashion, Allen and Fernandez's (2017) work on the VL2 Online Assessment System used the concept of ZPD to analyze results drawn from the Basal and Ceiling Scores in the Visual Communication and Sign Language checklist (VCSL), an important



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tool for measuring ASL advancement in visual language students from birth to five years. “The range between the Basal and Ceiling Scores represent skills where children demonstrate inconsistent mastery” (Allen & Fernandez, 2017, p. 6), indicating their zone of proximal development, helping to determine the amount of and nature of the mentoring or guidance required by each child.

Dynamic Assessment

An important consideration in using the concept of ZPD is the kind of assessment that can determine actual and potential levels of development. Lantolf (2008) describes the psychological and educational measurements developed by the Russian neuropsychologist, Luria, that avoided the pitfalls of traditional approaches: “According to Luria, traditional assessments failed to differentiate between various groups of learners, offering only documentation of their poor performance. By co-constructing a ZPD with the learners, it was possible to uncover the source of their difficulties and to tailor an appropriate remediation program” (p. 16). A number of sociocultural researchers have applied dynamic assessment (DA) to SLA with a clear understanding of DA “as a development-oriented unification of assessment and teaching” (Lantolf, 2008, p. 17). A theoretical argument for the application of DA to SLA stresses that through such unification, educators are able to see that bringing a learner’s future into the picture requires mediation (i.e., teaching/learning) that is sensitive to a learner’s ZPD. For instance, Naeini (2014), in her study of 68 EFL learners, found “that the Mediated Learning Experience (MLE) intervention approach of DA was effective and exerted profound impacts on the learners’ reading comprehension” (p. 1297). In another study, Minaabad (2017) investigated the impacts of two reading comprehension techniques: dynamic assessment and graphic organizers (GO). In his study of 45 EFL learners in three experimental groups, Minaabad found that learners who got DA and GO performed better than the others.

Inner Speech

The concept of inner speech is an important component of Vygotsky’s analysis of the unification of thinking and speaking processes resulting in a system with meaning at its core (Mahn, 2012). In differentiating his theory from the work of Piaget, who felt that egocentric speech in children disappeared, Vygotsky argued that instead of disappearing, egocentric speech is transformed into inner speech through internalization. Vygotsky studied inner speech in children as they developed their systems of meaning, but he did not study it in adults. Again, this is an area where sociocultural approaches to SLA research have taken a key concept and used it to understand second language learning and development, especially with adult learners. Hammer (2017), in an empirical study on competent Polish–English bilinguals, found that,

across all participants, the L2 is used most extensively in the communicative function, followed by the cognitive function, and then inner speech. This study adds an acculturation perspective to L2 internalisation research, by providing empirical evidence that sequential bilinguals who acculturate to a higher level, and who function in predominantly L2-speaking social networks, internalise the L2 to a higher degree across all functions of language use. (p. 84)

In a dissertation study of second language learners, Mahn (1997) used interviews, questionnaires, and written texts to examine students’ attitudes to the use of dialogue



journals and the role of inner speech and verbal thinking as they made meaning through their writing. A key function of inner speech is to help regulate thought and activity, a topic that is addressed after a description of another sort of regulatory speech: private speech.

Private Speech

This term applies to speech that is directed toward oneself but, unlike inner speech, it is articulated. While Vygotsky investigated egocentric speech, a type of private speech, most of the sociocultural studies on private speech have been conducted with adults. McCafferty (1994) examined self-regulatory private speech through a picture narration task and found that less proficient learners of L2 create more self-regulatory private speech than their more proficient peers. Swain, Lapkin, Knouzzi, Suzuki, and Brooks (2009), using quantitative and qualitative measurements, demonstrated through the use of pretests and posttests that private speech impacted the internalization and learning of concepts in L2. Centeno-Cortés and Jiménez Jiménez (2004), in one of a small number of studies that have looked at the use of L2 to regulate thinking, gave complex cognitive tasks to participants in L2, showing that if students were able to use private speech in the L2, they were more successful on tasks than using L1 to complete the task. In a study of bilingual children, Smith (2007), through observations of interactive group activity and game playing, documented the private speech of ESL (English as a second language) children in bilingual contexts. The private speech produced by children was helpful in understanding what the children were learning and what their difficulties were. Jiménez Jiménez (2015) observed 30 adult bilinguals when they were competing a problem-solving activity, and found “bilinguals’ dominant language played an important regulatory role in their verbalized thinking while the other language provided a complementary set of cognitive resources and strategies that were employed when needed” (p. 259). Gheisari (2017) investigated occurrence of private speech in student–teacher interactions in an EFL class while the students completed a reading task. He concluded: “even in teacher–learner interactions, which are of a competent–novice nature, private speech emerges depending on the difficulty nature of the task” (p. 70).

The Regulatory Function of Speech

The way in which egocentric speech and inner speech are used to regulate thinking and activity was a central focus for Vygotsky, as it was for Frawley and Lantolf in their 1985 study—as noted above, generally considered to be the first application to SLA of a sociocultural approach based on the work of Vygotsky. Analyzing discourse generated by students providing oral narratives, Frawley and Lantolf showed how the linguistic features of oral narratives were demonstrative of the ability to regulate speech and thinking in L2 adults, as well as L1 children and adults, completing a difficult narrative task. A number of researchers following up on this study examined the language that was produced by L2 learners completing a task, both in the classroom and outside of it. Ahmed (1994) used discourse analysis to examine cognitive regulation by focusing on tense marking in dialogue. Using two-way information gap tasks, Brooks and Donato (1994) analyzed the regulatory functions of speech between L1 and L2 speakers in collaborative tasks. Anani Sarab and Gordani (2015) studied the regulatory function of adult EFL learners’ private speech and concluded that “private speech with its different forms, content, and functions plays a very crucial role in cognitive regulation of EFL learners which has important implications for the context of language learning classrooms” (p. 1).



Gesture

Vygotsky maintained that an adult attributing communicative intent to an infant's grasping motion helped establish the social contact necessary for children to develop the pointing gesture as a symbol of their desires. The use of a symbol to communicate intention helped lay the foundation for the symbolic representation needed to communicate meaning through language. Steve McCafferty (2002) was the first sociocultural researcher to look at the relationship between gesture and speech in L2 as well as at what gesture could reveal about internal speech and cognition. He examined the expression of motion events in L2 as a way to understand the relationship between speech and gesture, and focused on when expressions for motion vary in L1 and L2. Jina Lee (2008) documented private speech and gesture in college-level ESL biology students and found that gestures accompanied by private speech helped students learn new scientific terms. Matsumoto and Dobs (2017) observed teacher-student interactions in an ESL grammar class and found that "gesture is an important element of interactional competence for teaching and learning in L2 grammar classrooms" (p. 7). Van Compernelle and Smotrova (2017) based their study on McNeill's and Duncan (2000) developmental (growth point) hypothesis and the notion of "thinking-for-speech" and observed "how the precision timing of the teacher's gestures and their synchronization with her speech combine to make the meanings of the unfamiliar words transparent to her students" (p. 194).

Social Situation of Development

As Firth and Wagner (2007) note, one of the major contributions that sociocultural approaches have brought to SLA research is the examination of the influence of context in studying SLA. Vygotsky insisted that all phenomena be understood as existing within social, cultural, natural, and historical contexts and developed the concept of *perezhivanie* (lived, emotional experience) to describe the relationship between an individual and the environment, broadly conceived to include social relationships. Key to his theory was the notion that the way in which individuals sense, perceive, internalize, appropriate, understand, and emotionally respond to their experiences of interactions with their environment actually shapes the environment. Mahn and John-Steiner (2002) looked at the way that *perezhivanie* shaped L2 writers' ability to write in English.

Leo van Lier (2004), who has played a leading role in analyzing the centrality of context in language teaching, learning, and acquisition, has developed

an ecological perspective on language learning and teaching grounded in the principles of SCT and constructivist models of human activity . . . An ecological perspective compels us to reconceptualize learning as always and everywhere contextualized. Thus, not only do language and learning matter, but so do place, time, others, goals, and motives. (Lantolf, 2000, pp. 24–5)

Negueruela's 2003 study marked the emergence of an orientation to SLA classroom-based research within a theory-as-educational-framework based on Vygotsky's conception of the dialectical unity between theory and praxis (reported in Lantolf & Beckett, 2009). Negueruela's research on his own L2 classroom utilized a sociocultural developmental model to support the learning, internalization, and subsequent communication of conceptual understanding as evidenced in three types of data: performance data, verbalization data, and data concerning explicit definitions of the linguistic features being analyzed. Negueruela found that meaning was more essential than linguistic factors. Utilizing sociocultural theory, Chernova and Mustafina (2016) observed a classroom in which the



students were quite responsive and in which learners' zones of proximal development were recognized through such techniques as "portfolios," and "exchange journals" (p. 50). On the basis of this study, they proposed a four-step teaching methodology for ESL teachers.

Historical/Theoretical

A key component of Vygotsky's approach to building a theory of psychological materialism was analyzing the prevailing theories about human consciousness for their strengths and shortcomings. The historical and theoretical work that has been central to sociocultural approaches to SLA research can contribute to this effort through a reconceptualization of Vygotsky's work. As noted throughout this entry, Lantolf's work has been instrumental in establishing the theoretical framework for sociocultural approaches to SLA and for providing a historical perspective (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Other examples of historical/theoretical contributions include Jane Zuengler and Elizabeth Miller on an overview of sociocultural and cognitivist approaches to SLA; Karen Johnson on sociocultural approaches to L2 teacher education; James Lantolf and Matthew Poehner on DA; Maria de Guerrero on a synthesis of research on the role of inner speech in second language learning and implications for teaching; Holbrook Mahn and Vera John-Steiner on Vygotsky's contribution to second language literacy acquisition, and Mahn on Vygotsky's system of meaning and L2 writers; the aforementioned work of Leo van Lier on an ecological perspective on L2 teaching; and William Dunn and James Lantolf (1998) on Krashen's $i + 1$ and Vygotsky's ZPD.

In summarizing their analysis of sociocultural approaches to SLA, Firth and Wagner conclude:

Much SLA research that has been produced over the last decade bears witness to a marked increase in the number of sociocultural and contextual-interactive themes and concepts impacting upon SLA's research agenda, revealing an apparent growing awareness of the need to take seriously the requirement for a more balanced approach to SLA research. (2007, p. 803)

The significant contributions of sociocultural approaches to SLA research and the way these approaches have helped expand what constitutes SLA research are evident even from the present brief overview. An important contribution to be made in the future will be to reconnect with the ambitious research agenda on which Vygotsky was working at the time of his death. Important in this reconnection will be revisiting Vygotsky's work in *Thinking and Speech* (1987), which focuses on the essential aspect of his theory—*znachenie* (meaning) *slova* (word, that is, language) as a unit of the thinking/language system with meaning at its center (Mahn, 2018). Such a reconceptualization would also open up avenues for using a sociocultural approach to investigate SLA throughout the different stages of child development, including that of children who are raised bilingually.

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SEE ALSO: Vygotsky and Second Language Acquisition

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The abstract should be a short paragraph up to 200 words in length and keywords between 5 to 10 words.

Abstract: This entry analyzes and synthesizes various studies in the field of second language acquisition (SLA) that appeared after the publication of Frawley and Lantolf's 1985 study and expanded on sociocultural approaches based on Vygotsky's theoretical framework and methodological approach. Researchers interested in diverse facets of SLA both in and out of educational contexts have utilized sociocultural theory in a variety of ways. Some have focused more on the internal aspects of language, the mental processes involved in making and communicating meaning through language activities, while others have focused more on the social, cultural, physical, and historical contexts of second language learning and acquisition. These approaches seek to understand language development in its manifold richness and draw on the experiences and introspections of second language learners, who learn language in very different contexts and situations of development. The entry does not attempt to give a comprehensive account of all of the work that has been done using Vygotsky's core concepts to investigate second language learning, teaching, and acquisition from a sociocultural perspective, but instead focuses on such primary concepts as zone of proximal development; dynamic assessment; inner speech; private speech; the regulatory function of speech; gesture; social situation of development; and the historical and theoretical work that has been central to sociocultural approaches to SLA research and that can contribute to this effort through a reconceptualization of Vygotsky's work.

Keywords: Bilingualism; ESL/EFL; Methods; Second Language Acquisition; Vygotsky