



## **Sociocultural Theory-based Pedagogy in Second Language Teaching and European Language Policies**

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### **Abstract**

*Identification of the most suitable theories to provide teaching models, concepts and frameworks for the training of language teachers is a relevant goal for the dynamic social context of today's societies. Together with a package of appropriate educational policies, these theories can contribute to the creation of a platform for the training of foreign language teachers. We will pursue two major goals in our work: 1. To describe Sociocultural Theory (SCT) highlighting the essential characteristics of a pedagogy derived from SCT; 2. To demonstrate the compatibility between SCT and the standards, contents, and objectives provided for students and future teachers in European language policies. "SCT-based Pedagogy" is an integrative concept for curriculum planning activities, but also for teaching-learning-evaluation activities that can be extracted from Lev Vygotsky's theory. Some basic ideas for such a specific pedagogy are: that teaching and learning are culturally and linguistically mediated activities, situated and participatory, reflective, based on communities of practice, and accompanied by dynamic assessment.*

**Keywords:** European language policies; second and foreign language; sociocultural theory; sociocultural theory-based pedagogy; teacher education

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## **1. Introduction**

Second Language Pedagogy (SLP) and Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE) have been founded on certain theoretical approaches. Following the chronological axis, Osgood et al. (1954) have systematized The Linguistic Approach, The Learning Theory approach, and The Information Theory approach. Recently, but with many similarities, Mitchell, Myles & Marsden (2019) have established three approaches in Second Language Learning: The Universal Grammar Approach, the Cognitive Approach, and the Interaction Approach. A serious issue is the identification of the most suitable theories to provide teaching models, concepts, and frameworks for the training of language teachers. A possible solution is offered by psychosocial and cultural theories, described by some scholars as compatible with Second Language Pedagogy (Duff, 2007; Panhwar, Ansari & Ansari, 2016; Toth & Davin, 2016). Along with linguistic theories and other psychological theories (behaviorism, constructivism) that have been the basis of language teaching, sociocultural theories are focused on language as an essential tool of social and individual development.

In the last fifteen years, a package of educational policies has been launched at the European level, with the notion of competences in the center. Concerning language learning, several documents elaborated by international teams provide support to language teachers across Europe: *Council Recommendation on Key Competences for Lifelong Learning*, *The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR)*, *European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Language and European profile for language teacher education*. In this paper, we labeled this set of documents as European language policies (ELP).

In this study, we will pursue two major purposes:

- a. Description of Sociocultural Theory (SCT) highlighting the essential characteristics of a Pedagogy derived from SCT;
- b. Demonstration of the compatibility between SCT and the standards, contents, and objectives provided for students and future teachers in European language policies.

The reasons for our approach are multiple. First, language acquisition is a critical component of human development in general (Eun & Lim, 2009), and the second language becomes a communication platform for many people in our multicultural societies. Thinking, speaking, and writing in a second language has become a common practice, which ensures social, educational, and professional integration. Under these conditions, the specific training of teachers for teaching foreign languages becomes a crucial strategic component for the development of society. Concerning educational policies, multilingualism is one of the eight key competences in the Council of Europe Recommendation. Secondly, the pedagogical application of sociocultural theories is a must. Teaching and learning are essentially social processes, and lesson plans are anticipatory social acts (Gehlbach, 2010). Despite all the remarkable progress made in the discovery of learning mechanisms, many authors complain of insufficient benchmarks for their pedagogical conversion in the classroom (Gehlbach, 2010).

## **2. Sociocultural Theory (SCT)**

SCT was created by Lev Vygotsky, whose ideas still exert an overwhelming influence today. The core idea of the Sociocultural theory is that learning always takes place in a physical and sociocultural context (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). The context may be informal, namely groups of friends, or formal, the classroom or virtual classroom. The physical context is doubled by the social context, whether we refer to one or several participants. As compared to cognitivism, which mainly focuses on the activity of the isolated agent, sociocultural approaches emphasize the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). Both participation and context are critical to human cognition. Knowledge involves lived practices, not just accumulated information, learning processes being

negotiated with people in what they do, through experiences in the social practices associated with certain activities (Johnson, 2006).

*The core concepts of SCT:*

*Meaning.* For Vygotsky (1978), humans are the only beings capable of transmitting generalized meanings, beyond the meanings derived from contextual variability. Thus, written texts were considered by Vygotsky to have the most generalized meanings. Through repetitions, in their continuous interactions with adults, words acquire generalized meaning, beyond the variable conditions in which children encountered the objects from which they extracted the essential (Eun & Lim, 2009).

*Mediation* is the specific human capacity of intervention and voluntary control over psychological processes, through symbolic instruments (Aimin, 2013). Just as physical instruments serve as auxiliary means to enhance the capacity to control and change the physical world, symbolic tools serve as auxiliary means of controlling and reorganizing mental processes. These symbolic instruments are also called cultural artifacts, such as arts, technologies, arithmetic symbols, etc. Alongside these systems, language is the most pervasive and powerful cultural artifact that humans possess to mediate their connection to the world, to each other, and to themselves (Aimin, 2013). Language makes specific human activities possible such as remembering, and planning. Kozulin (2003) distinguishes between two large categories of mediation and mediators. The first category includes psychological mediation, through psychological intermediaries of the type of cultural artifacts, mentioned above. The second category includes human mediation, understood as adequate assistance from other people, the care that contributes to the internalization of psychological mediators. Every organization of the framework designed to facilitate the achievement of pedagogical goals consists of human mediation. Parents, older siblings, and teachers thus become mediators, having a decisive role in the development of children.

*Regulation* is the child's ability to adapt and model his activity with the help of language, moving from activities initially led by adults to activities led by himself (Kozulin, 2003). Regulation raises the child's mental and physical activity to a higher stage of development.

*Internalization* refers to the transition from the outside to the inside of some processes. Vygotsky (1978) captured this transition in the general law of genetic development: each psychological function appears twice, between people on the inter-psychological level, and within the individual on the intra-psychological level. Therefore, the process of development in the Vygotskian perspective is always initiated between people and only gradually passes into the psychology of the individual.

*The zone of proximal development (ZPD)* was defined by Vygotsky as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86).

### **3. Sociocultural Theory-based Pedagogy**

Foreign language teaching methodologies are created based on theoretical perspectives (Eun & Lim, 2009). Some authors have developed theoretical models and strategies to support the pedagogical application of Sociocultural Theory (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; Pawan, 2008; Eun & Lim, 2009; Aimin, 2013; van Compernelle & Williams, 2013).

*Teaching as human cultural mediation*

The development of higher mental functions from the outside to the inside, through the mediation mechanism, is the key to pedagogical approaches. Teaching is a social-cultural activity in which adults interact with children. According to Vygotsky, good teaching is, in fact, mediation, and teachers are human mediators (Eun & Lim, 2009). Furthermore, L2 is an excellent tool for cultural mediation. Although peer interactions are important, adult intervention is crucial.

All the psychological processes described by Vygotsky (mediation, internalization) have significant consequences for L2 pedagogy (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007). Human and symbolic mediators are present in all components of pedagogical activities (pedagogical materials, tasks, and technologies used by students). Exposure to input (social artifacts, vicarious participation) is necessary for SLA (Lantolf, Thorne & Poehner, 2015).

*Teaching as situated and interactive activity*

The best way to learn a foreign language is through immersion in the culture of the country and interaction with native speakers. However, in the absence of these privileged conditions, interaction and participation in regular classes are essential for children's development. The best way to acquire competence in all aspects of language use is by being exposed to the most varied types of social interactions. Students will be included in regular classes, rather than in separate classes, the role of teachers being essential in creating optimal conditions. Socio-cultural theory examines students as active participants in building learning processes and considers learning foreign languages as a social practice (Ozfidan, Machtmes & Demir, 2014).

*Teaching as linguistic, conceptual, social, and cultural scaffolding*

Even if Vygotsky did not use the concept of "scaffolding", other authors have connected it to ZPT. Wood et al. (1976, p. 90) define scaffolding as a process "that enables a child or novice to solve a task or achieve a goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts." All the activities that call for the intervention of adults: teaching in class, tutoring, and mentoring, include scaffolding, i.e. the control of those elements of the task that are initially too difficult for the students. Pawan (2008) established scaffolding types for foreign languages:

- Linguistic scaffolding: shortening selections, speaking in the present tense.
- Conceptual scaffolding: providing charts, and metaphors.
- Social scaffolding: using social interaction (pairs, group work).
- Cultural scaffolding: using historical symbols, culturally significant documents, etc.

*Teaching as guided assistance, close to the development potential*

As Lantolf and Thorne (2007) explained, ZPD is a conceptual and pedagogical tool that teachers can use to better understand aspects of the emerging capacities of pupils who are in their early stages of maturity. "The conceptualization of the ZPD begins with its social, cultural, and historical context and traces its development as a spatial and temporal metaphor that reflects the sociogenetic root of all human mental functioning" (Eun, 2019, p. 18).

*Meaning-based teaching and focus on pragmatics*

Some good practices to guide Second and Foreign Language teachers would be:

- to focus on the meaning of speech (Eun & Lim, 2009). Referring to Bilingual instruction, Vygotsky specifically noted that the learning of L2 had its foundation in the knowledge of one's L1. Furthermore, he argued that the semantic aspects of a word were acquired before the actual name of the word (apud Aimin, L., 2013);
- to rely on the learners' L1 to provide the concepts of the second language. Concepts should be developed first and word names later because second language learners already possess a significant linguistic system from their first language.
- Aspects of speech that may come naturally to L1 speakers (intonation, certain idiomatic expressions) should be explicitly taught to L2 learners. Since there is no one-to-one correspondence between meaning and linguistic form, L2 learners should be explicitly taught second language pragmatics.

*Best teaching strategies: physical presence, drama, portfolios, storytelling, Think-Aloud, meetings with natives, and dynamic assessment.*

The pedagogy derived from SCT supports the direct intervention of a teacher physically present with his students (van Compernelle & Williams, 2013). Thus, concepts and skills are taught directly to students through lectures, dialogues, and debates.

The qualities of drama support the learning of foreign languages. Language use becomes less abstract and more saturated with meaning when written speech turns into oral speech, and when

sound, interlocutors, and a visible audience are provided. Conversational concepts and skills develop before the development of literacy skills, and dramatic techniques can build on the foundation of the developed conceptual system and oral language.

Dynamic assessment (Aimin, 2013) aims to evaluate the learning potential of the individual. It is an assessment that discovers what the person can do with scaffolding because it depicts what the person will be in the future when that help has been internalized. The stages for dynamic assessment are pretest - teaching/mediation - posttest. As a pre-test, the students try to complete the given task and the teacher carefully observes and finds problems. In teaching, the teacher designs a mediation, with activities aimed at solving the existing problems in the students' performance. In the post-test, the students are asked to solve the task again based on the teacher's intervention. "Dynamic Assessment provides a powerful framework for integrating assessment and teaching as a dialectical activity aimed at diagnosing and promoting learner development" (Lantolf, Thorne & Poehner, 2015, p.214).

Language development portfolios provide concrete evidence chosen by students according to their growing language (Donato & MacCormick, 1994). Unlike journals and diaries that are impressionistic and disconnected from the concrete, the portfolio is directly related to one's material products, the reflection being anchored in concrete evidence of learning experiences that serve as a benchmark for thinking (Donato & MacCormick, 1994).

*Focusing on children's needs/differentiated teaching/inclusive pedagogy*

As with any other school subject, language learning should be based on children's interests, needs, and goals. Connecting language teaching to the real world or various academic disciplines is one way to implement this principle. Differentiated teaching is greatly supported by using SCT as the foundation of classroom activities (Karimi & Nazari, 2021).

Other research establishes the external variables (teaching methods, pedagogical resources) or the internal variables that support the pedagogical application of SCT. Among sociocultural factors with a crucial role in foreign language learning, Ozfidan, Machtmes & Demir (2014) name interaction with colleagues, feedback, private discourse, and self-efficacy.

Based on the above, we may argue that a Pedagogy derived from SCT may constitute an advanced and relevant teaching-learning-evaluation framework for foreign languages. Appropriate training models may be elaborated based on the methodological conversion of learning theories (Neacșu, 1999). Below we present some elements of suitability and compatibility between Pedagogy derived from SCT and European language policies, mentioned in the introductory section of this paper (Table 1).

**Table 1.** Samples of compatibility between SCT-based Pedagogy and European Language Policies

SCT-based Pedagogy	European Language Policies (Excerpts)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>Situated and participatory teaching and learning</i></li> <li>• <i>Reflective teaching and learning</i></li> <li>• <i>Focus on Pragmatics</i></li> <li>• <i>Meaning-based teaching and learning</i></li> <li>• <i>Dynamic assessment and self-assessment</i></li> </ul>	<p><i>The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the levels can be adapted and used for multiple contexts and applied to all languages;</li> <li>• supports the development of a communicative approach;</li> <li>• contains tools that emphasize the perspective of the participants (students and teachers) in teaching and assessment (Self-assessment - grid)</li> <li>• focus on different qualitative aspects of language use (contains a map of Qualitative aspects of spoken language use)</li> </ul>

#### 4. Sociocultural Theory and Language Teacher Education

The teaching strategies exposed in the previous paragraph can be used in the activity with pre-service and in-service teachers. Johnson (2006) laments the fact that Language Teacher Education was structured for a long time around the assumption that teachers should learn about didactic content and methods only in formal teacher education programs, through mentor observation and a few semesters of practice and internship. The field is currently shaped by two categories of pressures (Burns & Richards, 2009): there are internal pressures, generated by teachers who want a renewed knowledge base, according to recent theoretical developments in critical pedagogy and sociocultural approaches. External pressures relate to issues brought about by globalization, such as international language teaching policies, the need for standards, and other forms of accountability.

The essential domains of Language Teacher Education programs identified by Richards (2008) are the knowledge base of a second language, the relationship between teaching skills and academic knowledge, the nature of the teacher-learning relationship, the role of context in teacher learning, and teacher identity. We believe that SCT can provide lines of development for all these areas. Kelly (2006) uses the concept of teacher learning, as the process by which novice teachers move towards expertise. He considers that the expert teacher is strongly involved in the production of knowledge, using physical and cultural artifacts. The implications of SCT on teacher learning concern three approaches that could be used in professional development schools (Kelly, 2006, pp. 516-517): 1. using collaborative activities to critically reflect practice; 2. exploring opportunities for developing teachers' knowledge-in-practice; 3. the development of reflexive, discursive and collaborative identities through the process of reflective writing.

Teacher learning will be planned as a form of socialization in the thought and professional activities of a community of practice. Teachers' knowledge is built by participating in communities within specific social activities (Johnson, 2006). Also, the concept of mediation is very useful in the field of teacher training. The teacher educator is a mediator and teacher education colleges, programs, and courses are mediator tools (Azadi, Biria, & Nasri, 2018). Regarding the university environment, Lai (2023) identifies ways of integrating sociocultural perspectives into a university classroom: course planning capitalizing on students' culture and experience, the use of differentiated activities, problem-based learning, and online groups to enhance students' peer interaction.

In Table 2, we will highlight the connection between a series of international European language policy documents regarding teacher education and the pedagogical concepts derived from SCT.

**Table 2.** Compatibility samples between Pedagogy derived from SCT and European language policies for Teacher Education

SCT-based Pedagogy	European Language Policies for Teacher Education (Excerpts)
<i>Situated teaching and learning, social scaffolding: the physical presence of teachers; communication with the natives</i>	<p><a href="#"><i>European profile for language teacher education: A frame of reference</i></a></p> <p>Focus on teaching practice (stage/practicum);                      Working with a mentor and understanding the value of mentoring;                      Experience an intercultural and multicultural environment;                      Participation in links with partners abroad, including visits, exchanges, or ICT links;                      The opportunity to observe or participate in teaching in more than one country;</p> <p><i>The European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL)</i> is a tool for reflection and self-assessment of the didactic knowledge and skills necessary to teach languages. The</p>

<i>Reflective teaching</i>	portfolio makes explicit references to the culture of students and groups as follows: <i>I can understand the personal, intellectual, and cultural value of learning other languages.</i>
<i>Self-assessment and dynamic assessment</i>	<i>I can appreciate and make use of the value added to the classroom environment by learners with diverse cultural backgrounds.</i>
<i>Product-based approach: the portfolio</i>	<i>I can create a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities.</i>
<i>Situated teaching and learning</i>	<i>I can evaluate and select meaningful speaking and interactional activities to encourage learners of differing abilities to participate.</i>
<i>Communities of practice valorization</i>	<i>I can evaluate and select meaningful speaking and interactional activities to encourage learners to express their opinions, identity, culture, etc.</i>
<i>Focus on Pragmatics</i>	<i>I can evaluate and select activities that enhance the learners' intercultural awareness. I can evaluate and select a variety of texts and activities to make learners aware of the interrelationship between culture and language</i>
<i>Meaning-based teaching and learning</i>	<i>I can encourage learners to reflect on their work (diaries, logs, etc.), etc.</i>

As we can see, some of the indicators present in the educational policy texts show strong compatibility with SCT. This proves that the current language policies are based on advanced theories, offering appropriate practices to students and teachers. Language teaching in Europe has a privileged position, through curricular compatibility supported by the CEFR, but also through efforts to build teacher training systems adhering to common principles.

## 5. Conclusions and implications

In this paper, we have explored SCT to provide the basic elements of a pedagogy for second and foreign language teaching. The “SCT-based Pedagogy” is an integrative concept for curriculum planning activities, but also for teaching-learning-evaluation methods that can be extracted from Lev Vygotsky's theory. Some basic ideas for “SCT-based Pedagogy” include: teaching and learning are culturally and linguistically mediated activities, situated and participatory, reflective, based on communities of practice, and accompanied by dynamic evaluation. Further benefits could be derived by associating SCT with poststructuralist theories, which provide new insights into student and teacher identity, enhancing understanding of social context as the primary variable that generates learning. Also, a theoretical and practical extension by valuing the symbolic tools brought by technologies could be pursued in further research.

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