

Book Review

Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education: An Introduction through Narratives, by Merrill Swain, Penny Kinnear & Linda Steinman (2015, 2nd ed.). Multilingual Matters Textbooks, 192 pages, Paperback £19.95, Hardcover £69.95, ISBN: 978-1-78309-317-5.

Herri Mulyono

The University of York, UK and The University of Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. Hamka, Indonesia

(Review received 17 June 2015, final version received 2 July 2015)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5565/rev/jtl3.635>

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of mind (1978) highlights the interdependence of the individual, social community and interactions in the construction of knowledge. The theory has been widely adopted in the area of applied linguistics research, and it has been employed to explain second language learning processes (Storch, 2013). The stated aim of this 192-page book is to introduce the key concepts of sociocultural theory (SCT), including mediation, zone of proximal development, collaborative dialogue, private speech, everyday and scientific concepts, the interrelatedness of cognition and emotion, activity theory and assessments. As is posed on the cover of the book, these key notions of SCT are illuminated within the narratives to which the authors, Merrill Swain, Penny Kinnear and Linda Steinman, link various contexts of second language learning, teaching, testing, and research. Although major concepts discussed in the book originate from its first publication, this second edition provides the readers with more recent studies on Vygotskian SCT in second language education. The authors have also completed the book with references from all of Vygotsky's collected works that appear in the bibliography.

Sociocultural theory in second language education: An introduction through narratives, comprises eight chapters which follow a brief introduction from the authors. The book, in some respects, may be regarded as a narrative because the authors occupy all the eight chapters with stories related to language teaching and learning. In total, there are ten stories presented within the eight chapters. The authors purposefully employed these ten stories to illustrate one or more concepts of SCT and to create engagement between the theory and its classroom practice. The characteristics and context of the story are also presented by the authors to help readers follow the discussion and build a connection between SCT concepts and language learning practice. At the beginning of each story, the key principles of SCT and the working terminologies are briefly introduced to maintain the readers' focus

when reading. The authors' in-depth evaluation and relevant research related to the topic appear after the story and discussion questions are posed to readers to evaluate their understanding of the SCT concepts and their criticality. More importantly, the authors remind readers that the stories themselves are not the primary units of analysis in the book (p. xiii); nonetheless, they serve the SCT concepts which are so. Finally, a discussion is presented to the readers after the main chapters in order to review the concepts of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory they are already familiar with.

The first chapter *Mona: Across time and geography* illustrates the SCT tenets related to mediation. In Vygotsky's SCT, all forms of human higher mental (cognitive and emotional) activity are mediated by material and/or symbolic means (also known as artefacts). Within the chapter, mediation is explained as "the process which connects social and individual" (p.149). Mediational means refer to tools that individuals use to achieve their interactional goals. Through Mona's narrative, the authors highlight several mediational means that Mona used to attain her English learning goals, including grammar books, computers, English language lessons played on the radio and TV, tapes, her first language, and her social interactions. This book provides valuable insight for classroom language teachers to consider any classroom resources that may potentially mediate pupils' learning activity and teachers' instructional goals.

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) is demonstrated in chapter two, *Madame Tremblay: A French immersion story*. Madame Tremblay, a story written by Sarah who attended primary education in a Canadian French immersion program, resonates a number of interactions that enable learners to accomplish more than he/she could have accomplished if working alone; what is known as the ZPD. It is interesting that the authors perceive ZPD as a collaborative and dialogic interaction rather than a metaphor as ascribed by John-Steiner and Mahn (1996). The authors' argument that ZPD is an activity primarily relies on their grammatical and lexical interpretation of the term. In addition to the authors' attempt to define ZPD, they take issue with what is called intersubjectivity within the ZPD. The authors argue that a ZPD involves a number of individuals and thus suggests co-authorship or co-construction. To provide readers with clearer analysis of the *Madame Tremblay* narrative, the authors discuss two other related social theories, including scaffolding and community of practice (CoP).

Chapter three presents two narratives, namely *Jody (talking to self)* and *Sophie and Rachel (talking to others and self)*. However, the two narratives elaborate one same concept

of SCT, being that of languaging. From the two narratives, the authors show how languaging plays a salient role in promoting individuals' thinking processes. In Jody's narrative, the authors demonstrate the process of internalising language aspects through self-talk whilst in Sophie's and Rachel's, the authors suggest the role of collaborative dialogue in language learning. In spite of the authors' presentation of the two types of languaging (i.e private speech/self-talk, and collaborative dialogue), they contend that the use of the two terms appears to be interchangeable. The authors write, "what looks like collaborative dialogue may on closer inspection also be considered as speech for the self" (p. 32).

Thaya's narrative depicting Vygotsky's concepts of scientific (conscious, systematic) and everyday (spontaneous) language and their interconnection is the topic of chapter four (*Thaya: Writing across languages*). Contextualised in a writing classroom at the University of Ontario, the narrative is employed to illustrate "how students, especially Thaya, move between their everyday and scientific concepts to build their writing skills and sensibilities as well as a more conscious understanding of the writing process" (p. 50). To this end, the authors distinguish between Vygotsky's concepts of scientific (conscious, systematic) and everyday (spontaneous) language and evaluate the implications of these concepts when applied into language teaching and learning classroom practice.

In chapter five, entitled *Grace: The effect of affect*, the authors discuss the SCT concept of affect by demonstrating the interrelatedness of cognition and emotion in a learning process. From a SCT perspective, the involvement of acting, thinking and feeling is critical mainly when learning in the ZPD because not only does it suggest participation, but it also transforms learners' identity (Wells, 1999). Drawing upon Grace's narrative, the authors argue that thinking (cognition) and feeling (emotion) are inherently related and separating the two may limit individuals' complete understanding of their learning. To support this argument, the authors provide some evidence from research regarding the role of emotion in classroom language learning. Additionally, two other relevant concepts, including identity and regulation, are discussed to help readers better understand the concept of 'affect' and its value in language learning.

Sandra's narrative illustrates the key SCTs concept related to activity theory and it is presented in chapter six, entitled *Sandra's story: A teacher's dilemma*. Within the chapter, the authors present an activity theory perspective, claiming that human construction of knowledge is a physically and socially motivated activity. The focus of activity theory, as the authors argue, is on "the interaction of multiple individual and social forces rather than on an

individual” (p. 96). At this point, the authors evaluate Sandra’s (teacher) and Marc’s (student) email exchange and they reflect three primary elements in an activity system, namely subject (agent), object (goals) and mediational means. Sandra’s tension within herself regarding her role and objectives during the many interaction between herself and her student is also illustrated to clarify the interconnectedness of the three elements. Of the complex networks within an activity system, the authors emphasise the rules (e.g. level of formality, languages), community and division of labour. At the end of the authors’ discussion, they raise controversies related to the activity theory and challenge for the reconceptualisation of the relationship among learning, the individual and the context in order to suggest a view of learning for language teachers and scholars.

Chapter seven – *Yang: Being assessed* – recounts Yang’ story in preparing a high-stakes exit test after attending an Academic Preparation Program at a Canadian university. Within the context of an English for academic purposes speaking course in Canada, the story exemplifies the potential contribution of SCT for second/foreign language assessment. Assessment itself is viewed as the process of documenting students’ language learning, and its practice is a social and cultural activity. The authors argue that assessments “reflect the values and belief of the broader society in which they are developed and used” (p. 121). A debate about dynamic assessment is briefly presented as it has been considered for second language assessment. To this end, the authors discuss the story with a focus on second and foreign language testing as a mediated, goal-driven activity with social and educational implications.

The final chapter (chapter eight), entitled *Maria and the Beatles; Jean-Paul and Second life*, presents additional narratives from Maria and Jean-Paul. The first story of Maria presents a dialogue between two teachers who look to the Beatles for inspiration. The other, Jean-Paul’s story, moves the discussion from the traditional classroom into a digital environment, specifically Second Life. In this chapter, the authors attempt to engage readers with the process of trying to understand the situation through SCT principles. Readers are given an opportunity to consider and evaluate the two additional narratives with the SCT concepts they already comprehend.

Overall, this second edition of *Sociocultural theory in second language education: An introduction through narratives*, is an exceptional discussion of SCT concepts that serves readers with an accessible entry to complex principles of Vygotsky. Despite the fact that the title of each chapter appears to drive attention towards one concept of SCT, the authors exceptionally establish the interrelatedness of Vygotsky’s principles so that readers may gain

a complete understanding of the theory. Following Richard Donato's remarks about the book as shown on the publisher's website, it is a highly recommended and worthwhile read, not only for graduates and undergraduates as addressed by the authors, but also for language teachers or other newcomers seeking to understand the interaction between sociocultural theory and language classroom teaching.

References

- John-Steiner, V., & Mahn, H. (1996). Sociocultural approaches to learning and development: A Vygotskian framework. *Educational psychologist*, 31(3-4), 191-206.
- Storch, N. (2013). *Collaborative writing in L2 classrooms*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). *Mind in society. The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press
- Wells, G. (1999). *Dialogic inquiry: Towards a socio-cultural practice and theory of education*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
-

Author's information

Herri Mulyono is a member of the teaching staff at the University of Muhammadiyah Prof. Dr. Hamka (UHAMKA), Jakarta Indonesia. He has an undergraduate degree and an MA in English language education. He is currently pursuing his PhD in the Department of Education at the University of York, UK investigating the use of technology to enhance collaborative writing activity in secondary EFL classrooms in Indonesia. His research interests include computer-enhanced collaborative writing, computer-assisted language testing and writing instruction in secondary EFL classrooms.

Email: hmulyono@uhamka.ac.id

To cite this article:

Mulyono, H. (2015). Review. Sociocultural theory in second language education: An introduction through narratives (2015, 2nd ed.). *Bellaterra Journal of Teaching & Learning Language & Literature*, 8(3), 94-98. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5565/rev/jtl3.635>

