

Book Reviews

Research on Second Language Teacher Education: A Sociocultural Perspective on Professional Development

ESL and Applied Linguistics Professional Series.

Karen Johnson and Paula Golombek (Eds.) (2011). New York: Routledge. (285 pages).

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Of the many considerations made for second language teacher development, the one that has finally come to attention is that of critical perspectives on the social practices and situated contexts that teachers inhabit and work in. Whether it is Korea or India, Ecuador or Czech Republic, teacher development programmes do not seem to succeed as much as expected, as the concepts and practices suggested in these programs do not permeate into the frames of teachers' understanding. The studies reported in this book aim to enhance such an understanding by looking at the research undertaken in various countries.

In the 'Introduction', the editors posit that central to this set of perspectives is the Vygotskian framework based on his writings in the seventies, on the inherent interconnectedness of the cognitive and the social. Human cognition is mediated by being situated in a cultural environment, as an interactive process in which culture, context,

language and social interaction are the mediating factors. This rings true when we consider that teachers have deeply ingrained notions of language, what it is, how it is learnt and how it should be taught. These are mostly unarticulated, but very often teachers swear by them on the basis of their everyday experience. However, such concepts are limiting, insufficient and even detrimental as they are broadly generalized and understood only superficially. They need to be investigated and systematized by supplementing and connecting them with relevant scientific concepts, which in turn will enable teachers to move beyond their immediate circumstances. This is where Second Language Teacher Education (SLTE) programmes have a key role to play.

Although SLTE programmes have been attempted before, but the presentation of the theories and concepts in these programmes have been ill-absorbed by teachers as they seem to be disconnected with goal-oriented pedagogic practices. We also see that knowledge about the subject (for instance, about the theory of second language acquisition) is different from procedural knowledge about how to teach it; teachers may grasp the former and verbalize it, but not practice it. Empty verbalism, such as the kind we often see displayed, is thus mistaken for expertise.

How, then, do teachers develop expertise? Here we may bring in the Vygotskian concept of 'internalization', a dialogic process of the transformation of self and activity, without which the necessary interconnections between theory and practice cannot be made. While the actual forms of such internalization would be expectedly idiosyncratic, the process itself would involve the teachers' learning and teaching histories, institutional contexts and

teachers' engagement in teacher development programs. This would be followed by conceptual development, which is also a true psychological tool for instantiating generally sound pedagogic practices which are at the same time, locally appropriate and goal-fulfilling. 'Mediation' is another central Vygotskian concept. There are many kinds of mediation, or mediating tools—activities and concepts, as well as cultural and social relations.

From the teacher-educator's point of view, Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) would be important to define. Vygotsky defines it 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". Simply put, the ZPD is defined as a space of potentiality—of what one can do on one's own and what one can do with assistance. This concept is intuitively supported by our experience of participating in good teacher development programs; we are encouraged and stimulated by a degree of challenge which the interaction with capable educators and mentors provides. For the educators, it means that the ZPD has to be organized and strategic in the kind and quantity of assistance given. It is a space of mediation in which cognition in individuals emerges in and through social activity. A teacher may be doing problem-solving on his / her own, but the potential for new learning would not be seen until he / she interacts with someone who can accomplish the task more capably—that she may or may not emerge with an enhanced ability is itself a measure of the potential. It will certainly involve some cognitive struggle, a situation that some of the studies in this volume investigate. It becomes evident that this struggle is a site for mediation, and for the development of metacognitive awareness and reflective capacities.

The studies in the book therefore involve teacher-educators working within the ZPD and recognizing the limits of the teachers' ZPD. Chapter 8 (Golombeck) entitled 'Dynamic assessment in using dialogic video protocols', makes explicit their conceptual and experiential understanding as it exists, through stages of verbalization and interaction. This in turn may progress to more dialogue in which the rationale for the expert's responses is made transparent, and lead to intersubjectivity. For instance, in Chapter 4, 'Working towards social inclusion through concept development in second language teacher education', Dunn explores how the concept of social inclusion is mediated by teachers and experts while reading, responding, paraphrasing and collating with their social experience. Many of the studies in the book follow the framework of Activity Theory—an extension of Vygotskian sociocultural theory—which is an analytical framework of a collective human activity system. It involves the community of teachers, mentors and students as the subjects; the objects are the space of activity and the planned outcome; the mediating artefacts are the tests or tasks; the rules or norms and conventions stem from social history. Various contradictions may occur between the elements of the activity system. An instance of this is seen in the two studies on Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in Korea, by Kim and Ahn, in Chapters 14 and 15 respectively. In this case, one element in the activity system—the rules and conventions—did not include the use of English as a medium of instruction or instructional activities which would allow learners to engage in communicatively-oriented activities. Hence, the government's import of a CLT model did not permeate the instructional practices of Korean teachers. This in turn had an impact on other elements, for instance, teachers and students veered towards attention to grammar and vocabulary rather than communicative proficiency, and even when

teachers tried to redirect the outcome, other factors such as testing methods affected the participants. The community of teachers were unsure of how, when and by whom the communicative activities should be conducted.

This scenario seems somewhat familiar in the Indian context and experience of CLT, though the specificities are different. Another study relevant to the Indian situation of SLTE has been taken up in Chapter 3 by Davi Reis, entitled 'Empowering non-native English speakers to challenge the native speaker myth'. This study traces the attempt of NNESTs (Non-Native English Speaking Teachers) in exploring, through narratives of identity construction, how their identities are connected to their position as teaching professionals and by extension, their instructional practices. This is an issue which involves not only the complex sociology and politics of education in India, but also the kind of psychologies that emerge in the English teachers within a framework of very un-English social expectations, role and class differentiations. Gender also enters into this framework, as the majority of English teachers in India are women, and the profession of an English teacher changes their own perceptions of their identity as well as the social perceptions, with consequences, one might suggest.

This useful and thought-provoking collection of fifteen empirical studies has been organized around five central areas of concern for SLTE programmes. Part I has studies on 'Promoting Cultural Diversity and Legitimizing Teacher Identities'. Part II is 'Concept Development in L2 Teacher Education' and Part III is 'Strategic Mediation in L2 Teacher Education'. Part IV is 'Teacher Learning in Inquiry based Professional Development' and Part V is on 'Navigating Educational Policies and Curricular Mandates'. SLTE also could benefit from empirical work as much as from theory, because SLTE programmes have to ultimately be located

in specific contexts and handled by particular individuals; the outcomes in terms of teacher education would be significant if such studies become a part of the programmes.

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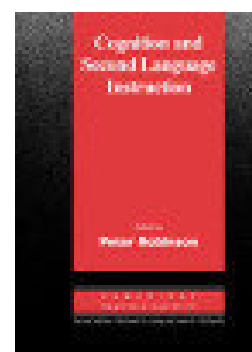
Cognition and Second Language Instruction

Peter Robinson, (Ed.) (2001).

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. (464 pages).

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Reviewed by: *Iqbal Judge*



This book presents a detailed analysis of some of the key issues of cognition and learning in Second Language Acquisition (SLA), that reflect current developments and research findings on the role of cognitive variables such as attention, memory, automaticity, connectionism and learnability. Densely packed with theories about SLA, and backed by reviews of empirical researches in the field, it is a valuable compendium for the serious researcher. The collection of twelve articles is divided into two sections: the first section summarizes contemporary theoretical thinking about the above-mentioned cognitive correlates and the second section relates them to SL instruction, specifically task-based learning, vocabulary-building and instructional design.

In the first chapter, Richard Schmidt explores the theme of 'Attention', and asserts that