Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education: An Introduction through Narratives

Merrill Swain, Penny Kinnear and Linda Steinman

Reviewed by Quang Nam Pham

It can be challenging for a new Second Language Acquisition (SLA) student to fully understand various concepts in Sociocultural Theory (SCT) such as activity theory, private speech, and mediation. It may not be an easy task to fully unpack these concepts and make them understandable to emerging scholars in the field. Merrill Swain, Penny Kinnear and Linda Steinman, however, published a book titled *Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education* to present key concepts in SCT. With the insightful analysis of eight narratives through the lens of SCT, the authors successfully explain what each concept involves and how it applies in each story. In addition, this book also includes controversial perspectives for each SCT concept and recommends interesting questions for future research.

The most time-consuming job in writing this book, as the authors admit, is how to convey and address the SCT terminology and concepts in a simple but solid way. Sociocultural Theory, as the authors put it, deals with the relationship among the individual psychological aspects and the social and culturally produced artifacts that transform the individual cognitive and mental functions. To familiarize readers with the SCT concepts, the authors decided to use eight typical stories from those who are involved in second language teaching and learning. The analysis of these stories through the lens of SCT illuminates the concepts and act as a scaffold for readers to make advancement in SCT understanding. It is this approach that makes the information in this book available for those who have little experience with SCT.

Affiliation

Department of Teaching and Learning, University of South Florida, Tampa, Florida.
email: namquangpham@mail.usf.edu

Sociocultural Theory in Second Language Education has eight chapters in total. Except for the last chapter, each of the first seven chapters focuses on one or two key concepts in SCT. Each chapter begins with a systemic review of SCT studies that pertain to the concept being explored. Then, the story is shared, followed by an in-depth analysis to illustrate and clarify each theoretical construct. To provide a multidimensional view, each chapter includes a current controversy section that highlights different perspectives perceived by well-known scholars. The authors also do an extraordinary job of providing an annotated bibliography that incorporates relevant empirical studies and raising some thought-provoking questions. These two sections are a useful resource for conducting subsequent research in SCT.

To be specific, in Chapter 1, the authors discuss the notion of mediation in language learning. Presenting the story of Mona who is a student in both EFL and ESL contexts, the authors make an explicit distinction between signs and tools and show how affordances and internalization works in second language learning processes. By using familiar and vivid examples in Mona's story, this chapter invites readers into the world of Sociocultural Theory.

In Chapter 2, the authors explore another concept called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this chapter, the analysis of the story of Madame Tremblay, a student in a French immersion program, serves as a guide for understanding the roles of scaffolding and community practice in second language development. This chapter also discusses the possibility of ZPD in second language acquisition and makes the clear differentiation between ZPD and $i+1$.

In Chapter 3, however, there are two stories. One is the story of Jody, a Cantonese-English bilingual student and the other is of Sophie and Rachel, two Grade 8 French-immersion students. The first story demonstrates the use of private speech in learning while the second illustrates the collaborative dialogue. Here, the authors focus on the theoretical connection between the speech of self and the speech for others and make useful implications of how to go beyond using language merely to transmit information.

The story of Thaya, a student in a professional writing program at a university, in the fourth chapter clearly serves as a useful source for exploring the inter-relationship between scientific and everyday concepts. A concise distinction between these two concepts is made here. In addition, readers will see the importance of using scientific and everyday concepts to build up writing skills and enhance conscious understandings of the writing process.

The analysis of the interview with Grace in the fifth chapter successfully unpacks SCT concepts such as emotions, regulations, and identity. This chapter offers a thorough analysis and connection of these topics with extensive literature in the field. Such connections not only clarify the concepts, but

also provide a diverse source of information that can be useful for designing a theoretical framework in subsequent studies.

In Chapter 6, readers have a chance to explore the story of Sandra, an experienced ESL teacher and also a graduate student in applied linguistics. Sandra's dilemma assists readers in making sense of how the notion of activity theory works in second language teaching. This story highlights the complex interactions between the individuals, the symbols and the tools that mediate the world of each individual. The authors' use of diagrams has vividly displayed how all elements of activity theory interact in the world of second language teaching and learning. In this chapter readers can see how activity theory is interpreted by three well-known scholars: Engeström, Vygotsky, and Leontiev.

In Chapter 7, the authors focus on the notion of assessment or documenting student language learning. The story of Yang, a student in an academic preparation program at a Canadian university, adds new insights of conducting and researching language assessment from SCT perspectives. In this chapter, readers can see that assessment is not an independent process, but it is a social and cultural activity with tools and procedures. The story analysis also reveals that assessment is a jointly constructed performance between assessors, people being assessed and their peers.

Chapter 8 is different from previous chapters in that there are no analysis or theoretical constructs presented. In this chapter, there are two stories, one is from Maria and the other is from Jean-Paul. The first story portrays conversations between two teachers while the latter explores the notion of Second Life in cyberspace. The authors leave the analysis of these stories to readers who now have been familiarized with SCT concepts through each of the first seven chapters. Therefore, the last chapter can be considered as a 'quiz' in which readers are able to use key constructs in SCT to make sense of the stories.

Overall, it is clear the authors have successfully narrowed the gaps between complex SCT concepts and those with little experience. It is the great passion in the field that enables the authors to provide in-depth analyses and extensive reviews from diverse sources. By using familiar stories, the authors have effectively supported readers in unpacking key concepts in SCT. Therefore, this book should be recommended for a wide range of readers such as teachers, educators, and researchers who would like to start their academic work in the area of Sociocultural Theory.