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In the second of Li Li’s books on language teacher cognition, she attempts to combine sociocultural theory (SCT), discursive psychology, and applied conversation analysis (CA) in order ‘to understand how knowing, understanding, conceptualising, doing, learning and being are displayed through interactive work that teachers do in a situated micro-context’ (p. vii). The tie that binds these three theories together, she claims, is that learning is social, that thinking and language work together, and ‘cognition is developed in and through social interaction’ (p. 3). Building off a construct developed in her earlier book, *cognition-in-interaction* (Li, 2017), Li characterizes teacher cognition as fluid, emergent, and socially and contextually situated. The ultimate goal of this book is to scrutinize, at the micro-level, teacher cognition; ‘what teachers think, believe, and do in their professional practice’ as well as ‘how they construct assumptions, conceptions, and ideologies in contexts and in social interaction’ (p. 8).

Before Li offers excerpts from her massive database of over 80 hours of Chinese EFL pre/in-service teachers’ instructional and interview data, she provides brief historical literature reviews on language teacher cognition,
sociocultural theory (Vygotsky but mostly cites Lantolf), discursive psychological (Edwards and Potter), and interaction analysis (CA, ten Have). Against her argument for the value of conceptualizing cognition as socially constructed and interaction as socially and locally constructed by speakers in micro contexts (and a brief CA tutorial), readers get to see and hear what Li means by teacher cognition-in-interaction. In Chapter 4, readers are introduced to teachers who demonstrate six different ways in which they conceptualize teaching and learning: focusing on linguistic knowledge, fostering communication skills, promoting content-integrated language learning, developing creativity and criticality, and enhancing teaching learning strategies. For each data excerpt, a classroom transcript is presented, a lengthy CA of the interactional work is given, and then conclusions are drawn about the teacher’s cognition. For example, if during instruction a teacher focuses on grammar rules and correct form, as illustrated by CA, this teacher’s cognition-in-interaction suggests providing correct input, using the drilling method, and offering teacher explanations are seen as key to second language learning. On the other hand, if a teacher strategically involves students in making contributions to the class discussion, also illustrated by CA, it is assumed that this teacher’s cognition-in-interaction reflects the value of communication and thus he/she works interactionally to create opportunities for interactional practice. The remaining chapters follow a similar structure although the focus turns towards how and why teachers make interactive decisions (Chapter 5), teachers’ beliefs about and use of technology (Chapter 6), and teacher identity (Chapter 8).

An exception is Chapter 7, The Impact of Teacher Education on Teacher Cognition which presents case studies of two pre-service teachers who through their MA TESOL programme are said to have gained greater linguistic knowledge, expanded their understanding of the scope of language learning, reimagined their notions about pedagogy and shifted their understanding of teachers’ roles. While classroom transcripts, tutor interactions, and researcher interview data are presented, they contain little evidence of either implicit or explicit mediation (in the SCT sense). The tutor or researcher may probe a teacher’s reasoning or suggest an alternative activity, however, they appear to function as a sounding board, rather than expert-others who are intentionally trying to uncover and challenge teachers’ everyday concepts and then link them to scientific concepts with the goal of transforming both the teacher’s thinking (reasoning) and the teacher’s activity (teaching). Given the focus (and title) of this book, one would expect data that capture successful learning as involving a shift from collaborative inter-mental activity with an expert to intra-mental activity, emphasizing the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge. While both preservice
teachers report finding value in their MA TESOL programme, a Vygotskain SCT-informed analysis would have uncovered what those developmental processes looked like and, more importantly, what sort of mediation pushed the teachers’ conceptual development toward greater levels of teaching expertise. From a Vygotskain SCT (1978, 1986) perspective it is not just that individuals learn from others in social contexts or during social exchanges, but rather that the actual means of social interaction (e.g., language and other psychological tools) are appropriated by the individual (internalized and transformed) to form the intra-mental tools for thinking and higher mental processing such as problem-solving, attention, and memory, among others, that can then be transferred and transformed as necessary to novel situations later on.

Throughout the data chapters, it is unclear how or why certain excerpts were chosen but readers can assume each was an exemplar of teacher cognition-in-interaction that Li was attempting to illustrate. In Chapter 4, Bin, who teaches pronunciation through drill and repetition, displays cognition-in interaction that is substantively different from Mia’s, who places heavy emphasis on fluency and communication in order to develop creativity and criticality. In Chapter 5, when a student offers an unexpected contribution while struggling to retell ‘The Necklace’ story, Zhou, the teacher, makes an interactive decision to deal with this student’s contribution. Yet, Yuan, a teacher who also confronts an unexpected student contribution about American Christmas customs, instead makes an interactive decision to ask an interrogating question and uses acknowledgement tokens to close down the exchange. In Chapter 6, Zhang uses an image on a computer monitor to orient his students to a shared visual display which facilitates both dialogue and understanding, while Lilly teaches grammar via a network-based website where students receive feedback on the accuracy of their grammatical choices. In Chapter 8, Sue struggles with feelings of incompetence as she continues to see herself as a learner rather than a teacher, while Yun is critical of a school-wide innovation to use iPads and defends her and her colleagues’ choice not to take risks in their teaching. Overall, Li’s painstaking micro-level CA descriptions of the interactional work that all of these teachers do certainly offers a window into their instructional worlds. What remains missing are the processes of learning and development and, importantly, the mediational means that directly impact teachers’ conceptual development.

Vygotsky’s ultimate goal was to understand the development and functioning of human consciousness which he believed could not be accomplished by looking at consciousness when it is fully formed and functioning smoothly as in the case of normal adult thinking, but instead by tracing its formation either from child to adult or from novice to expert or when it breaks down in difficult tasks, or as a result of brain damage (Luria, 1973). In other words, his commitment was to tracing the processes rather than the product of
human thinking. More importantly, to Vygotsky a theory was not an instrument of observing the object of study, instead it was to change the object of study in order to understand it. Referred to as the *pedagogical imperative*, (Lantolf and Poehner, 2014), a fundamental principle of Vygotskian SCT is to deploy specific SCT principles and concepts to intentionally promote cognitive development through appropriately organized instructional practice. In line with Lantolf and Beckett’s (2009) claim over a decade ago, much of the early Vygotskian SCT-informed L2 research did use the theory as a lens to understand classroom interactions between teachers and students. However, more recent research, and in particular, SCT-informed research on language teacher cognition has shifted its focus from observation to praxis; the unity of theory and practice aimed at intentionally provoking the conceptual development of teachers (person) and teaching (activity) expertise (Cross, 2006; Edwards, 2010; Feryok, 2012; Golombek and Doran, 2014: Johnson, 2009; Johnson & Golombek, 2011; Johnson and Golombek, 2016; Worden, 2014).

Furthermore, reflecting a common misreading of Vygotsky, Li conflates SCT with social constructionism or socially situated theories of learning (i.e., Lave and Wenger) which argue that knowledge entails lived practices and the processes of learning are negotiated with people in what they do, through experiences in the social practices associated with particular activities. One critique of socially situated perspectives is that they rely heavily on an apprenticeship model of learning. Vygotskian SCT also argues that the way in which human consciousness develops depends on the specific social activities (and relations) in which people engage but it differs in that Vygotsky called for intervention in thinking and activity to create social change (and in a radical way for his time!). Moreover, while socially situated perspectives argue that social activity influences cognition, Vygotskian SCT argues that social activity *is* the very source through which human consciousness is formed.

Throughout this book, Li uses the conventions of CA to illustrate the moment-by-moment interactional moves between teachers and students which, she argues, signal teachers’ beliefs, understandings, and knowledge. Despite the book’s title and repeated references to Vygotskain SCT, what this book does not do is illustrate how language instruction or language teacher education can be (or is) set up on the principles and concepts of Vygotskian SCT; a transformative model of conceptual development that results from systematic, intentional, well-organized instruction that challenges teachers to move toward more theoretically and pedagogically sound instructional practices and greater levels of professional expertise. Vygotskian SCT-informed teacher educators would have much to offer teachers like Bin, (Chapter 4) who teaches pronunciation through drill and repetition, or Yuan (Chapter 5) who struggles with unexpected student contributions, or Sue (Chapter 8)
who suffers from feelings of incompetence as a teacher. According to Li, these teachers now face a new paradigm imposed by Chinese educational reforms which expects them to shift from mechanical drilling, receptive learning, rote memorization and exam-oriented teaching to applying English in real-life situations and promoting exploration, collaboration, negotiation and communication. Instead of describing Bin’s, or Yuan’s, or Sue’s cognition-in-interaction, Vygotskian SCT-informed pre/in-service professional development would seek to change it. And it is doubtful that on their own, through reflection, or even within the collaborative dialogic framework that Li recommends, will they be able to overcome the contradictions between their historically shaped thinking and doing of teaching, to ways that meet the expectation of the Chinese educational reforms.

Clearly, Li provides evidence of language teachers’ thinking, beliefs, and interactions. The challenge that remains is how can teacher educators and language teacher education as an enterprise, provoke, promote, and advance teachers’ conceptual development to enable teachers to enact theoretically and pedagogically sound instructional practices in ways that create productive learning environments for the students they teach.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Karen E. Johnson is Kirby Professor in Language Learning and Applied Linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University. Her research focuses on a Vygotskian socio-cultural theoretical perspective on teacher learning and second language teacher education, narrative inquiry as professional development, and the dynamics of communication in second language classrooms.

REFERENCES


