Toward an understanding of *perezhivanie* for sociocultural SLA research

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Abstract

Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory has been invaluable for informing new theoretical approaches to the study of L2 acquisition. However, the concept of *perezhivanie* has been overlooked despite playing a central role in crystallizing ideas in both Vygotsky’s negative arguments and his positive theory. Here, I revisit the concept as a potential means to inform the kind of emic approach to research Firth and Wagner (1997; 2007) had argued was necessary for balance in the field of SLA. As a first step, I examine *perezhivanie* as discussed in ‘The problem of the environment’ (Vygotsky, 1994), and within the context of other aspects of Vygotsky’s work – his criticisms of psychology; the functional unity of consciousness; the concept of the unit; and holism – to clarify misunderstandings and expand on its theoretical content. I conclude with a discussion of the issues raised when *perezhivanie* is applied in the study of memory.

Keywords: Second Language; acquisition; cultural-historical psychology; *perezhivanie*; Second Language Research Methodology; Sociocultural Theory

Introduction

This paper discusses the concept of *perezhivanie* and its potential contribution to second language acquisition (SLA)\(^1\) research in providing a basis for informing emic (i.e., learner-centred) methodologies, reconceptualizing learner-centred data on sociocultural-theoretic terms, and expanding the tra-
ditional classroom database. Without an adequate English equivalent, *perezhivanie* is loosely translated as ‘lived experience’, and within the context of cultural-historical theory (CHT), refers to a unit of analysis Vygotsky had identified for investigating the development of human consciousness. In this unit, Vygotsky attempted to capture, in an analytically useful manner, the unity of cognition and emotion (among other mental functions) in the experience of a concrete situation. However, appearing in his work only just before his death, the concept was not adequately developed and its consequences subsequently not well understood by researchers seeking to use it. Thus, if the concept is to be operationalized for SLA research, further examination is needed to unpack its content and its place within CHT overall. First, however, it is necessary to understand, briefly, the broader research context that necessitates the use of *perezhivanie*.

**Sociocultural SLA**

Sociocultural theory (SCT), the adaptation of CHT for SLA research, has gained increasing recognition as a major alternative to traditional cognitivist approaches. Early in the history of sociocultural-SLA, the concepts of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and private speech opened the door to new possibilities for research and reconceptualizations of extant classroom research, learning, and practices; the concepts themselves having resonated with contemporaneous pedagogical and psycholinguistic concerns within the field. The ZPD led researchers to investigate the pedagogical implications of the zone: how it is created in activity, and how it can be best exploited for instruction (e.g., through the use of ‘scaffolding’; Wood, Bruner, and Ross, 1976; also see, van de Pol, Volman, and Beishuizen, 2010) or assessment (e.g., dynamic assessment; Poehner and Lantolf, 2005). Meanwhile, research into private speech foregrounded the potential for self-directed verbalizations (whether in the L1 or L2) to act as a measure of, or means for, promoting linguistic development (e.g., Centeno-Cortés and Jiménez-Jiménez, 2004; de Guerrero, 2013; Frawley and Lantolf, 1985; Lantolf and Frawley, 1984; McCafferty, 1994; Ohta, 2001; Saville-Troike, 1988). Reflecting subsequent developments and expansions of Vygotsky’s theoretical system, the work of A. N. Leontiev (1974/1981; 1977) and Engeström (1987; 2001) expanded the scope for sociocultural-SLA research (e.g., Coughlan and Duff, 1994; Lantolf and Genung, 2002; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Roebuck, 2000; van Lier, 2000) under the umbrella of Activity Theory.

The sociocultural approach emerged alongside meta-theoretical questions raised within SLA more generally (e.g., Firth and Wagner 1997; 2007; Ortega, 2012) regarding the then-dominant cognitivist approach. Two of the many
recommendations put forward to address this imbalance was the development of complementary methodologies that are socially-oriented and emically-informed, and the expansion of the traditional classroom database (Firth and Wagner, 1997; 2007). Therefore, in this paper, I wish to examine the possibility of informing such a methodological development by revisiting Vygotsky’s concept of *perezhivanie*, which has gained renewed and increasing attention in recent times. Grounding emic SLA research methods in CHT through this concept adds an important dimension to the understanding of L2 learning, a dimension that applies not only to classroom learning, but also extends to forms of learning and practices beyond formal education (e.g., self-directed online language learning). Additionally, the concept of *perezhivanie* provides researchers using qualitative and emic methods (e.g., narrative analysis, diary studies, phenomenology, conversation analysis, and autoethnography) a tool for reconceptualizing their data within the theoretical framework of CHT and sociocultural theory.

To begin this process of developing *perezhivanie* for SLA research, I first set out the tenets of Vygotsky’s non-classical psychology, and its relation to issues in the methodology and epistemology of classical psychology Vygotsky had identified. It is from this foundation that *perezhivanie* is best understood. Next, I turn to the concept as it is presented in ‘The problem of the environment’ to unpack its role in Vygotsky’s theoretical, epistemological and methodological arguments. I clarify some of the misunderstandings of the concept before examining how the concept may be operationalized in SLA research by applying it to existing empirical research. Here, a clearer understanding of *perezhivanie* provides sociocultural SLA researchers with a means to approach the study of L2 learning as ‘principally the same type of process as other types of human learning’ (Firth and Wagner, 2007: 806), while preserving the richness both of the process of learning and of the individual learners themselves.

**Vygotsky: The methodology and epistemology of psychology**

To contextualize the eventual emergence of the concept of *perezhivanie*, it is necessary to first examine Vygotsky’s motivation for his non-classical, cultural-historical psychology. Here I examine two facets of his methodological criticism: the subject matter of psychology, and the lack of a general psychological theory to study it.

For Vygotsky (1925/1999b), the proper object of psychology was the culturally developed consciousness of human beings. Being unique to humans, it required a similarly unique theoretical framework, one beginning with the proposition that the study of consciousness was a problem of the structure
of behaviour – that is, that consciousness and behaviour are causally linked. Thus, the materialist approaches of (American) behaviourism and (Russian) reflexology were inappropriate because they only studied behaviour, conceptualizing human behaviour as essentially the same as animal behaviour, ignoring the contribution of consciousness. Conversely, the idealist approach of subjective psychology was inadequate because it only described consciousness without explaining its causal link with behaviour or human biology. Studying only behaviour or only consciousness, and in isolation from each other, both materialist and idealist approaches were unsuitable as approaches to the study of human psychology. Reflecting on this situation, Vygotsky declared there was a ‘crisis’ in psychology.

The nature of this crisis was the fact that, although materialism and idealism shed light on complementary aspects of human psychology, they had different goals and principles and were incommensurable with each other. Further, there lacked a general psychology to unify, coordinate, and structure their findings. Extending the explanatory principles or broadening the scope of either approach to serve as the unifying theory would merely lead to a version of materialism or idealism (Vygotsky, 1997a: Chapter 15). Moreover, it would have been inappropriate to generalize what is common to all branches of psychology, as this fails both to specify how heterogeneous fields relate to each other, and to determine the dominant conceptual language. Furthermore, Vygotsky took issue with the deriving of psychological methodology from the natural sciences, since the result was a focus on observation and description, in an effort to attain the status of a natural science, to the neglect of explanation.

**Vygotsky: A new psychology**

In the context of this methodological criticism, Vygotsky’s theory is thus an attempt to situate consciousness at the centre of a new approach to psychology that is also both holistic and explanatory. One of the fundamental tenets of his theory is his genetic law of cultural development:

every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an intermental category, then within the child as an intramental category. (Vygotsky, 1997b: 106)

Even in Vygotsky’s (1925/1999b) early, but later abandoned, reflexological work, he noted that what differentiates human from animal behaviour is the former’s cultural origin. Human behaviour is informed not only by immediate experience and biological adaptations (as is the case for animals), but also by
historical and social experience (i.e., the experiences of past generations and other people, respectively), and imaginative mental activity. The genetic law reconceptualizes the relationship between mental development and the social world and avoids contemporary psychology’s dualism. The social world is not merely a context for development, but the source of development. Conversely, higher mental functions (HMFs) are uniquely human precisely because they have social origins.

Social activity is primarily mediated by signs (e.g., the use of language in asking someone to follow you) rather than being direct (e.g., grabbing them by the arm). All animals have the capacity for instinctive reaction to stimuli, but what differentiates humans is the ability to create signs, or ‘artificial stimuli-devices’ (Vygotsky, 1997b: 54) to externally stimulate, control, and coordinate the behaviour of ourselves and others. Within activities, sign use is structured by rules to accomplish specific goals within those activities. To internalize socially created signs is to assimilate these structures so that the signs can then be used as a stimuli-device for regulating one’s own behaviour through their role in internal mental activities (Vygotsky, 1997b). It is this internalization of signs that constitutes cultural development – the development of HMFs.

The mental function that will later be internalized, as it appears on the social plane, is what Vygotsky (1994) calls the ‘ideal form’ (p. 347). It is the interaction between this form and the actual ‘real’ form expressed by the individual that constitutes the ‘moving force of development’ (Veresov, 2010: 85). As a concrete example, the speech of a child is a ‘real’ form, while the speech of adults surrounding her constitutes the ‘ideal’ form towards which the real form of speech develops. However, if the social environment were to be conceptualized in absolute terms, it would mean individuals in identical environments would develop identically – but this cannot be the case. The same child at different ages will be differently affected by the fully formed speech of adults around her depending on whether she understands only single words or whole sentences (Vygotsky, 1994). Similarly, the ideal forms to which the child is exposed may change if the child is put in a different environment (e.g., from home, to pre-school, to play with other children). That is to say, the relationship between the ideal and real – between environment and individual – is dynamic. In Vygotsky’s (1994) example, three children from the same family are observed to present three completely different cases of disrupted development in relation to the sometimes-abusive behaviour of their mother, who suffers from various mental disorders. Vygotsky concludes, in this example, it is attitudes of the children and their unique experience of their living conditions that leads to their divergent developmental trajectories, and it is from here the concept of perezhivanie is introduced.
**Perezhivanie**

Though *perezhivanie* is a common Russian word, referring to the mental and emotional experience of some event, it is likely Vygotsky’s theoretical usage was inspired by Stanislavsky, a Russian theatre director (whose eponymous system of acting forms the basis of what is commonly known as Method Acting), given Vygotsky’s familiarity with both Russian theatre (Kozulin, 1999; Smagorinsky, 2011; Veresov 2009; 2010) and Stanislavsky’s work (see, e.g., Vygotsky, 1999a: 237–244). The difficulty in translating the word into English is evidenced by translations of Stanislavsky’s *perezhivanie* variously as ‘the art of living a part’, ‘to live the scene’, ‘sensations’, ‘living and experiencing’, ‘experience’, ‘experiencing’, ‘emotional experience’, ‘creation’ and ‘re-living/living through a role’ (Carnicke, 2008: Chapter 7). Similarly, translators of Vygotsky have used ‘experience’ (in ‘The Crisis at Age Seven’, Vygotsky, 1998), ‘lived experience’ (drawing on the German equivalent, *Erlebnis*; Blunden, 2010), ‘inner experience’ (Zavershneva, 2010) and ‘emotional experience’ (in ‘The problem of the environment’, Vygotsky, 1994). The translation of *perezhivanie* as ‘experience’ is itself problematic for readers of Vygotsky’s (1998) *Collected Works* (Vol. 5), given that the Russian word *opyt*, referring to a person’s accumulated body of knowledge or skills, can also be translated as experience. In ‘The Crisis at Age Seven’, for example, there is no clarification as to whether ‘experience’ is translated from *opyt*, or the more theoretical *perezhivanie*. By contrast, the editors of the volume in which ‘The Problem of the Environment’ appears (Vygotsky, 1994) explicitly acknowledge the difficulty in translation:

> Neither ‘emotional experience’ (which is used here and which only covers the affective aspect of the meaning of *perezhivanie*), nor ‘interpretation’ (which is too exclusively rational) are fully adequate translations of the noun. (p. 354)

In the following discussion, I focus on Vygotsky’s examination of *perezhivanie* in ‘The problem of the environment’, where it plays a central role in three interrelated arguments:

1. the theoretical proposition that *perezhivanie* is the prism through which the role and influence of the environment is determined;
2. the epistemological argument that the concept allows for the holistic approach Vygotsky had been advocating, in contrast to reductionist approaches which lose the richness of the complex phenomenon that is human psychology; and finally
3. the methodological claim that an analysis of *perezhivanie* guarantees an analysis of the individual and environmental factors that actually played a role in the aspect of development under investigation.
I discuss these three arguments in two parts: the first covering theoretical aspects and conceptual aspects of perezhivanie, and the second its epistemological and methodological implications.

**Perezhivanie as a prism**

Discussing the role of the environment in development, Vygotsky (1994) writes:

The emotional experience [perezhivanie] arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment, determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child. Therefore, it is not any of the factors in themselves (if taken without reference to the child)… but the same factors refracted through the prism of the child’s emotional experience [perezhivanie]. (p. 339–340)

and:

[Paedology] ought to be able to find the relationship which exists between the child and its environment, the child’s emotional experience [perezhivanie], in other words how a child becomes aware of, interprets, [and] emotionally relates to a certain event. This is such a prism which determines the role and influence of the environment on the development of, say, the child’s character, his psychological development, etc. (emphasis in original, p. 341)

In a traditional classroom demonstration of prism refraction, a beam of light is projected into one side of a glass prism and a change in the angle of the beam is observed both inside the prism and where the light has exited. The statement that environmental factors are ‘refracted through the prism of the child’s emotional experience [perezhivanie]’ initially suggests that the prism represents the mind, and the influence of the environment determined when it has passed through the prism. This interpretation, however suggests an independent, dualistic analysis of mind and environment followed by an analysis of their structural relationship. While this may be appropriate for the study of light and prisms, the human mind is not similarly reducible. In actuality, perezhivanie is defined in Vygotsky’s (1994) theory as containing an ‘indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics’ and represents ‘that which is being experienced…and how I, myself, am experiencing this’ (p. 342). Returning to the metaphor, then, it is not the prism itself without light, nor is it the beam of light after it has been refracted but, more accurately, the prism while it is refracting a particular beam of light. Given that perezhivanie determines what kind of influence a given situation will have on an individual, any change to this perezhivanie, whether through a change in the individual or environment, will mean development will be differently affected. This concept thus provides a means to account for the different developmental trajectories
of the three children discussed earlier. The environment that emerges for the development of a specific individual through their perezhivanie of, and relationship to, an objective environment, is what Vygotsky (1998) calls the ‘social situation of development’ (p. 198). Within perezhivanie, individual and environmental characteristics are found in unity rather than isolation, and so too is the social situation of development defined by this unity, and not, as the name would otherwise suggest, only external circumstance. I return to the issue of ‘unity’ in the following sections, as first, it is necessary to examine of what this metaphorical prism consists.

Vygotsky (1994) writes that perezhivanie takes into account ‘all the child’s personal characteristics which took part in determining his attitudes to the given situation’ (p. 342), specifying it ‘does not just represent the aggregate of the child’s personal characteristics’ (p. 343). The question then is: what kinds of psychological characteristics are within the scope of ‘personal characteristics’? Does Vygotsky include mental, psychological, emotional, cognitive, and/or affective characteristics? In the footnote to ‘The problem of the environment’, the editors acknowledge perezhivanie includes, though is not reducible to, both emotion and cognition.

It is possible to read ‘The problem of the environment’ in a way to support an interpretation of perezhivanie as referring to either emotion or cognition. For example, in discussing the two youngest children of the three and the effect of their sometimes-abusive mentally ill mother on their development, Vygotsky writes ‘he is simply overwhelmed by the horror…’ (p. 340) and ‘…a clash between his strong attachment, and his no less strong feeling of fear, hate, and hostility’ (p. 341). Here, it appears that perezhivanie refers to strong (and negative) emotional experience of a particular situation. By contrast, in discussing the eldest child of this family, he writes that the child ‘already understood the situation. He understood that their mother was ill and he pitied her’ (p. 341), thereby foregrounding cognitive development – specifically the ability to comprehend a situation – as being central to understanding the effect of that situation for that particular child. Similarly, Vygotsky later writes that the effect of the environment on development is contingent on the degree to which a child is aware of, or has insight into, their situation: a child who does not understand the significance of a death in the family, or a child who does not have the mental capacity to comprehend the bullying that is happening to him, will clearly be impacted by those events differently in a comparison to a child who does understand.3

While an individual’s emotional response to, or ability to comprehend, a given situation may possibly determine the developmental influence of that environment, it is in fact important for researchers to ‘find out…which of these constitutional characteristics [have] played a decisive role in determining the
child’s relationship to a given situation’ (emphasis in original, Vygotsky, 1994: 342). Thus, *perezhivanie* is best described as an indivisible unity of all and only those personal and situational (environmental) characteristics actually related to, and elicited in, a given individual’s experience of a specific situation. In other words, it is through analysis of *perezhivanie* that a researcher identifies the personal characteristics (and the degree to which they are instantiated) that shaped that particular experience of the situation and are thus developmentally relevant.

However, researchers who have used the concept have interpreted *perezhivanie* as referring, pre-analytically, to particular kinds of characteristics. For example, A. N. Leontiev (2005) argues that Vygotsky’s conception of *perezhivanie* emphasizes a subject’s comprehension of a given environment, and its significance for that subject. Viewing this as unsuccessful in maintaining a true ‘unity’, Leontiev argues that what determines *perezhivanie* is not a subject’s physiological properties, but instead the material content of their activity through which the relationship with a given object or situation is realized. Similarly, Bozhovich (2009) argues that Vygotsky ‘felt that the nature of experience in the final analysis is determined by how children understand the circumstances affecting them, that is, by how developed their ability to generalize is’ (emphasis in original, p. 67), with Bozhovich mounting an argument similar to Leontiev’s that such a conception ignores the complex interrelations between a subject’s needs and the possibilities for meeting them, in determining experience. By contrast, the editors of *Vygotsky and Creativity* initially highlight the influence of past experience in colouring present perceptions of social interaction when they define *perezhivanie*. However, their definition settles on unspecified ‘emotional aspects of experience’ (John-Steiner, Connery, and Marjanovic-Shane, 2010: 8), drawing on Stanislavsky’s usage. In her chapter in *Vygotsky and Creativity*, Ferholt (2010) translates *perezhivanie* as ‘intensely-emotional-lived-through-experience’ (p. 164) and takes this to be self-explanatory without further discussion of the concept’s place in Vygotsky’s work.

Within SLA research, interpretations of *perezhivanie* have tended also towards its emotional and affective aspects. Mahn and John-Steiner (2002), for example, address what they view as a lack of emotion in conceptualizations of the ZPD by using *perezhivanie* to focus on the ways in which individuals cognitively and affectively relate to emotional aspects of social interactions. Specifically, they focus on ways in which partners in collaborative activity can provide emotional scaffolding for each other in what is often an emotionally turbulent process of learning. Similarly, Cross (2012) uses *perezhivanie* to refer to the way in which an individual’s affective past (e.g., the sense of words already in their L1) can be set in emotional tension with present needs (e.g.,
the need to be understood in a certain way, to make sense of something), the cathartic release of which can be brought about through creative engagement (whether in the form of internalization and/or transformative externalization of signs and tools). By contrast, Antoniadou (2011) suggests that perezhivanie is formed by investment in a given activity, that is, an engagement with the subject’s interests, motives, and needs, thus foregrounding the importance of emotion. Finally, Kang (2007) proposes that what underlies an individual’s perezhivanie is their identity – constructed anew in each environment in the context of available cultural-historical resources available, and not necessarily known to the individual – within a given situation. However, Kang (2007) also later defines perezhivanie as an individual’s ‘thoughts, emotions, and intentions within each specific environment’ (pp. 205–206).

Though these SLA researchers have productively engaged with perezhivanie and deployed it for the study of particular personal and/or environmental factors in learning, there has been little work done to understand perezhivanie within the broader context of Vygotsky’s other theoretical contributions. Chai-klin (2003) and Veresov (2004), for example, have argued that researchers and educators have often employed the definition, rather than concept, of another of Vygotsky’s contributions: the ZPD. The (narrow) definition of a term can be obtained simply by quoting the relevant passages in which the term is explicitly mentioned. However, to fully understand the (broader) concept, one needs to understand its interrelation with other concepts. Therefore, here I discuss two other aspects in Vygotsky’s work to further illuminate the theoretical content of perezhivanie: his discussion of the functional unity of consciousness, and methodological units.

The functional unity of consciousness

Vygotsky agreed with the idea in traditional psychology that consciousness was a unified whole. However, he disagreed with the premises that interrelationships between mental functions within consciousness were constant and consistent, inessential for analysis, and that the development of mental functions could be studied in isolation. The development of consciousness, he argued, could not be understood as merely ‘a sum of the changes occurring in each of the separate functions’ (Vygotsky, 1987: 187–188). Rather, development of particular mental functions can only be understood in terms of changes to interfunctional relationships, that is, in terms of changes to the whole of consciousness. The emergence of a higher mental function like logical memory, for example, comes about when the biologically-given lower mental function of memory is interfunctionally connected, within the system of consciousness, with other mental functions, with volition and affect, with conceptual knowledge, and with sign systems like language and numbers.
This understanding of consciousness clarifies two aspects of perezhivanie. First, since consciousness is essentially, to use Mahn's (2013) term, a 'system of systems', any part of that system – HMFs, conceptual knowledge, internalized sign systems, personality, and so on – has the potential to play a role in a given perezhivanie due to the interdependence of all those systems. Not every system will be accounted for, of course, nor will the systems be equally salient. In some cases, emotional reactions to a given situation will dominate over rational thought; in other cases the opposite may be true. However, this can only be determined by examining specific perezhivanie: it would be premature to focus on rationality, emotion, or any other particular aspect of perezhivanie pre-analytically. It is clear from Vygotsky’s discussion of consciousness that the different kinds of personal characteristics mentioned in ‘The problem of the environment’ (emotion, attitudes, and comprehension and understanding) form a non-exhaustive and descriptive, not prescriptive, list.

Second, since development of particular mental functions is best understood in terms of the development of consciousness as a whole (that is, in terms of interfunctional connections), then any on-going development will potentially have an influence, directly or indirectly, on future perezhivanie, altering its ‘content’ even if the objective environment remains unchanged. An English language learner, for example, will differently experience the words tire and dire depending on whether or not they have the ability to distinguish /t/ and /d/. Existing knowledge and ability, therefore, shape perezhivanie. As Vygotsky writes, ‘mental functions always act in unity with one another’ (Vygotsky, 1987: 188) – the act of perception in this example would itself draw at least on memory and the ability to discriminate, all of which are also connected to the developing system of English signs, among other systems (attitudes to the language and situation, conceptual knowledge, attention, etc.).

**Perezhivanie as holistic**

As discussed earlier, Vygotsky (1997a) had argued psychology could not be unified if it maintained a materialist-idealist dualism and forced together two fundamentally opposed disciplines. This position was also manifest as an opposition to reductionism in psychology: reducing the object of psychological research to its constituent elements is inappropriate for understanding the whole as a uniquely human phenomenon. If psychology was to provide insight into specifically human phenomena, then it could not proceed purely on the basis of general physical or biological laws. The conceptual language – in this case dialectical materialism – needed to be specific to the object of inquiry. Thus, Vygotsky (1994) argued, ‘analysis into elements ought to be replaced by analysis which reduces a complex unity, a complex whole, to its units’ (p. 341).
In this section, I aim to illuminate why Vygotsky identified *perezhivanie* as a *unit* of analysis by examining how a *unit* is distinguished from an *element*, and how this distinction fits within the broader argument against a reductionist approach to psychology.

Simply put, units and elements are both empirically identified actual parts (i.e., not merely analytic constructs) of the larger phenomenon under investigation. Where they differ is that units retain the dynamic relations (e.g., those characterizing its growth, development, and on-going operation) of the whole by maintaining a unity of what would otherwise be reduced to separate elements (Vygotsky, 1987; 1994). Thus to understand the development of verbal thinking Vygotsky identified and examined the unit of word meaning, within which the unity of thinking and speech was preserved. Similarly, to understand the role of the environment in the on-going development of consciousness, Vygotsky identified the unit of which consciousness consists—*perezhivanie*—within which the unity of personal and situational characteristics as represented in development, is maintained.

An analysis by elements is, to use one of Vygotsky’s well-known examples, like trying to explain the characteristics of water by decomposing it into oxygen and hydrogen atoms (Vygotsky, 1987; 1993). To do so would be to ‘cut the knot rather than unravel it’ (Vygotsky, 1987: 44) and ignore the internal regularities characterizing what is unique about and specific to water. Consequently, the researcher is forced to find the ‘external, mechanical forces of interaction between elements’ (Vygotsky, 1987: 45) to explain the characteristics of the whole— that is, what the oxygen atom does for the hydrogen atom (or thinking, for speech), and vice versa. Such analyses by elements are reductive, and while useful for other disciplines, are inappropriate for the study of human psychological development. Specifically, Vygotsky argued against three kinds of reductionism (Matusov, 2007). First is *downward reductionism* (Lantolf, 2006), the explanation of the whole in terms of lower-level biological or physical processes (as in e.g., behaviourism and reflexology). Second is *upward reductionism* (or what Wertsch, 1985, calls ‘cultural reductionism’), an explanation of the whole in terms of higher-level cultural processes (e.g., idealism). Third is *horizontal reductionism*, the explanation of parts of a system in isolation from other interdependent parts. Each of these kinds of reductionism simplifies and destroys the complexity of the whole by ignoring the interdependence with higher-level processes, lower-level processes, and other parts of the system, respectively.

Any kind of reductionism, any kind of ‘analysis’ by elements ‘is not analysis in the true sense of the word but a process of raising the phenomenon to a more general level’ (emphasis in original, Vygotsky, 1987: 244). The issue with generalization here is that specificity is lost: an elemental analysis of water only
produces knowledge about oxygen and hydrogen atoms in general, and not specifically of the phenomenon of water itself. Consequently, the interdependencies between various elements, interdependencies characterizing the whole as being uniquely human, are lost, and the issues germane only to the whole (and not its parts) remain outside the field of view of the researcher (Vygotsky, 1987: Chapter 7). Thus, an elemental analysis of verbal thinking produces knowledge about speech or thinking, while saying nothing about what makes human verbal thinking distinct from other sounds in nature, or from the intellectual operations of other animals. Similarly, an elemental analysis of the influence of the environment on mental development says little about how the environment is concretely represented in the process of development for a specific individual. It becomes impossible to follow the process of human psychological development, to distinguish it from other kinds of development, to understand the diversity of internal regularities, when the analytic scope is not sufficiently specific to the unified whole.\(^5\) Perezhivanie, then, as a unit of analysis, avoids these issues inherent in reductionism and allows more adequate theorization about how the individual and the environment are represented as a complex, dynamic, and rich unity in human mental development.

A final and brief note about Vygotsky’s use of perezhivanie is its convenience: it accounts for all and only those personal and situational characteristics relevant to a given experience of a situation (and thus, relevant for understanding an individual’s behaviour and mental development). A focus on perezhivanie also resists the imposition of top-down, researcher-imposed labels, and the distorting interpretation of participants’ experiences from the perspective of the researcher – or what has been termed the ‘psychologists fallacy’ (Belland, Drake, and Liu, 2011: 529). Crucially, the ability to analyse the influence of the environment on an individual’s development in concrete terms allows researchers to better understand what is an ever-changing dynamic relationship. Having examined the place of perezhivanie in Vygotsky’s work, we can now turn to its potential contribution to SLA.

The perezhivanie of L2 learning

The concept of perezhivanie suggests an emic approach to research, one that is sensitive to the subjective experiences of the learner, linking these with both past and ongoing development. To highlight the potential contribution of the concept for sociocultural SLA research, here I examine some of the issues that are raised when perezhivanie is foregrounded, in the context of understanding the role of memory in L2 learning.

Perezhivanie provides a means to approach and reconceptualize fundamental SLA concepts from an emic perspective. Such a perspective, Firth
and Wagner (1997; 2007) argued, is necessary for theoretical, conceptual and methodological balance in a field traditionally dominated by cognitive approaches. By way of example, we can examine the case of memory. Typically discussed in terms of working memory, memory is often conceptualized as a capacity, with research focused on how this capacity can either be increased or better managed and used in activity (for a review, see Juffs and Harrington, 2011; Sagarra, 2013). Missing from this conceptualization, however, is an understanding of how the use of memory is experienced in concrete situations – that is, what is the developmental significance of the act of recalling information? Perhaps equally important, what is the content of recall? If we conceptualize memory as mediating learning (e.g., the use of mnemonic devices) and frame its analysis in terms of *perezhivanie*, then we can begin to answer some of these questions.

Tulving’s (1989, 2002) theory of episodic memory, earlier defined by William James as ‘present conscious awareness of an event that has happened in the rememberer’s own past’ (Tulving, 1989: 3), is useful here. In contrast to semantic memory – a purely factual type of remembering (Tulving and Szpunar, 2009) – episodic memory is what allows individuals to re-experience prior experiences. Episodic memory is not confined to the memory of linguistic form, and thus provides a way to understand the different kinds of memories that may be used in the process of learning language. Additionally, the content of a particular memory reflects what a learner originally noticed. As Schmidt and Frota (1986) noted in their seminal paper, noticing is the point at which individual differences, cognition, and affect enter into the language learning process. That which is noticed says as much about the environment as it does about the learner and their relationship to a particular situation at a specific point in time.

In her autoethnographic account of learning Spanish as a L2 as an ‘edu-tourist’ in Costa Rica, Lotherington (2007) recounts two examples where the social embarrassment of having misspoken, and the struggle to locate the correct word in time, ‘turbo-charge[d]’ (p. 125) her memory. The experience of being embarrassed ensures that the words she had mistakenly spoken – *lentejas* (lentils) instead of *lentes* (glasses), and *cuchillos* (knives) instead of *cucharas* (spoons) – are firmly lodged in her memory, as though the affective experience were a mnemonic device. Similarly, in Mok (2013), I undertook an autoethnography of my learning of Mandarin Chinese as a L2, and noted instances where I had recalled previous instances of being confused or mistaken, these recollections mediating my lexical search and production of written constructions. Analysed as part of the *perezhivanie* of language learning, the experience of recall is an emic conceptualization of memory as an active mediating tool in the learning process. The situations that give rise to those memories...
can themselves be understood as experiences reflecting the unique relationship the learner had with the environment at a particular moment, thereby providing a basis for investigating that learner’s development over time.

The need to understand what learners actually do in language learning – specifically with regard to the use of mediation – is a concern that has also been raised from within the framework of Activity Theory. In their study, Coughlan and Duff (1994) distinguish between tasks, the ‘behavioural blueprint’ given to subjects to elicit data, and activities, the actual behaviour produced. Although the same task may be given, different subjects (and indeed, the same subject at different times) may, for whatever reason, approach the task differently, with different goals in mind, creating different activities. As a result, the mediating behaviour used to complete the task will differ. While Coughlan and Duff’s study is a caution against isolating data from the contexts from which they were gathered, the issues raised have also been echoed in classroom research, where the strategies deployed to complete tasks have been observed to vary with the learner’s perception of the activity (Brown, 2008; 2010; Roebuck 2000). Similarly, others (Allen, 2010; Storch and Wigglesworth, 2010; Wigglesworth and Storch, 2012) have found that the degree to which learners engage with opportunities for learning (e.g., practice, engaging with feedback) is also contingent on the ever-shifting attitudes to, and perceptions of, those opportunities. Implicit in this activity-theoretic research is the centrality of perezhivanie – the dynamic relationship between individual and environment, personal and situational characteristics, expressed as an experience of that environment – in shaping behaviour and thus influencing and reflecting development. While for activity theorists this relationship is only part of the larger unit of analysis of the activity system, in Vygotsky’s CHT, perezhivanie is in itself sufficient as a unit of analysis as the characteristics that are developmentally relevant are only those which are actually manifested in perezhivanie.

Concluding remarks

In this paper I have attempted to illuminate the concept of perezhivanie within the framework of Vygotsky’s CHT so that it may be applied to SLA research with a full understanding of its theoretical content, methodological and analytical potential, and epistemological implications. To do this, I have set out the tenets of Vygotsky’s non-classical psychology to illuminate the broader issue that inform his positive theory. It is from within the context of these issues that I have explicated the concept of perezhivanie as discussed in ‘The problem of the environment’. Just as Vygotsky had argued that the development of mental functions cannot be understood in isolation, so too does the concept of perezhivanie require an understanding of its place within CHT as a holistic unit of
analysis that overcomes the reductionism which Vygotsky opposed. Thus, this paper has provided an elaboration of the theoretical content of perezhivanie. Further inquiry into the concept is possible by comparing perezhivanie to another unit of analysis, word meaning, Vygotsky had identified in what Gonzalez Rey (2009) pointed out was a distinct moment in Vygotsky's thinking. In examining the potential application of perezhivanie to SLA research in the case of memory, I have also highlighted its potential for informing emic sociocultural approaches to research. Such approaches allow for reconceptualizations of existing concepts by accounting for their concrete manifestations, thereby providing conceptual balance to the field more generally.

For SLA, perezhivanie embodies a less traditional epistemology and approach to research, one maintaining the richness of reality rather than its deconstruction. The concept also allows for a synergy between existing qualitative, emic methods and sociocultural theory as a whole, rather than individual concepts. Similarly, perezhivanie, shedding the pedagogical and psycholinguistic connotations of cultural-historical concepts previously adapted for SLA, broadens the scope of research to include the informal and self-directed L2 learning contexts that are a reality for some language learners. The concept is a useful addition to the sociocultural SLA repertoire, furnishing researchers with new perspective on L2 learning, as well as options and opportunities for thinking about the implications of their work, for making manifest their research agendas (see, e.g., Ortega, 2005), and for engaging with Vygotsky's work. Perezhivanie is useful in that it provides a more general non-linguistic approach to the study of language learning, an approach that appreciates the need to understand, for example, mediation more thoroughly in terms of its relationship to the individual. It also provides a way to reconceptualize existing constructs within SLA in terms of a dynamic, rather than static, relationship. Hopefully, there will be further development of the concept for SLA, if not for research, then for the sake of preserving the essence of Vygotsky's work, as Smagorinsky (2011) writes:

perezhivanie thus far remains more a tantalizing notion than a concept with clear meaning and import to those who hope to draw on it. How this feature of human development is constructed and employed in future work will affect how Vygotsky's legacy in the development of a comprehensive, unified cultural psychology is extended and realized by those working in his considerable wake. (p. 339)

Notes
1. Here I use SLA to refer to the field of research and 'L2 learning' to the object of its study.
2. To clarify, I use ‘cultural-historical’ to refer to the work of Vygotsky, and ‘sociocultural’ to its adapted form within SLA.
3. Vygotsky also discusses attitudes, and although to what ‘attitude’ refers is itself a com-
plex issue, it is indicative of the issues in reading Vygotsky that the word translated as 'attitude' (отношение) is more accurately translated as 'relationship' (Veresov, personal communication).

4. Vygotsky (1998): ‘experience is the actual dynamics of the unity of consciousness; that is, the whole which comprises consciousness’ (p. 294). A more accurate translation of this is ‘пerezhivanie’ is an actual dynamic unit of consciousness, i.e. the complete unit which consciousness consists of’ (Veresov, personal communication).

5. It should be noted that Vygotsky supports the generalization of a principle from a particular case – for example, he had earlier praised Pavlov’s abstraction of a general biological principle, the conditional reflex, from a specific phenomenon, the salivation of dogs (Vygotsky, 1997b: Chapter 15). However, he is opposed to the application of the general principles, available to psychology at the time, to specific phenomena – for example, using the conditional reflex to explain the particular properties (and origins) of uniquely human higher mental functioning (Vygotsky, 1997a: Chapter 1).

About the author

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