

Individual Paper Session 23
Research Methodology
Thursday, July 6
3:45-4:15pm

Theory to Practice: Methodological implications of Vygotskian sociocultural theory

Russell CROSS
Monash University
russell.cross@education.monash.edu.au

In what Block (2003) has labelled the ‘social turn in SLA’, recent research on second language and teaching has become increasingly social in orientation, with Vygotskian sociocultural theory and its associated theory of activity being an especially significant influence on such research (see, for example, Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Lantolf, 2000, 2002, 2005, and Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). In contrast to the Cartesian perspective offered by the cognitive input-interaction-output model of SLA that has characterised the majority of SLA research since the late 1970s, the social orientation offered by Vygotsky sees a dialectic relationship emerge between the self and society with development being the result of social interaction (i.e., ‘mediated activity’).

This paper considers empirical issues that the application of sociocultural theory in SLA raises with respect to research methodology and design. While sociocultural theory offers a rich theoretical and conceptual framework for (re)conceptualising the relationship between learners, language, and their sociocultural context, its still comparatively recent introduction to the field of SLA has meant that many of the methodological implications it carries have yet to be adequately debated and explored.

Beginning with a general overview of the theory, this paper then focuses on three of its principal constructs: genetic development, mediated activity, and tools. Through an examination of how recent empirical studies in SLA from a sociocultural perspective have dealt with these concepts methodologically, the paper concludes by identifying the key methodological trends that currently exist in socioculturally oriented SLA research, and the implications they raise for future studies of SLA.