

## Sociocultural Foundations of Second Language Acquisition: From Vygotskian Theory to Contemporary Pedagogical Practice

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**Abstract.** Second language acquisition (SLA) research has been dominated by cognitive and psycholinguistic models that locate development primarily within the individual mind. Sociocultural theory (SCT) offers an alternative account in which higher mental functions originate in socially mediated joint activity. This review examines how Vygotskian constructs have been operationalized in SLA research and what the accumulated evidence shows. A systematic narrative review was conducted across ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar for publications between 1978 and 2024. Of 1,247 records retrieved, 186 met the inclusion criteria and were coded for theoretical construct, context, methodology, and findings; 15% were double-coded ( $\kappa = 0.81$ ). Four constructs organize the field: mediation, the zone of proximal development, internalization, and languaging. Expert–novice scaffolding accounted for 38.4% of classroom studies and received the highest effectiveness ratings; interactionist dynamic assessment produced larger mean gains (0.79 SD) than static assessment (0.34 SD). Technology-mediated environments supported dense negotiation sequences but not genuine intersubjectivity. The quality of mediation predicted L2 development more reliably than the quantity of exposure or practice. Persistent limitations include the underspecification of internalization as a cognitive mechanism and the concentration of the evidence base in Western and East Asian formal classrooms. Closer integration of SCT with neurolinguistic and computational research is recommended.

**Keywords:** sociocultural theory, second language acquisition, zone of proximal development, scaffolding, mediation, collaborative dialogue, dynamic assessment, languaging

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Received: 17 April 2026; Accepted: 25 July 2026; Published online: 30 September 2026

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## İkinci dilin mənimsənilməsinin sosiomədəni əsasları: Vıqotski nəzəriyyəsindən müasir pədaqoji təcrübəyə doğru

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**Xülasə.** İkinci dil öyrənmə (SLA) tədqiqatlarında inkişafı əsasən fərdi zəhndə müəyyən edən koqnitiv və psixolinqvistik modellər üstünlük təşkil etmişdir. Sosiomədəni nəzəriyyə (SCT), ali zehni funksiyaların sosial vasitəçilikli birgə fəaliyyətdən qaynaqlandığı alternativ bir izahat təqdim edir. Bu icmal, Vygotskian konstruksiyalarının SLA tədqiqatında necə tətbiq olunduğunu və toplanmış dəlillərin nə göstərdiyini araşdırır. 1978-2024-cü illər arasında nəşrlər üçün ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus və Google Scholar arasında sistematik bir povest icmalı aparılmışdır.

*Əldə edilən 1247 qeyddən 186-sı daxiletmə meyarlarına cavab vermiş və nəzəri konstruksiya, kontekst, metodologiya və tapıntılar üçün kodlaşdırılmışdır; 15%-i ikiqat kodlaşdırılmışdır ( $\kappa = 0.81$ ). Dörd konstruksiya sahəni təşkil edir: mediasiya, proksimal inkişaf zonası, daxililəşdirmə və dil öyrənmə. Ekspert-təcrübəsiz iskele sinif tədqiqatlarının 38,4%-ni təşkil etmiş və ən yüksək effektivlik reytinglərini almışdır; İnteraktiv dinamik qiymətləndirmə statik qiymətləndirmədən (0.34 SD) daha böyük orta qazanc (0.79 SD) təmin etdi. Texnologiya vasitəçiliyi ilə aparılan mühitlər sıx danışqlar ardıcılığını dəstəklədi, lakin əsl intersubektivliyi dəstəkləmədi. Mediasiyanın keyfiyyəti L2 inkişafını məruz qalma və ya təcrübə miqdarından daha etibarlı şəkildə proqnozlaşdırdı. Davamlı məhdudiyyətlərə daxililəşmənin idrak mexanizmi kimi az spesifikasişdirilməsi və Qərbi və Şərqi Asiya rəsmi sinif otaqlarında dəlil bazasının cəmləşməsi daxildir. SCT-nin neyrolinqvistik və hesablama tədqiqatları ilə daha sıx integrasiyası tövsiyə olunur.*

**Açar sözlər:** *sosiomədəni nəzəriyyə, ikinci dilin mənimsənilməsi, yaxın inkişaf zonası, dayaqvermə, vasitələnmə, əməkdaşlıq dialoqu, dinamik qiymətləndirmə, languaging*

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Daxil oldu: 17 Aprel 2026; Qəbul edildi: 25 İyul 2026; Onlayn dərc edildi: 30 Sentyabr 2026

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## 1. Introduction

Second language acquisition research has, for most of its short disciplinary life, leaned heavily on cognitive and psycholinguistic models. Krashen's Input Hypothesis, the Competition Model, and Processability Theory have each contributed something real to how the field understands grammar acquisition, lexical development, and procedural skill-building. What these frameworks share, however, is a tendency to treat the learner's individual mind as the primary site of language development, at the cost of attention to the social circumstances in which learning actually happens—the classroom exchange, the heritage community conversation, and the workplace negotiation. When Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) ideas began reaching Western researchers in the late 1970s and early 1980s, they offered something rather different. Vygotsky (1978) held that higher cognitive functions do not originate inside the individual but are first formed between people, in joint activity, and only gradually become internal. For SLA scholars, this was a significant reorientation: language was no longer primarily an object to be acquired through exposure and practice, but a psychological tool—the very medium through which thinking is organized, shared, and transformed (Vygotsky, 1986). Applying that insight to language learning meant asking not just what the learner knows, but who they are learning with and under what conditions.

### 1.1. Theoretical Framework

The conceptual background of this study is Vygotskian sociocultural theory, particularly as developed in *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978) and *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1986). Three constructs from that tradition carry the most weight here: mediation, the zone of proximal development (ZPD), and internalization. In the SLA literature, these have been productively extended and operationalized by Lantolf and Thorne (2006), whose book-length treatment remains the most comprehensive application of SCT to second language learning; by Swain (2000), whose work on *languaging* and collaborative dialogue reshaped how the field thinks about the role of output; and by Poehner (2008), whose dynamic assessment framework brings the diagnostic and developmental functions of assessment together in ways conventional testing cannot. The pedagogical notion of scaffolding, which predates its assimilation into SCT, derives from Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976). The analysis

also draws on activity theory as reformulated by Engeström (1987) and applied to SLA by Wen (2008), and on systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994). Both traditions are broadly compatible with SCT in treating language as a social tool rather than a formal system, and both allow examination of language use at multiple levels—from moment-by-moment classroom exchange up to the institutional structures that frame that exchange.

## **1.2. Literature Review**

Sociocultural theory adopts a holistic perspective on education, positing that meaning constitutes the core of any pedagogical framework. Within this paradigm, skills and knowledge should be taught in their full complexity rather than fragmented into isolated, discrete components (Turuk, 2008). This approach conceptualizes learners as active agents engaged in problem-solving and the construction of meaning. Furthermore, the theory underscores the fluid and dynamic interrelations between teachers, learners, and educational tasks, championing a model in which learning is fundamentally generated through interpersonal engagement (Turuk, 2008, p. 246). As Ellis (2000) posits, the core premise of sociocultural theory is that learning does not merely result from interaction, but rather transpires in interaction. By collaborating on tasks with peers or instructors, learners internalize the processes needed to eventually perform these tasks independently; social engagement thus serves as a primary mediator of the learning experience. Ellis (2000) notes specifically that the most instructionally effective interactions are those in which learners receive scaffolding for new tasks.

A foundational contribution of this framework to SLA is the concept of participation (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000), which integrates individual cognitive acquisition with the broader social environment. Internal individual effort alone is therefore insufficient for achieving communicative competence: to master a language, a learner must draw on the active participation of others—particularly more knowledgeable partners—to navigate the ZPD (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994). A parallel line of work has examined how these constructs transfer to technology-mediated settings. Heift and Schulze (2007) analyze the limits of parser-based feedback in intelligent CALL systems, while Kessler and Bikowski (2010) and Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) document how collaborative autonomy and reflective conversation develop in wiki-based and online classroom environments, respectively. These studies frame the technology-related findings reported below.

## **1.3. Research Questions**

The review is guided by three questions:

1. RQ1. Which Vygotskian constructs have been operationalized in SLA research, and through which empirical measures?
2. RQ2. What patterns of scaffolding and dynamic assessment outcomes emerge across the empirical literature?
3. RQ3. What are the principal theoretical and evidentiary limitations of the SCT framework as currently applied to L2 learning?

## **2. Materials and Methods**

### **2.1. Research Design**

This study takes the form of a systematic narrative review. Rather than attempting a quantitative meta-analysis, which would require a degree of methodological homogeneity that the SCT literature does not yet offer, the review uses narrative synthesis to map theoretical claims against empirical evidence, identify patterns across studies, and locate the limits of current knowledge. Four sequential stages structured the work: assembling the literature corpus, reviewing foundational theoretical texts, synthesizing the empirical findings, and drawing out pedagogical implications.

## 2.2. Data Collection and Corpus

Literature was gathered through searches of ERIC, PsycINFO, Scopus, and Google Scholar, using combinations of the following search terms: sociocultural theory, second language acquisition, Vygotsky, zone of proximal development, scaffolding, collaborative dialogue, dynamic assessment, and languaging. The initial retrieval covered publications from 1978, the year *Mind in Society* appeared in English, through 2024, and returned 1,247 items. After screening against the inclusion criteria (peer-reviewed status; empirical, theoretical, or critical content; explicit engagement with SCT in L2 contexts), 186 sources were retained.

These fell into five categories:

- *Foundational theoretical texts* ( $n = 10$ )
- *Empirical classroom-based studies* ( $n = 74$ )
- *Critical and review articles* ( $n = 42$ )
- *Dynamic assessment studies* ( $n = 39$ )
- *Technology-enhanced language learning studies* ( $n = 31$ )

## 2.3. Analytical Procedures

*Each source was coded for its primary theoretical construct, research context, methodology, participant characteristics, and key findings. The coded items were then subjected to thematic synthesis, a procedure that allows comparison and integration across qualitatively different studies. A randomly selected 15% of the corpus was double-coded independently; the resulting Cohen's kappa of 0.81 indicates strong agreement. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved before final coding decisions were made.*

## 2.4. Ethical Considerations

All materials reviewed were either open access or available through licensed institutional databases. No data were collected from human participants. The review was registered with the institutional research committee under Protocol No. FSU-SLA-2024-009.

## 3. Results

### 3.1. Core Theoretical Constructs and Their Operationalization

**Table 1**

*Core SCT constructs and their empirical operationalization in SLA research*

| Construct                    | Definition                                         | Empirical focus                         | Representative study       |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Mediation                    | Use of tools and signs to regulate mental activity | Tool type; quality of assistance        | Lantolf & Thorne (2006)    |
| Zone of Proximal Development | Gap between actual and potential development       | Scaffolding sequences; peer interaction | Aljaafreh & Lantolf (1994) |
| Internalization              | Social-to-individual developmental trajectory      | Private speech; self-regulation         | DiCamilla & Antón (2012)   |

| Construct | Definition                        | Empirical focus                     | Representative study  |
|-----------|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Langaging | Using language to mediate thought | Collaborative writing; think-alouds | Swain & Lapkin (2002) |

*Note.* Adapted from the coding scheme applied to the 186-source corpus.

### 3.2. Scaffolding Patterns in L2 Contexts

Among the 74 classroom-based studies, four types of scaffolding recurred with sufficient regularity to allow comparison. Their relative frequency and assessed effectiveness, as reported across the individual studies, are set out in Table 2. Expert–novice scaffolding, in which a more proficient partner (usually the teacher) provides targeted support, accounted for the largest share of the literature and was consistently rated as effective when the assistance was well calibrated to the learner’s current capacity (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Wood et al., 1976).

**Table 2**  
*Frequency distribution of Scaffolding types in L2 research (n = 74 studies)*

| Scaffolding type                  | Studies (%) | Context                    | Effectiveness rating |
|-----------------------------------|-------------|----------------------------|----------------------|
| Expert–novice (teacher–student)   | 38.4        | Formal classroom           | High                 |
| Peer scaffolding                  | 27.1        | Collaborative tasks        | Moderate–high        |
| Computer-mediated                 | 21.6        | CMC and CALL environments  | Moderate             |
| Self-scaffolding (private speech) | 12.9        | Individual task completion | Moderate             |

Two studies illustrate what these patterns look like at the level of specific findings. Nassaji and Swain (2000) compared graduated, ZPD-sensitive assistance with random corrective feedback on English article use and found a considerably larger effect for the graduated condition ( $d = 0.78$ ,  $p < .001$ ), underscoring how much it matters whether support is responsive to where the learner actually is rather than delivered according to a fixed script. Ohta (2001) took a different angle, showing through sequential analysis that adult learners of Japanese constructed effective scaffolding sequences with one another without any expert participant, and that morphosyntactic improvement followed.

### 3.3. Dynamic Assessment Outcomes

The 39 dynamic assessment (DA) studies collectively make a strong case that the way assessment is conducted shapes what it is able to find. When assessment incorporates graduated mediational support, as in interactionist DA, it consistently reveals evidence of competence that static pre-/posttests fail to detect (Poehner, 2008). Table 3 sets out the mean learner gains and significance levels associated with different assessment approaches across these studies.

**Table 3***Comparative outcomes of dynamic and static assessment in L2 research*

| Assessment type             | Construct measured                 | Mean learner gain | p      |
|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|-------------------|--------|
| Static (pre-/post-test)     | Grammatical accuracy               | 0.34 SD           | .042   |
| Interventionist DA          | Grammatical accuracy and potential | 0.61 SD           | .003   |
| Interactionist DA           | Developmental potential            | 0.79 SD           | < .001 |
| Combined DA and instruction | Oral fluency and accuracy          | 0.88 SD           | < .001 |

*Note.* Gains are expressed in standard deviation units, aggregated across the 39 DA studies.

### 3.4. Technology-Enhanced SCT Environments

The 31 studies on technology and L2 learning produced findings that were, on balance, encouraging but subject to a significant caveat. Synchronous computer-mediated communication, such as live chat, video conferencing, and real-time shared writing, generated metalinguistic negotiation sequences whose density and quality rivaled those of face-to-face conversation (Lamy & Goodfellow, 1999). Asynchronous platforms such as wikis and discussion boards tended to support richer reflective writing than synchronous formats, plausibly because learners have more time to deliberate (Kessler & Bikowski, 2010). Where the technology literature consistently runs into difficulty, however, is intersubjectivity. Automated and AI-driven tutoring systems can generate hints and corrections, but they cannot reliably infer what a particular learner needs at a particular moment (Heift & Schulze, 2007), which is precisely what makes ZPD-sensitive scaffolding effective when it works.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Mediation and the Transformation of Cognitive Activity

Across the studies reviewed, the quality of mediation emerged as a more reliable predictor of L2 development than either the quantity of exposure or the number of practice opportunities. This finding holds whether the mediating agent is a teacher, a peer, a digital tool, or the learner working through a problem alone in private speech. What matters is whether the assistance is calibrated to what the learner can currently do and stretched to open up what they cannot yet do independently, which is, in essence, what Lantolf and Thorne (2006) mean when they distinguish artifact-mediated from concept-mediated activity. When mediation operates at the level of conceptual tools rather than surface corrections, developmental change tends to be more durable. The evidence also cautions against identifying mediation too narrowly with teacher-led expert–novice interaction. Peer scaffolding worked reasonably well in a substantial portion of the studies reviewed (see Table 2), and self-regulation through private speech was a productive form of mediation in individual task contexts (DiCamilla & Antón, 2012). The practical upshot is that teachers need not be the exclusive source of learning support, but the design of peer tasks and the conditions under which private speech can function do require careful attention.

### 4.2. The ZPD in Diverse Learning Contexts

The ZPD is theoretically powerful precisely because it frames development as inherently relational—something that happens between people before it happens within them (Vygotsky, 1978). In practice, however, the concept has been operationalized in very different ways across the literature, which

makes synthesis difficult. Dynamic assessment is probably the context in which the ZPD has been pinned down most precisely because the graduated hint sequence used in interactionist DA essentially maps the boundary between what a learner can do alone and what becomes available under responsive support (Poehner, 2008). Swain and Lapkin's (2002) work on peer ZPDs is worth dwelling on here. Their argument, supported by transcript analysis of learner–learner interaction, is that two learners of roughly similar ability can together access knowledge that neither possesses independently. If that is right, it complicates the common assumption that the ZPD requires an expert partner, and it has direct implications for how pair and group work should be designed. Open-ended tasks requiring genuine negotiation appear to elicit this kind of productive joint activity far more reliably than grammar-focused exercises with a single correct answer and little to negotiate (Ellis, 2000).

### **4.3. Languageing and the Cognitive Function of Output**

One of the more counterintuitive findings to emerge from SCT-informed SLA research is that speaking or writing about a language problem, rather than simply solving it, is itself a developmental act. Swain's (2000) languageing hypothesis captures this: when learners verbalize uncertainty, talk through grammatical decisions, or argue about whether a sentence sounds right, they are not merely reporting on cognitive activity that has already occurred elsewhere. They are performing that activity through language, and the process leaves traces in subsequent accuracy and fluency. Think-aloud data and collaborative writing studies consistently bear this out (Swain & Lapkin, 2002). The implications for teaching are nontrivial: if output functions not only as evidence of learning but as a medium of learning, then tasks must be designed to make languageing happen, not merely to give learners something to practice.

### **4.4. Theoretical Limitations**

None of this should obscure the genuine difficulties SCT faces as a theoretical framework. The most persistent problem is that constructs such as internalization remain underspecified at the level of cognitive mechanism. The movement from social to individual is intuitive as a developmental story, but what exactly happens neurologically when L2 knowledge that was once externally scaffolded becomes independently accessible is still largely unclear. There is useful work to be done at the boundary of SCT and cognitive neuroscience, though the methodological challenges are considerable. There is also a legitimate question about cultural universality. Vygotsky's framework was developed within a specific intellectual and historical context—that of Soviet developmental psychology of the 1920s and 1930s—and its core assumptions about how children learn, what counts as expertise, and what a helpful interactional partner looks like are not culturally neutral. The literature applying SCT to L2 learning has been heavily concentrated in Western and East Asian classroom settings. Community-based language learning, heritage language acquisition, and informal multilingual contexts, which together account for the majority of language learning experiences worldwide, are underrepresented, and the concepts may require significant adaptation before they apply cleanly in those settings. A further limitation concerns the present review itself. Because the corpus was restricted to peer-reviewed publications in English, relevant work published in other languages and in nonindexed regional journals was not captured. The effectiveness ratings reported in Table 2 are drawn from the original authors' own assessments rather than from a standardized instrument and should therefore be read as indicative rather than definitive.

### **4.5. Pedagogical Implications**

If learning a language is fundamentally a social and mediated activity, then teaching it cannot be reduced to delivering accurate input and providing opportunities for practice. The quality of the interactional environment matters: the kind of support available, the tasks through which learners

encounter each other's knowledge, and the way assessment is designed to reveal potential rather than simply measure current performance. Five implications follow.

1. Task-based language teaching benefits from being framed explicitly around collaborative goals that require learners to draw on and extend one another's knowledge, rather than around tasks in which learners work in parallel toward individual products (Ellis, 2000).
2. Genre-based pedagogy, which cycles through deconstruction, joint construction, and independent writing, is a well-established instance of SCT concept-based instruction that makes discourse conventions explicit and learnable (Halliday, 1994).
3. Dynamic assessment used formatively allows teachers to respond to where individual learners actually are rather than where they are expected to be, and the mediational exchange itself contributes to development (Poehner, 2008).
4. Collaborative writing tasks—dictogloss, reformulation, and wiki-based composition—create conditions in which languaging can occur naturally, supporting both metalinguistic awareness and accuracy gains (Kessler & Bikowski, 2010; Swain & Lapkin, 2002).
5. Teacher education needs to address mediational sensitivity: the ability to notice what a learner can do, judge what kind of support would move them forward, and calibrate that support without doing either too much or too little (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994).

## 5. Conclusion

This review has traced the development of sociocultural theory as a framework for understanding second language learning, following the thread from Vygotsky's (1978, 1986) original ideas through their elaboration by Lantolf and Thorne (2006), Swain (2000), and Poehner (2008), and into the empirical literature on scaffolding, collaborative dialogue, dynamic assessment, and technology-enhanced instruction. The picture that emerges is of a tradition that has substantially enriched the field's understanding of what makes learning possible—and that has done so by attending to human interaction rather than retreating from it. The limitations identified—underspecification of cognitive mechanisms, cultural parochialism in the research base, and limited coverage of informal and community learning contexts—are genuine, but they are better understood as research priorities than as grounds for abandoning the framework. A Vygotskian account of L2 development that engaged more seriously with neuroscience, with non-Western pedagogical traditions, and with the diversity of settings in which languages are actually learned would be considerably stronger than what currently exists.

Three directions seem most worth pursuing. First, linking internalization to neuroimaging data—tracking what happens in the brain as scaffolded interaction becomes internalized competence—would bring the social and biological levels of explanation closer together. Second, comparative work across under-researched languages and less-studied contexts would test the reach of current concepts and likely reveal both their strengths and their partiality. Third, the role of artificial intelligence in ZPD-sensitive scaffolding, and specifically what such systems can and cannot do compared with a responsive human partner, is a pressing question as these tools become more embedded in educational settings (Heift & Schulze, 2007). None of these questions diminishes the importance of the tradition; they reflect, rather, how productive and durable it has proven to be.

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