

Possible Contributions From Vygotsky's Socio-Historical-Cultural Theory To Collaborative Education Of Language Teachers In Brazil

Paula Graciano Pereira

Abstract:

In this article some concepts are discussed about the Vygotskian perspective of education, the roles of educators in the teaching-learning process and some implications for the education of language teachers. Based on ideas articulated by Vygotsky (VYGOSTKY, 1996; 1998; 2005; 2010), with the support of other authors, this paper addresses the constructs of interaction, mediation, teaching-learning and the places and functions that the teacher can occupy in this process. At the end, a brief analyzes is presented regarding some researches on teacher education in Brazil from a collaborative perspective and propose reflections on possible contributions of socio-historical-cultural theory to the area.

Keywords: *Teacher education. Interaction. Mediation. Socio-historical-cultural theory. Language education.*

Date of Submission: 04-02-2024

Date of Acceptance: 14-02-2024

I. Introduction

Lev Semionovic Vygotsky, in addition to being a psychologist, was a great and very active teacher who took part in several educational institutions and instances throughout his brief life. The socio-historical-cultural theory was born with him, in Russia, at the beginning of the 20th century, in opposition to the biologicalist and determinist perspectives, dominant in Psychology at the time. These theories advocated that the human being, as an ontogenetic¹ species, develops exclusively from its biological maturation, to the detriment of its cultural phylogenesis². Vygotsky and his collaborators, on the other hand, focused their attention on the socio-historical aspect of human development, based on the observation that we are constituted through our interactions with the social environment.

For Vygotsky, interaction with other people and the environment is essential for human beings to build and modify the world and, in the process, also build and modify themselves. The socio-historical-cultural context thus plays a considerable role in the cognitive development of the individual, as we understand that the human being is not, in itself, a (ready-made) product that only consolidates its innate capabilities and characteristics as it ages. On the contrary, as Magalhães (2004, p. 68) states, "it is in and through social practices that one constitutes oneself as a human being, that is, one develops thought and language and builds one's subjectivity". Therefore, for there to be development and construction of knowledge, mediated interaction must take place. It is then necessary to define the intrinsic nature of what constitutes interaction within the Vygotskian perspective.

Interaction, mediation and construction of knowledge

As Figueiredo (2005, p. 17) explains, classroom interaction is "understood as the set of opportunities created for students to communicate with each other or with the teacher in the language they are learning". Although short, this definition contains many elements that need to be observed carefully. By conceiving interaction as a "created opportunity", Figueiredo understands that it is a formative event, an instance of promoting access and construction encouraged by the subjects in a real situation. It is also important to keep in mind the Bakhtinian conception of communication as a social activity in which subjects use language to act in the world. By stating that the objective of interaction is communication between the different people in class, Figueiredo places this formative event within the scope of reciprocal multilateral construction, the negotiation of

¹ Ontogenesis deals with the history, development and evolution of the being as an individual, in terms of growth and maturation of its structures and capabilities (VYGOTSKY, 1998).

² Phylogenesis studies the history of development and evolution of human beings as a species, a collective of individuals, addressing hypotheses about the constitution of man as a cognitive and social being (VYGOTSKY, 1998).

meanings and the formation of identities, since, for the author, “we communicate not **for** others, but **with** them” (FIGUEIREDO, 2006, p. 16, emphasis from the original).

This implies understanding that interaction is not mere contact between human beings or between a human and the environment or an object. Contact is not interaction. Likewise, dealing specifically with the educational context, interaction is not a one-way street in which one person teaches and the other learns, one speaks and the other listens, or even a situation in which the individual puts himself in a passive role and starts to function like the weakest end of a tug of war. As Molon (2003, p. 111) states, “the social relationship is not composed of two elements, the social relationship is a dialectical relationship between self and the other”. Therefore, it is in social interaction that the development of subjects and the construction of individual and collective knowledge takes place.

We commonly hear expressions such as “acquiring”, “transmitting” or “passing on” knowledge. Such words reveal a positivist perspective that sees knowledge as a product, something ready that can be transported from one place to another, from one mind to another. In the same way, the people involved in the “transmission” and “acquisition” process are taken in defined and watertight positions, as the one who does and the one who suffers the active and passive action of a linear process. However, we can easily reach the conclusion that such a perspective is, at the very least, reductionist and naive.

More than acquired or passed on as a product, knowledge is built through the relationships we establish with the information we have access to. And this information comes to us through the countless interactions we establish with the world around us and with other people. As Vieira-Abrahão (2012, p. 460) highlights, a sociocultural perspective understands that human cognition is constructed through engagement in social activities, and that it is social interaction and the culturally constructed materials, signs and symbols, referred to as semiotic artifacts, that mediate these interactions, that create the forms of thought superior, uniquely human. Therefore, cognitive development is an interactive process, mediated by culture, context, language and social interaction [...].

Building knowledge is an active and reflective process of (re)structuring lived or observed experiences, a process in which “we transform our interpretations of experience into knowledge structures that we use to define, for ourselves, our reality” (FIGUEIREDO, 2006, p. 16). We all have access to the world only indirectly, or mediately, rather than directly or immediately. This applies both to the way people obtain information about the world and also to the way they act on it, because, as Vygotsky explains, “the scheme is not person-thing (Stern), nor person-person (Piaget). But: person-thing-person” (VYGOTSKY, 1996, p. 189).

Mediation constitutes the core of socio-historical-cultural theory. However, despite being the pillar that supports Vygotsky's entire proposal, finding a definition for mediation in his writings is an almost unfeasible task. Although extremely concerned with conceptual precision in his studies, the author does not present us with a concept of mediation and this is precisely due to the fact that mediation is not a concept, but the assumption that guides his entire theoretical-methodological framework (MOLON, 2003). For Vygotsky (1998), mediation is the very process by which human beings perceive and construct reality. The author borrows the relationship between instrument and work from Karl Marx and states that the linguistic sign plays, as a mediating instrument, a role similar to that which a tool (like an axe, for example) plays in physical work (VYGOTSKY, 1998). Language plays a fundamental role in interaction processes, because, as previously stated, the scheme of social interaction (person-thing-person) depends on the semiotic element.

It is important to emphasize, however, that this is not a deterministic position. On the contrary, it is a dialectical stance that conceives mediating instruments, especially language, as means by which people act on social, cultural and historical factors and suffer their action. Mediation intrinsically underlies the notion that human beings live in environments (trans)formed by cultural mediational tools that are, at the same time, conceptual (because they are culturally imbued with meaning) and material (because they bring together physical substance).

In his works, Vygotsky emphasizes the role of language as an instrument for mediating human development, because, for the author, “thought is not simply expressed in words; it is through them that it comes into existence” (VYGOTSKY, 2005, p. 156-157). From this perspective, language acts not only as an external instrument of mediation, but also as a formatter of internal structures and the process of construction and reconstruction of these structures itself. For Daniels (2002, p. 12), language – the most powerful and pervasive of semiotic devices – functions as a psychological tool in the construction of individual consciousness. The social does not become individual through a process of simple transmission. Individuals construct their own meaning from socially available meanings. Inner speech is the result of a construction process through which speech of others and with others becomes speech for oneself. [...] The social voice becomes the inner voice.

In other words, language acts not only in the construction and expression of concepts, but, mainly, in the ways in which human beings perceive, filter and signify reality and language itself. These processes of meaning do not occur in isolation or individually, but in and through mediated social interaction. And education plays a fundamental role in these processes, as we will see below.

Vygotsky's perspective on education and the teacher's roles

As Magalhães (2012) points out, the Vygotskian vision of the educational process is based on the prerogative that learning occurs through experience, that is, learning is a socially and historically situated act, but eminently personal. For Vygotsky (2010, p. 64), “in the educational process, the student's personal experience is everything. Education must be organized in such a way that the student is not educated, but the student educates himself.” This implies that the relationship between “teaching” and “learning” takes on other forms: no longer as emission-reception, but as mediation and construction. As Figueiredo (2013, p. 113) explains, these are “processes that complement and feed each other all the time”.

Within a Vygotskian perspective, it is not possible to talk about teaching and learning as distinct categories or activities. When problematizing education and the teaching role in the educational process, Vygotsky starts from the premise that “all education is social in nature, whether you like it or not” (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 63) and makes some notes in relation to pedagogical theories which presuppose neutrality and artificiality to the school context. For the author, “education in all countries and at all times has always been social, no matter how anti-social it may have been in its ideology” (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 64). This implies understanding that teaching and learning are, essentially, political actions of subjects inserted in social, historical and ideological realities.

Highlighting and ratifying his Marxist affiliation, Vygotsky establishes the parameters of a socially and politically engaged educational proposal, aiming to educate the human being as a conscious subject and towards social transformation. The author asserts that education has had a class character always and everywhere, regardless of whether its apologists or apostles were aware of this fact or not. It turns out that, in human society, education is a perfectly defined social function, always guided by the interests of the dominant class, and the freedom and independence of the small artificial educational environment in the face of the large social environment are, in essence, conventional freedoms and independence very relative within narrow spaces and limits (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 75).

The big question that arises, then, is to clearly establish the true limits of this independence. For the author, the artificiality attributed to and assumed by the school is the biggest problem in reaching a satisfactory answer to this question.

The different conceptions and pedagogical approaches, over the centuries, imbued with different ideologies – but always elitist – and the configuration of the capitalist society itself ended up establishing a polarization between school and the world, between “school life” and “real life”. real”, as if school were not part of life, of social practices. Distancing school from life does not make sense in Vygotski's view, since, obviously, “the pedagogical process is active social life” (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 461). Vygotsky then proposes that these ideological fences that isolate the school should be torn down, because “at the end of the day, only life educates, and the more widely it breaks out in the school, the more dynamic and richer the educational process will be” (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 461).

In his proposal for socially and politically engaged education, Vygotsky (2010) lists and discusses some roles commonly attributed to and assumed by teachers. Firstly, the author presents us with the view of a teacher as an executor of pre-determined tasks, as a mechanical worker or “part of the educational machine” (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 67), one who simply performs what is ordered, works as a mere element of a system, with no intrinsic value beyond its functional utility, capable of being easily replaced. Next, we have the notion of the teacher as an “instrument of education”, who acts in a material way in the educational process, but, objectified and passive, only reproduces models, like “a gramophone that does not have its own voice and sings what the record disc dictates to you” (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 448).

To this notion, Vygotsky (2010) adds other widespread ideas: the teacher as a nanny who takes care of children with warmth, tenderness and concern, often replacing the mother and the family; the pencil case teacher, who, like pencils in a pencil case, is enveloped in such a way by the curricular contents that they end up devouring his entire life and the person ceases to exist; and the teacher as a priest, with the beautiful and sacred mission of guiding the spirits of children and young people and must not, in any way, get involved in worldly matters, such as worries about money, employment, politics, etc.

Vygotsky (2010) refutes all these ideas and argues that “the most important requirement that is made of a teacher [...] is that he completely leaves the status of a pencil case and develops all the aspects that breathe dynamism and life” (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 449). For the author, the focus of the educational process must be on the apprentices, with the teacher having the role of organizer and regulator of teaching-learning, that is, being “the tracks along which the wagons move freely and independently, which receive only the orientation of the movement itself” (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 64).

However, although the apprentice is the central figure in teaching, this does not imply belittling the teacher. On the contrary, Vygotsky (2010) highlights the teacher's value and argues that “if the teacher is important to act immediately on the student, he is omnipotent to exert immediate influence on him through the social environment” (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p 65). In turn, the social environment is understood as the lever of the

educational process, and it is up to the teacher to give direction to this lever. It is important to emphasize, however, that, when stating that the teacher acts as the operator of the lever, Vygotsky in no way equates teaching with the technical and mechanical notion of industrial work. On the contrary, he argues that the teacher's work is necessarily "creative, social and vital" (VYGOTSKY, 2010, p. 456). In this sense, it is important to reflect on educating this teacher so that he is creative and socially active.

Some contributions from the socio-historical-cultural theory to teacher education

Reflecting on the contributions that socio-historical-cultural theory can offer to work in the area of teacher education, Liberali (2010, p. 20) states that "this perspective becomes fundamental, since subjects are seen as capable to establish constant and profound changes in their contexts and in society as a whole". According to Nóvoa (1992, p. 4), "more than a place to acquire techniques and knowledge, teacher education is the key moment of socialization and professional configuration". In this sense, Vieira-Abrahão's (2012, p. 462) adds that a sociocultural perspective on language teacher education recognizes that teacher education is not only a process of acculturation to existing social practices of teaching and learning, but is also a dynamic process of reconstruction and transformation of these practices according to the needs of individuals and of specific teaching contexts, which means that human agency is essential in this perspective [...].

Following this train of thought, Figueiredo is emphatic in stating that "a teacher education course cannot be limited to teaching methods, techniques and approaches" (FIGUEIREDO, 2013, p. 120). The author has vehemently defended the need for teaching-learning to be a collaborative process in which people work together and can give and receive ideas and promote mutual assistance for the "co-construction of knowledge in a social context" (FIGUEIREDO, 2006, p. 19). It is possible to extend this perspective to teacher education and think about collaborative education that takes place within the scope of interaction.

Santos (2007), in her research with four teachers on collaborative planning of English classes, points out that the interaction between the participants and the exchange of experiences was important for the professional development of all of them, at levels that transcended the linguistic and the didactic instances. The author shows that the difficulties highlighted by the teachers, relating to lesson planning itself, but also, and mainly, to their level of proficiency in the language, were gradually overcome with mutual assistance from all of them. Furthermore, the insecurity and embarrassment demonstrated by the teachers at the beginning of the research gave way to a relationship of trust, friendship and respect. The results presented by Santos (2007) corroborate and strengthen Figueiredo's (2006) defense about the advantages of collaborative learning.

Another defense of the importance of interaction for teacher education is made by Pessoa (2002), who draws our attention to a negative and very frequent phenomenon: pedagogical loneliness. For the author, the way education is commonly configured in Brazil, teaching work is very lonely, especially in public schools and, especially, among foreign language teachers. This phenomenon is due to multiple causes, including: the school routine, the lack of time and long working hours of teachers, the existence of only one foreign language teacher at the school, the curriculum, the physical structure of many schools, the fact that pedagogical coordinators have little knowledge about teaching and learning a foreign language, among other factors. Thus, the author notes that "the teacher is alone with his problems and dilemmas, relying, in most cases, only on his own resources and going on without available interpersonal vehicles for the purposes of stimulus, change or control" (SARASON, 1982, p 162, cited by PESSOA, 2002, p. 42).

Regarding especially inexperienced teachers or undergraduates in initial professional education, insecurity, anxiety, doubts and frustration in relation to teaching can be immensely increased with isolation and lack of support, which can lead to even abandoning the career, as stated by Oliveira and Figueiredo (2013). Pessoa (2002) indicates that collaborative work helps to mitigate problems and to share experiences and has the function of affirming professional identity and teaching practices, in addition to being an important political act.

However, interaction with colleagues and, in particular, with supervisors, is not always perceived by undergraduate students (teachers-to-be) as appropriate or positive, as highlighted by Tostes (2013). It is well known that relations of power and hierarchy intensely permeate classroom phenomena and the supervisor's own position of supposed superiority can have a negative effect on the interaction. However, as Paiva (2010, p. 205) states, this "does not nullify the importance of the role of others in learning, but makes us see the social context not only as an environment of cooperation, but also as an arena for conflict and of frustrations." In this framework, some discussions are presented regarding three studies carried out in Brazil on teacher education, focusing on interaction and mediation.

In her research with undergraduate students of English (teachers-to-be), Ortenzi (1999) analyzed the interactions of language students in internship with their colleagues and with two professors, referred to, in the research, as "professors-mediators". During the analysis of the data presented by the author, it is possible to see that the presence and interference of teacher-mediators are fundamental for the interns to perceive and understand certain subjects, and that the collaboration with colleagues is essential for raising questions that are often hidden or unknown to teachers in initial professional education regarding their own practice, teaching approaches and

competences. However, the author narrates some episodes of disagreement between the participants. The interns perceive themselves as being in a relationship of conflict, as if they were under attack from other colleagues and professors-mediator, reaching peaks of intimidation, anger and crying.

Something similar can be observed in the research developed by Magalhães (2001) on lesson planning by undergraduate English students. The interactions between the students and the internship supervisor are described as not egalitarian, with the exacerbation of power relations and the assumption of attack and defense positions by the interlocutors. Due, perhaps, to the somewhat direct and somewhat impolite approach on the part of the advisor, the students felt offended, attacked, and took a defensive stance. Terms such as “fight”, “competition”, “attack”, “rivalry” and “hostility” are constantly used when analyzing interactions between students and supervisor. This competitive stance ends up vetoing possibilities for greater professional and personal development, as it moves away from the collaborative interaction proposal defended by Figueiredo (2006). Regarding interactions between teachers-to-be and supervisors, Tostes (2013) argues that it is necessary to “definitely abandon the controlling and supervisory character to become foci of discussion and reflection that ratify or redirect pedagogical work in search of rethought educational actions” (TOSTES, 2013p. 202). Another point to be highlighted is that, unfortunately, gender and power relations are not discussed in the research.

Reis (1999), on the other hand, seems to witness the opposite process to that discussed by Magalhães (2001) and Ortenzi (1999). The author presents us with a study in which the supervisor assumes a reductionist and almost maternal dialogue with the teachers-to-be. Reis's research (1999) focused on the education of a professor-supervisor and aimed to understand how she views the expectations and needs of student-teachers, the demands of the course and the job market and the reality of the university. In her desire to understand and respect the students' needs and limitations, the supervisor tends to overly alleviate difficulties and problems and ends up lowering her demands and goals for the class, a contradictory attitude since she declares that she intends to educate competent and capable future teachers.

What we can infer from the research discussed is that interaction and mediation are fundamental for teacher education and professional development. However, the supervisor, as she is generally the leader of this educational process, must pay attention to her position as a dialogical collaborator. It is not their presence or their intervention that will necessarily promote the construction of knowledge by teachers-to-be, but the interactive process and mediation itself. As Molon (2003) points out, it is not the presence of the other person, their corporeality and interference that establish the mediated relationship. It occurs through signs, through words. “Mediation is a process, it is not the act in which something gets in the way; mediation is not between two terms that establish a relationship. It is the relationship itself” (MOLON, 2003, p. 102). As she deals essentially with language, at different levels, the language teacher needs to be aware of the roles that language plays as a mediator and constructor of experiences and, consequently, of reality.

II. Conclusion

The Vygotskian educational conception is close to what Figueiredo openly defends when stating that “our role as language teachers and as teacher trainers is to work so that our society becomes fairer” (FIGUEIREDO, 2013, p. 115). Language teaching-learning, teacher education and education in general can no longer be seen as a mere transmission of information. In this context, the teacher must assume an active and critical role in the process of co-construction of knowledge.

Teacher education is a complex, cyclical and continuous process that must presuppose professional and personal growth, because, as Silva (2012, p. 29) found, “apprentices who work collaboratively tend to extend this way of acting to their families and groups of the community where they live, generally as a way of living and dealing with other people”.

References

- [1]. Daniels, H. Introdução: A Psicologia Num Mundo Social. In: Daniels, H. (Org.).
- [2]. Uma Introdução A Vygotsky. São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2002. P. 1-30.
- [3]. Figueiredo, F. J. Q. Semeando A Interação: A Revisão Dialógica De Textos Escritos Em Língua Estrangeira. Goiânia: Editora Ufg, 2005.
- [4]. _____. (Org.). A Aprendizagem Colaborativa De Línguas. Goiânia: Editora Da Ufg, 2006.
- [5]. _____. Conversa Com Francisco José Quaresma De Figueiredo. In: Silva, K. A.; Aragão, R. C. (Org.). Conversas Com Formadores De Professores De Línguas: Avanços E Desafios. Campinas, Sp: Pontes, 2013. P. 113-122.
- [6]. Liberali, F. C. Formação Crítica De Educadores: Questões Fundamentais. Campinas, Sp: Pontes, 2012.
- [7]. Magalhães, A. S. Compartilhando E Aprendendo: Uma Perspectiva “Dialógica” Do Planejamento De Aula De Professores Em Formação. In: Leffa, V.J. (Org.). O Professor De Línguas Estrangeiras: Construindo A Profissão. Pelotas: Educat, 2001. P.137-155.
- [8]. Magalhães, M. C. C. A Linguagem Na Formação De Professores Como Profissionais Reflexivos E Críticos. In: Magalhães, M. C. C. (Org.). A Formação Do Professor Como Um Profissional Crítico. São Paulo: Mercado Das Letras, 2004. P. 59-85.
- [9]. _____. Vygotsky E A Pesquisa De Intervenção No Contexto Escolar: A Pesquisa Crítica De Colaboração – Pccol. In: Liberali, F. C.; Mateus, E.; Damianovic, M. C. (Org.). A Teoria Da Atividade Sócio-Histórico-Cultural E A Escola: Recriando Realidades Sociais. Campinas, Sp: Pontes, 2012. P. 13-26.
- [10]. Molon, S. I. Subjetividade E Constituição Do Sujeito Em Vygotsky. Petrópolis: Vozes, 2003.

- [11]. Nóvoa, A. Formação De Professores E Profissão Docente. In: Nóvoa, A. (Coord.). Os Professores E Sua Formação. Lisboa: Dom Quixote, 1992. P. 13-33.
- [12]. Oliveira, H. F.; Figueiredo, F. J. Q. O Que O “Não” Nos Diz: Narrativas De Licenciados Em Letras Que Não Se Tornaram Professores. In: Oliveira, H. F.; Bicalho, P. S. S.; Miranda, S. C. (Org.). Educação E Diversidade: Múltiplos Olhares. Anápolis: Universidade Estadual De Goiás, 2013. P. 111-138.
- [13]. Ortenzi, D. L. B. A Reflexão Coletivamente Sustentada: Os Papéis Dos Participantes. In: Almeida Filho, J. C. P. (Org.). O Professor De Língua Estrangeira Em Formação. Campinas, Sp: Pontes, 1999. P.127-137.
- [14]. Paiva, V. L. M. O. O Outro Na Aprendizagem De Línguas. In: Hermont, A. B.; Espírito Santo, R. S.; Cavalacante, S. M. S. Linguagem E Cognição: Diferentes Perspectivas, De Cada Lugar Um Outro Olhar. Belo Horizonte: Editora Pucminas, 2010. P. 203-217.
- [15]. Pessoa, R. R. A Reflexão Interativa Como Instrumento De Desenvolvimento Profissional: Um Estudo Com Professores Da Escola Pública. 2002. Tese (Doutorado Em Letras/Linguística Aplicada) – Faculdade De Letras, Universidade Federal De Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, 2002.
- [16]. Reis, S. Expressões De Conhecimento De Uma Iniciante Na Formação De Professores De Língua Estrangeira: Um Estudo De Imagens. In: Almeida Filho, J. C. P. (Org.). O Professor De Língua Estrangeira Em Formação. Campinas, Sp: Pontes, 1999. P.139-155.
- [17]. Santos, D. D. X. Planejamento De Aulas Em Contexto Reflexivo-Colaborativo: Contribuições Para O Desenvolvimento Profissional De Quatro Professoras De Inglês Da Rede Pública Estadual. 2007. Dissertação (Mestrado Em Letras E Linguística) – Universidade Federal De Goiás, Faculdade De Letras, Goiânia. 2007.
- [18]. Silva, S. V. Da. O Processo Ensino-Aprendizagem De Línguas Em Teletandem: Um Estudo Na Área De Turismo. 2012. Tese (Doutorado Em Letras E Linguística) – Faculdade De Letras, Universidade Federal De Goiás, Goiânia, 2012.
- [19]. Tostes, S. C. Interações Supervisor - Professor: Diálogos De Proteção Da Face. Revista Brasileira De Linguística Aplicada, V. 13, N. 1, P. 197-218, 2013.
- [20]. Vieira-Abrahão, M. H. A Formação Do Professor De Línguas De Uma Perspectiva Sociocultural. Signum: Estudos Linguísticos, Londrina, N. 15, V. 2, P. 457-480, Dez. 2012.
- [21]. Vygotsky, L. S. Teoria E Método Em Psicologia. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1996.
- [22]. _____. A Formação Social Da Mente. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1998.
- [23]. _____. Pensamento E Linguagem. 3 Ed. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2005.
- [24]. _____. Psicologia Pedagógica. 3. Ed. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2010.