

Contextualizing Socio-Cultural Theory on Language Teaching and Learning in Nepal

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<p>Article info: Received: February 10, 2024 Revised: March 18, 2024 Accepted: April 1, 2024</p>	<p>Abstract: Grounded in the socio-cultural theory (SCT) of learning, this study postulates that cognitive development is intricately tied to social interactions, highlighting the significance of cultural and social contexts in shaping an individual’s learning experiences and intellectual growth. Utilizing the content analysis methodology, the study systematically analyzes three key constructs—social interaction, the more knowledgeable other (MKO), and the zone of proximal development (ZPD)—drawing from Vygotsky’s seminal works to contextualize these constructs to enhance the language teaching and learning process within the specific cultural framework of Nepal. The findings reveal insights into the application of SCT in Nepalese language education. Social interactions, crucial in Vygotsky’s theory, find significance in Nepal’s communal spirit, influencing language learning positively. MKOs, both human and symbolic, play an essential role in shaping language learning, aligning with Nepalese values and linguistic diversity. The ZPD framework is applicable in Nepal’s diverse educational landscape, addressing individual differences and accommodating cultural nuances in which the scaffolding technique has a fundamental role in bridging linguistic gaps and fostering a collective journey toward linguistic proficiency. Overall, Vygotsky’s SCT demonstrates relevance and adaptability in the unique cultural and linguistic context of Nepal, offering insights into educational policies and practices.</p>
<p>Keywords: <i>Language learning, Nepalese context, more knowledgeable others, scaffolding, social interaction, zone of proximal development.</i></p>	

Introduction

Nepal stands as a culturally rich nation, supplemented with a reflective diversity encompassing socio-cultural ethnicities, languages, and traditions. The influence of the varied cultures is reflected in its festivals, rituals, and daily lives. Nepal’s social structure is characterized by a strong sense of community, and a tradition of shared responsibility (Chapagain et al., 2024). The linguistic diversity is remarkable, with 129 languages and several dialects spoken across the nation, and 142 ethnic groups reflecting the multicultural variation of its populations (National Statistics Office, 2021). This cultural diversity is mirrored in the schools as they are the “microcosm” (Walther, 2014) of the societies and to everyday lives of the Nepalese people. In this context, language learning can be facilitated by implementing Vygotsky’s SCT.

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934), a Russian psychologist, argued that society and culture have a major impact on a child’s cognitive development (Lally & Valentine-Suzanne, 2019). Sociocultural theory, which has made a great impact on the learning and teaching profession, advocates learning as a semiotic process where participation in socially mediated activities is essential (Turuk, 2008). Vygotsky’s SCT of learning explains that learning is a social process, and the foundation of human intelligence begins in society or culture.

The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a central role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky believed that parents, relatives, peers, and society all have an essential role in developing students' higher levels of functioning. There are mainly three fundamental principles concerning Vygotsky's ideas of sociocultural learning: (1) learning originates in social, historical, and cultural interactions, (2) 'the more knowledgeable others (MKO)' mediate the development of higher mental functions, and (3) learning occurs within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as stated by scholars (e.g., Polly et al., 2017; Wertsch, 1991).

In the Nepalese educational landscape, there is a noticeable gap in scholarly attention towards the language learning involvements of students, particularly when analyzed through the lens of Vygotsky's theoretical constructs. This paper addresses this breach by delving into three key constructs (i.e., social interactions, the MKO, and the ZPD relating to teaching and learning) derived from Vygotsky's work. Through analyzing these constructs and their application to the local context, the study aims to provide an understanding of the language learning process among Nepalese students. By shedding light on this underexplored aspect, the study seeks to contribute valuable insights to the broader discourse on language education, emphasizing the need for context-specific considerations in educational practice, especially in language teaching and learning.

Methodology of the Study

This study adopted a content analysis methodology, aligning with established principles that prioritize the exploration of latent meaning, emphasize contextual attention, and allow for nuanced inferences to context (Krippendorff, 2018; Kuckartz & Rädiker, 2023; Mayring, 2014; Neuendorf, 2002; Neuendorf & Kumar, 2015; Schreier, 2013). The approach systematically examined textual information, adhering to a structured process. Initially, relevant documents, primarily sourced from Vygotsky's seminal works (1978, 1981), were selected. Subsequently, a coding scheme was developed, grounded in predefined categories focusing on the elements of social interaction, the MKO, and the ZPD.

The coding process, guided by qualitative analysis techniques, facilitated the systematic interpretation of the coded data. This enabled the identification of patterns, relationships, and themes specifically pertinent to the socio-cultural aspects of language teaching and learning within the context of Nepal. By employing the content analysis design in this manner, the research aimed to unveil rich insights into the application and manifestation of SCT in the Nepalese language education landscape, offering a comprehensive understanding that could inform educational practices and policies.

Findings and Discussion: Analyzing the SCT in Nepalese Context

In the initial stage of the study, careful consideration was given to selecting three crucial constructs: social interaction, the MKO, and the ZPD. This choice formed the basis for a systematic exploration into these components in the paragraphs that followed. Subsequently, the study proceeded to interpret these constructs in the context of Nepal, contributing to a nuanced comprehension of how social interaction, the MKO, and the ZPD are expressed and interrelated within the educational framework of Nepal.

Social Interactions: An Overview

Vygotsky viewed that learning originates from social interactions, which play an important role, especially in the development of higher-order thinking skills. Cognitive development cannot be fully understood without bearing in mind the social and historical context within which it is surrounded

(Polly et al., 2017). Vygotsky (1978) believed that everything is learned on two levels. First, through interaction with others, and then integrated into the individual's mental structure. For him, each aspect of a child's cultural development is observed in two instances: initially, at the social level, and subsequently, at the individual level. The progression involves interactions between people (inter-psychological) first and then transitions into the child's internal domain (intra-psychological). This principle extends to various cognitive functions such as voluntary attention, logical memory, and the development of concepts. In essence, all higher functions originate as real connections between individuals.

This implies that the initial skills acquired by children are interconnected with their interactions with others; they absorb information and apply it internally. Collaborating with peers on diverse societal tasks leads learners to assimilate socially shared experiences and their consequential impacts, enabling the acquisition of valuable strategies and knowledge (Scott & Palincsar, 2013). From this standpoint, engaging in a wide array of communal activities allows learners to internalize the outcomes of collective efforts, leading to the acquisition of fresh strategies and a deeper understanding of the world and culture.

Social Interactions: Application in Local Context

In the unique socio-cultural landscape of Nepal, characterized by its rich cultural and shared values, the application of Vygotsky's SCT of learning holds insightful implications, particularly in the realm of language learning. Vygotsky's framework posits that learning is inherently social, and the Nepalese context, with its deeply ingrained communal spirit, aligns seamlessly with this perspective.

Central to Vygotsky's theory is the idea that language learning is not merely an individual endeavor but a process intricately woven into the fabric of social interactions. In Nepal, a country where traditions, rituals, and community life play pivotal roles, the emphasis on social interactions resonates profoundly which is inconsistent with the study of Mikkonen (2017). The communal values that characterize Nepalese society provide a fertile ground for language development, emphasizing the collective nature of knowledge construction.

Within the Nepalese cultural context, learners are poised to acquire significant benefits from engaging in collaborative tasks that reflect their cultural practices. Group discussions, a cornerstone of Vygotsky's theory, find resonance in the Nepalese tradition of communal decision-making and shared knowledge. This aligns with Pulatbek's (2023) and Karki's (2019) concept that the practice of engaging in group discussions allows learners to not only exchange linguistic insights but also delve into the cultural nuances embedded in language usage.

Storytelling, deeply embedded in the Nepalese cultural heritage, becomes a powerful way for language learning. Vygotsky's emphasis on the social origin of learning finds manifestation as individuals participate in the shared experience of narrating stories. Aligning with the concept, D. Rai et al. (2023) reported that learners not only motivate and enhance their linguistic abilities but also absorb cultural nuances, traditions, and historical contexts embedded in the narratives when using these common activities.

The Nepalese cultural context, like any other context, highlights the importance of language as a tool for communication within communities. Vygotsky's theory, which views language as a semiotic process as stated by Hoffmann (2008) deeply entangled with social interactions, finds resonance in the Nepalese emphasis on effective communication for community cohesion. Moreover, in a country characterized by linguistic diversity, where numerous languages and dialects coexist, Vygotsky's theory encourages teachers to embrace this diversity as a valuable resource for language learning.

In the Nepalese multilingual classrooms, Vygotsky's concept of social interaction, in the form of group discussions using various dialects and languages, telling stories relating to various cultures, aligns with the communal values ingrained in Nepalese society, emphasizing the collective nature of

knowledge construction. This connection highlights the significance of leveraging social interactions as a fundamental aspect of language learning, echoing Vygotsky's notion that language acquisition is complexly tied to social engagement. Recognizing and celebrating the multiplicity of languages within the Nepalese context enriches the socio-cultural dimension of language learning. Teachers can leverage this diversity to create inclusive learning environments balancing and considering the "gender perspectives" (Karki, R. D., & Karki, 2020) that honor the linguistic heritage of each student.

In conclusion, the SCT of learning finds a natural home in the Nepalese context. The emphasis on social interactions, collaborative learning, and the recognition of language as a communal tool aligns seamlessly with the rich cultural and communal values that define Nepalese society. In this symbiotic relationship between socio-cultural dynamics and language learning, teachers in Nepal have a unique opportunity to craft pedagogical approaches that not only foster linguistic proficiency but also celebrate and preserve the diverse linguistic and cultural heritage of the nation.

The MKO: An Overview

According to Vygotsky's theory, children gain knowledge by participating in social interactions, specifically collaborative dialogues, with individuals possessing greater expertise in the tasks they are trying to understand. These proficient individuals, termed MKOs, demonstrate an advanced grasp or heightened aptitude for a specific task, process, or concept and can include teachers, parents, experienced peers, and occasionally friends and juniors with superior knowledge in specific domains.

Importantly, the MKO designation is not limited to human entities (McLeod, 2018). It can also extend to technology, tools, and symbolic representations, such as "language; various systems of counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps, and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs and so on" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 138). Moreover, modern semiotic means encompass computers, calculators, paintbrushes, and similar tools, all playing a crucial role in facilitating representation (Scott & Palincsar, 2013). Scott and Palincsar (2013) suggest that these semiotic means not only serve as collaborative knowledge construction tools but also act as instruments that internalize over time, aiding individuals in subsequent independent problem-solving endeavors.

The MKO: Application in Local Context

In the rich cultural setting of Nepal, where respecting elders and valuing the wisdom of experienced individuals are integral to societal norms, Vygotsky's concept of MKOs discloses with reflective significance in the territory of language teaching and learning. The Nepalese context, standing in respect for elders and seasoned individuals, provides a fruitful space for the application of this socio-cultural theory, shaping language learning through a network of human interactions and symbolic representations.

Respect for elders in Nepalese society is not merely a cultural delicacy; it is a basis of societal structure and interpersonal relationships. This cultural attitude unites seamlessly with Vygotsky's proposition that individuals of higher proficiency, the MKOs, play crucial roles in mediating the process of language learning. This concept, aligning with the study by Maharjan (2022) elders in family members, as respected sources of knowledge, serve as living repositories of linguistic richness, guiding the younger generation in the intricacies of language usage, idioms, and cultural connotations embedded in expressions.

Teachers, occupying a crucial role as MKOs, become key facilitators in the language teaching and learning journey of Nepalese students like the other cultures. In a culture where the teacher-student relationship is deeply respected, teachers are not just transmitters of knowledge but also orchestrators

of linguistic development. The teachers, as suggested by Kumar and BB (2017), contribute not only subject expertise but also cultural insights, helping learners route the linguistic landscape with a nuanced understanding of context and tradition.

Beyond the realm of human interactions, Vygotsky's theory extends the concept of MKOs to include symbolic representations, and in the context of Nepal's linguistic diversity, this takes on particular relevance. Nepal is a melting pot of languages and scripts, each carrying its unique cultural and historical significance. This situation is also reflected in the Nepalese multilingual classrooms. The numerous languages coexisting in this landscape and using the students' first language in the classroom as a resource (Ruiz, 1984) become symbolic MKOs, offering varied perspectives and linguistic nuances.

The recognition of language as a symbolic MKO aligns with the reality of a multilingual society, urging teachers to incorporate diverse linguistic examples in their teaching materials as suggested by Lucas (2011). By acknowledging and celebrating the linguistic variety of Nepal, teachers can empower learners to appreciate the richness of language as a symbolic MKO, fostering not only linguistic proficiency but also intercultural competence.

In conclusion, in the Nepalese context, where respect for elders and experienced individuals is deep-seated, Vygotsky's concept of MKO resonates profoundly. Elders and teachers emerge as pivotal MKOs, shaping the language learning journey through their guidance and shared experiences. Additionally, the acknowledgment of language represented in the societies itself as a symbolic MKO reflects the diverse linguistic landscape of Nepal, emphasizing the need for inclusive and culturally sensitive language education practices. By incorporating both human and symbolic MKOs, teachers in Nepal can craft comprehensive language learning experiences that not only respect tradition and embrace diversity but also empower and motivate learners to enhance language proficiency while fostering a deep understanding of their linguistic culture (K. R. Rai et al., 2022).

The ZPD: An Overview

The fundamental sociocultural concept known as the ZPD plays a crucial role in shaping the design of learning experiences. Vygotsky (1978) defines it as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). Similarly, Baker and Wright (2017) describe it as "a metaphorical space between what an individual can do on his or her own, and what he or she can do with support from a teacher or other more knowledgeable person" (p. 434). Vygotsky's theory emphasizes the need to differentiate between actual and potential developmental levels. The former involves tasks a child can competently undertake alone, while the latter requires assistance for successful completion. The ZPD encompasses significant aspects highlighted by Kozulin (2003), focusing on ongoing mental functions in maturing children, the pivotal role of assistance for learning, and providing a mechanism to distinguish between current and latent learning capacities.

Dissecting the ZPD reveals three prime assumptions, as outlined by Chaiklin (2003). The generality assumption suggests a child can accomplish certain tasks autonomously but can achieve more with guidance. The assistance assumption defines the appropriate manner of delivering guidance, and the potential assumption revolves around a child's inherent readiness and ability to learn. Scaffolding, particularly crucial to learners' achievement of their learning objectives, involves temporary support from teachers or parents to facilitate task completion (Lally & Valentine-Suzanne, 2019). This concept closely aligns with the ZPD, as scaffolding provides the tools and actions needed to guide learners within this developmental realm. These supportive measures create an interactive and dynamic relationship, where both the learner and the scaffold provider mutually influence each other's actions, adapting collaboratively as they work together.

The ZPD: Application in Local Context

The ZPD, a central tenet in Vygotsky's SCT of learning, unfolds as a highly pertinent and adaptable concept in the context of Nepalese education. This framework, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between learners' existing competencies and their potential for further development, finds particular significance in the diverse and culturally rich educational landscape of Nepal. In the Nepalese educational context, characterized by linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic diversities, the ZPD concept serves as a valuable tool for teachers. The recognition that students enter the learning environment with varying levels of readiness for language learning is fundamental. This heterogeneity may stem from factors such as linguistic background, exposure to different dialects, and variations in socio-cultural contexts. Acknowledging this diversity is crucial for designing effective language teaching strategies that cater to the unique needs of each student.

Teachers in Nepal can leverage the ZPD framework to assess students' current linguistic abilities and provide targeted support to propel them towards higher levels of proficiency. This involves recognizing the gap between what students can achieve independently and what they can achieve with guidance. As suggested by Borthick et al. (2003), by identifying this zone, teachers in Nepalese classes with a diversity of languages can adapt their instructional approaches to suit the individual needs and potentialities of each learner. Cultural diversity in Nepal further emphasizes the importance of the ZPD concept. The linguistic landscape of the country is characterized by a multitude of languages and dialects, reflecting the rich cultural multiplicity. This diversity may result in variations in students' exposure to language, with some learners being more immersed in particular linguistic contexts than others. The ZPD framework accommodates these differences by allowing for personalized and culturally sensitive instructional strategies.

One practical application of the ZPD concept in the Nepalese context is through the implementation of scaffolding techniques. Scaffolding involves providing temporary support to learners, enabling them to accomplish tasks that would be challenging without assistance. In the realm of language learning, Ouyang et al. (2022) suggest that scaffolding can take various forms, including providing additional resources, offering hints or prompts, and structuring collaborative activities. Scaffolding aligns with the communal values deeply ingrained in Nepalese society, where collaboration and shared responsibility are highly valued. Teachers can strategically scaffold language learning activities to bridge the gap between students' current abilities and their potential development. For example, in a multilingual classroom, teachers can encourage peer collaboration, allowing students with different linguistic backgrounds to learn from each other and collectively progress in their language skills.

In Nepalese multilingual classrooms, the ZPD and scaffolding strategies facilitate language learning for students with diverse linguistic backgrounds. Teachers utilize these approaches to gauge students' current language proficiency levels and identify areas for growth within their ZPD. By modifying instruction to students' linguistic abilities and cultural contexts, teachers effectively bridge the gap between current proficiency and desired language skills. In such classrooms, where students exhibit varying levels of language proficiency, scaffolding techniques such as translated materials, visual aids, and peer collaboration can be employed to support language learning. Moreover, teachers leverage the cultural diversity within Nepalese classrooms to create engaging and meaningful learning experiences that foster language development and academic success for all students.

In conclusion, the ZPD stands as a robust and adaptable framework for language education in the Nepalese context. Its emphasis on recognizing and addressing individual differences in readiness for language learning, coupled with the flexibility to accommodate cultural diversity, positions the ZPD as a valuable guide for teachers. By implementing strategies such as scaffolding, teachers in Nepal can

create inclusive learning environments that honor linguistic diversity, empower students to navigate their ZPDs and foster a collective journey toward higher levels of linguistic proficiency.

Conclusion

In this study, a content analysis methodology was employed, following established principles that prioritize the exploration of latent meanings, contextual attention, and nuanced inferences within the socio-cultural context. The systematic examination of textual information, primarily derived from Vygotsky's seminal works, utilized a structured process to formulate a coding scheme based on predefined categories. This approach aimed to reveal insightful perspectives on the application and manifestation of SCT in the context of language education in Nepal, offering a comprehensive understanding that could guide educational policies and practices.

The results highlighted the relevance of Vygotsky's SCT in language teaching and learning within the distinctive socio-cultural setting of Nepal. Specifically, the investigation into social interactions, the role of the MKOs, and the dynamics of the ZPD within the Nepalese educational framework yielded a nuanced understanding of how these components are articulated and interconnected. The results emphasized the significant influence of cultural values on language teaching and learning practices, underlining the importance for teachers in Nepal to develop pedagogical approaches aligned with the socio-cultural dynamics of the state. In essence, this research contributes to a broader comprehension of SCT in language education and offers valuable insights for educators aiming to enhance language teaching and learning experiences in diverse cultural contexts like Nepal.

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