



---

## Sociocultural and Sociolinguistic Approaches to the Role of the Social Context in Online L2 Learning: A Comparative Analysis of Two Empirical Studies

Sunmin Lee 

University of Cambridge, Cambridge

To cite this article:

Lee, S. (2020) Sociocultural and Sociolinguistic Approaches to the Role of the Social Context in Online L2 Learning: A Comparative Analysis of Two Empirical Studies, *Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal*, Volume 7, pp. 256-275. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.58322>



Published online: 1<sup>st</sup> November 2020



[Link to Apollo](#)



[Video of Article Summary](#)



Cambridge Educational Research e-Journal published by the [Faculty of Education at the University of Cambridge](#) is licensed under a [Creative Commons \(CC\) Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported Licence](#).

## Sociocultural and Sociolinguistic Approaches to the Role of the Social Context in Online L2 Learning: A Comparative Analysis of Two Empirical Studies

Sunmin Lee 

University of Cambridge

### Abstract

This paper compares and evaluates sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches to the role of the social context in second language learning (L2 learning), through analysing two empirical studies about online interaction. The paper argues that due to the different focus of study in the two perspectives, each approach only provides partial explanations of the complex role of the social context in online L2 learning contexts. While the developmental perspective taken by the sociocultural approach provides a detailed account of how learning is socially mediated from external to the internal planes, there is an absence of exploration about how learners themselves can impact the learning process. Contrastingly, while the sociolinguistic approach provides rich insight to how learner affect, identities, stances and ideologies can impact L2 learning processes, how these factors impact the actual acquisition of L2 code is rather unclear. After a critical evaluation of the two approaches, the paper concludes that each of the partial explanations provided by the two approaches are complementary in nature, and that together, they provide a useful tool kit for understanding the complex social nature of L2 learning. Nonetheless, some of the rigid premises set out by both approaches, such as expert-novice participation and language-culture correlation need to be re-evaluated given the backdrop of today's multilingual age where technology and globalization have fundamentally changed the ways we interact and learn

### Resumen

Este artículo compara y evalúa enfoques socioculturales y sociolingüísticos sobre el papel que juega el contexto social en el aprendizaje de L2, mediante el análisis de dos estudios empíricos sobre la interacción en línea. Este estudio argumenta que debido a que las dos perspectivas utilizan diferentes enfoques de estudio, cada perspectiva sólo proporciona explicaciones parciales sobre el complejo papel del contexto social en los contextos de aprendizaje en línea L2. Si bien la perspectiva de desarrollo adoptada por el enfoque sociocultural proporciona una descripción detallada de cómo el aprendizaje es mediado socialmente desde el plano externo al interno, hay una carencia de análisis acerca de cómo los propios alumnos pueden impactar el proceso de aprendizaje. Por el contrario, aunque el enfoque sociolingüístico proporciona una rica visión de cómo el alumno afecta, las identidades, las posturas y las ideologías, pueden afectar los procesos de aprendizaje de L2, no está claro cómo estos factores afectan a la adquisición real del código L2. Después de una evaluación crítica de los dos enfoques, el estudio concluye que cada una de las explicaciones parciales proporcionadas por los dos enfoques son de naturaleza complementaria y que, en conjunto, proporcionan una serie de herramientas útiles para comprender la compleja naturaleza social del aprendizaje L2. Sin embargo, algunas de las premisas rígidas establecidas por ambos enfoques, como la participación de expertos-principiantes y la correlación lengua-cultura, deben reevaluarse teniendo en cuenta el telón de fondo de la era multilingüe actual, en que la tecnología y la globalización han cambiado fundamentalmente las formas en que interactuamos y aprendemos.

### Article History

Submitted: 17<sup>th</sup>

March 2020

Accepted: 19<sup>th</sup>

August 2020

### Keywords

sociocultural theory, sociolinguistic theory, online interaction, social context, L2 learning

### Palabras Clave

teoría sociocultural, teoría sociolingüística, interacción online, contexto social, aprendizaje L2

**المخلص:**

تقارن هذه الورقة النهج الاجتماعي الثقافي و الاجتماعي اللغوي لدور السياق الاجتماعي في مجال تعلم اللغة الثانية و تقييمها، من خلال تحليل دراستين تجريبيتين عن التفاعل على الإنترنت. تؤكد الورقة أنه نظراً لاختلاف تركيز الدراسة من المنظورين، لا يقدم كل نهج سوى تفسيرات جزئية لدور السياق الاجتماعي المعقد في سياقات تعلم اللغة الثانية الإلكترونية. و في حين أن المنظور الإنمائي الذي يتبعه النهج الاجتماعي الثقافي يوفر سرداً مفصلاً عن دور المحيط الاجتماعي في تفسير عملية التعلم، فإنه ليس هناك تركيز كاف على دور المتعلمين أنفسهم وتأثيرهم على عملية التعلم و على النقيض من ذلك، ففي حين أن النهج الاجتماعي اللغوي يوفر بصيرة غنية لكيفية تأثير مشاعر، هويات، المواقف و الإيديولوجيات للمتعلم على عمليات تعلم اللغة الثانية، فإن الكيفية التي تؤثر بها هذه العوامل على اكتساب رموز اللغة الثانية الفعلية غير واضحة إلى حد ما و بعد إجراء تقييم حاسم للنهجين، تلخص الورقة إلى أن كل تفسير جزئي مزود من النهجين مكمل للآخر في الطبيعة، و أنها معا توفر مجموعة أدوات مفيدة لفهم الطابع الاجتماعي المعقد لتعلم اللغة الثانية و مع ذلك، فإن بعض الفرضيات الجامدة التي حددتها كل من النهجين، مثل المشاركة بين الخبراء و المبتدئين و ترابط الثقافة اللغوية، لا بد و أن يُعاد تقييم بعض الفرضيات بالنظر إلى خلفية عصرنا المتعدد اللغات حيث التكنولوجيا و العولمة غيرت الطرق التي تتفاعل بها و نتعلم بشكل أساسي.

**الكلمات المفتاحية**  
النظرية الاجتماعية  
الثقافية، النظرية  
الاجتماعية اللغوية  
التفاعل الإلكتروني  
السياق الاجتماعي  
تعلم اللغة الثانية

**Introduction**

Contrary to cognitive-oriented approaches to second language learning (L2 learning) which view language learning as an individualistic, mentalistic functioning independent of external social factors, both sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches “view language learning in essentially social terms” (Mitchell, 2013, p.220). Both approaches share the view that target language interaction is not simply a source of input to be processed by internal learning mechanisms, but a key entity which plays a central role in language learning.

However, while both approaches place great emphasis on the social nature of learning, each approach takes a somewhat different angle in exploring the role of the social context in L2 learning. On the one hand, sociocultural approach is essentially a “theory of the mind” (Lantolf, 2000), maintaining “learning as a mediated external, not just a mental internal phenomenon” (Ellis, 2015, p.221). It explores the social roots of human thinking, or in other words, how social learning mediates cognitive development. On the other hand, sociolinguistic approach focuses “less on mental representations, restructuring or developing L2 systems” (Duff, 2007, p.313). Rather, it is focused on investigating the interrelation between language and society (Coupland, 2016; Tarone, 2007), and how learners’ affects, identities, stances and ideologies transform as they socialize into communities through language (Duff, 2007).

The main argument of this essay lies in the idea that due to the differences outlined above, each approach alone, offers only a partial explanation of the complex role of the social context in L2 learning. The paper aims to re-evaluate each of the two approaches in explaining L2 learning in the context of today’s multilingual world, where globalization, technology, and increased mobility have brought fundamental changes to the nature of how we interact with others. Through exploring two studies about online interaction, one which takes a sociocultural approach and another which takes a sociolinguistic approach, the paper highlights the strengths and limitations of each approach in addressing the complex role of the social context in online L2 learning. Through this exploration, the paper highlights the complementary nature of the

two approaches and suggests that the integration of the two approaches may be immensely beneficial in gaining a more holistic picture of the social nature of L2 learning. Furthermore, the paper argues that some of the rigid premises set out by both approaches, such as expert-novice participation and language-culture correlation need to be re-evaluated, in order to better account for today's social context which is continuously evolving to be more interconnected and multilingual.

### **Defining social context**

Prior to examining the two approaches in explaining the role of the social context in L2 learning, this section reviews the definitions and parameters of what social context entails. Despite the upsurge of interest and research focusing on the social context in various disciplines, a clear and comprehensive definition has been somewhat difficult to pin down (Barnett & Casper, 2001). Various definitions have been provided (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007; Siegel, 2003; Spolsky, 1988), but only a few key points that are most relevant to the current discussion will be outlined. Firstly, the social context is a complex and multi-layered entity with both local micro-structures, such as the individual's personal social network, as well as political, social and universal macro-structures of society impacting the learning process (Spolsky, 1988). In other words, individuals are enmeshed in ecological systems which consist of multiple environments, and these environments inevitably interact with each other and influence all aspects of peoples' lives (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2007).

Another key point to note when it comes to defining the social context in relation to language learning, is that the learners are not distinct and separate entities from it. Just as the social context impacts learners and the learning process, learners are also "inherently part of, act upon and contribute to shaping the social, cultural and physical environments with which they interact" (Ushioda, 2014, p.48). From an interactional viewpoint, a person has multiple social identities and the one that arises in a particular situation is determined both by the person's membership to the group, as well as the social interaction itself. These identities and relationships "may be continuously changing and renegotiated as the interaction proceeds" (Siegel, 2003 p.183).

It is also important to note that the social context is dynamic in nature; it changes over time as new tools and communities emerge. In today's multilingual world, globalization, technologization, and mobility are key factors that have "penetrated all aspects of L2 learners' lifeworlds" (Atkinson et al., 2016, p.22). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century which we live in today, the nature of classroom discourse and interactions are inevitably changing, owing to the development of technology and its applications to the field of education.

## **L2 learning: developmental vs relational perspectives**

The developmental and relational perspectives taken by sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches, accordingly, provide different insights to the complex role of the social context in L2 learning. The key characteristic that sets apart sociocultural approach from sociolinguistic approach in explaining second language learning is that it is “essentially not about social or cultural aspects of learning”(Duff, 2007 p.1). Rather, its focus is to investigate how social learning precedes and mediates cognitive development. In other words, it is still “fundamentally concerned with understanding the development of cognitive processes” (Zuengler & Miller, 2006, p.38). It takes a developmental perspective in the way that it does not scrutinize learners’ own perspectives or conscious experiences of learning, but rather, explores learning as a process, by investigating how “new concepts (including new linguistic forms) originate in social interaction and are subsequently internalized as mental schemata” (Ellis, 2015, p.214). The idea of zone of proximal development and scaffolding are two concepts within sociocultural approach that highlight how cognitive development is essentially situated in social learning. Zone of proximal development refers to the difference between what an individual achieves by herself and what she might achieve when assisted (Lantolf, 2000). In other words, when learners are provided with support from others, they can achieve more than what they can on their own. Within sociocultural approach, zone of proximal development is an optimal time for learning to occur (Thornton, 2018), in the way that the support, or “scaffolding” (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976) provided by a more knowledgeable other subsequently leads to internalization of higher thinking skills.

Contrastingly, stemming from the interest to investigate the link between language and society, sociolinguistic researchers conceptualize L2 learning as a transformative process in which learners co-construct both linguistic knowledge, as well as their affect, identity, stances and ideologies through participation and membership to the wider community (Duff, 2007). In this way, sociolinguistic approach takes a relational perspective to L2 learning, where learners’ social relationships are viewed as key factors that influence language learning processes. For instance, language socialization proposes the interdependence between the development of language and culture (Ochs, 1988), under the premise that novices in a community are socialized both to the language forms and, through language, to the values, behaviours, and practices of the community in which they live (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). Communities of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991) explains how learners develop socialization practices, through a process where newcomers learn the daily activities, values and norms of the community over time from experienced members. This broad conceptualization of language learning has led sociolinguistic researchers to explore L2 learning beyond linguistic and cognitive gains. In fact, apart from variationist researchers whose focus is to investigate “socially patterned variations in language use” (Mitchell, 2013, p.251), most branches of sociolinguistics focus their investigations on exploring learners’ personal qualities and ambitions, as well as their own social contributions to the learning context (Mitchell, 2013). While this paper takes the stance that while sociolinguistic approach is not synonymous with

social identity approach (Ellis, 2015), it acknowledges that linguistic construction of identity, or in other words, the ways in which individuals co-construct their identity through language (Bucholtz & Hall, 2008; Omoniyi & White, 2006) are key constructs of investigation within sociolinguistic approach.

### **Online Communities as evolving social context: A Comparative Analysis of Two Studies**

This section compares and evaluates the contributions and shortcomings of the two approaches in explaining L2 learning in today's globalized, multilingual world, by closely analysing two studies which focus on L2 learning in online settings. Isbell's study (2018),<sup>1</sup> scrutinizes an informal online community of Korean L2 learners, and Yim's study (2011)<sup>2</sup> which examines two groups of English L2 students whose classroom instruction have been formally extended through an online blackboard (otherwise known as BB, an online forum). Both studies illustrate the emergence of new discursive practices in online settings, which inevitably differ from those that are found in traditional classrooms. While both studies are situated in similar settings, they provide varying insights to the role of the social context in language learning in online contexts. On the one hand, Isbell's study takes on a sociocultural perspective, shedding light to how social interactions, environmental factors and learners themselves play a role in mediating cognitive development of linguistic items. Contrastingly, Yim's study takes on a sociolinguistic lens in exploring how these factors yield different participation roles and learner identities, and more importantly how learners can in turn, impact the language learning process.

#### *Role of Social Interactions: facilitating mediation vs participation*

Unlike cognitive approaches, both sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches acknowledge "the key role that is played by interlocutors, peers, relatives, caregivers" (Duff, 2007, p.312) in the learning process. However, while the role of social interactions lies in facilitating internalization from social to individual in the sociocultural approach, it entails facilitating participation and access to the community which speaks that language in the sociolinguistic approach. In the case of the sociocultural approach, the creation of meaning is very much a collaborative act where the gap between the inter-mental and social and the intra-mental and individual is bridged through social interactions (Lantolf, 2000).

---

<sup>1</sup> "Online informal language learning: insights from a Korean learning environment" (Isbell, 2018) examines the practices of an online community for informal Korean learning on a social link-aggregation website called 'Reddit', using Activity Theory (Engeström, 2001) as a theoretical framework.

<sup>2</sup> "Second Language Students' Discourse Socialization in Academic Online Communities" (Yim, 2011), compares second language students' participation in Canadian English-language university courses in two different modes: face-to-face off-line and asynchronous online, drawing on "community of practice" and "situated learning" (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

**Topic:** How can I say “Get over it!” with the same nuance as in English?

**Author:** OddChoice {Beginner}

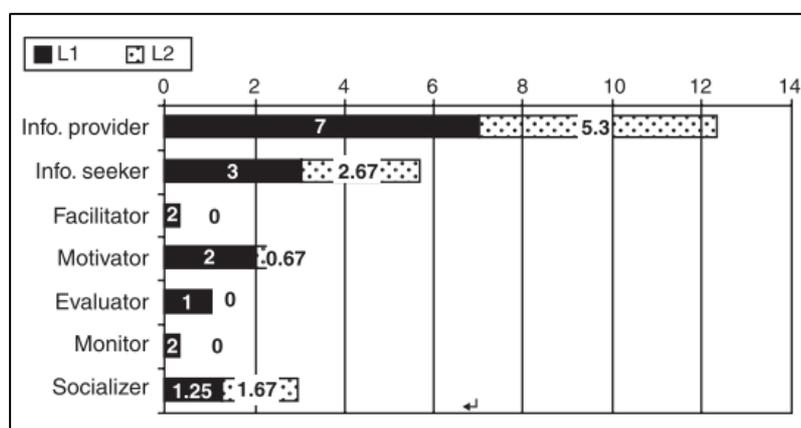
Box 1: A language knowledge topic discussion (Isbell, 2018, p.92)

A clear example of the mediation taking place in the form of a social activity is demonstrated in Isbell’s study. As illustrated by Box 1, we can observe OddChoice, who is a beginner learner of Korean, making an inquiry about how to express the phrase “Get over it” in the target language. From her enquiry, we can learn that there is a gap in her linguistic knowledge, or in other words, that she lacks the “access to the necessary L2 vocabulary to mediate her performance of the task” (Ellis, 2015, p.214). To bridge this gap, she has reached out to gain the assistance of more advanced users of the language. In response to this request, users DonggiAUS and duck50 who possess advanced and native proficiency in Korean respectively, provide OddChoice with examples of L2 phrases such as “just deal with it”, and “just get over it”, as well as some details concerning the register and the contexts in which these phrases would be used. In other words, advanced learners are scaffolding these phrases into Oddchoice’s linguistic repertoire. In fact, duck50’s response, describing a situation in which you would use the phrase “just get over it” in a restaurant, is a clear example of *explanation*, one of the four mediating devices identified by Ohta (2001). In such ways, this example clearly illustrates how “social interaction actually produces new, elaborate, advanced psychological processes that are unavailable to the organism working in isolation” (Vygotsky 1989, as cited in Lantolf, 2000).

In further illustrating this point, one of the advanced users petericn, specifically states that “by discussing some words in English, they (the other users) can understand the meaning more easily and help them to use it better.” (Isbell, 2018, p. 90). From his response, we can witness his skilled use of English as a mediational tool to scaffold new language items into the beginner learner’s language repertoire. Although not demonstrated explicitly in the study, from a sociocultural viewpoint, we can assume that OddChoice would eventually be able to gain voluntary control over this phrase and produce it independently in the future, without any assistance from others. Hence, the scaffolds provided by advanced users are creating a zone of proximal development for beginner learners in the community. This process demonstrates how language use in the form of other-regulation can eventually scaffold the process of self-regulation, as well as how “new concepts (including new linguistic forms) originate in social interaction and are only subsequently internalized as mental schemata” (Ellis, 2015, p.214). The emphasis placed on the importance of social interaction in facilitating this transformation, shows how meaning extends beyond an individual phenomenon and is in fact, a social and negotiable product of interaction (Ellis, 2015).

In the sociolinguistic approach, social interactions also play a crucial role in facilitating learning. However, unlike the sociocultural approach, sociolinguistic explanations focus less on the transfer of knowledge from external to internal planes, and instead emphasize how social interactions fuel learners to become a member of the community (Ellis, 2015). In other words, through a process of socialization, novices are guided by “experts or more proficient members of a group”, who implicitly or explicitly teach them “to think, feel and act in accordance with the values, ideologies and traditions of the group” (Duff, 2007, p.311).

However, while the assumption that “mutual engagement in activity by ‘oldtimers’ and ‘newcomers’ provides the foundation for learning” (Duff, 2007, p.315) can to some extent, explain the learning process in some communities, it seems that it is much too limited in explaining the learning process in communities where the notion of oldtimers and newcomers is unclear. In Yim’s study, the community was not pre-established and instead, “emerged out of the interactions among students, and the expectations put forth by each instructor.” (Duff, 2007, p.317). All of the students in the two courses were newly socialized to online learning, and although the instructors facilitated and set boundaries and rules for the interaction, they were not the main discourse socializers (Duff, 2007). Moreover, although there were both L1 and L2 students in this community, it is difficult to argue that the L1 students served as experts in the sense that they were of equal status to the L2 students, and they did not take a guiding role in socializing the L2 students to the online community.



*Figure 1:* Mean frequency of participant roles identified in BB discussions (Course A) (Yim, 2011, p.19)

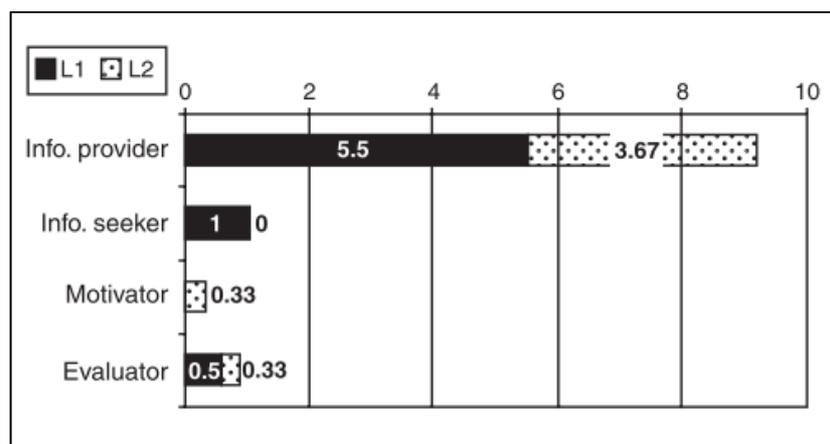


Figure 2: Mean frequency of participant roles identified in BB discussions (Course B) (Yim, 2011, p.19)

As illustrated by Figures 1 and 2 above, students in both courses A and B played various participant roles, including information provider/seeker, facilitator, motivator, evaluator, and monitor, despite the fact that all of them were novices in the community. What is also interesting is that different roles emerged in course A and course B, with less types of participation roles in course B. In fact, the ‘socializer’ role did not arise in course B at all. This example explicitly illustrates how different participation roles arise even in very similar settings, depending on the complexities of the environment in which the social interactions take place. Therefore, these varied roles cannot be reduced to simplistic ‘expert’ and ‘novice’ notions.

That’s a good observation, Jenny. Children’s innate knowledge on linguistic aspect is a key one...Environment triggers the maturation of a LAD....I haven’t found answers for this question.

Ping (L2 learner)

Box 2: Ping’s post: demonstrating various participation roles (Yim, 2011, p.19)

Furthermore, in Yim’s study we also learn that learners are not always limited to playing a single role, and instead, that they can play multiple roles in the instance of a single interaction. As demonstrated in Box 2, it is possible to see that Ping, an L2 learner is taking the role of a motivator by commenting on Jenny, an L1 student, about the observations that she previously made. Simultaneously, she goes on to “demonstrate her expertise as a linguistic major, i.e. taking an information-provider role” (Yim, 2011, p.19) by providing her knowledge about how the environment triggers the maturation of a LAD. At the same time, she seeks other students’ guidance by stating that she has not found answers to this question yet. Hence, the complexities of Ping’s participation roles demonstrate how the idea of “newcomers’ centripetal movement toward full participation” (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p.108) is too simplistic and limited in explaining the multiplicity of participation roles which learners can take on in the instance of a single interaction.

*Role of the learner: 'psychological mediators' vs 'constructors of identity'*

Both sociocultural and sociolinguistic perspectives reject the prevailing view from traditional cognitive perspectives which limit the language learner to “an abstract input-processing machine” (Ellis, 2015, p.235). Learners’ conscious agencies and decision making are a key part of the L2 learning process in both approaches. While in the sociocultural approach, learners demonstrate agentive decision-making in meditating their own learning; in the sociolinguistic approach, learners exercise choice over whether or not to accept or reject learning opportunities, based on their evolving identities, affect, ideologies and stances (Duff, 2007).

Firstly, the sociocultural explanations posit that although “the historical origins of the self and social interactions are located in collective practices of material production”, this “does not mean that their phenomenological richness or agency is denied” (Stetsenko & Arievidtch, 2004, p.483). In fact, mediation itself can be seen as an active process of meaning-making in the way that “humans can control their own behaviour, not from the inside, on the basis of biological urges, but from the outside, using and creating artefacts” (Engeström, 1999, p.29). Learners’ conscious control over their learning processes are exemplified in the interview response from *annyeong\_kiwi*, a beginner Korean learner in Isbell’s study, who states “I think some users like *m\_guishin* and *petericn* are incredibly insightful and helpful. I always pay attention when they answer questions because I think they know what they’re talking about...” (Isbell, 2018, p. 96). This example illustrates that the learner’s role in mediation is not to passively accept externally transferred knowledge. Instead, it depicts how the learner both consciously and purposefully selects and uses appropriate posts posted on the online forum by more advanced users as mediating tools.

The active role in which learners can direct their own learning is further demonstrated in Isbell’s study, where *qwerty*, a beginner learner of Korean, extends the discussion about the use of the phrase “just get over it” in Box 1 (p.6, this paper) by asking “Can this also be used when someone will not get over someone?”, to which an advanced user, *duck50* responds “Nope that would be something like *그냥 잊어* (just forget about her)” (Isbell, 2018, p. 92). Here, we can see how mediation does not simply involve “the transferal of an external activity to a pre-existing internal plane of consciousness” (Leontiev, as cited in Wertsch & Stone, 1985, p.163) Instead, it involves an active and mindful process in which the learner purposefully asks for clarification concerning the instances in which the phrase would be used. In other words, this example illustrates the process in which the mediator and the learner are negotiating and collaborating to build knowledge together (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996).

However, although the sociocultural approach recognizes that our responses to social-material circumstances allow for agentive choice-making in learners, the researchers in this field also argue that these choices are variably afforded and constrained by the mediational means that they have internalized (Compernelle, 2014). For instance, an advanced learner of Korean in

Isbell's study, who is known as Peteric, recognizes "that there are pros and cons to using Korean and English as mediational tools" (Isbell, 2018, p.90), and furthermore acknowledges the fact that "by discussing some words in English, they (learners) can understand the meaning more easily and help them use it better" (Isbell, 2018, p.90). From a sociocultural perspective, while this learner is indeed capable of making conscious choices of the mediational tools, they exercise to catalyse the learning process, this is only possible because he has already integrated cultural artefacts and concepts into their mental and material activity (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006).

Isbell's study clearly illustrates the idea that "goals and values that support and motivate learners to engage reside in the practices of knowledgeable communities rather than the hearts and minds of individuals" (Hickey & Granade, 2004, p. 224) in the sociocultural approach, which is exemplified through the various unwritten rules which affect the online learning community in her study.

"Just don't romanize. The English alphabet and Korean alphabet don't translate into each other at all, they're completely different. Learn your hangul and disregard the sins of the Romanization."

Box 3: Unwritten rule 'no romanization' (Isbell, 2018, p.95)

A system of *voting* where upvotes were given to posts that followed unwritten rules and likewise downvotes to those that did not, permeated in the learning process in this community. As depicted in Box 3, the romanization of Korean characters (hangeul) into alphabet was an important unwritten rule. The post in Box 3 received 19 upvotes, based on the community's collective belief that "romanization of Korean alphabet does a poor job of representing Korean sounds" (Isbell, 2018, p. 95). While this example clearly demonstrates how "activities change, develop and interconnect with social and material structure" (Güngör & Güngör, 2019, p. 113), it simultaneously highlights the unidirectional impact of the wider social context on learning. In other words, owing to the focus of learning as a process of mediation from the social, external plane to the individual, internal plane in the sociocultural approach, learners' goals for language learning are often seen to be situated in wider social structures. Hence, there is an absence in "the exploration of the myriad social identities that L2 learners can and do draw on in their social encounters in the real world" (Ellis, 2015, p.221).

On this note, it seems that Isbell's study would benefit from a sociolinguistic analysis of how the beginner learners in her study reacted to the unwritten rules of the online community. Currently, the study assumes that beginner learners are simply accepting the rules of the online community, with absence in exploration of how a person's identity can both change and be changed by the learning process. By adopting a more emic perspective, a more detailed account

of the bi-directionality of learning may be gained concerning how learners negotiate their identities by accepting, resisting or partially appropriating the rules of the community.

Contrastingly, in Yim's study, it is possible to see how the focus on learners' subjective experiences, leads to in-depth insights about the bi-directionality of learning. For instance, the L2 learners in Yim's study develop very different identities in online modes of learning as opposed to face-to-face modes during the course of the study. Yim states that the L2 learners in her study "usually spoke only when they were personally addressed – for example, to report to the class on their progress on their group project's findings" (Yim, 2011, p.18) in face-to-face classroom contexts. However, in the online BBs, nearly equal number of postings were uploaded by L1 and L2 students. In explaining this finding, Yim (2011), describes that the L2 students in her study were more comfortable in writing academic papers, rather than orally contributing to class discussions. Subsequently, the demands presented by the physical classroom resulted in students' rather unsuccessful socialization to the classroom community, only allowing them to take peripheral roles and resulting in limited and passive, marginalized participation compared to their L1 counterparts. Contrastingly, the online setting has allowed students to participate more actively in the discussions, by unlocking opportunities for students to engage in socialization practices through writing rather than verbalizing. Through avoiding turn-taking mechanisms and interruptions of spoken discourse, L2 students were allowed with more control over discourse management, which subsequently lowered their inhibitions toward expressing ideas (Fitze, 2006). In such ways, Yim's study demonstrates that it is possible for the same learner to construct different identities in different social contexts, and that the degree of learning and participation depends on these identities which learners form.

The extent to which learners can exercise their agency in rejecting or accepting social practices is illustrated further in Yim's study. For instance, one of the participants in the study known as Daehan, shares that he wrote much less than he could have, and that he chose not to write about his professional experiences as a teacher even though he thought it might be interesting to share them with his peers. He elaborates that "if we were allowed to write in free style, it would be easier for me, too. Even though I don't have good English skills, I would've been able to compose more often freely" (Yim, 2011, p.17). From his response, we can witness the frustration he feels due to the constraints of the academic format required by the instructor, as well as his exercise of choice not to fully participate as a result of such requirements. This example depicts an instance where the learner is exercising both agency and judgement concerning the "practices they may wish to emulate and those they do not" (Duff, 2007, p. 311). In other words, he is challenging and resisting the structures of the environment (Zuengler & Cole, 2005), through not completely accepting nor completely rejecting the practices of the community, but instead, only partially appropriating the target norms and practice (Duff, 2007) by deliberately choosing not to share a part of his personal experiences.

Unlike sociocultural perspectives, we can see from the above discussion that sociolinguistic perspectives' focus on learners' emic perspectives and experiences of learning allows us to

deviate from the view that learning is a smooth process in which only the wider societal values impact the learner. Instead, it shows that there are often tensions involved between the learner's beliefs and the wider expectations of the society, and that these tensions can indeed impact and change the extent to which learning opportunities are afforded.

Nonetheless, although “paying great attention to the personal qualities and ambitions of the learner, and their own social contribution to the learning context” (Mitchell, 2013, p.283) is a key strength of the sociolinguistic approach, several researchers argue that while these identities create or limit learning opportunities, it does not explicitly demonstrate the extent to which these opportunities lead to learning (Ellis, 2015, p.232). All too often, sociolinguistic researchers view learning opportunities and learning as equal entities (Ellis, 2015), but as Sfarid (1998) warns, one should be careful not to equate participation with acquisition. For instance, in Yim's study, while Daehan may not have participated in the language learning process due to his dissatisfaction with the instructor's expectations, how the deprivation of his full participation impacts his actual acquisition of language, remains unexplored

In fact, Yim tries to explain the link between participation and acquisition of language in her study, identifying that the two similar courses “socialized students to produce discourse that differed in length, formality, and amounts of appraisal use” (Yim, 2011, p.21). Yim attributes these differences in discourse production to the varied participation roles displayed by students in each course, suggesting that the varying demands of the instructors, coupled by the learners' desire to satisfy the expectations of the instructors have yielded different results in language use among the two groups. However, while Yim's analysis provides us with insights concerning how learners' desire and intentions to please the instructors have had an impact on their discourse production, we learn little about the actual routes of learning which led learners to produce such discourse. It seems that for a more comprehensive picture of L2 learning, Yim's study could benefit from a sociocultural analysis of how the learning paths were socially mediated among students and the instructors during their socialization process.

#### *Role of environmental factors: unlocking mediational tools vs impacting learning outcomes*

According to Firth and Wagner, research in traditional cognitive approaches in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) provide overly narrow data as it is mainly consists of “interactions from a laboratory or classroom setting” (as cited in Ellis, 2015 p.210), ignoring the need to investigate learners within their social contexts (Ellis, 2015). Contrastingly, both sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches view social contexts as “the actual site of learning” (Ellis, 2015, p.221). On the one hand, sociocultural explanations posit that the environment unlocks different mediational tools which subsequently impact the learning process. On the other hand, sociolinguistic explanations view the role of culture and variations of language embedded in the environment as key factors in determining what kind of linguistic outcomes and discursive practices which learners end up adopting.

Firstly, in the sociocultural approach, environmental factors can be seen to activate different mediational tools, and subsequently impact learning in different ways. In fact, according to Lantolf (2000), “whether physical or symbolic, artifacts are generally modified as they are passed on from one generation to the next” (p.2), suggesting that changes in the environment result in change of mediational tools, and subsequently impact how we think and learn. Lantolf further explains that each generation reworks its cultural inheritance to meet the needs of its communities and individuals. Isbell’s study well illustrates how recent technological developments offer new possibilities for mediated action in the language learning process. While traditional views of Vygotsky’s ideas have been often criticized based on the notion that it reduces the learner’s role to one of passivity and dependence on the mediation process guided by the adult or the more knowledgeable other (Lambert & Clyde, 2000), we can see that the participatory culture of online settings have allowed for increased opportunities for learners to be key drivers of their own learning in Isbell’s study.

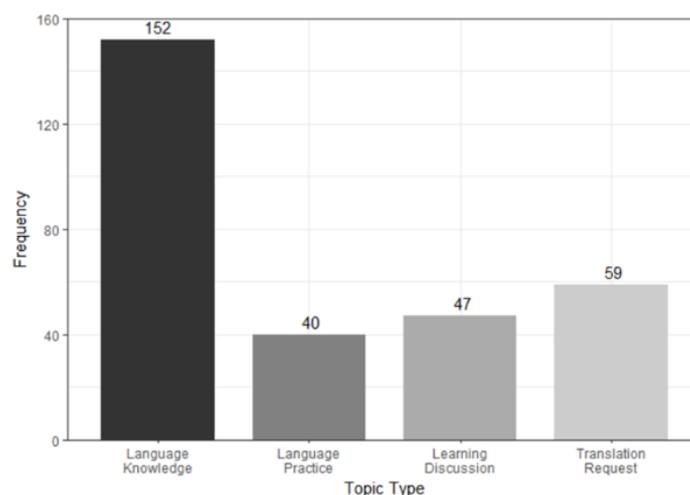


Figure 3: Bar plot showing frequencies of topic submission types (Isbell, 2018, p. 83)

For instance, all language topics were decided by the learners themselves in the community in Isbell’s study. Figure 3 depicts the details of the 298 submissions that were observed on Reddit. Across all archived posts, the topic which learners demonstrated most interest was Korean language knowledge. 51 submissions focused on grammar, followed by vocabulary (49), and then pronunciation (25), and these posts dominated the learning activities on the forum. Furthermore, learners drew on the use of various “outside artefacts” outside of the activity system, “such as YouTube videos or dictionary entries” which were also, “selected and shared on the initiative of community members” (Isbell, 2018 p.91). This clearly illustrates how the changing environment unlocks new mediational tools for the learners, which in turn, impacts the dynamics of the learning process.

In the sociolinguistic approach, environmental factors also play an important role in L2 learning, based on the idea that the culture and shared practices of the community in the environment determines sociocultural rules, disciplinary subcultures, and discourse conventions learners acquire (Schieffelin & Ochs, 1986). However, we must note that the

notion of culture is becoming increasingly complex in today's world with more and more communities becoming transnational, multicultural and multilingual. As evidence for this, Baker (2015), argues that the emergence of English as a lingua franca challenges the traditional assumptions concerning the purported inexorable link between language and culture, and calls for new approaches to understanding the relationship between language, culture and identity. This is because within the English as an International Language paradigm, English does not belong to any particular language community, and attention is shifted to using the language for accommodating mutual intelligibility across different cultures (Liyanage & Walker, 2014). In other words, the notion of who is considered an expert user and who is a novice user, and the question of ownership of the English language becomes unclear within this framework.

In fact, although Yim's study does not explicitly draw on the idea of English as an international language, it demonstrates how the notion of language ownership can be complicated in certain contexts. Unlike traditional settings where native speakers would be considered the expert user of the language and L2 counterparts as novice users, the context of Yim's study shows otherwise. In Yim's study, both L1 and L2 students were newly being socialized to academic discourse, guided by the expectations of the instructors rather than the shared practices of the community. The academic writing style demanded by the instructors in Yim's study was free from native-like standards of typical monolingual communities in the sense that they were not seeking for conversational fluency in the language of everyday interactions, but instead, for target language features appropriate to specific academic contexts. In fact, this has allowed the L2 learners to be on "a proverbial 'level playing field' with L1 students ... in the sense that both had to learn 'the university language' in online discourse" (Yim, 2011, p.21). In fact, one L1 student mentions in her interview that "after she received the interim written feedback from the instructor, she 'completely changed' her writing style on the BB" (Yim, 2011, p.11). This example explicitly demonstrates how the context of Yim's study involves even native speakers of the target language to be newly socialized to the online academic community.

The context in which Yim's study takes place, clearly illustrates that cultures and languages are not stationary and homogenous entities, limited to geographical areas or specific communities. Instead, they are both fluid and complex, merging and changing over time as new communities emerge. Yim's study therefore illustrates that while expert-novice differences and language-culture relationships still characterize L2 learning in many traditional settings, such notions cannot account for explaining the "global flows of ever-changing negotiated spaces of current language use" (Pennycook, 2009, p.115) in new social settings that have newly emerged as a result of globalization and technological advancement. The online setting in Yim's study is a clear example which is difficult to be accounted for using the language-culture correlation and expert-novice notions.

### **Evaluation: Bridging the gap between developmental and relational perspectives**

Both the sociolinguistic approach and sociocultural approach have shown in different ways how “social context influences how successful learners are in acquiring an L2” (Ellis, 2015 p. 235). Both approaches have addressed the extent to which learners, social interactions and environmental factors play a crucial role in the language learning process, which are typically ignored by traditional cognitive perspectives of SLA. Overall, it seems that the different angles in which they look at the social context have resulted in providing complementary insights to the complexities of the social context in L2 learning.

On the one hand, by taking a developmental view of the learning process, the sociocultural approach demonstrates how linguistic development moves from social to the cognitive planes, and that once internalized, learners can initiate and use linguistic items in entirely different contexts (Ellis, 2015). While this exploration enables us, “as analysts, to investigate how activities change, develop and interconnect with social and material structures, it makes it more difficult to analyse how participants themselves actually make sense of their surroundings” (Arnseth, 2008, p.301). Thus, it brings questions “to what extent sociocultural SLA truly belongs to ‘social turns’” (Ellis, 2015, p.221), given that exploration of identities of how learners’ social encounters in the real world relate to learning are neglected and that it does not seem to explore how learners are also able to influence how contexts are constructed (Ellis, 2015).

On the other hand, sociolinguistic approach’s commitment to studying the learner’s subjective experience of L2 learning, sheds light to how learning is not necessarily a smooth and seamless process and that learners may demonstrate agency and contest being positioned as novices (Ellis, 2015). All in all, this approach provides us with a “more rounded view of the learner as a social being” (Mitchell, 2013, p.283), and how the L2 learning process is complicated by learner’s choice to accept, resist or partially appropriate social practices and learning opportunities. However, in some ways, research in this approach has resulted in shedding limited light on actual learning. According to Ortega (2009), sociolinguistic approaches focus solely on the access and participation of learners, rather than the actual acquisition of the L2 code. Given the difficulties of making a clear distinction between participation and acquisition (Sfard, 1998), sociolinguistic researchers have maintained a rather ambiguous disposition as to where the cognitive side of L2 learning fits into this overall picture of L2 learning. Therefore, it is fair to say that adopting a sociolinguistic perspective makes it more difficult to study the “linguistic detail of the learning path being followed, or the cognitive processes involved” (Mitchell, 2013, p.282) in L2 learning.

It is however, important to recognize that the two approaches, when put together, provide us with a bigger tool kit (Ellis, 2015), for understanding both the micro, local factors and macro, exogenous factors within the social context in impacting the learning process; something that has been completely ignored in traditional SLA. While the sociocultural approach has provided

us with how social activities drive and determine our cognitive development of L2 learning, sociolinguistic approaches provide us with a detailed account of how learners make sense of their experience and how their identities can impact the learning process. In such ways, the two approaches collectively contribute to explaining two separate sides of the same coin, with one side of the coin being the social context, and the other, L2 learning.

As the two empirical studies discussed in this article demonstrate, the process of SLA is becoming more "emergent, dynamic, unpredictable, open-ended and intersubjectively negotiated" (Douglas Fir Group, 2016, p. 19), reflecting the complexities of the multilingual age, brought by advancements in technology and globalization. Given that a number of scholars in the field of SLA have proposed transdisciplinary approaches to SLA (Atkinson, 2011; Douglas Fir Group, 2016; Duff & Byrnes, 2019), perhaps it is both timely and appropriate to bring the two perspectives together, in order to facilitate better understanding of the complexities of the social context in L2 learning in today's world. In fact, this paper has shown how both Yim's study and Isbell's may benefit from incorporation of analysis from the other perspective. Through integrating the complementary contributions of each approach, both researchers and practitioners would be able to gain a much more comprehensive understanding of the social nature of L2 learning.

However, while the integration of the two approaches may provide us with a more comprehensive picture of understanding the role of social context in L2 learning, one other aspect that needs to be considered, is the idea of change. The earlier exploration of social context in this paper outlined that it is not just a complex and multi-layered entity, but that it is also dynamic in nature, changing over time as new tools and communities emerge. On this note, the efficacy of notions such as expert-novice participation, language-culture correlation need to be re-evaluated in understanding the changes in which globalization and technological development has brought to the language learning process, and hence, better reflect the fluid and dynamic nature of the social context in L2 learning.

## **Conclusion**

One of the key challenges of distinguishing the differences in the sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches in explaining the role of the social context in L2 learning is that both approaches place great emphasis on the highly social and situated nature of language learning. The fact that both approaches have "different but interrelated research foci, methods, and theory" (Duff, 2007, p.311) makes it even more difficult to make the distinction clear. This paper has contributed to clarifying these rather blurred boundaries between the sociocultural and sociolinguistic approaches in explaining the role of the social context in L2 learning, by explicitly highlighting the interrelation and points of differences in the two approaches. The in-depth exploration of 'social context in L2 learning' has revealed that although the two approaches look at different aspects of social learning, they have collectively contributed to the

field of SLA by showing that L2 learning is not purely a cognitive and internal process and essentially a social affair.

Finally, given the complementary nature of the two approaches, this paper proposes that integrating the two theories may provide further insight for an even more holistic picture of the social nature of learning in today's multilingual age. It also argues that some premises put forth by the two approaches must be re-evaluated, given the dynamic nature of social context which changes over time. In the social world we live in today, relations across local, regional and global contexts have evolved to be more interconnected than ever. Some notions proposed by the two approaches must also evolve accordingly, in order to better reflect these changes.

## References

- Arnseth, H. C. (2008). Activity theory and situated learning theory: contrasting views of educational practice. *Pedagogy, Culture & Society*, 16(3), 289–302. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681360802346663>
- Atkinson, D (Ed.). (2011). *Alternative Approaches to Second Language Acquisition*. New York: Routledge.
- Atkinson, Dwight, Byrnes, H., Doran, M., Duff, P., Ellis, N. C., Hall, J. K., ... Tarone, E. (2016). A Transdisciplinary Framework for SLA in a Multilingual World. *Modern Language Journal*, 100, 19–47. <https://doi.org/10.1111/modl.12301>
- Baker, W. (2015). *Culture and identity through English as a Lingua Franca: rethinking concepts and goals in intercultural communication*. Boston : De Gruyter Mouton.
- Barnett, E., & Casper, M. (2001). A definition of "social environment". *American Journal of Public Health*, 91(3), 465. <https://doi.org/10.2105/ajph.91.3.465a>
- Bronfenbrenner, U., & Morris, P. (2007). The Bioecological Model of Human Development. In *Handbook of Child Psychology Theoretical Models of Human Development: Vol. Vol. 1*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470147658.chpsy0114>
- Bucholtz, M., & Hall, K. (2008). All of the above: New coalitions in sociocultural linguistics. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 12(4), 401–431. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9841.2008.00382.x>
- Compernelle, R. A. van. (2014). *Sociocultural theory and L2 instructional pragmatics*. Bristol : Multilingual Matters.
- Coupland, N. (2016). *Sociolinguistics*. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781107449787.002>
- Duff, P. A, & Byrnes, H. (2019). SLA across disciplinary borders: Introduction to the special issue. *The Modern Language Journal*, 103, 3–5.
- Duff, Patricia A. (2007). Second language socialization as sociocultural theory: Insights and issues. *Lang. Teach.*, 40(4), 309–319. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444807004508>
- Ellis, R. (2015). *Understanding second language acquisition*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2015.
- Engeström, Y. (1999). Activity theory and individual and social transformation. In Y. Engeström, R. Miettinen, & R.-L. Punamäki (Eds.), *Perspectives on Activity Theory* (pp. 19–38). <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511812774>
- Engeström, Y. (2001). Expansive Learning at Work: Toward an activity theoretical reconceptualization. *Journal of Education and Work*, 14(1), 133–156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080020028747>

- Fitze, M. (2006). Discourse and participation in ESL face-to-face and written electronic conferences.(English as a second language). *Language, Learning & Technology*, 10(1), 67.
- Güngör, M. N., & Güngör, M. A. (2019). Pre-service English language teachers' collaborative development: the emergence of research, rehearsal and reflection (3R) model from an activity theory perspective. *European Journal of Teacher Education*, 42(1), 98–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02619768.2018.1545016>
- Hickey, D. T., & Granade, J. B. (2004). The influence of sociocultural theory on our theories of engagement and motivation. In D. M. McInerney & S. Van Etten (Eds.), *Big theories revisited: Theories of engagement and motivation* (pp. 200–223). Greenwich, CT: Information Age.
- Isbell, D. R. (2018). Online informal language learning: Insights from a Korean learning community. *Language Learning and Technology*, 22(3), 82–102.
- John-Steiner, V., & Mahn, H. (1996). Sociocultural approaches to learning and development: A Vygotskian framework. *Educational Psychologist*, 31(3), 191–206. [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3103&4\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep3103&4_4)
- Lambert, E. B., & Clyde, M. (2000). *Re-Thinking Early Childhood Theory and Practice*. Social Science Press.
- Lantolf, J., & Thorne, S. . (2006). *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development* (S. L. Thorne, ed.). New York: Oxford.
- Lantolf, James. (2000). *Sociocultural theory and second language learning*. Oxford: Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning : legitimate peripheral participation / Jean Lave*, (E. Wenger, ed.). Cambridge: Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Liyanage, I., & T, W. (2014). *English for Academic Purpose (EAP) in Asia: Negotiating Appropriate Practices in a Global Context*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.
- Mitchell, R. (2013). *Second language learning theories* (Third edit; F. Myles & E. Marsden, eds.). London : Routledge, 2013.
- Ochs, E. (1988). *Culture and language development: language acquisition and language socialisation in a Samoan village*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ohta, A. S. (2001). *Second language acquisition processes in the classroom : learning Japanese*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Omoniyi, T., & White, G. (2006). *The sociolinguistics of identity*. London: London.
- Ortega, L. (2009). *Understanding second language acquisition*. London: Routledge.
- Pennycook, A. (2009). Plurilithic Englishes: towards a 3D model. In K. Murata & J. Jenkins (Eds.), *Global Englishes in Asian contexts : current and future debates* (pp. 194–207). Basingstoke: Basingstoke : Palgrave Macmillan.
- Schieffelin, B. B., & Ochs, E. (Eds.). (1986). *Language socialization across cultures*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Sfard, A. (1998). On two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one. *Educational Researcher*, 27, 4–13.
- Siegel, J. (2003). The social context. In C. Doughty & M. H. Long (Eds.), *The handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 178–223). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Spolsky, B. (1988). Bridging the Gap: A General Theory of Second Language Learning. *TESOL Quarterly*, 22(3), 377–396. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3587285>
- Stetsenko, A., & Arievitch, I. M. (2004). The Self in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: Reclaiming the Unity of Social and Individual Dimensions of Human Development. *Theory & Psychology*, 14(4), 475–503. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354304044921>

- Tarone, E. (2007). Sociolinguistic Approaches to Second Language Acquisition Research: 1997-2007. *The Modern Language Journal (Boulder, Colo.)*, 91(5), 837. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4781.2007.00672.x>
- The Douglas Fir Group. (2016). A transdisciplinary framework for SLA in a multilingual world. *The Modern Language Journal*, 100, 19–47.
- Thornton, H. (2018). *The It Factor: What Makes a Teacher Great?* Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV.
- Ushioda, E. (2014). Context and Complex Dynamic Systems Theory. In Z. Dörnyei, P. D. MacIntyre, & A. Henry (Eds.), *Motivational Dynamics in Language Learning* (pp. 1–429). <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781783092574>
- Wertsch, J., & Stone, A. (1985). The concept of internalization in Vygotsky's account of the genesis of higher mental functions. In J. Wertsch (Ed.), *Culture, Communication and Cognition: Vygotskian Perspectives* (pp. 162–179). New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Wood, D., Bruner, J., & Ross, G. (1976). The role of tutoring in problem solving. *Journal of Child Psychology & Psychiatry & Allied Disciplines*, 17, 89–102.
- Yim, Y. K. K. (2011). Second language students' discourse socialization in academic online communities. *Canadian Modern Language Review*, 67(1), 1–27. <https://doi.org/10.3138/cmlr.67.1.001>
- Zuengler, J., & Cole, K. (2005). Language socialization in second language learning. In E. Hinkel (Ed.), *Handbook of research in second language teaching and learning* (pp. 301–316). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Zuengler, J., & Miller, E. R. (2006). Cognitive and Sociocultural Perspectives: Two Parallel SLA Worlds? *TESOL Quarterly*, 40(1), 35. <https://doi.org/10.2307/40264510>