

**PRAXIS-ORIENTED PEDAGOGY AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF
L2 NOVICE TEACHER EXPERTISE**

*Karen E. Johnson, Deryn P. Verity and Sharon S. Childs,
The Pennsylvania State University, USA*

ABSTRACT

While past L2 teacher cognition research has critically examined what L2 teachers know, believe, and think, limited progress has been made in addressing fundamental questions about the development of L2 teacher/teaching expertise. Grounded in Vygotskian sociocultural theory, this article tracks the developmental trajectory of three novice ESL teachers over two years as they move through three praxis-oriented pedagogy courses. The findings illustrate how a specific set of pedagogical concepts come to function as mediational means, enabling them to shift their instructional stance from teacher-centred to teaching as dialogic mediation.

KEYWORDS

Sociocultural theory, language teacher education, responsive mediation, pedagogical concepts

1. INTRODUCTION

As language teacher educators (TEs), we attempt to make our language teacher education (LTE) pedagogy explicit by empirically documenting our interactions with our novice teachers (NTs) as they unfold within our own institutional context. At the same time, we explore the influences and consequences of our LTE pedagogy on their professional development. Working from a Vygotskian Sociocultural Theory (VSCT) perspective, we agree with Vygotsky (1935/1994) who argued that school learning is not the same as learning in the everyday world. Instead, he characterised school learning as an ideal venue for systematic, intentional, goal-directed instruction where new *psychological concepts* can be introduced with the goal of restructuring both thinking (teacher cognition) and activity (language teaching). We believe LTE pedagogy should not only intentionally shape the social situation of development by creating *structured mediational spaces* where NTs can grow into becoming teachers, but also represent spaces where TEs can see, support and enhance the development of teacher (person) / teaching (activity) expertise.

In this article, we offer empirical data that track the developmental trajectory of three novice English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers over two years as they move through three praxis-oriented pedagogy courses; educational interventions that reflect the dialectical principle

that changes in social activity affect cognition, or more concretely, how an appropriately designed LTE practice can change the way language teachers think about and enact language teaching. We are particularly interested in how a specific set of pedagogical concepts come to function as mediational means for our NTs, enabling them to shift their instructional stance from teacher-centred to teaching as dialogic mediation.

1.1 A VYGOTSKIAN SOCIOCULTURAL THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE ON LANGUAGE TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

A VSCT perspective, representing a coherent theory of mind, can inform LTE pedagogy in ways that systematically and intentionally create opportunities that support the development of novice teachers/teaching expertise during initial learning-to-teach experiences (Johnson, 2009, 2015; Johnson & Golombek, 2016). Fundamental to this perspective is the idea that cognition is mediated and develops through engagement with cultural artefacts and activities, concepts and social relations. During LTE programmes, the development of teacher/teaching expertise is most often mediated through engagement with *academic concepts* and through social interactions (oral and written) with expert others (i.e., TEs, mentor teachers). Thus, the mediational role of academic concepts and the quality and character of the social interactions around those concepts are crucial to understanding the processes of language teacher professional development.

In our analysis, we rely on several VSCT-informed concepts when examining NT/TE engagement with a specific set of pedagogical concepts as they participate in the activities associated with learning-to-teach/tutor L2 learners. We refer to these concepts as *pedagogical*, rather than *academic*, because they inform *how* to teach, rather than *what* to teach. According to Vygotsky (1978, 1981), human cultures create categories for organising events and objects, which over time become concepts, represented in linguistic signs, that are passed from one generation to the next. He distinguishes *everyday concepts* based on concrete experiences in the world from *academic concepts* which reflect understandings based on systematic observation and theoretical investigations in various academic disciplines. The function of educational activity, according to Vygotsky, is to modify learners' conceptual systems so they are aligned with the most up-to-date academic knowledge available. Since language has a powerful influence on conceptual development, the ways in which the language and the objects are understood, used and transformed in purposeful activities set the stage for productive instruction (teaching/learning) and ultimately conceptual development. For LTE programmes, this means altering NTs' existing conceptual systems about language teachers/teaching, conceptual systems that have been appropriated through the social and historical processes of schooling (i.e., apprenticeship of observation, Lortie, 1975).

The VSCT concepts that inform our praxis-oriented LTE pedagogy are the same concepts that inform our vision of theoretically and pedagogically sound L2 instruction. In other words, VSCT-informed pedagogy is appropriate for learners of teaching (NTs) as well as learners of any object of study. VSCT-informed pedagogy is neither a traditional teacher-centred

transmission view of teaching nor unstructured student-centred discovery learning, but rather “a student-centered approach with deliberate teaching” (Johnson, 2009, p. 62). VSCT-informed pedagogy conceptualises *teaching as dialogic mediation*; it focuses attention on the quality and character of activity and interaction and highlights their mediating role in learners’ conceptual and language development. To learn to teach from a teaching as dialogic mediation instructional stance, our NTs are asked to focus on the quality and character of the activities they engage in with their L2 learners, the conceptual and linguistic resources they use to engage in those activities, and the educational and developmental goals they are attempting to accomplish through those activities. We also assist our NTs in learning how to offer assistance and guidance that is highly responsive to L2 learners’ immediate needs and educational goals. This requires that our NTs develop a general sense of what Vygotsky (1986) termed the *zone of proximal development* (ZPD): the distance between learners’ actual development, or what they can achieve on their own, and their potential development, what they can achieve with assistance. Taking a teaching as dialogic mediation instructional stance allows NTs to create spaces for L2 learners to make their thinking explicit, thereby opening it up to external influence. They strive to engage L2 learners with the subject matter content in ways that promote deeper understanding and conceptual thinking by employing VSCT-informed pedagogy, which links academic knowledge (subject matter content) to practical everyday activity (meaningful language use).

Throughout our three praxis-oriented courses, we design experiences that allow NTs to be, temporarily, what they have not yet fully become. Each course is designed to create structured mediational spaces where NTs are supported as they attempt to “jump ahead of themselves,” to try out and try on being and becoming a language teacher/tutor. As we assist and guide them through these experiences, we engage in *responsive mediation* (Johnson & Golombek, 2016), mediation (oral and written) that is dialogic, intentional and contingent upon the nature of the interactions and activities. Through sustained and mediated activity, we see NTs gradually move from the social plane, in which their thinking and activities are mediated through academic and pedagogical concepts and interactions with us, to the internal plane, where they begin to appropriate the necessary conceptual resources to regulate their own thinking and activities.

VSCT defines this process as *internalisation* (Leont’ev, 1981), not simply the transmission of knowledge and/or skills but a transformation of the self and one’s activities. By documenting the process of internalisation, we can observe and track the development of language teacher/teaching expertise.

1.1.1 PEDAGOGICAL CONCEPTS AS MEDIATIONAL MEANS

Grounded in the VSCT-informed seminal research on classroom discourse which argues that how teachers and students talk and act in classrooms greatly influences what they learn (Alexander, 2008; Barnes, 1976; Mercer, 2000), we have developed a set of pedagogical concepts designed to enable NTs to foster greater levels of participation and engagement in

their L2 instruction. Our intention, as VSCT-informed TEs, is for these pedagogical concepts to assist NTs in shifting their instructional stance from teacher-fronted instruction to teaching as dialogic mediation. Across our three praxis-oriented courses, these pedagogical concepts are operationally defined, modelled and analysed in the activity of actual teaching. While the concepts are emphasised differently from course to course, they “travel” across the courses as the NTs apply them, reflect upon them, and ultimately appropriate them. In fact, during the final Practicum Teaching Experience, they are intentionally emphasised and explicitly linked to the concrete activities of planning for, teaching and reflecting on L2 instruction. Likewise, we expect our NTs to consider these pedagogical concepts when they prepare and teach their lessons or engage in tutoring sessions. While our collective set of pedagogical concepts are numerous, three emerged as most salient in our data analysis of three NTs that are the focus of this article. The NTs, Deena, Sage and Trevor, had no prior teaching experience. Deena and Trevor are Chinese. Sage is American.

Teach off Your Students, Not at Them: In order to enable NTs to develop a *teaching as dialogic mediation* instructional stance, this pedagogical concept encourages NTs to take up what students say and do to bring it into the instructional conversation. It does not negate the important role of the teacher in the processes of teaching/learning, but it encourages more dialogic, collaborative, co-constructed interactions between teachers and students. It also shifts teachers’ attention to the norms that govern participation in an activity and the extent to which L2 learners are able (or not) to participate in that activity. It requires teachers to pay attention to the resources, for example, semiotic, linguistic, instructional, that L2 learners are using, attempting to use, or need to be aware of in order to successfully or even partially participate in an instructional activity.

Be Direct, Not Directive: To collaborate with students means being able to provide clear guidance, but the temptation for the NT is to display knowledge rather than to help learners to construct it. Being *direct* means being explicit, while being *directive* means taking all the initiative away from the student. This pedagogical concept reminds NTs to clarify their expectations and instructions, while simultaneously giving the learner room in the ZPD; in a way, it articulates the tension between the teacher-as-expert and the teacher-as-strategic mediator.

Teaching as Connecting: This pedagogical concept helps NTs to recognise and respond to the interconnected, complex nature of teaching. Through their daily teaching activity, teachers make connections at and between both the macro and micro levels. At the macro level, they respond to the broader institutional and curricular goals of an organisation by addressing required standards and objectives. At the micro level, they seek to connect with their students with the goal of designing lessons and activities that effectively shape student learning. Rost (2006, p. 3) notes that connection is:

the engagement of intention, attention, and memory in the activity itself. All teachers want their students to connect with the learning activities we prepare, yet we often fail to take concrete steps that will lead to better connections.

Teaching as Connecting is a pedagogical concept that enables NTs to make “better connections” through reasoned, informed instructional decisions.

2. TEACHING ESL COURSE

During the introductory Teaching ESL course, our NTs participate in an extended team-teaching project (EXTTP) which lets them engage in a range of authentic activities associated with language teaching. In essence, a team of NTs teach one session (55-75 minutes) of an actual ESL course. The team discussed in this article, Deena, Sage and Trevor, taught a lesson on transition usage in academic writing with a group of ESL students enrolled in a freshman composition course.

The EXTTP moves the team through a sequence of mediated activities: (1) meeting with the ESL instructor and observing one class, (2) collaboratively planning a lesson, (3) practice teaching the lesson (digitally recorded) and getting feedback from the TE and classmates, (4) collaboratively re-planning the lesson with assistance from the TE, (5) team teaching the lesson (digitally recorded) in the ESL course, (6) watching and discussing the digital recording of the lesson with the TE (digitally recorded), and (7) writing a 5-7 page reflection paper about the 8-week project.

2.1 THE PRACTICE TEACH

During the practice teach, the team presented three types of transition usage in academic writing: pronoun reference, repeated key words, and other lexical words and phrases. As the lesson progressed, their classmates and the TE struggled with the example paragraph they had selected to teach transition usage; a dense, highly technical description of “insect population growth under primitive agricultural conditions.” In Excerpt 1, the TE makes her expert thinking explicit by articulating why the class was struggling not only to understand the content of the paragraph, but also with identifying different examples of transition usage.

Excerpt 1

Selecting appropriate content

TE: where↑ did you get this paragraph?

T1: in their textbook

TE: it's in their textbook (.) is this a topic they've been talking about↑ uhm like insect populations (.) and >insect problems and stuff>↑

T3: no (.) they haven't talked about this

TE: >okay so< 'cause the reason that (.) there's a bunch of things that I'm cognitively (.) having cognitive overload (.) one is just what is the thing ABOUT (.) and Cassy was reading↑ it (.) and Cassy was struggling to read it (.) because it's very dense (.) it sounds like it comes from a science textbook (.) and that would↑ be fine if they were familiar with this topic and then they'd been talking about this topic (.) and the previous examples about uncle John or uncle Bob (.) whoever (.) was about this (.) but

those previous examples were S:O simple, (.) and S:O easy (.) and this is so complicated (.) part of it is because of the content (.) part of it is because it's just not so obvious what they are (.) s:o (.) you either need to make your (.) your easy↑ examples more complicated (.) or you need to have this paragraph that you use for the first attempt at it to be a simpler paragraph (.) and then maybe you move into something that is more complicated (.) but this is like a hu:ge (.) >from uncle john shop< to (.) primitive agricultural conditions.

In planning the lesson, the team had failed to *make connections* between the subject matter content they selected to teach transition usage and how their classmates or the TE might understand that content. Likewise, because the content they selected was largely inaccessible there were no opportunities to *teach off* the students. Immediately following this exchange, in Excerpt 2, the TE offers concrete suggestions for how the team might procedurally move the ESL students through progressively more complicated content while simultaneously making transition usage more explicit to their ESL students.

Excerpt 2

Making content accessible

TE: right (.) or take this and make an easy one about uncle Johns and Bobs and then make and then have a harder one (.) so you progress:ive:ly get more difficult (.) more difficult- and another thing you could do is you could (.) for the paragraph that follows this (.) the examples are already marked (.) right s:o you do uncle Bob (.) oh (.) I'm sorry (.) uncle John (.) then you go to the next one (.) which is insect whatever (.) and they're already marked there

T1: already marked↑

TE: yeah (.) they're already marked (.) just like okay (.) all you have to do is read the sen- oh I see what they're- now get another paragraph (.) oh (.) they're already marked (.) then here's a third paragraph (.) you guys mark it

T1: oh!

TE: you see what I'm saying? s:o your progressively working them through the process and each time the paragraph gets more complicated (.) more complicated (.) that's another way you can think about to do it (.) right↑? you see↑? and I (.) I think what you were hearing was their struggle with >what is this about↑< and >what am I supposed to do< okay↑

The team takes up this responsive mediation, as can be seen in their final reflective papers, where each teacher acknowledges the need to be more deliberate when selecting appropriate content as well as making that content more accessible to their ESL students. Deena, Sage and Trevor each recall their thinking processes as they collaboratively re-planned the lesson after the practice teach. Additionally, they are increasingly aware of the need to *make connections* between their instructional activities in terms of the rationale for each activity, their students' needs and the sequencing of activities throughout the lesson.

Deena: *During our second time of designing, we focused more on selecting appropriate articles and designing meaningful activities. We paid more attention to students' need to avoid having meaningless interaction.*

Sage: *I need to spend more time on the front end pondering my rationale for decisions, not just being satisfied with the first thing that seems to work. If that were the case, then in a feedback-receiving situation, I would be better able to explain what I was trying to do.*

Trevor: *Besides, we also paid more attention to the selection and design of contents and activities. To make our whole layout of lesson more logical, we tried to make each activity to be connected by adding some rationale for the activities and arranging the activities in a logical learning and acquiring sequence.*

2.1.1 THE ACTUAL TEACH

During the actual teach, the team made several adaptations. First, they selected example paragraphs from several student-authored academic essays that the ESL instructor had given them. This ensured that the ESL students could easily *make connections* to the content of the example paragraphs. Additionally, the team highlighted uses of transitions in the paragraphs with colour. Procedurally, they then asked individual students to identify what type of transition was being used and to speculate why the author had chosen to use it. This instructional move allowed their teaching to *be direct* (i.e., find the transition usage), yet *not directive* (i.e., speculate on the author's rhetorical choice). Selecting more appropriate content, highlighting transition usage and asking students to imagine the writer's thinking, enabled the team to garner greater levels of participation and engagement in the lesson, in effect creating opportunities for them to *teach off* the students. Later, when the team assigned an additional, unmarked essay for the students to analyse, they were quickly able to identify transition usage and willing to discuss rhetorical choices and their impact. In enacting this lesson, the team sequenced their activities to make them progressively more complex and moved the students towards a deeper understanding of and autonomy over transition usage in their academic writing.

2.1.1.1 FINAL REFLECTION PAPERS

In their final reflection papers, all three NTs described the need to shift their instructional stance from being teacher-fronted to *teaching as dialogic mediation*.

Deena: *To be a qualified teacher, I have to explain the reason why I choose this class material and why I design this activity. Before our practice teaching, what concerned me most was how to teach, how to deliver. After our teach practicing, what plays the main role during my teaching is to think from both teacher's perspective and students' need.*

Sage: *I realized that my conception of teaching was very much presentation-focused and revolved around an explanation of the core concept...It was harder than I anticipated to assess in the moment the effectiveness of my explanations...I was still looking for some kind of indication that the students understood the directions and the connection to the topic.*

Trevor: *To be honest, I have been a passive recipient in English learning for a very long time since I intensively learned English in China. I absorb the knowledge of English, like a sponge, however, I never tried to squeeze myself to transmit the knowledge that I learned to other people. In hindsight, I totally changed my stance from an ESL learner to an ESL teacher.*

The development of teacher/teaching expertise begins with conscious awareness. After this initial learning-to-teach experience, all three NTs articulated a heightened awareness of what it feels like to be an ESL teacher. At this point, they have come to realise what they do not know how to do – how to shift their instructional stance from teacher-centred (*teach at*) to teaching as dialogic mediation (*teach off*). The structured mediational spaces built into the EXTTP and the responsive mediation they received supported their attempts to make these shifts as they engaged in the activities of planning, teaching and reflecting on being and becoming a language teacher in this initial learning-to-teach experience.

3. THE TUTORING INTERNSHIP

In the semester-long Tutoring Internship, tutors meet three tutees (international students in a first-year ESL composition class) weekly. They write a reflective commentary after each meeting, and also meet weekly with the TE. Tutoring supports class assignments and is not proofreading or editing. “Giving” ideas, corrections and sophisticated sentences to tutees contradicts the programme’s goals, but for many tutors (and tutees), “good writing” equals “correct grammar.” Explicitly reframing tutoring as an exploration of choices resonates with the pedagogical concept *be direct, but not directive*. Responsive mediation helps tutors to help their tutees to focus on higher-order features such as logical organisation, coherence, word choice and information structure.

After each session, tutors post a reflection. The TE responds to every post and provides commentary (expert interpretation) or concrete suggestions (expert help). These responses are *non-directive*, filtered through a written report. However, they are *direct* in that they make elements of the activity more salient and open to inspection. The posts thus serve two functions: (1) they allow the TE to mediate tutor learning and (2) they encourage the tutors to examine their own activity. The discussion board helps tutors to interrogate the principles and practices of dialogic mediation. They both pose questions and answer them, using the board to explore and evaluate actual and potential actions (Verity, 2018). Although each post is relatively short, tutors write nearly 10,000 words per semester, including a final reflective paper.

3.1 TUTORS AS AUTONOMOUS TEACHERS

Tutors are typically inhabiting an autonomous instructional role for the first time. By design, the instructional context is “stripped down”: no lesson plans, grades or classroom management. Nevertheless, there is a pressure in tutoring that was absent during the EXTTP. Every meeting is the real thing. Tutees bring, as learners do, agency and unpredictability. Plentiful responsive mediation for the tutor exists, but it is remote in time and space, available mostly through recall and reflection. The course gives tutors freedom to explore and use all the resources available (including what they learnt in Teaching ESL) while “trying out” independent use of the pedagogical concepts. The tutors practise *reasoning* instruction through praxis-oriented reading, writing, discussion and practice, especially when challenges inevitably arise. Throughout, the TE models the pedagogical concepts through spoken and written mediation.

Teaching as Connecting

In the internship, “connecting” refers first to affect rather than content. Creating an interpersonal bond that fosters instructional and cognitive collaboration is essential to the dyadic format of tutoring. It is not irrelevant for classrooms, of course, but perhaps less salient, so *connecting* during the EXTTP focuses more on content knowledge than relationship building.

Emotions run high, especially when “book knowledge” bumps up against practical implementation. After his first session, Trevor recalls his anxiety:

When I was waiting for him...I kept honing my introduction and some requirements which I wanted him to know. I hoped that the first meeting is well-prepared. But when he came into the room and sit down besides me, I found my mind became as pale as a white paper which all the words I have written down just disappeared suddenly. (Session #1)

Deena also records notable emotions in her first session:

At the end of the Session, [Tutee Y] showed great interest in our tutoring, which made me delighted. (Session #1)

Even as a novice, Trevor knows that emotional connection, though necessary, is insufficient. He needs to learn how to “arouse” the “interest” of his tutee. *Connecting* means more than being social:

Without any....assignment that I can work with him, at the beginning, I felt kind of embarrassed because I did not know how to open our conversation....After this meeting, I found that...I need to pay more attention to arouse his interest and make him concentrate on our meeting. (Session #2)

Similarly, Deena realises that empathy is not the same as the actual instructional work of tutoring:

[she]...*just does not know how to use outline to help her to think. I don't know what I can help her on this...if she strays from the point, it can be a problem, but I don't have the solution...[making an outline] seems doesn't work for her. I feel bad, because I don't know how to help her.* (Session #2)

This pedagogical concept is first glimpsed through an affective lens, but the connections that are forged initially through personal bonds become the basis of future instructional dialogue. The tutors realise that interpersonal connection is essential but not sufficient for effective instruction. Even by Week 2, they begin to identify other tools for connection that make a tutoring session more effective (an “assignment”; a “solution”).

Teach off Your Students, not at Them

This pedagogical concept is explicitly invoked: respond to, and focus on, the writer's questions and text, not on your own opinions about good writing or prescriptive grammar, but tutors struggle to wield it productively.

They question their ability to be sufficiently responsive. Even seven weeks in, Trevor wonders what to say when he lacks topic knowledge. Sage realises that she needs more instructional versatility. Reflections serve as private speech; the tutors think aloud in their posts. These are self-directed questions, a sign of externalised thinking as they “talk through” the challenge of *teach off*:

Trevor: *Based on this meeting, I thought that I am already accustomed to give some thought-provoking ideas to stimulate tutee's thought.* (Session #7)

Trevor has proved to himself that he can teach *at*, but “react” suggests that he knows his ability to teach *off* needs improvement. He offers himself some suggestions, but also poses a challenging question about the future:

Trevor (continued): *However, I did not figure out what should I react when I have no idea about the topic. Maybe, I need to encourage tutee to express more ideas so that I could give more effective feedback according to their ideas. What if the tutee [does] not know how to conceptualize her idea too?* (Session #7)

Sage needs a new way of responding:

Sage: *How can I shift my own attitude so that when I encounter work that seems to fall flat, I can perceive the learning in progress?* (Session #10)

The discussion board fulfils its function as an arena for developing understanding especially at mid-semester, when the tutors begin to display a greater commitment to, if not full control over, the pedagogical concepts. The posts help tutors to construct an instructional “radar” for identifying student needs. While the evidence is indirect, because it is *ex post facto*, this increased sensitivity of judgment and awareness potentially leads to a stronger grasp of two

pedagogical concepts – *teaching off* the students and *connecting* with them – as well as to greater instructional versatility.

3.1.1 SOURCES OF MEDIATION

Mediation in the tutoring internship is relatively remote from the actual instructional activity. This spatial and chronological distance is designed to allow the tutors to “play” tutor, to explore the pedagogical concepts as personally meaningful tools for reasoned teaching, and to inhabit autonomously, if very briefly, the role of instructor. As noted, the internship design embodies *be direct, not directive*. In weekly meetings, the TE explicitly states the purposes and goals of the internship, and illustrates through reading assignments, discussion and role-play differences between *direct* (clear, articulated and explicit) and *directive* (prescriptive, rule-bound and didactic) strategies for tutoring.

Tutors reference these meetings in their reflective posts, building a “praxis bridge” between book learning and material activity. Deena notes her growing realisation that being able to describe something is not the same thing as mastery:

Before [this] Session...I took...time thinking about what we shared and learned on our Monday class. When I listened to my classmates' sharing, it sounded like an easy thing. And when I applied solutions into practice, it was a tough task. (Session #2)

Trevor looks forward to being a “qualified tutor” who must be able to understand both theoretical principles and instructional strategies:

The talking and sharing on Monday class give me an access to start developing insight into being a qualified tutor, and I tried to implement what I have learned from class when I met [Tutee N] today. (Session #2)

In written responses to posts, the TE refracts the pedagogical concepts through verbal responses, and continuously attempts to model *teaching as connecting* by using a tone of supportive engagement.

Teach off Your Students, Not at Them

When Trevor expresses frustration that questioning elicits silence, the TE notes that questions can imply a correct answer, while a statement, somewhat paradoxically, can feel more open-ended:

It's true that not every tutee is talkative and this can feel frustrating...maybe you can...try using “statements”...it may be easier for her to react to a statement rather than formulate a good answer to a...question...If you say...I don't see any transition between Paragraph 1 and Paragraph 2 and then wait for her to respond, she doesn't feel that she has to come up with an answer, just a comment. You can try that; it may work. (Session #5)

Be Direct, Not Directive

Deena complains that praise does not improve performance. The TE suggests that praising a specific textual feature may work:

I can see why you want to build your tutees' self-confidence. It may be that just "praising" a student is not that useful; it might be better to find a specific point in the text that you think is strong and pointing out why it is strong. That way, the praise is connected to a clear achievement on her part. (Session #7)

Teaching as Connecting

Sage comments on her tutee's strong writerly identity; the TE paraphrases a pedagogical concept to highlight its relevance:

It seems that this is who "she already is" and that is a huge part of teaching: recognizing who and where your students actually are. (Session #9)

Throughout, the mediation that the TE provides is constructed to support tutors in their attempts to recall, understand, apply and internalise these essential pedagogical concepts.

After several weeks, tutors display a more complex and nuanced understanding of the pedagogical concepts. Deena's posts note that *teaching as connecting* is clearer to her now:

...so in my view, besides helping them to improve their writing skills, my job is to help students to gain self-confidence, from other perspective. (Session #7)

Sage reflects upon on a new strategy she has developed that seems to embody *teaching off* her students rather than *at* them:

I am trying to answer differently or bounce the question back to her. Instead of a simple, "Sure, you can do that"...I've been answering with "You could do it that way; what do you think?..." and that seems to be working better. (Session #11)

Trevor identifies his success in fulfilling the goals of the tutoring programme as being successful in the *non-directive* aspects of instruction:

[My tutee] told me that the most she gain from our meeting session is the ideas of her writing. By sharing ideas with me and discussing with me, she found that she developed many thinking skills which help her to be more creative and productive than before. (Session #12)

3.1.1.1 FINAL REFLECTION PAPERS

Inhabiting two roles, student and teacher, creates cognitive and emotional tension for NTs (Johnson & Golombek, 2016). NTs navigate "book learning" and material practice, absorb new

ideas and refract them through pedagogy. Tutors reflect a more dynamic and nuanced understanding of the pedagogical concepts, as recounted in the final reflective papers, as they acknowledge and appreciate this duality.

Deena rephrases and reinterprets the concept of *teaching as connecting*:

To sum up, tutoring experience teaching really introduces me to step into the ESL teaching world. I start to know the difficulties of ESL tutoring and teaching, and also feel the joy from ESL teaching. After this tutoring experience, I realize that an ESL tutor really need to place a great emphasis on caring about his or her students, their abilities, their potential, and their feelings, etc....a tutor's attitude open enough or not directly affect tutees decision or their attitude.

Sage recounts how she has come to trust the concept of *teaching off and not at* her students; she notes that her authority as a tutor lies in strategic interaction with her tutees, not in “boundless” knowledge:

As this semester progressed, a[n] idea dawned on me: what if these students are not actually expecting perfection from me? ...I learned two things: first, I don't have to pretend in order to feel or be qualified, and second, I was much more of an expert than I realized. My...strategy this term has [been] question asking, but my rationale for it has changed. At first, I would ask questions back to cover my own ignorance...[but then] I discovered that it was actually effective at getting tutees to think critically and independently about their work...perhaps it was not critical to maintain the (perception of) authority, as evidenced by boundless knowledge, that I had always thought necessary.

And Trevor, focused on his role as strategic mediator to his students, recalls how he has developed a personal version of *being direct but not directive*:

By listening to the tutees, I can also know their concerns, needs and problems, which help me to give more specific feedback helping them to solve their problems...the strategy I use is arousing the awareness first, and then...discuss...the problems and finally reach an agreement...rather than pointing out the issues directly, I always encourage them to analyze the issues...after that, I will ask the tutees to find a way to solve the problems on their own. If they cannot find a proper way to solve the problems, I will offer them hints supporting them to find the answers. Under the other circumstance, if I do not know how to solve the problems too, I will express my opinions first, and start a discussion with my tutees. In this way, we will end up with reaching an agreement.

The reflective commentaries, which are both narrative and analytic, both self-directed musing and other-oriented requests for feedback from the TE, illuminate the non-linear and non-deterministic nature of concept development. Tutors experience stasis and undergo change; they discover useful paths to explore and garden paths that lead nowhere. The novices consolidate real – because grounded in material activity – understandings of the pedagogical concepts, while coming to recognise how much more there is to learn.

4. PRACTICUM TEACHING EXPERIENCE

The NTs take the Teaching ESL and Tutoring Internship in the first year of their programme and the Teaching Practicum, a 15-week, mentored teaching experience, during the final year of their programme. They are placed in a university-level ESL class and work closely with a mentor teacher. The TE visits each NT several times throughout the semester, video records the classes, and meets with the NT and mentor following each visit. NTs also attend a weekly practicum class, a structured mediational space where they engage in professional dialogues designed to help them to make connections between pedagogical theory and practice.

4.1 UNDERSTANDING AND ENACTMENT OF PEDAGOGICAL CONCEPTS

The practicum is a mediational space in which the pedagogical concept *Teaching as connecting* becomes salient for the NTs. At the macro level, they learn to *connect* their classroom instruction to institutional, programmatic and curricular goals and mandates. At the micro level, they are reminded of the Tutoring Internship and the importance of *connecting* with their students, both as learners and as individuals. Through responsive mediation from the TE and mentor teacher, the NTs learn to *connect* learners and instructional content by developing meaningful, substantive and engaging lessons.

NTs explore their experiences through writing weekly reflective teaching journals (RTJs), the final reflective paper, and a philosophy of language teaching. They also engage in ongoing discussions with the TE and other NTs in the weekly practicum class. The TE uses these intentionally designed spaces to model teaching as dialogic mediation with the goal of encouraging the NTs to consider the quality and character of their teaching activity for opening spaces for their students' learning. Their understanding of the pedagogical concepts becomes visible in the data.

Deena – Teaching as Connecting

In the first two weeks of her practicum, Deena recognises the importance of *connecting* with her students on a personal and academic level, yet she struggles with how to do so. Here, she reflects on her attempt to engage with students as they complete a small group assignment:

Now writing my reflection, I keep asking myself why I just left and did not give any suggestions. I regarded myself as an outsider to the class, an observer, an MA student trying to do her practicum. So, I walked to the next group to avoid MYSELF feeling embarrassed. (RTJ, Week 2)

When she “re-imagines” this moment, she recognises her anxiety and considers other actions she could take in the future to change the quality and character of the connection with her students:

If this situation happened next lesson, I would ask some more specific questions, for instance, what is the thesis statement? Do you feel clear or more confused after reading your peers' paper? (RTJ Week 2)

In addition to making connections with their students, the NTs have to develop connections with their mentors. In this next excerpt, a trusting relationship is indeed emerging as Deena notes that she is already participating in the instructional decision-making for the class:

Based on our students' previous understanding, we decided to do some changes on the lesson plan for Monday's class. (RTJ, Week 4)

In this brief but powerful excerpt, we see evidence of teaching as dialogic mediation as the mentor helps the NT to understand the importance of connecting new course content to students' prior understanding. Also of note, is Deena's reference to "changes on the lesson plan." In the following excerpt, Deena shares that those changes are motivated by her own learning experiences in the Tutoring Internship, evidence that she is making *connections* between her previous learning/tutoring experiences and her current teaching context:

Benefitting from my [Tutoring Internship] and my understanding of this assignment, I thought [a topic] "not too broad" was not clear enough for students to understand what the requirement is. (RTJ, Week 4)

Deena also realises that focusing on the students and their needs is not a new concept for her. She recalls having learnt to *teach off, not at them* in her EXTTP experience and indicates that she now has a deeper understanding of what that means:

As a novice student teacher, I might try to make a perfect lesson plan and follow it strictly. I feel I focus too much on what makes a great teacher but neglect the students' needs (totally forget what I've learned from [the Teaching ESL] class, reasoning teaching and regarding students as individuals). (RTJ, Week 4)

By the end of the semester, Deena is designing lessons on her own and can articulate what it means to make appropriate instructional choices that *connect* students with course content:

The process I went through for preparing this [lesson] helped me to illustrate that as a teacher, I have to help students to link the previous class content to the present content and prepare them for the upcoming new class content and concepts. (RTJ, Week 11)

This pedagogical concept is also a key point in her teaching philosophy:

Connection plays a crucial role in teaching as well as motivating students. Being a qualified teacher is to help students to connect knowledge to their life. By connecting learning activities with my students learning can be made more meaningful for them.

Because she understands *teaching as connecting*, Deena is able to reason her teaching by connecting with her students as individuals to determine what motivates their learning. With

that knowledge, she is better able to design meaningful lessons that help her students to connect with the content of the course.

Sage – Teaching as Connecting

For Sage, *teaching as connecting* is also a powerful concept, and she begins to explore it in the second week of her practicum. In this excerpt, she realises that connecting content with students begins with her own understanding of the material:

I'm figuring out how to explain those ideas in my own words, making connections between different concepts, and thinking about how best to communicate it all to the students. (RTJ, Week 2)

Sage also recognises early on that her own learning is mediated by how her mentor engages with her by pushing her to explore both the quality and character of her reasoning and her teaching activity. Here she writes that her mentor is:

asking good questions to help direct my ideas, filling in thoughts when I'm stuck, and being sweet with counter-suggestions when my idea might not be the best. (RTJ, Week 2)

By mid-semester, Sage has become more comfortable with how to link course content with student learning, and she begins to explore ways to open up spaces for students to engage in cultural conversations in addition to discussions about academic writing. She writes that she wants “*a deeper level of connection with students, and for them with each other*” (RTJ, Week 8), but this type of connection is challenging for her:

I tend to shy away from sensitive conversations, especially in contexts where they don't feel natural (or at least not typical), like the classroom...In the future, I want to get creative in my lesson planning and try to leave space or create space for significant conversations to happen in my classroom. (RTJ, Week 8)

Her interest in creating deeper connections emerges from her mentor's responsive mediation, and Sage continues to experiment with challenging topics in the classroom with the support of her mentor. She also has ongoing dialogues to understand the intentionality behind her mentor's instructional choices and shares this understanding:

Developing quality connections depends on creating a space in which students are central and are encouraged to take risks and grow from mistakes. This requires community; students and teacher are progressively building relationships with one another, with a measure of commitment to helping others to learn even as individuals aspire to succeed.

For Sage, the pedagogical concept *Teaching as connecting* informs not only how she reasons her teaching and designs lessons, but also how she relates with her students and helps them to relate to one another.

Trevor – Teach off Your Students, Not at Them, and Be Direct, not Directive

Very early in his practicum, Trevor becomes acutely aware of his own language use in the classroom, specifically how his instructional language shapes classroom interaction and student learning. Throughout the semester, with responsive mediation with his mentor and the TE, Trevor focuses on reframing his instructional language to *teach off rather than at his students*. He also works to use language that is *direct* rather than *directive*, but as this next excerpt illustrates, he struggles to do so:

As my mentor said, I explained too much which backfired...When I recalled what I said, I found that I circled around the point that I wanted to make but did not express it directly and clearly...For next time, if I rehearse for multiple times and pay attention to my words, I will see whether it will be better or not. (RTJ, Week 2)

His mentor provides mediation immediately following this class, and Trevor recounts that conversation in his reflective journal indicating his conscious awareness as well as his plan for the next class.

For several weeks, Trevor attempts to use various strategies to refine his instructional language, yet he continues to struggle to *be direct, not directive* and to *teach off, not at his students*. He is consciously aware of his language:

When I conducted my instruction, I was aware of some of my students were frowning or blankly staring at me. I knew there must be something unclear to them; therefore, I chose to explain my directions again in a longer version. However, I found that the repetition of my directions might not be an effective way... (RTJ, Week 5)

Towards the end of the semester, Trevor feels confident that he has finally and effectively facilitated a whole-class activity. He indicates that he made appropriate changes to his instructional language yet recognises that he is still learning:

I made some adjustments to the activity. In this way, I successfully saved a lot teacher talk...and enabled them to prepare for the group discussion. I thought my approach to simplify my instruction is a good start to raise more self-awareness of my teaching language.

Frustration with how to *be direct, not directive, and teach off, not at his students* returns in the final week of the semester:

It's like the nightmare of figuring out how to lead a group discussion flood back again. At this stage of this semester, I thought I made a great progress on leading group discussion

for in-class activities. However, when I led this peer review conference, I found that there are some other factors come into play influencing the progression of discussion... I have to learn how to strike a balance between giving them freedom to think and comment and controlling their thoughts to finally achieve my teaching goals. (RTJ, Week 13)

In the final version of his teaching philosophy, Trevor writes once again about the importance of *teaching off your students, not at them*, a concept he has been trying to enact throughout his practicum experience:

I believe that the ESL teacher and ESL learners should be in the midst of a reciprocal relationship. ESL teaching is by no means a unidirectional transmission of knowledge from the teacher to learners.

4.1.1. SOURCES OF MEDIATION

Mediation in the practicum comes from several sources, including the practicum class in which NTs can share their experiences, ongoing dialogues with the mentor teacher, the actual teaching activity in the classroom, and the interactions with the TE. The TE's responses reflect the pedagogical concepts and what it means to *teach off, not at your students*, to offer *direct* yet supportive ideas for managing a dilemma, and to help NTs to *connect* what they are learning with their own teaching bridging theory and practice.

Deena focuses on making connections with her students on both a personal and academic level. Early in the semester, she expresses concern about how to link course content with her students, and the TE reassures her:

Yes – this is a very natural way for us to start as new teachers. In many ways, we are still learning the content, and until we know that well, it's hard to think beyond that to focus on our students. That comes with time and awareness – I'd say you are developing the awareness – an important first step! (RTJ, Week 4)

Deena also wants to write effective lesson plans with “perfect” transitions between each of the activities. She knows that *making connections* within a lesson plan is important for lesson coherence and student learning, but she is not yet sure how to do that. The TE provides support and encouragement along with a specific strategy:

That's a lot to expect of yourself! Do your best to create cohesiveness in your lesson and share your reasons for why you are teaching certain content and having them complete activities. The idea is to help them make sense of what they are doing. (RTJ, Week 5)

Like Deena, Sage writes frequently about *teaching as connecting*, and as noted earlier, Sage's mentor consistently pushes her to articulate her reasoning. The TE encourages Sage to be even more cognisant of the dialogic mediation her mentor provides:

Very insightful, Sage...[your mentor] encourages you to verbalize your thinking and she responds to your ideas with questions, thoughts that push you to think more completely. These are the moments in which she is mediating your thinking/learning by helping you begin to internalize the new content. Because you then teach it and reflect on the teaching afterward with [your mentor] and in your RTJs, there is a lot of learning happening! (RTJ, Week 2)

Connecting with students on a deeper level is also a goal for Sage, and she closely observes her mentor's approach for doing so. The TE offers direct support to encourage Sage to continue to move towards her goal:

Sage first and foremost, find the time to talk with [your mentor] and raise your questions/share your observations to understand her motivation for opening up this space for cultural dialogue...Trust yourself with your instructional decisions. What you have written here shows me that you have a depth of understanding for your students as well as compassion for their experiences. (RTJ, Week 8)

While Sage and Deena focus on *making connections*, Trevor grapples with *teaching off his students, not at them*. In a journal entry at the beginning of the semester, he uses negative language to describe how he handled a class activity, and the TE responds by being direct, yet supportive and encouraging:

You are reasoning as a teacher and paying close attention to how your students are 'taking up' the content and how you are designing activities. But let's try to use more positive [language, not] 'defect' or 'noticeable shortcomings,' okay? How about awareness of self and others? Or maybe recognizing how to manage dilemmas? (RTJ, Week 2)

Here the TE reminds Trevor that he is a learner of teaching and that enacting pedagogical concepts takes time.

In the last part of the semester, Trevor tries to provide clear activity instructions but realises that he fell a bit short. The TE responds by complimenting Trevor's awareness of his students, explains why the students' may have struggled with the activity, and what the students themselves did to "save" it:

Again, I commend you for your 'noticing' of their uptake of the activity and for wanting to 'redirect' it. It's tough to write as a group. So, the students actually were quite resourceful by assigning parts to each one, writing their part, and trying to synthesize them together. (RTJ, Week 10)

She then pushes him to reflect on ways to redesign the activity and provides support by suggesting that he share this experience in the practicum class:

How else might you design this type of activity so that all students can share in the writing process? Why don't you raise this issue in our class this week, and we'll brainstorm approaches? (RTJ, Week 10)

These examples of responsive mediation by the TE illustrate that for each NT, the practicum experience is unique. Each of their stories illustrates the individual nature of learning-to-teach and provides a window into how NTs move from reasoning their teaching practice to enacting it with varying degrees of self-control in the classroom. They also indicate the importance of a teaching as dialogic mediation perspective and the need for intentionally designed mediational spaces for facilitating teacher learning.

5. CONCLUSION

Our analysis highlights the multi-layered role of pedagogical concepts in mediating NTs' conceptual development. The pedagogical concepts help NTs to conceptualise, articulate and restructure their understanding and their practice, while serving as useful touchstones throughout the two-year programme. The pedagogical concepts *Teach off your students, not at them*, *Be direct, not directive*, and *Teaching as connecting* initially function as semiotic devices that NTs meet and engage with as they carry out the activities of planning, teaching and reflecting. Through exposure in multiple structured mediational spaces these pedagogical concepts come to function as internalised psychological tools that help NTs to regulate understanding and enactment of their roles as L2 instructors. Also critical to their developmental trajectory is the quality and character of the responsive mediation that emerges from within the praxis-oriented LTE pedagogy. As we have illustrated here, responsive mediation requires TEs to acknowledge NTs "where they are" and to offer mediation that is dynamic, contingent and aimed at NTs' emerging capabilities (ZPD). It also demands that TEs create opportunities for guided reflection on the activities of teaching and explicitly focus on the reasoning processes of both being and becoming a language teacher. Principled examination of our own LTE pedagogy has enabled us to capture the quality and character of our interactions with NTs, the pedagogical concepts we ask them to engage with, and the mediational role these play in enabling them to embrace a teaching as dialogic mediation instructional stance.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, R. (2008). *Essays on pedagogy*. London: Routledge.
- Barnes, D. (1976). *From communication to curriculum*. Middlesex: Penguin.
- Johnson, K. E. (2009). *Second language teacher education: A sociocultural perspective*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Johnson, K. E. (2015). Reclaiming the relevance of L2 teacher education. *The Modern Language Journal*, 99(3), 515–528.

- Johnson, K. E., & Golombek, P. R. (2016). *Mindful L2 teacher education: A sociocultural perspective on cultivating teachers' professional development*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Leont'ev, A. N. (1981). The problem of activity in psychology. In J. Wertsch (Ed.), (1990), *The concept of activity in Soviet psychology* (pp. 37–71). Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Mercer, N. (2000). *Words & minds: How we use language to think together*. London: Routledge.
- Rost, M. (2006). *WorldView: Generating student motivation*. London: Pearson Longman Education.
- Verity, D. P. (2018). Coming around: Tutors, orientation, and prolepsis. *Journal of Academic Writing*, 8(2), 114–123.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1935/1994). The development of academic concepts in school aged children. In R. van der Veer & J. Valsiner, (Eds.), (1994), *The Vygotsky reader* (pp. 355–370). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1981). The genesis of higher mental functions. In J. V. Wertsch (Ed.), (1990), *The concept of activity in Soviet psychology* (pp. 144–188). Armonk, NY: Sharpe.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Karen E. Johnson is Kirby Professor in Language Learning and Applied Linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University, USA. Her research focuses on teacher learning in second language teacher education, sociocultural theory and the dynamics of communication in second language classrooms. Her most recent book is *Mindful L2 Teacher Education: A Sociocultural Perspective on Cultivating Teachers' Professional Development* (with P. Golombek, Routledge, 2016). On the MA TESL and the PhD in Applied Linguistics programmes, she teaches courses in Teaching English as a Second Language, Teaching L2 Writing, Communication in Second Language Classrooms, and Theory and Research in Language Teacher Education.

Deryn P. Verity is Director of ESL/EAP Programs and Teaching Professor in Applied Linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University, USA. She currently directs a first-year ESL academic writing programme, teaches in the MA TESL Program, and develops online courses in applied linguistics. Her research interests are in tutor and teacher development, academic communication, online pedagogy and SCT. She has taught English and worked in teacher education programmes in several different countries, including Japan, Thailand, Poland, Slovenia and Serbia.

Sharon S. Childs is Associate Teaching Professor in the Department of Applied Linguistics at The Pennsylvania State University, USA. She oversees the department's MA TESL Program and teaches a variety of L2 pedagogy-related courses. Her research interests focus on language teacher professional development, the knowledge-base of language teacher education, and language teacher cognition from a sociocultural perspective.

