Language Teaching as Sociocultural Activity: Rethinking Language Teacher Practice

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Theoretical in orientation, the focus of this article is the study of language teachers and teaching and builds on a body of research that has become increasingly influential since the mid-1990s. S. Borg’s (2006) recent review of the field identifies a number of pathways with promise for new areas of research, but it also highlights the conceptual challenges that continue to exist in terms of moving the field forward. This article aims to engage with these themes and concerns by considering the potential of Vygotskian (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987) sociocultural theory as the basis for a conceptual framework to research language teacher cognition. The conceptual challenges addressed include the need for a theoretical orientation that recognizes the social, practical, and contextual dimension of cognition; an understanding of the teacher as a historical, sociological agent within larger (and political) contexts for practice; an awareness of the contradictions and tensions that arise within cognition as thinking and doing is mediated by and played out within the contexts that it exists; and an analytic framework commensurate with current empirical and methodological developments in the field.

ALTHOUGH THE KNOWLEDGE BASE OF second language teacher education has been historically dependent on studies of second language acquisition (SLA)—and their focus on the relationship among language, learners, and learning (Yates & Muchisky, 2003)—the application of that knowledge to the practical concerns of classroom teachers has been a partnership not without problems (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Indeed, the dominance of behaviorist and cognitive paradigms within SLA for the better part of its history led to what Breen (1985) first recognized as a “neglect [. . . of] the social reality of language learning as it is experienced and created by teachers and learners” (p. 141, emphasis in original). For the practice of language teaching itself, the result has been a steady but increasingly problematic reliance on methodological “blueprints” for instruction that typically conceive of teaching as little more than the sum of its parts—collections and patterns of behaviors and techniques that, if followed, were thought to establish the requisite conditions for “learning” to then occur (Adamson, 2004; Freeman, 1994).

Our growing understanding of the social and cultural dimension of language and language acquisition over the last 10–15 years, however, has challenged many of the cognitive and behaviorist assumptions that were once central to mainstream SLA (Firth & Wagner, 2007). In particular, an increased awareness of the situated and socially distributed nature of learning has highlighted the need to better understand the complexities of the contexts within which learning takes place, with a related focus on teachers and, increasingly, how teachers have come to understand their professional roles within those contexts and the teaching–learning relationship more broadly (see Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Edge & Richards, 1993;
and Richards & Lockhart, 1994, for examples of the practitioner-oriented research that characterized much of the early work in this area). As a result, the last decade has seen a growth in research on, about, and for language teachers and their work, with an especially strong focus on the topic of teacher cognition in particular: “what language teachers think, know, believe, and do” (S. Borg, 2003, p. 81).

Theoretical in orientation, this article aims to complement the existing body of empirical research that has been established on language teachers and teaching, by offering a conceptual framework that engages with a number of themes, issues, and concerns raised in S. Borg’s (2006) recent review. In an attempt “to impose some structure” on a domain that is still comparatively young, S. Borg’s synthesis of the current state of the art provides a programmatic agenda for future research but also draws attention to a number of conceptual issues and challenges that remain for moving forward (see p. 280).

This article is organized into three main parts. The first part considers S. Borg’s (2006) recent review of the field, with a focus on the challenges his agenda presents for future developments in this area at a conceptual level. In the second part, I outline a framework for researching teacher cognition from the perspective of Vygotskian sociocultural theory (SCT; Vygotsky, 1978, 1987) to complement the existing empirical knowledge base on language teachers and teaching and to address those concerns raised by S. Borg for advancing the current state of the art. Finally, in the third part, I present a short illustrative example of the empirical application of the framework using data on teacher practice.

A RESEARCH AGENDA FOR LANGUAGE TEACHER COGNITION

While acknowledging the important contribution previous studies have made to formative research on language teacher cognition, S. Borg’s (2006) recent book-length treatment of the subject concludes that we have now reached a point where the current multiplicity of frameworks presents a hindrance to moving forward (p. 92). In a comprehensive synthesis of the literature on language teacher cognition to date, Borg highlighted the following issues as the basis for a future research agenda:

- the nature of language teacher cognition;
- the scope of language teacher research;
- the relationship between language teachers’ cognitions and classroom practices;
- the impact of context on language teachers’ cognitions and practices;
- the processes of pre-service language teacher learning;
- the nature of expertise in language teaching;
- the relationship between cognitive change and behavioral change in language teachers;
- the methodological issues in the study of language teacher cognition.

In the following discussion, I briefly summarize the key issues that S. Borg (2006) highlighted in relation to each of these points, focusing on (a) the nature and scope of research on language teacher cognition and the relationship between teacher cognition, practice, and context; (b) the impact of personal and professional learning and experience; and (c) methodology. I then conclude by considering what conceptual challenges these issues present with respect to future studies of language teachers and teaching.

The Nature and Scope of Research on Language Teacher Cognition and the Relationship Between Cognition, Practice, and Context

Within contemporary studies of language teachers and teaching, cognition is now generally understood as being practical in orientation and “personally defined, often tacit, systematic and dynamic” (S. Borg, 2006, pp. 271–272). Still, despite consensus on the general nature of teacher cognition in broader terms, the studies have resulted in considerable terminological differences in how concepts have been defined and used across the field. Whereas some studies have used different terms to refer to essentially the same concepts, others have used similar (and sometimes even the same) terminology but within entirely different conceptual frameworks (S. Borg, 2006). Of the various terms having a low degree of conceptual consistency across the field, many would seem to be those fundamental to establishing a common foundation for the domain as a whole: “cognition, knowledge [. . .], beliefs, attitudes, conceptions, theories, assumptions, principles, thinking and decision-making” (p. 272, emphasis in original).

In contrast to early studies of teacher cognition that grew out of psychocognitivist research in the mid-1970s, Clark (1986/2003) was one of the first to argue that the field could no longer be reasonably premised on cognition as a purely mental construct and independent of the “practical world of the classroom” (p. 213). Likening
teacher cognition to a “sense-making” process tied to sites for teacher practice, there is already some recognition in Clark’s conception of cognition that teacher thinking is influenced by both practice and context. Although an awareness of the impact of context upon practice is not new within research on language teaching (S. Borg, 1998; Johnson, 1996; Spada & Massey, 1992), it has only been in the last 3–5 years that the field has begun to assert a need to more fully understand the nature of the relationship between practice and context (see S. Borg, 2003; Freeman, 2004; Johnson, 2006; and also Crookes, 1997, as a notable contribution of early work in this area).

This renewed interest in context has emerged from the dissonance often noted between what teachers think and what teachers do. Although the psychocognitive paradigm assumed that what teachers thought translated directly into behavior (i.e., a causal relationship between internal mental processes with external physical practices), the expanded focus on thinking in relation to practice in the 1980s and 1990s revealed that what teachers know, think, and even believe can contradict their practice in classrooms. Early studies focusing on these tensions between thinking and doing suggest that they provide a potentially powerful and positive source of teacher learning (Freeman, 1992, 1993), with more recent work confirming that a “recognition of contradictions in the teaching context” is a “driving force” in teachers’ professional development (Golombek & Johnson, 2004, pp. 323–324).

Methodological Implications for the Study of Teacher Cognition

Perhaps the most significant methodological shift within studies of teacher cognition since the 1970s has been in terms of “what counts as evidence” (S. Borg, 2006, p. 278). With changes in how we have come to understand the nature of cognition itself (i.e., from a purely mental construct, to a more dynamic conceptualization based on the interaction between thinking and practice), there has been a corresponding shift in attempts to document and analyze cognition as an object of research. This is perhaps most evident in the transition from research designs that once assumed a clear separation between thought and behavior (e.g., the reliance on self-report data about what teachers think or the use of observation records of what teachers do) to approaches incorporating a focus on both. Recent work has also made a convincing case that not only should both sets of data be included in any one study but that they be strategically juxtaposed in a way that practice-based data (e.g., classroom observation notes) are informed by thinking-based data (e.g., stimulated recall or interviews)—in other words, having data on practice grounded in the “sense making of teachers” themselves (Breen, Hird, Milton, Oliver, & Thwaite, 2001; Hird, 2003; Hird, Thwaite, Breen, Milton, & Oliver, 2000).

However, beyond the immediate question of “what counts” as data, there has been less focus on the subsequent issue of analysis. S. Borg (2006) noted that the bulk of empirical studies to date have relied on inductive analytical approaches, whereby categories and codes for interpreting and discussing data are grounded within the specifics of each study, rather than a priori categories common to the field more broadly. Given the
absence of any shared or established conceptual framework for theorizing and understanding the nature of teacher cognition, this reliance on inductive approaches is not surprising. Individual studies have had to formulate their own analytical framework using the available data to make sense of teacher cognition as it presents itself within each particular case. The result, however, is that findings have little to offer other studies across the field at a broader theoretical or conceptual level, as each operates on its own terms and within its own framework.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK TO SUPPORT RESEARCH ON LANGUAGE TEACHER COGNITION

The concerns previously discussed lead me to the focus of the present article: The potential of a Vygotskian perspective as the basis for a conceptual framework to understand the relationship among thinking, practice, and context that has been identified in the existing literature. Although the field has made significant headway in the last 30 years, and especially the last 10–15 years, on the subject of language teacher cognition more specifically, what continues to remain absent is a sense of an “overall unifying framework” (S. Borg, 2006, p. 280) that brings together the disparate threads of research that comprise and define the current state of the art. As S. Borg (2006) concluded, a broader conceptual framework to organize our current understanding of what teachers think, know, and do is an imperative for moving the field forward:

[A unifying framework] militates against the accumulation of isolated studies conducted without sufficient awareness of how these relate to existing work; it reminds researchers of key dimensions in the study of language teacher cognition; and it highlights key themes, gaps and conceptual relationships and promotes more focused attention to these. (p. 284)

Although S. Borg’s (2006) agenda is useful for gaining a sense of the existing scope and nature of the field, and especially for identifying productive pathways for new areas of research, it is not, in itself, a conceptual framework to support those developments. Before discussing what a Vygotskian perspective might offer such a framework, it is necessary to distill some of the challenges that a conceptual reframing of cognition would need to address in relation to existing concerns.

First, and most significantly, it is now clear there is a need for a more expansive psychological theory of cognition that recognizes the influence of the social in relation to thought—that is, a theory of cognition that extends its focus to include mental processes together with teachers’ practice, and, increasingly, the contexts within which the interaction between thinking and practice takes place. This contrasts with earlier mentalist theories of cognition upon which the field was established. Based on assumptions about the separateness of thought and behavior, these gradually lost relevance as empirical developments revealed them to be untenable and problematic (e.g., Clark, 1986/2003). However, although the empirical knowledge base of teacher cognition has since moved on to develop in increasingly complex and sophisticated ways (e.g., Hird and his colleagues’, 2000, work on the strategic juxtapositioning of data to gain new insights into teachers’ thinking and practice), this has not been paralleled with a theory or related conceptual framework to make sense of those empirical findings across the field as a whole, with a reliance instead on inductive analytical approaches based on data specific to each study.

On a related point, a social psychological understanding of cognition raises the further issue of recognizing the teacher subject as a social agent rather than a mere mental processing entity that acts on or reacts to stimuli in the teaching environment. Despite contemporary work that now suggests cognition lies in the interaction between the thinking and doing, a legacy of the mentalist paradigm has been the neglect of understanding power and agency within that relationship. Although past interpretations might attribute external forces on teachers’ thinking and doing as something “beyond their control” (S. Borg, 2006, p. 40), assumptions concerning the social positioning and agency of teachers within their contexts for practice need to be more fully addressed as we consider the implications of a social dimension within teacher cognition.

A second consideration is that the framework must be able to recognize and account for cognition as being neither static nor fixed, but malleable and subject to change and further development across time and experience. A clear theme to emerge from the existing literature is the importance of teachers’ prior background in relation to how they think and behave in the present. The framework must therefore not only focus on the current nature of teachers’ thinking and practice but further incorporate a focus of how the past continues to be instrumental in relation to sense-making processes that take place in the here and now.
Third, the framework must accommodate the tensions and contradictions that arise within cognition. The research focusing on these dissonances holds particular promise for the field of language teacher learning, education, and development. However, although the empirical evidence has revealed that a dissonance does often exist between what teachers think and do, it is important to further understand why those tensions have emerged and how they might be resolved to reconcile the ideal (i.e., knowledge of language teaching) with the actual (i.e., practice).

Finally, and related to each of the three points discussed, the conceptual framework should be commensurate with current empirical and methodological innovations in the field; that is, it should complement what is becoming an increasingly qualitative approach to research. While this is not to dismiss the valuable contribution of quantitative methods in understanding teachers and their work, it is important to recognize the substantive gains made from the strategic juxtaposition of qualitatively oriented data on teachers’ thinking (e.g., interviews, reflective writing, and so on) in relation to practice (e.g., observations, stimulated recalls, teaching artifacts, and so on).

In light of these considerations, the next subsection focuses on the potential of Vygotskian sociocultural theory, and its cognate theory of activity, as the basis for a framework that engages with these concerns.

A Sociocultural Reframing of Cognition: Thinking, Doing, and Context

Although the term “sociocultural” has gained significant currency within the field of second language education in the last 10–15 years (Firth & Wagner, 2007), the label continues to be a less than “homogeneous” point of reference across the domain as a whole (Lantolf & Thorne, 2007; van Lier, 2004, p. 13; Zuengler & Miller, 2006). In this article, I use the term to refer to Vygotsky’s (1978, 1987) theory on the social and cultural nature of human development, which has been especially influential in contemporary sociocultural perspectives on SLA (Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), communication (especially those mediated by Information and Communication Technologies [Belz & Thorne, 2006]), and, most recently, assessment (Lantolf & Poehner, 2007; Poehner, 2007).

Given Vygotsky’s present influence on the field of language education, I do not intend to rehearse the more general aspects of the theory here, but to concentrate on two of its key constructs—the Vygotskian principle of genetic analysis and the notion of mediated activity—as the basis for reconceptualizing language teacher cognition from the perspective of “sociocultural activity”—that is, a framework that fuses the dialectic between thinking and doing with the socially and culturally constructed contexts in which teachers—as thinking, historical, social, and culturally constituted subjects—find themselves engaged through the “activity” of teaching language. Although there are already some key studies on teachers and teaching that have drawn on sociocultural theory (e.g., Freeman, 2004; Freeman & Johnson, 2005; Golombeck & Johnson, 2004; Johnson, 2006), it remains a comparatively nascent area within the field of language teacher cognition research as a whole, with no extensive discussion to date on how the theory might relate to broader conceptual concerns of the field as a body of research more generally.

A Genetic Framework for Analysis

In Vygotsky’s (1981) core thesis that “all higher mental functions are internalized social relationships” (p. 164), he rejected the then dominant descriptive–analytic orientation to psychology at the time, in favor of a genotypic approach focusing on the origins of the phenomenon in question. It is this meaning of genetic that Vygotsky appropriates within his own theory of human development and advances as the basis for an “explanatory” (cf. “descriptive”) analytic framework for understanding the human mind and behavior. As he put it, “behavior can only be understood as the history of behavior” (Blonsky). This is the cardinal principle of the whole method” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 70; see also Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65).

Vygotsky (see Scribner, 1985; Vygotsky & Luria, 1993) proposed that human development spanned four different but interrelated domains: The phylogenetic, cultural–historic, ontogenetic, and microgenetic. In Figure 1, Cole and Engeström (1993) represented this concept of genetic development as a four-tiered analytic framework in relation to physical time. The ellipse, representing the focal point of analysis, highlights the nested and interrelated nature of all four domains at any one point in time.

In broad strokes, the phylogenetic domain concerns the development of humankind as a natural species (i.e., physical evolution), the cultural–historic focuses on development in terms of the broader “external” world within which humans exist (i.e., the social, cultural, and historic basis for development), and ontogenesis shifts the focus to development of the individual subject across the
human life span. This, itself, is the culmination of microgenetic development—the momentary instances of concrete, practical activity that subjects engage in with the world around them. It is the internalization of these external interactions that leads to the development of higher psychological functions within the ontogenetic subject.

In terms of what this means for researching teacher cognition, it demands an explanatory orientation to research that goes beyond a focus on descriptive accounts of how things exist in the present, to, instead, attempting to understand why that present has come to exist in the way that it has. Early studies of language teacher cognition typically relied upon research designs reflecting a predominantly descriptive–analytic orientation, with a focus on the more immediate aspects of how teachers think and behave: Whether in relation to what teachers are observed to be doing (e.g., in classroom practice), report to be thinking (e.g., through reflective writing or interviews), or through a combined focus on both (e.g., stimulated recalls). A genetic–analytical orientation, by way of contrast, requires historicity to be central in the overall design of the methodological and analytical framework; that is, any instance of observable activity that takes place in the present (i.e., teachers’ classroom practice) is analyzed not only on the basis of what the teacher thinks (i.e., in the here and now) but also the genesis that underpins that thought/practice relationship.

Contemporary methodological developments have begun to attend to these imperatives, such as Hayes’s (2005) focus on teachers’ life narratives that accentuates historicity within the study of language teacher cognition, whereas others attempt to relate observable instances of classroom practice with how teachers think (e.g., Breen et al., 2001; Hird et al., 2000). Indeed, contributions such as S. Borg’s (1998) qualitative study on teacher cognition in grammar teaching and Johnson and Golombek’s (2002) collection of narratives from practitioners engaged in their own personal reflections on language teaching exemplify the types of methodological approaches now recognized as crucial for better understanding teachers and teaching—namely, a focus on current practices in relation to the personal histories that continue to influence how teachers think and act in the ways that they do. As Johnson and Golombek (2002) emphasized in their review of the field, the move toward an understanding of teacher knowledge as “highly interpretive, socially negotiated, and continually restructured” (pp. 1–2) sits “parallel” with a Vygotskian view of cognition. The perspective outlined in this article therefore offers a framework that is responsive to contemporary developments in this area, by bringing together what are recognized as related, but have otherwise tended to remain separate, threads of inquiry on historicity, context, and practice into a single, unified framework for analysis.

At this point, however, it also necessary to consider the related concept of mediation and the implications it raises for identifying an appropriate unit of analysis within this broader framework. Although mediation has become a familiar concept within Vygotskian studies of second language learning, my interest in the concept here is somewhat different. With a greater focus on the
role of mediation within social and cultural practices, I draw on the field of activity theory and the potential it presents for conceptualizing the “thinking and doing teacher subject” within socially, culturally, and historically constituted systems of “activity”—the sites within which thinking, doing, and context converge.

**Activity a Sociocultural Unit of Analysis for Cognition**

Within SCT, mediation refers to the idea that humans rely upon tools and other social and cultural artifacts to regulate the world around them. Whereas the tool remained Vygotsky’s primary unit of analysis in his own work, his contemporaries expanded the concept by shifting the emphasis away from the tool itself, to the purpose for which the tool was used (Leontiev, 1981).

Leontiev’s (1981) concept of activity, in keeping with Vygotsky’s principle of genetic analysis more generally, views individual activity—the relationship between the subject and object, as well as the tools which mediate that relationship—as only having meaning when understood in relation to its broader social context: “The human individual’s activity is a system of social relations. It does not exist without those social relations” (pp. 46–47, emphasis added). In the case of “language teaching,” for example, what language teachers do (and think) cannot be described, analyzed, and understood as something that “exists” in its own right. Instead, the activity of teaching and the thought and practices associated with it are defined (mediated and even constructed) in relation to the context within which that activity exists: Its community, the rules that regulate that activity within that community, and the distribution of roles and responsibilities within that community (i.e., the division of labor). As illustrated in Figure 2, Engeström (1987) conceptualized this set of social and cultural relations as a collective unit in the form of an “activity system” (p. 41).

A caveat concerning the system as a unit of analysis, however, is its potential misuse as a descriptive–analytic heuristic, in which analyses of concrete activity are simply dissected into its immediately apparent constituent parts (Chaiklin, 2004). It needs to be recognized that each instance of concrete activity that is observable in the present (e.g., what a teacher does in day-to-day classroom practice) takes place at the microgenetic level and thus only comprises one aspect of the analysis from the whole. Each constituent node within any instance of microgenetic activity—its rules, community, division of labor, subject, object, and tools—brings into that current system histories of their own. Again, using language teaching as an example, the observable activity of a teacher engaged in classroom practice occurs not simply on the basis of the activity system apparent in that immediate setting, but it is also being simultaneously shaped by the background, experience, and history of the (ontogenetic) teacher–subject within that activity system, together with the broader (cultural–historic) expectations of language teachers and teaching that are being reflected in the rules, community, rights and responsibilities, and even the object that has been brought to, and distributed through, the system as a whole. As Roth (2007) explained, activity as a unit of analysis is “an irreducible theoretical entity that cannot be broken down into elements” (p. 143, emphasis in original). The system is always more than the sum of its parts, with the “concrete” activity system only being fully understood as a unit of analysis when further considered in relation to the broader social, cultural, and historic genetic framework from which it has emerged and continues to be part (see Cole & Engeström, 1993).
This relationship between the individual system and the broader context brings into further focus the issue of contradictions and tensions as an inherent, and even necessary, aspect of activity (Engeström, 1987, 1993). As noted earlier, the dissonance between what teachers think and do has become a matter of particular interest within studies of language teacher cognition. Being constituted from elements that already exist within a wider social, cultural, and historical context, any one “individual” system is borne from, and continues to operate alongside with, a complex network of multiple systems within that broader domain. As systems continually draw on, overlap with, and intersect one another, they are rendered unstable, dynamic, and subject to further change with, and intersect one another, they are rendered unstable, dynamic, and subject to further change.

Engeström (1987) identified four potential contradictions within activity. Primary or inner contradictions are those contained within the components of the activity themselves (e.g., within the subject, or tool), whereas secondary contradictions arise between components within the system (e.g., rules that prevent certain tools being used, or a division of labor, which means the subject cannot enforce rules). Tertiary contradictions occur between activity systems when object/outcomes conflict between systems (e.g., the outcome of one activity system attempting to change that of another). Quaternary contradictions are those that emerge from interactions and overlaps between neighboring systems (e.g., the production of new tools within one activity system that affect those of the central activity system under investigation). The representation of activity offered by Engeström articulates these points of tension within and between systems to understand how and why contradictions arise and what possibilities might exist to alleviate or remove them (Roth, 2004).

**Education Policy, Teacher Agency, and Teaching as a Socioculturally Constructed Activity**

The final issue I wish to raise here concerns the subject of policy. Although policy has not yet received much attention in either the field of language teacher cognition or SCT, I believe it will become increasingly necessary to account for the political dimension of how and what language teachers think and do as research on language teachers and teaching expands to include a greater awareness of context. Drawing on insights from the field of critical policy sociology, I have discussed the implications of a sociocultural perspective in analyzing language policy in more detail elsewhere (Cross, 2009). However, in relation to language teacher cognition, it will suffice to note just some of those key points here—in particular, the role and significance of policy within the cultural–historic domain of education and the implications this carries for understanding the ontogenetic subject, and their microgenetic space for activity as classroom teachers.

Put simply, policies represent a key sociocultural “tool” that mediate the genesis of teacher activity within the cultural–historic domain (i.e., societal views on the value, nature, and expectations of education, schooling, and languages). Gale’s (1999) notion of “policy as ideology,” which extends Ball’s (1994) notion of “policy as text” and “discourse,” clarifies this idea of policy as an artifact of wider social and cultural practices further. While acknowledging that policies are represented in certain ways as text, and interpreted in certain ways as practice, Gale’s point is that “policies are ‘ideological and political artifacts which have been constructed within a particular historical and political context’ (Burton & Weiner, 1990, p. 205)” (p. 399). Indeed, as Ball (1990) explained elsewhere, policies represent attempts to influence:

The way things could or should be—which rest upon, derive from, statements about the world—about the way things are. They are intended to bring about idealised solutions to diagnosed problems. Policies embody claims to speak with authority, they legitimate and initiate practices in the world, and they privilege certain visions and interests. (p. 22)

This is not to suggest that policy therefore dictates the nature of individual teachers’ practice, but, reflecting Vygotsky’s (1981, 1987) view on the dialectic relationship between tools and social activity, policy-as-sociocultural-tool is perhaps better understood as having “both possibilities and constraints, contradictions and spaces. The reality of policy in practice depends upon the compromises and accommodations to these in particular settings” (Bowe, Ball, & Gold, 1992, p. 15, emphasis added). Indeed, the ontogenetic subject acts as a further mediatory influence in the relationship between microgenetic activity and the broader cultural–historic context, by bringing into the microgenetic domain their own experiences, background, and previous knowledge as the basis from...
which to accept, resist, and renegotiate the nature of their engagement with that system. To take Apple’s (2004, p. 32) argument that “all texts are ‘leaky’ documents [. . .] subject to ‘recontextualization’ at every stage of the process,” the “reading” of policy is therefore ultimately contingent upon the way the subject of any one activity makes sense of that policy within their own particular social, cultural, and historic domain of practice. In this sense, teacher agency exists in the dialectic between broader social structures (that created through cultural–historic tools [i.e., policy]) and the subject (i.e., the ontogenetic “person,” in terms of their own personal background, values, and understandings), but, and importantly, with “neither subject (human agent) nor object (‘society,’ or social institutions) . . . having primacy [since] each is constituted in and through recurrent practices [i.e., activity]” (Giddens, 1982, p. 8, emphasis in original).

In the following section of this article, I outline an example of how the theoretical and conceptual issues discussed so far might be realized in an empirical analysis of language teaching. Because of space, the data, analysis, and interpretation that appear here have been heavily truncated and kept necessarily brief. However, I believe it serves as a basic working example of how the conceptual ideas set out thus far might be applied to matters of empirical concern, and the type of issues and insights the framework can begin to identify within the data.

### ANALYZING LANGUAGE TEACHING AS A SOCIOCULTURALLY CONSTRUCTED ACTIVITY: AN EXAMPLE

The following empirical analysis focuses on Dan, a nonnative teacher of Japanese as a foreign language in the middle years of school (i.e., Grades 7–10). The data for this example have been drawn from a larger study of language teaching in Victoria, Australia (Cross, 2006) and are set out below using the genetic–analytic domains described earlier:

- **a) Cultural–historic:** A focus on the broader policy context within which Dan’s activity is situated as a teacher of Japanese in the middle years;
- **b) Ontogenetic:** A discussion of what Dan brings as the subject (i.e., background, experience, and personal history) to the system; and,
- **c) Microgenetic:** Dan’s engagement with his immediate sociocultural context in relation to instances of actual, concrete activity.

The cultural–historic data were initially generated through a survey of policy on the teaching of Japanese in Victorian schools. As the study progressed and the focus shifted to the ontogenetic and microgenetic domains of analysis, it became apparent that other cultural–historic influences were also significant in shaping the nature of Dan’s engagement with his immediate context for activity from his perspective. Through a reiterative process focusing on the dialectic between domains, the cultural–historic focus was expanded to also include further policy data on the middle years in Victorian schools.

The ontogenetic data were generated through three audio-recorded sessions with Dan just after he had finished teaching a Japanese lesson in the middle years. Each session lasted an average of 90 minutes and consisted of two parts: A stimulated recall procedure and an open-ended interview. The interview component focused on incidents that arose from the stimulated recall, when Dan was invited to speak about himself, his background, and any other prior knowledge, education, or experiences that he felt were influential in terms of how he had behaved in response to any incidences that had occurred during the lesson. Similarly, at the end of each session, Dan was also asked to tell me anything else about himself based on the overall nature of the discussion up to that point if he felt it was useful for further understanding how he now sees himself as a Japanese language teacher in his particular context for practice.

The stimulated-recall procedure was also used to generate the majority of the microgenetic data, which were transcribed, coded, and categorized using the conceptual categories identified through Engeström’s (1987) model of activity as a system. These stimulated-recall data, as opposed to my own observation records of Dan’s lesson, were essential for the microgenetic analysis, as they represented Dan’s perspective of the system within which he was positioned (i.e., as the subject) and his account of how he interpreted and made sense of it.

#### Cultural–Historic Analysis

When Dan was involved in this study (2005), the ostensible goal of Japanese in schools at the time—to have students learn “to communicate in the target language” (Victorian Board of Studies, 2000, p. 5, emphasis added)—seemed to lack any genuine relevance in the broader social, cultural, political, and educational context for Australian schooling. Instead, a growing emphasis on
a “back-to-basics” approach, with a focus on literacy, numeracy, and thinking across the curriculum as a whole, had eroded the place Japanese once had as a subject with inherent value in its own right when first introduced into the core curriculum in the early 1990s.

Although a number of initiatives during the early 1990s secured dedicated support from both state and federal governments for the teaching of Japanese in Australian schools, the same developments were also the cause of the subject’s eventual demise. As one of the key languages introduced under the socially motivated National Policy on Languages (Lo Bianco, 1987) framework in the late 1980s, Japanese continued to enjoy further financial and government support with the shift to the more economically driven Australia’s Language initiative in 1991 (Commonwealth Department of Employment, Education & Training, 1991). However, the change was censured by some as so utilitarian and narrow in focus that it became void of any balanced social and cultural argument to sustain a long-term vision for languages in the core Australian curriculum (Liddicoat, 1996).

With the change in government that followed the federal election in 1996, curriculum initiatives began to reflect a growing shift toward what Lo Bianco (2004) described as focus on “the primacy of English” (p. 25). Mueller’s (2003) argument for the place of Languages Other Than English (LOTE) within the core curriculum, for example, neglects any reference to the conventional goals of language teaching (i.e., “communicative competence”) and instead argues for the contribution LOTE makes to the development of thinking and learning skills more generally (i.e., “sound study habits and a better understanding of how to learn” [para. 10]), and its “benefit for student literacy in the first language” (para. 10). Indeed, such arguments reflect the general trend that has been observed by commentators on language education in Australia in recent years—that despite curriculum rhetoric on the need to teach languages with communicative intent, the reality is that LOTE is now often defended within schools on the grounds that it offers “a useful support for other curriculum areas, most recently, literacy in English” (Liddicoat, 2002, p. 30).

In addition to these policy and social shifts on the value of language education in Australian schools, the Victorian Department of Education undertook a large scale Middle Years Reform (MYR) initiative at the time this study took place. A whole-school approach involving the interrelated areas of curriculum, pedagogy, and school organization, the focus of the initiatives was a shift toward a thinking-oriented (rather than subject-based) approach to teaching and learning. In particular, the main organizing focus for change was the notion of developing key cognitive skills (e.g., Bloom, 1956), together with fundamental generic competencies (i.e., literacy, numeracy, problem solving, and thinking) through core curriculum subjects, rather than a traditional focus on the content of the subject areas themselves.

In tandem with these changes to curriculum, the Victorian Department of Education & Training (2002a) also called for pedagogy in the middle years to reflect a similarly thinking-oriented approach. As the following excerpt from a teacher professional development module in the middle years asserts:

> It is important to use [thinking-based] strategies that cater simultaneously for the range of learners. These include: Mind-mapping (which uses both left and right brain processes), open-ended tasks or inquiry learning (which promote constructivism, and allow students to function at the level and in the manner specific to themselves as a learner), or strategies that provide choice. One successful approach to providing choice is the learning centre, a very successful version of which utilizes both Bloom’s Taxonomy of Cognitive Processes (Dalton & Smith, 1986) and Multiple Intelligence Theory (Gardner, 1983) as organizing principles. . . . This structure caters for the highly varied interests and levels of development of young adolescents, provides room for student choice and input, and fosters independent learning. (para. 2)

For these innovations to curriculum and pedagogy to be successful in practice, the (re)organization of schools was identified as the final key element of reform. Among other strategies, teachers were encouraged to adopt interdisciplinary team-teaching approaches to reduce the number of staff that students encounter in any one year to foster stronger teacher–student relationships (Victorian Department of Education & Training, 2002b), and teachers were required to rethink their own subject areas in relation to other aspects the curriculum to ensure that thinking and learning skills were integrated across the school program as a coherent whole (Victorian Department of Education & Training, 2002c).

**Ontogenetic Analysis**

Dan, in his mid-twenties, is a native speaker of English and in his second year of teaching Japanese and Humanities at Blackvale Secondary School. He began learning Japanese during his first year of high school because LOTE was
compulsory and Japanese was the only language offered. When asked what he remembers about his experiences of learning Japanese as a student, he said that he “hated it with a passion at first.” When asked how it was he came to move from “hating” Japanese to now being a Japanese teacher himself, he spoke at length about his first Japanese teacher, whom he described as “very dynamic” and as someone with “a passion just for learning in general.” Previously a teacher of French, she had only been teaching Japanese for a year before Dan arrived. Due to her limited Japanese proficiency, Dan recalled his initial exposure to LOTE as having very little to do with learning the language. Instead, he said that what he remembered most was how this teacher was able to make learning an enjoyable experience in general: “It was more just her enthusiasm for learning in general that hooked me, not on the language at first, but her classes.”

Dan chose to continue Japanese through to Year 9 with this teacher, and when an opportunity arose to study in Japan as an exchange student in Year 10, he took it. Moving to a different school in Year 11 once he returned from Japan, he contrasted this later experience of learning Japanese with being in Years 7–9, describing the senior classes as “fairly traditional talk and chalk type lessons […] which were very content [i.e., language] driven.” The following extract not only illustrates this contrast between Dan’s early and later experiences of learning Japanese but also how Dan now related those early experiences to how he now sees himself as a teacher of Japanese in the middle years:

[In the initial first years] there was a very good rapport between me and my teacher to the point where that kind of student-mentor relationship continued even after I wasn’t her student anymore. So there was a strong emphasis on the relationship, and she used a lot of English in the classroom […] When I came back from Japan […] Quite the opposite. Relatively good teacher, used a lot of the LOTE in the classroom […] But there was actually very limited interaction between him and the students, other than “nooto o kaite kudasai [Please take notes],” and that type of thing.

So I guess when I come into the classroom, especially in the context of the environment that we have here […] I have reverted a lot more to I guess those first three years and the type of image of what it means to be a good mentor.

After high school, Dan went on to complete an Asian studies degree at university, with majors in Japanese language and Asian politics, and returned to Japan as an exchange student in his final year. During that time, he tutored Japanese students in English as a foreign language, which he said he found very enjoyable.

In terms of his formal teacher preparation, Dan enrolled in a Graduate Diploma of Teaching after finishing his initial degree and described it in rather conventional terms: A focus on the principles of second language teaching from a communicative perspective, an emphasis on the need for significant amounts of target language exposure, and the importance of providing a range of tasks that covered all four macroskills. However, although Dan chose Japanese as his teaching area because he felt it was “the logical thing to do,” his motivation for wanting to become a teacher was not really about teaching language. Again, he explained:

D: I can do Japanese, and I can speak Japanese better than … people who can’t speak any, so that’s the reason I teach Japanese. But I didn’t go into teaching to teach Japanese, that wasn’t the reason. I wanted my DipEd so I could work in a school. I think when I was at university over in Japan, I was doing a lot of tutoring on the side in English, and I thoroughly enjoyed it. […] I enjoyed just that interaction and I guess the satisfaction of having assisted somebody in skilling up in certain areas.

R (Researcher): So you’re saying that you didn’t actually reflect too much on LOTE method [at university … ]?

D: At the time I think I did. There’s still {a history?} of those in some of the things I do in the classroom but … I feel guilty saying this […] {but a lot of what […] the lecturer} was saying in terms of language teaching practices I can identify they’re different to the reasons I’m here.

Dan also argued that his understanding of what it means “to be a teacher” had changed considerably since leaving university: “In some senses [my Diploma of Education] kind of got left behind once I arrived at Blackvale College.” Indeed, Dan’s current sense of who he is, what he does, and how he now thinks was so context-specific that he not only makes this distinction in terms of “university knowledge” vis-à-vis “classroom knowledge” but even in terms of the “Blackvale” context in contrast to other schools, with expressions such as “Blackvale influences us,” “a non-Blackvale way of putting it,” and “Blackvale specific” appearing frequently throughout his interviews.

At the time of this study, Blackvale Secondary College was a recently established government school with approximately 1,000 students in Years 7–10. Because the school was new with a student population concentrated in the middle years,
Blackvale embraced many of the middle school initiatives described earlier. The school had a dedicated *Middle Years Policy*, and their *Teaching Policy* and *Learning Policy* emphasized the benefits of “cater[ing] for the multiple intelligences of all students,” the need for “teachers [to] use the Thinking Curriculum,” and the importance of teachers working collaboratively to “form teams to develop and implement the curriculum.” Classes are also assigned “significant teachers” and “mentor teachers” to teach the one class across a number of different areas, rather than one teacher being responsible for their specialization across different levels of the school.

**Microgenetic Analysis**

The focus at this level of analysis is the microgenetic domain of activity (i.e., actual instances of Dan’s practice as a teacher of Japanese in the middle years). Because of space, the analysis has been restricted to all but a few key points that emerged in relation to each of the elements within Dan’s activity system (Engeström, 1987).

**Rules.** Rules refer to “the explicit and implicit regulations, norms and conventions that constrain actions and interactions” (Engeström, n.d., para. 4). An aspect of the activity that emerged as significant in the regulation of Dan’s activity was the school curriculum. In particular, although there were few references to goals concerned with teaching or learning Japanese for communicative purposes during the stimulated recalls, there was a recurring emphasis on the need to have his students develop skills for “learning for life”:

> Well, learning outcomes and learning behaviors [for learning for life] are something that’s followed not only in the Japanese classroom or the language classroom. We do that across the school here. And we do it to explicitly let the kids know what our expectations are of them by the end of the lesson. What we expect to have seen achieved by the end of the lesson. I guess it becomes a bit of a contract with them. You know, you can say at the end of the lesson, “Have you achieved this?”

These outcomes were further represented “materially” (i.e., tools) in the form of laminated colored cards with labels such as “persistence” and “group work.” These were attached to the whiteboard at the start of every lesson. As Dan explained:

> When I refer to “persistence” in Japanese, it’s written on the board, the students remember back to the persistence that they’ve done in home group. And remember examining... and they’ll spend a whole session or two sessions of “What is persistence?” and “What does it mean to persist at something?” so that makes it easy for me to just whack it up on the board... make sure that they’re focused in on it for a couple of minutes just so that they know that that’s what I’m expecting and they can relate that back to what they’ve done in class.

**Division of Labor.** During the stimulated recalls, it became very clear that how Dan saw himself as the subject of the system was being heavily influenced by other roles and responsibilities he had within the school, especially in terms of having to teach multiple subject areas. At one point, for example, he said that he saw his identity as a “middle years teacher” rather than a “Japanese teacher.” Although he never indicated any distaste at being seen as “the Japanese teacher” in his school, the idea that his role was something much more than simply that of “teaching Japanese” appeared very important to him. As he was at pains to state during one postobservation session, for example,

> D: I was employed as a Japanese teacher, that was the job I went for, but the role that I play here in terms of being a mentor to two Year 7 home groups, a mentor to two other teachers that are new to Blackvale [...] I don’t see myself as a Japanese teacher and I don’t think other staff at the college and students of the college necessarily view me as a Japanese teacher, although they know that that’s one of the subjects that I teach.

> R: Do you think that impacts the way you carry out your Japanese lessons?

> D: It definitely... I think in the students’ eyes, it gives me a little bit more credibility. When I talk about learning in general, when I sit down and talk to the students about why it’s necessary to have a committed attitude and positive attitude to learning in general, I think there’s a bit more credibility because they can’t just fob me off as, “Well you’re just a Japanese teacher and that’s a subject I’m not interested in,” because I know that that’s not what I am: I’m an educator at the college, so that does help. And it also helps when I’m talking to parents. Especially parents who don’t see the validity of students learning a language. It helps when I’m able to present my role at the college and also support my role as a Japanese teacher also, because they can see me being involved in so many other aspects of the college and facets of the college that they do value what I have to say an educator.

> R: Okay, so when you talk to them about Japanese as a KLA [...] are you focusing on the idea of learning, as opposed to what Japanese has to offer—in terms of learning and thinking and cognitive development?
D: Very much.
R: Rather than the ability to speak “a language”?
D: Very much so.

Community. As indicated in the previous excerpt, the community—and especially the home community and parents—was another key influence on the system within which Dan was positioned as subject and how he then saw himself as a Japanese teacher. Describing the local community as mostly comprised of English-speaking Anglo-Australians from a lower socioeconomic background, Dan explained that “there’s families that don’t travel, that haven’t traveled, there’s kids with fairly localized, insular lives [...] and the LOTEs spoken at home are also quite low, so they’re not kids who’ve been exposed to a variety of cultural experiences.” When asked how he felt this influenced him as a teacher, he explained: “We felt that there was a need to bring up their awareness of different places and not just bring their awareness of different ways of communicating, using language, but different ways of living.” Again, as he pointed out on another occasion:

When we’re talking to parents, when we’re talking to the community, and it’s not just for Japanese, it’s for the lot of the subjects that we teach here, we present it as, “How is this assisting your child in developing as a learner holistically.”

Object. The “problem space” (Engeström, n.d., para. 4) to which the subject’s intent and attention is directed, the object is an especially interesting aspect of activity for teacher cognition, as it focuses on the teachers’ perception of their students and (their perception of) the relationship they have with them. Of the many points that were raised in relation to students during Dan’s stimulated recalls, something of particular significance was how he perceived his students’ skills level in language learning and the effect this had on his activity. Although the impact was sometimes obvious, such as modifying the language used to make it comprehensible, it also influenced the nature of activity in two other more substantial ways: First, it shifted the outcome of the activity from “teaching Japanese” to one more akin to “revising Japanese” and, second, Dan focused on presenting Japanese (i.e., a tool) in a way that emphasized language as a linguistic system of structural elements rather than as something used with communicative intent.

In relation to the first point, Dan often explained that his students seemed unable to remember much of what is taught from one lesson to the next, with repetition being an essential aspect of what it meant to teach Japanese in this context:

I hope that the repetition, not that I hope, I know that the repetition does mean that even the weaker students do, even if they don’t know explicitly what each word means—I mean the more switched on kids work out that “kudasai” means “please” because they relate that to the other phrases that they’ve learned at the end—but even the other students have an understanding of what it means.

He similarly argued that a structural approach to teaching language was more appropriate for his particular group students than a communicatively oriented style, based on their perceived lack of general literacy skills. Again, he explained:

D: They don’t have the literacy skills to deal with a lot of English tasks. I mean if you’re taking a whole language approach, those skills need to already be established [...] I don’t think a whole language approach would work.
R: How come? Why don’t you think you can develop those skills in LOTE?
D: Well I think I can. But I think that it needs to be to a certain extent decontextualized and explicitly taught as skills and strategies that the students can then build on. I mean, I came across a kid the other week who doesn’t even know the ABC song, like he doesn’t even know the order of the English alphabet.
R: How many students in your class have English support?
D: There’s about probably ten percent, and that’s only the ones that we can accommodate [...] So when you’ve got a kid in your class who doesn’t know their English alphabet, there’s no point I don’t think in having a whole language approach because maybe he can’t work with English so you’re not going to be able to, even with support, they’re not going to be able to feel that they can succeed.

Tools. Given that Dan’s activity was, at least notionally, “teaching Japanese,” it was remarkable to observe that very little Japanese was actually used within lessons.

Simply put, English (the first language [L1]) was the dominant tool Dan chose to mediate his overall activity as a teacher within the system. As he stated in the following excerpt, he saw a clear distinction between using Japanese (second language [L2]) when addressing students in the
context of “doing something Japanese,” in contrast to using the L1 for “doing teaching things”:

I find it difficult, and they probably find it difficult, to step into a classroom and purely be their Japanese teacher [...] I tend to use the Japanese suffixes when I’m interacting with them—when I’m requiring of them something that I know that they’re going to be able to produce. Whether it be answering the roll for example, I often take the roll and add the Japanese suffixes on the end because all they need to say is “hai” [“yes”] in return. So it’s something that I’m explicitly targeting as an activity where there’ll be some output from the interaction.

When I’m interacting with them on a level of reinforcing or explaining, I guess my expectations just as a member of staff here, and them just as students of Blackvale College, members of the college community, I tend to slip back into addressing them using their name or “Mr.” or “Mrs. such and such,” “Ms. such and such.”

At another point, Dan said to the class in English, “I’m about to let you go.” Unable to see any particular purpose (other than the obvious) as to why this phrase was said, let alone why it was said in English, I dismissed it as having no special significance. However, when it came to this moment in the stimulated recall, Dan gave the following unprompted explanation that reveals even the apparently inconsequential use of the L1 was tied to an underlying concern with managing the lesson as a teacher:

Sorry, just getting back to “about to let you go.” Once again, more cueing the students because what I wanted to hear from them is, “sensei ja mata” [See you later, sir], which is what we’ve taught them, you know, “see you later.” We haven’t taught them “sayonara” [farewell] because we think it’s not used anywhere near as much and I didn’t get the response that I wanted. There were a few students that remembered what to say but that “I’m about to let you go” was trying to cue the students into, “Okay, I’m about to let you go so try to remember what we normally say when we’re leaving the classroom.”

As this excerpt also suggests, when the L2 was used within lessons, it was primarily to display “lesson content” rather than for genuine “classroom communication.” In the following excerpt, Dan avoided using the word “nijuu” [twenty] when collecting results from students on a quiz:

D: jill-san? [Jill?]
J: Nineteen.
N: {Eleven}
M: Twenty.
D: Twenty... out of twenty? yoku dekimashita. mick-kun? [Well done. Mick?]
M: Seventeen.
J: Eighteen out of twenty.
R: Twenty.
D: hai. yoku dekimashita. [Okay. Well done.]

Like the earlier example, what seemed to be little more than a slip of the tongue in the L1 (i.e., saying “twenty” rather than “nijuu”) was actually the result of a careful and deliberate decision on Dan’s part to intentionally avoid using the L2 because it was not “content” that he had previously taught:

When we taught the students numbers, we only explicitly taught them numbers one to ten, and then taught them your basic “ten plus” rule for numbers ten through to nineteen. I could’ve said “nijuu” [twenty], but the students would have confused that with twelve because of those sound combinations to them. They’re more familiar with hearing “juuni” [twelve] rather than “nijuu” [twenty] [...] Not that I’m saying I never use numbers in the LOTE over twenty, I do, but I would only do it in a context where the students explicitly know that they’re the numbers I’m targeting.

DISCUSSION

Although only brief, the previous example already provides some interesting insights into Dan’s cognitions as a language teacher, especially in terms of the relationship among what Dan actually does as a language teacher, his thinking in relation to those actual instances of practice (but in further relation to the knowledge, experiences, and beliefs that he brought to making sense of that setting, as its subject), and the broader social, cultural, historical, and political genesis of the activity within which that thinking/practice relationship took place.

The analysis of the cultural–historic domain for Japanese language teaching in Dan’s case suggests it was one in which the teaching of a language other than English has become
increasingly irrelevant, at least from the perspective of broader policy concerns shaping the then current priorities for Australian schools. Instead, the new focus has been on improving educational outcomes with a specific emphasis on (English) literacy, which has been further reinforced by the educational discourse of the middle years and its push to have the “core basics” (i.e., literacy, numeracy, and thinking skills) taught across the curriculum.

Teachers, as subjects within this broader cultural–historic domain for activity, have therefore come to see their role as being less that of a discipline-specific (e.g., language) “specialist” than as a middle years “generalist.” Dan, for example, frequently mentioned during his stimulated-recall sessions that he did not see the outcome of his activity as being that of improving his students’ communicative competence in Japanese, but to develop their more generic skills for “learning for life.” This was further reflected in the system that Dan operated within at the microgenetic level of activity. The curriculum, for example, was organized around a set of core “generic skills” across learning areas rather than a focus on the development of discipline specific outcomes, and Dan’s other duties within the school meant that he saw his relationship with (and responsibilities to) to wider school community, his students, and even the home community and parents as something much broader than being identified as “their Japanese teacher.”

Because Dan no longer strongly identified with language teaching, or the development of his students’ communicative competence in Japanese as the primary outcome for his activity, he considered his language teacher education as not an especially valuable aspect of the ontogenesis into the “Japanese language teacher” he now sees himself. Whereas Lortie (1975) has written on the apprenticeship of observation and its effect on teacher practice, it must also be remembered that experiential knowledge does not override education or formal learning by default, but because certain types of knowledge are (or at least seem to be) more relevant in some contexts than others. Despite a significant portion of Dan’s experiences as both a learner and a learner–teacher of Japanese emphasizing “language” (e.g., an exchange student in Japan, his accelerated language program in senior high school, completing a language teaching education program with a strong communicative focus), it was his early years when the focus was not language but on making learning enjoyable more generally that now appears to provide the knowledge base upon which he relies to make sense of an activity system with a similar focus.

In short, although Dan’s approach to teaching does not make sense in relation to how we might theorize practice from a conventional “methods” perspective on teaching, it does become clearer when we understand why and how what Dan thinks and does has been socially and culturally constructed in the way that it has—both in relation to the broader cultural–historic domain from which, and within which, Dan’s microgenetic activity as a teacher is unfolding, as well as his own ontogenetic history that he brings to that activity as a basis for engaging with it.

Indeed, this is one of the most powerful applications of a sociocultural genetic–analytic perspective—it provides an explanatory framework to derive meaning from what can otherwise appear meaningless (Engeström, 1993). To dismiss Dan’s practice from analyses of “language teaching” on the grounds that it represents a “poor” example of language teaching (even in Dan’s words it was a case of “not language teaching”) would appear justifiable, but to do so fails to acknowledge the very real (and, more importantly, diverse) social and cultural contexts that language teachers do construct what “language teaching” means within those settings. As Johnson and Golomboke (2002) maintained, teacher knowledge is ultimately “highly interpretive and contingent on knowledge of self, students, curricula, and setting” (p. 2). Although how Dan thinks and behaves as a language teacher might be inconsistent with how language teaching is described in theory, or even in relation to empirical research on “best” practice in language education, “a language teacher” was the role that he was nonetheless fulfilling as the subject of his particular social and cultural system for activity.

At the same time, however, to end the analysis at this level of interpretation is also limiting. Although there might be intrinsic value in understanding how Dan’s thinking and practice as a language teacher has come to exist in the way that it has, that, in itself, offers nothing in an applied or transformative sense. Although it revealed that Dan is not necessarily focused on developing his students’ communicative competence in Japanese, a further strength of framing cognition from the perspective of sociocultural activity is its ability to articulate points of contradictions and tensions within the activity in question.

Although there are numerous tensions evident in this example, perhaps the most significant given the space available here is the primary contradiction between Dan’s formal preparation as a language teacher with his personal experiences
as a language learner in relation to the broader cultural–historic domain in which he now finds himself. In short, Dan said that he failed to see any strong relevance between his teacher education—with its focus on developing listening, speaking, writing, and reading skills to communicate in a foreign language—and the priorities he actually faced as a Japanese teacher in the middle years: Literacy, numeracy, and thinking. As he expressed it: “I feel guilty saying this [. . .] {but a lot of what [. . . the lecturer] was saying in terms of language teaching practices} I can identify they’re different to the reasons I’m here.” Dan therefore seemed to rely more on his own recollections of teaching as a language learner, and he noted that it provided him a model of teaching that he found better attuned to the context within which he now practices as a language teacher himself—that is, one with a focus on learning and engagement in schooling more generally, than on language and the development of communicative competence more specifically.

To reconcile such dissonance, there was a need in this case for Dan’s teacher education to be more contextually responsive to the settings within which he, and his fellow teacher trainees, would eventually go on to teach within and apply that knowledge. Indeed, the need to reconcile the dissonance between trainees’ formal teacher preparation and the cultural–historic contexts within which they are expected to apply that knowledge would seem to be Freeman and Johnson’s point in their recent calls for a “located” approach to second language teacher education (Johnson, 2006, p. 245) with the need for second language teacher education to change “from the outside in” (Freeman, 2004, p. 192).

However, by being able to offer an explanation of why and how tensions and contradictions have emerged among thinking, doing, and context through framing teaching as an activity, it is possible to formulate a response to reconcile those dissonances. In this example, Dan suggested that the priorities he faced as a teacher in the middle years (i.e., literacy, numeracy, and thinking skills) were incommensurate with what he had been taught about teaching language (i.e., developing communicative competence). There is, however, substantial evidence that acquiring additional languages—as in developing genuine communicative competence—is beneficial to the development of L1 literacy skills (Bournot-Trites & Tellowitz, 2002). Moreover, emerging concepts in language pedagogy based sociocultural theories of learning (Vygotsky, 1978, 1987), such as collaborative dialogue (Swain, 2000, 2005a) and “languaging” (Swain, 2005b), are clearly compatible with curriculum outcomes that emphasize thinking-orientated approaches to learning. Such knowledge would seem essential for a language teacher education program in Dan’s context, but he made no references to any links between language education and L1 literacy, or to language learning and the development of thinking and cognitive skills, when reflecting on his formal language teacher preparation. To have done so might have alleviated this primary contradiction, which would have then had subsequent repercussions for resolving secondary contradictions within the system (e.g., more appropriate use of the L1 and L2 as tools for fostering communicative competence, making sense of curriculum goals around thinking in relation to language learning, relating lessons content to the needs of the local and home community, and so forth).

CONCLUSION

As noted in the introduction, a long-standing problem of L2 teacher education has been its historical dependence on studies of language and learners to understand what language teachers should then think and do in the classroom. The field of language teacher cognition therefore stands to make a significant contribution to both language teaching and learning as it continues to develop a greater understanding of the complexities that actually comprise language teachers’ work and an appreciation of how teachers come to apply their knowledge of learners, language, and learning to the contexts within which they practice.

It is, however, still a nascent domain of inquiry. As S. Borg’s (2006) review of the field has revealed, whereas the emerging knowledge base on what language teachers think, know, and do presents a number of pathways with considerable promise for new areas of research, it also highlights the gaps that continue to exist and the challenges these present for moving the current state of the art forward. The focus of this article has been the potential of a Vygotskian sociocultural framing of teacher cognition in response to what Borg argues is a need for an “overall unifying framework” (p. 280)—one that ties together the significant, but disparate, threads of knowledge that comprise and define the field at present.

The intention, then, has been to offer a framework that complements the significant developments and approaches made within recent research on language teacher cognition. A sociocultural theoretical perspective on teacher practice provides the basis for a systematic, comprehensive, and theoretically robust framework.
that accounts for the social dimension of thought and knowledge: A perspective now recognized as essential for understanding how teachers come to think, know, and behave in the ways that they do, as historical and sociological agents within larger (and, as I have argued, political) contexts for practice. Additionally, the framework also provides a means by which to identify and better understand the contradictions and tensions within cognition when “thinking” and “doing” play out within the contexts that this relationship exists. In turn, this opens further possibilities for resolving the problematic divide between theory and practice that continues to be an ongoing concern for the field (Freeman, 2007). Although there remains space for developing these ideas further as our understanding of teaching and learning also continues to expand, a Vygotskian framing of teacher cognition nonetheless offers a valuable starting point for developing these ideas further as our understanding extends beyond the concept of cognition as a purely mental or psychological construct.

NOTES

1I use “teacher cognition” interchangeably throughout the article with other phrases, including “studies of teachers and teaching” and “understandings of teachers’ knowledge and practice.” As S. Borg’s (2003) definition suggests, the focus of work in this area extends beyond the concept of cognition as a purely mental or psychological construct.

2Pseudonyms have been used for all personal and institutional identifiers to maintain confidentiality.

3Languages Other Than English (LOTE), the curriculum area for “Languages” within Australian schools.

4Key Learning Area (KLA), or “subject area.”

REFERENCES


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