

**RETHINKING ESL LITERACY EDUCATION IN MULTICULTURAL
CONDITIONS: THE PASSAGE THROUGH CULTURAL-
HISTORICAL PSYCHOLOGY**

ALEXANDER KOSTOGRIZ

BEd, Hons Dip Ed (VSPU, Ukraine)

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores new possibilities in the field of ESL education to address the issue of the growing cultural-semiotic heterogeneity and polyphony in contemporary classrooms. Covering a wide range of areas including cultural-historical and sociocultural psychology, postcolonial literature, applied linguistics, studies in cultural semiotics and the New Literacy Studies, this thesis seeks to move beyond the limitations of rationalist approaches to second language and literacy learning. However, a sociocultural perspective on ESL education reveals not only the constraints and limitations of cognitivist frameworks of learning but also the compacting of identity and language politics into a closed logic of binarised categories. Therefore, an attempt is made to crack open these categories by drawing on the concepts of Thirdspace and cultural-semiotic hybridity.

Part One problematises the categories of 'culture', 'mind', and 'literacy' by disclosing the reductionism of binary logic - that is, privileging one term, concept or element in a dichotomy over the other (e.g. a universal national identity over diversity of particular identities, mental over social and material, decontextualised literacy over situated literacy practices, etc.). The political strategy of Thirthing then becomes an important step toward rethinking these categories productively to offer a positive, practical Thirdspace alternative. While Thirdspace is a sphere of living practices, it is also important to conduct research on the learning of languages and literacies from a sociocultural perspective. The metaphor of participation for learning is discussed as an appealing framework for research and practice in the field of ESL.

Part Two explores the relevance of Vygotskian theory-method to language and literacy learning in a contemporary pluralistic society. Three major issues raised by Vygotsky in cultural-historical approach to learning and psychological development are discussed here. These issues are a dynamic approach to meaning and concept formation, an historical, heterochronous approach to the role of language and sign-mediated activities in psychological development and literacy learning, and a culturally situated approach to the analysis of learning environments. All these issues are elaborated with regard to the recognition of difference.

Part Three focuses on the implications of the cultural-historical approach to ESL education. Two matters are discussed in this respect: first, the application of cultural-historical activity theory to the modelling of literacy learning activity systems (classroom communities) and, second, implications of Vygotskian and Neo-Vygotskian perspectives for conceptualising a framework for a literacy pedagogy of Thirdspace.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

AS	activity system
AT	Activity Theory
EFL	English as a foreign language
ESL	English as a second language
L1	first or native language
L2	second language
LLAS	literacy learning activity system
NESB	non-English-speaking background
NLS	New Literacy Studies
SLA	second language acquisition
ZPD	zone of proximal development

PREFACE

A decade ago I could not have imagined writing this kind of project. At that time, I started my career as a lecturer in English and German, believing that my knowledge of cultural-historical theory of language and learning would safely guide me past the various landmines of educating language teachers. However, soon after, during the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, I found myself fumbling with questions from my students about language and cultural politics. The Ukraine, like other post-Soviet republics, faced the problem of redefining those canonical assumptions that had informed education for decades. I became especially attentive to the initiatives in reforming language and literacy education. These were attempting to move away from the older Soviet canon in general, and, in particular, from rote learning and the memorisation of official texts translated into foreign languages as learning materials. It was also the time when I had written a few papers critical of new nationalist texts used for EFL teaching. It seemed to me that these texts needed to be more carefully scrutinised for their appropriateness in any classroom, especially ones of great social and cultural diversity.

In the years that followed I conducted several research projects with colleagues in Germany, Austria and the USA. In addition to my understanding of the subtleties and techniques of teaching German and English as second languages in those countries, I came to see how language is used to structure expectations, participation and exclusion in society. I began to realise how important it is to complement the Vygotskian perspective on the teaching and learning of a second language (L2) with critical perspectives, so as to help prepare minority students for a social world in which language practices can provide as well as deny opportunity. It was, however, only when I came to Australia (and was lucky enough to meet and work with people of a particular persuasion) that my earlier ideas and experiences crystallised in this project.

This thesis addresses some important sociocultural issues faced by ESL education in late modern society. It has often been noted that the modern world is in a state of turbulence and flux due to the endless motion of people, texts and goods. Global migration is not just a movement, however, or a shift from place to place. It is linked to the dream of a better life filled with the promises of progress, liberation and emancipation. But it is also associated with the nightmare of loss, uncertainty, fear and insecurity. Migration in contemporary times has acquired distinct new features that are radically different from earlier conceptions - staked between, on the one hand, the automatic assimilation of migrants and, on the other hand, their gradual integration into the host society. Major immigrant-receiving countries today find themselves in new conditions of inter-ethnic complexity. Both dominant and minority cultural groups have begun to argue in favour of

new models for representing the processes of intercultural communication as well as the new emergent forms of cultural identities. As a result of changes in the cultural-political landscape of the multicultural state, the traditional models of assimilative education have been challenged by a variety of approaches, which seek to construct the frameworks and practices of L2 literacy education on the basis of re-examined relationships between culture, identity and language learning.

These political transformations and intellectual debates on nationalism, multiculturalism and literacy education provide the broad horizon of this thesis. Specifically, however, I seek to problematise those views that insist upon the denial of cultural, linguistic and identity dynamics. Many attempts to articulate new perspectives on migrants' political and language rights in literacy education are constrained within the logics of essentialism and binarism. This thesis is written in the conviction that both cultural universalism and ethnic particularism are ineradicable dimensions in the making of migrant identities, but that the articulation between them is far from being evident. I believe, therefore, that a more appropriate reappraisal of the fundamental sociocultural divisions in relation to the identities of deterritorialised people is offered by new intellectual movements in postcolonialism, feminism and studies in cultural semiotics and political geography.

The concept of Thirdspace, which has been recently given greater theoretical significance by Homi Bhabha, Julia Kristeva, Edward Soja and others, has added a crucial dimension in rethinking polarised positions, allowing for the possible mediation of cultural binaries. Today, and even more so in the past, the literacy education of migrants has tended to be framed in the mechanistic terms of progressive and unidirectional movement: from a native language and cultural literacy to the language and culture of a host country. Space 'in-between' has rarely been seen as an active part in the field of identity formation and cultural-semiotic practices. However, it is increasingly evident that contemporary experiences of migration can not be mapped as a single trajectory with a simple end-point. Migrant experiences - my own, those of my family and people that we know closely - can be re-presented rather as an interminable and multifarious process of oscillation between cultures and literacies. The experience of living and learning in Thirdspace is an ongoing process and needs to be understood as an open journey, as the very act of movement in which identities are unlocked in the course of intercultural hybridisation and mutation. Hence, the identity of the migrant is being formed by and in this turbulent journey of deterritorialisation, recognition, translation and, to use Soja's (1996) term, 'Thirling-as-Othering'.

For me, however, Thirdspace is not just a useful noun for describing the unsettling identities of migrants swaying in between cultural orthodoxies; it is a metaphor for a

broader perspective on L2 literacy pedagogy and on those political forces that are in play in contemporary classrooms of difference. I am concerned with the interrelationship between the transformative energy of Thirthing in meaning-making and the construction of literacy learning environments. While hybridity in the literacy practices of L2 learners has often gone unnoticed, there is a need for new theoretical frameworks and pedagogical practices, those that are capable of addressing the ongoing processes of negotiating differences, rather than promoting the rigid acquisition and performance of predetermined scripts. The recognition of Thirthing and hybridity in L2 literacy learning becomes increasingly important both for understanding the meaning of cultural difference in identity and for stressing the incompleteness of our sense of Self in communication with the Other.

In writing this project, I am far from taking a position that cultural hybridity is an embodiment of intercultural synthesis, bridging and reconciling differences and hence blurring the very relations of power that hybridity ought to highlight in L2 literacy education. This can not be reduced to the occasional experiences of celebrating cultural diversity in classroom events. Rather, I always equate hybridity with that kind of Thirthing that can only function critically when contradictory forces in meaning-making are operating simultaneously. It is only when we understand contradictions between the polarised dichotomies of 'us-them', 'dominant-subjugated', 'insider-outsider', etc., that hybridity can offer a 'radical middle' position in theorising L2 literacy learning. I take this stance in exploring the possibilities of cultural-historical theory in rethinking L2 literacy education in new conditions of cultural complexity. It is for the reader to judge what is achieved or not through this kind of approach.

A last word must be said about the general discourse and purpose of this thesis. It addresses a broad community of sociocultural researchers as well as educational policy-makers, rather than speaking to practitioners in schools or indeed, in teacher education. This is a purely theoretical exploration in which I endeavour to elaborate Vygotskian views of literacy learning in/for a turbulent life in plural societies and in classroom communities of difference. In setting out this aim, I operate with and construct general concepts that can hopefully inform practices in the particular settings of L2 literacy education and research. These should be seen as provisional explorations rather than as fully-fledged theoretical constructs or as 'answers' to the ethical and political imperatives of intervening in debates about literacy education and pedagogic practices in multicultural classrooms. I hope, anyway, that they can be useful in throwing a certain light on some of the more pressing problems in educating 'other people's children', in these new times of global migration and cultural mutation.