PART II

Vygotsky and Vygotskian-Inspired Theoretical Concepts That Inform Responsive Mediation
In this chapter, we define Vygotsky and Vygotskian-inspired theoretical concepts that inform how we conceptually articulate and operationally define the concept of responsive mediation. We begin with an overview of Vygotsky’s ideas on school teaching/learning or, in Russian, obuchenie, and build a rationale for why we use obuchenie as a lens through which to explore responsive mediation in the practices of L2 teacher education. To accomplish this, we turn to Vygotsky’s views on emotion, in particular the notion of emotional experience or, in Russian, perezhivanie, a construct that enables us to better understand how teachers are experiencing and responding to the practices of L2 teacher education. We include Vygotsky’s (1987) claim of the affective and volitional tendency as central to teacher cognition and explore the role of emotion in the learning-to-teach process, as well as how teacher educator and teacher emotions and motives shape their interactions. Finally, we invoke McNeill’s (2000, 2005) construct of growth points as a moment or series of moments when teachers’ cognitive/emotional dissonance comes into being and argue that responsive mediation directed at the growth point creates the potential for the development of L2 teacher/teaching expertise.

Obuchenie: The dialectical unity of school teaching/learning

In Vygotsky’s (1935/1994) later writings he focused on the problem of teaching/learning in school and, in particular, the relationship between school teaching/learning (obuchenie) and cognitive development. He was highly critical of traditional approaches to formal schooling, claiming that

a straightforward learning of concepts always proves impossible and educationally fruitless. Usually, any teacher setting out on this road achieves
nothing except a meaningless acquisition of words, mere verbalization in children, which is nothing more than simulation and imitation of corresponding concepts which, in reality, are concealing a vacuum. (p. 356)

Instead, he postulated that the development of academic concepts in the mind of the child is substantially different from the development of everyday concepts, which arise spontaneously through concrete experiences in the everyday world. For Vygotsky, academic concepts in children undergo a fundamental process of development, that is, “when a child assimilates a concept, he reworks it and in the course of this reworking, he imprints it with certain specific features of his own thoughts” (p. 361). Thus, while their developmental processes are different, academic concepts and everyday concepts are “tightly bound up with one another and . . . constantly influence one another” (p. 365). For school aged children, Vygotsky argued that the key to internalization (from the social to the psychological) is the extent to which the processes of school teaching/learning (obuchenie) interrelate academic and everyday concepts in goal-directed, practical activity that has relevance in the material world (see also Robbins, 2003).

We find Vygotsky’s (1987) obuchenie, defined as “teaching/learning as collaborative interactions governed by a mutuality of purpose” (p. 212), to be a useful lens through which to explore the dialogic interactions that emerge in the practices of L2 teacher education. Obuchenie captures the actions and intentions of teaching and learning, rather than only a teacher who provides instruction to a child who learns (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). Importantly, obuchenie places greater focus on the instructional side of expert/novice interactions, suggesting that obuchenie leads rather than follows cognitive development (Cole, 2009). This distinction is important because Vygotsky argued against the prevailing notion of his time that a child’s psychological functions must reach a certain level of maturity before instruction is beneficial. In fact, he argued that teaching/learning (obuchenie) and development are distinct processes but that obuchenie enables a series of developmental processes to undergo their own development. Therefore, obuchenie “is only effective when it points to the road for development” and while Vygotsky argued that it is the teacher “who creates conditions for certain cognitive processes to develop, it is the child who has to learn to transform an ability ‘in itself’ into an ability ‘for himself’” (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 331). Obuchenie is, therefore, not simply concerned with cognitive functions and/or capabilities that have already been fully formed, but also with those that are still developing and thus typically manifest in joint activity with others. It is here, Vygotsky argued, where instructional intervention will have its greatest significance.

Vygotsky’s (1978) other major break with the field of Psychology at the time was the basic maxim that the relationship between the word (sign form) and thought (sign meaning) does not remain constant, but instead is unstable and undergoes fundamental change. His developmental or genetic method was designed to understand how this change happens by focusing almost exclusively on how
the inclusion of new tools or signs leads to qualitative transformation in mental activity (Wertsch, 2007). And from this method, one can observe how the inclusion of particular sign forms, especially those of a symbolic nature (i.e., language) play a role in converting learning that emerges in social activity into psychological tools (sign meanings), or tools for thinking.

Much, if not all, of what teacher educators try to do is to intentionally insert new tools or signs into the activities that constitute teacher education with the goal of qualitative transformation in how novice teachers think as well as how they teach. Such explicit mediation, according to Wertsch (2007) “involves the intentional introduction of signs into the ongoing flow of activity . . . designed and introduced by an external agent, such as a tutor, who can help reorganize an activity in some way” and it is throughout this process that “sign meaning develops” (pp. 185–186). Wertsch goes on to claim that a sign form, or word,

first appears in social and individual activity without the users’ full understanding of its meaning or functional role. What then follows is a process of coming to understand the meaning and functional significance of the sign form that one has been using all along. (p. 186)

Thus, the sign form, or word, functions as a sort of material sign vehicle that allows novices to function at a level that is out ahead of their current mastery. According to Wertsch (2007), “the general goal of instruction [obuchenie] is to assist students in becoming fluent users of a sign system” (p. 186). Wertsch further stated:

When encountering a new cultural tool, . . . the first stages of acquaintance typically involve social interaction and negotiation between experts and novices or among novices. It is precisely by means of participating in this social interaction that interpretations are first proposed and worked out and, therefore, become available to be taken over by individuals. (p. 187)

If we consider obuchenie as it unfolds in the practices of L2 teacher education, we would expect teacher educators to intentionally introduce new sign forms (e.g., genre) and in some cases entire sign systems (e.g., systemic functional linguistics) in order to reorganize how teachers think about and engage in the activities of L2 teaching. These new signs and/or sign systems typically represent the latest theory and research (academic concepts) on how language works, how languages are learned and used, as well as how languages can be taught in various instructional settings. The assumption, of course, is that the introduction of these new sign forms, through course readings, in-class discussions, and reflective activities, will enable teachers to work out the sign meanings and functional significance and eventually lead to changes not only in how teachers think about teaching but also in what they actually do in the classroom. However, this trajectory, from external
Obuchenie, Perezhivanie, and Growth Points

to internal, does not happen automatically, nor does it occur in a straightforward manner. Instead it requires prolonged and sustained participation in concrete goal-directed activity (e.g., actual teaching), supported by responsive mediation offered by an expert (e.g., teacher educator, mentor teacher, and/or peer teacher) that leads the development of sign meaning (e.g., theoretical and pedagogical tools or signs) so that sign meanings become more like those of experts, with the ultimate goal of enabling teachers to use sign meanings and sign systems flexibly and fluently in the activities of L2 instruction.

Bringing Vygotsky’s insights together, obuchenie entails high quality teacher–learner dialectics, in which learners interact with experts who offer pedagogically designed psychological tools (sign forms and/or sign systems) and semantic/pragmatic explanations of those tools (sign meanings) to promote a functional understanding of academic concepts in ways that facilitate the reorganization of the child’s mental structures. If we overlay these insights on the practices of L2 teacher education, it is the teacher educator who must create the conditions for L2 teacher/teaching expertise to develop. Such conditions must be grounded in clearly articulated professional development goals, provide exposure to theoretically and pedagogically sound instructional practices (sign forms and/or sign systems), and make the reasoning behind those practices explicit (sign meanings). Enacting obuchenie therefore will entail context-specific, high-quality, teacher–teacher educator dialogic interactions that support sign meaning development as teachers engage in a broad range of activities associated with L2 teaching. In exploring what happens inside the practices of L2 teacher education, we are interested in both the teaching of teachers and the learning of teaching and, in particular, the interactional spaces, mediated through language, where obuchenie takes place.

Perezhivanie: The subjective significance of teachers’ lived experiences

We acknowledge that carrying out obuchenie, as Vygotsky envisioned, requires a lot of teacher educators. First and foremost, it requires that we attend to what our teachers bring to our interactions: where they are coming from and how they understand what they are experiencing. And gaining access to such pre-understandings is no easy task. To do so, we invoke another Russian term, perezhivanie, used throughout Vygotsky’s writings to capture the subjective significance of lived experiences that contribute to the development of one’s personality, especially the emotional and visceral impact of lived experiences on the prism through which all future experiences are refracted (see van de Veer & Valsiner, 1994). Vygotsky stated that, “The emotional experience [perezhivanie] arising from any situation or from any aspect of his [sic] environment determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child” (as cited in van de Veer & Valsiner, 1994, p. 339). Since individuals will most certainly experience the same event quite differently, one’s perezhivanie is not
the experience itself, but how that experience is interpreted and understood by the individual.

We know from the research on teacher cognition that teachers draw heavily on their lived experiences as learners in classrooms, yet their emotional experiences (perezhivanie) grounded in their schooling histories may be vastly different. For example, one teacher may express deep admiration and respect for a ‘strict’ teacher who held high expectations and presented material thoroughly and systematically through lecture while another might perceive that same ‘strict’ teacher as authoritarian and controlling and thus choose to establish closer social and personal relationships with and among students. For teacher educators, establishing a sense of a teacher’s perezhivanie, both past (e.g., apprenticeship of observation) and present (e.g., how they are experiencing the practices of teacher education) is essential if we are to provide mediation that is responsive to how teachers are experiencing and responding to the practices of L2 teacher education.

Additionally, enacting obuchenie requires that we attend to what we, as teacher educators ourselves, bring to our interactions with teachers. Our mediation is shaped by the complex interplay of cognition and emotion, originating in and reshaped through our own perezhivanie. As teacher educators, our own emotions can influence the mediation we provide to teachers even though we may seemingly be engaging in consistent practices and feedback (Golombek, 2015). We should similarly identify the emotions we bring to particular relationships and how they affect what we mediate and how we articulate that in our interactions with particular teachers. Thus, enacting obuchenie requires teacher educators to stay attuned to our own subjectivities in the emergent, relational interactions we co-construct with teachers.

Affective and volitional tendency: The dialectic unity of cognition and emotion

Further complicating the process of enacting obuchenie is that in order to offer mediation that is responsive to teachers’ maturing capabilities, teacher educators must be able to ascertain what those maturing capabilities are. This poses unique challenges for teacher educators as, more often than not, teachers’ maturing capabilities are expressed as intensely emotional ‘highs and lows’ that emerge from being asked to perform as self-directed teachers before they have the necessary competence to do so. Once again, we know from our years of experience that teachers’ expressions of emotion run the gamut: from the exhilaration of meaningful student engagement to anxiety and humiliation when lessons go awry. We also recognize that within most teacher education programs, expressions of emotion are at best recognized as normal and glossed over, or at worst seen as a serious character flaw. While teaching has long been considered an emotional practice (Denzin, 1984), with teachers’ daily practices (lesson planning, managing instruction, interacting with students, colleagues, and parents, etc.) recognized
as being permeated with emotional meanings and influences (Hargreaves, 1998, 2000), as teacher educators we used to feel perplexed about how best to respond to teachers’ expression of emotion. This quandary reminds us, however, that teacher education is fundamentally about people: people with rich histories, resilient beliefs, and multilayered identities that emerge from and are shaped by the social, cultural, political, and economic environment from which they have come and in which they learn and work (see also Cross, 2010).

Thus, learning to teach, regardless of the instructional context, is about trying on and taking up new identities. It is a deeply personal matter, and often emotionally charged in ways that are rarely officially recognized in teacher education programs. So it is from this stance that we ground our own professional development practices in the sociocultural dialectic unity of cognition, emotion, and activity and argue that the emotional dimensions of learning-to-teach, when tapped into as a resource rather than viewed as a distraction, are fundamental to being and becoming a teacher (Golombek & Doran, 2014; Johnson & Worden, 2014). Finally, given the emotionally charged nature of learning-to-teach, teachers also need to develop trust in the teacher educator, much like Karpov (2014) suggests a child must “accept a caregiver as a mediator who will create the kind of supportive environment necessary for development” (p. 38). Therefore, we recognize that teachers will experience some sort of cognitive/emotional struggle as they develop L2 teacher/teaching expertise. As we explore the dialogic interactions that emerge inside the practices of L2 teacher education, it is to this cognitive/emotional struggle that teacher educators must be attuned.

Cognitive/emotional dissonance as potential growth points

Numerous studies in L2 teacher education support Vygotsky’s (1987) notion that cognitive/emotional dissonance acts as a catalyst that can, with the right mediation, create conditions that support the development of L2 teacher/teaching expertise (Childs, 2011; DiPardo & Potter, 2003; Golombek & Johnson, 2004; Johnson & Worden, 2014; Kubanyiova, 2012; Reis, 2011). However, the challenge for teacher educators is to stay attuned to instances of cognitive/emotional dissonance where responsive mediation may be most productive in terms of supporting teacher learning and development. Here we draw on elements of McNeill’s (2000, 2005) theoretical construct of the growth point since it not only helps elucidate Vygotsky’s (1987) dialectic unity of thought and language but because we have also found it to be useful for marking critical junctures in teacher learning and development.

For Vygotsky (1987), speech is not a matter of putting preexisting thoughts into words. Instead “thought is restructured as it is transformed into speech. It is not expressed but completed in the word” (p. 251). Thus, thoughts undergo continuous change during the process of speaking, which both shapes and is shaped by a speaker’s history, social interactive context, and agency. Based on
Slobin’s (1987) original notion of *thinking-for-speaking*, or how speakers organize their thinking during acts of speaking, McNeill’s (2005) work on the *speech-gesture synchrony* defines the *growth point* as the “minimal unit of an imagery-language dialectic” that thus constitutes a particular starting point for a thought as it “comes into being” (p. 104). Moreover, because it combines the two semiotic opposites of imagery and linguistic form, the *growth point* “creates a benign instability that fuels thought and speech” and represents “a speaker’s efforts to construct meaning” in a particular context and point in time (p. 104). For McNeill, the *growth point* in *thinking-for-speaking* represents what Vygotsky called the *psychological predicate*, providing a window into thinking as it arises in and is shaped by the activity of speaking (McNeill & Duncan, 2000).

While McNeill’s *imagery-language dialectic* is manifested through gesture and speech, our work examines instances of the dialectic of cognition and emotion as it arises in the context of teachers learning-to-teach while engaged in the practices of L2 teacher education. Like McNeill, we see *growth points* as instantiations of a dialectic ‘coming into being’ in specific contexts that can, with *responsive mediation*, create conditions for teacher learning and development. In our work, we posit *growth points* in the learning of teaching as ‘coming into being’ when contradictions emerge between what a teacher envisions and the reality of what actually occurs while teaching, contradictions that can be inferred through a teacher’s emotionally indexing language and behavior in such moments. Such contradictions create a sense of instability, or cognitive/emotional dissonance, that may be both mystifying and debilitating for teachers. In the face of such instability, teachers often turn inward, experience a crisis of confidence, and return to the sort of traditional monologic teaching that permeated their schooling histories. Moreover, teachers are typically unable to recognize what triggers moments of cognitive/emotional dissonance, and instead tend to blame their students or themselves.

In sum, we operationalize the *growth point* as a moment or series of moments when teachers’ cognitive/emotional dissonance comes into being. And we argue that *responsive mediation* directed at the *growth point* creates the potential for productive teacher learning and development. Like McNeill, we see the *growth point* as emergent and contingent, and thus mediation directed at the *growth point* cannot be predicted beforehand. It is dependent on the teacher educator’s ability to recognize and target teachers’ emergent needs as well as utilize their responses to that mediation and/or requests for additional support. Critical as well is enabling teachers to become consciously aware of the sources of their cognitive/emotional dissonance as this too can lead to productive teacher learning and development. The challenge for teacher educators is to be attuned to critical instances of teacher cognitive/emotional dissonance, recognize and capitalize on these as potential *growth points*, and create the conditions for *responsive mediation* to emerge in support of the development of L2 teacher/teaching expertise. With these concepts in mind, in Chapter 4 we introduce two additional
Vygotskian-inspired theoretical concepts that we believe function as powerful psychological tools for capturing responsive mediation as it emerges inside the practices of L2 teacher education.

References


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