

Language teaching through the lenses of Cultural-Historical Theory: attributing meaning to english throughout childhood and adolescence¹

O ensino de línguas à luz da Teoria Histórico-Cultural:
atribuindo sentidos ao inglês ao longo da infância e adolescência

La enseñanza de lenguas a la luz de la Teoría Histórico-Cultural:
atribuyendo significados al inglés a lo largo de la infancia y la adolescencia

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes a reflection on the teaching of the English language based on Cultural-Historical Theory - in Portuguese, Teoria Histórico-Cultural (THC), drawing on the studies of Vygotsky, Leontiev, and Luria. Grounded in a theoretical review, the text highlights central concepts such as mediation, zones of development (actual, proximal, and potential), internalization, appropriation, thought and language, study activity, and consciousness. Based on the Russian term *obutchénie*, the authors argue that teaching and learning are interdependent and dialectical processes that require intentional and contextualized teacher intervention. The work emphasizes the importance of the personal meanings students attribute to the English learning process, defending that intrinsic motivation and affectivity are fundamental elements for human development. Language teaching must be connected to the students' reality, integrating their interests, cultural repertoires, and prior experiences. By valuing the teacher's role as a mediator and promoter of meaningful environments, the study points toward the construction of more humanizing pedagogical practices. It concludes that the success of English teaching, through the lenses of THC, depends on the articulation between learners' subjective meanings and the social significances of the school and cultural context in which they are embedded.

Keywords: Cultural-Historical Theory. Meaning making process. English language teaching.

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RESUMO

Este artigo propõe uma reflexão sobre o ensino da língua inglesa a partir da Teoria Histórico-Cultural (THC), com base nos estudos de Vigotski, Leontiev e Luria. Fundamentado em uma revisão teórica, o texto destaca conceitos centrais como mediação, zonas de desenvolvimento (real, proximal e potencial), interiorização, apropriação, pensamento e linguagem, atividade de estudo e consciência. A partir do termo russo *obutchénie*, os autores defendem que ensino e aprendizagem são processos interdependentes e dialéticos, que exigem uma atuação docente intencional e contextualizada. O trabalho enfatiza a importância dos sentidos pessoais atribuídos pelos estudantes ao processo de aprendizagem do inglês, defendendo que a motivação intrínseca e a afetividade são elementos fundamentais para o desenvolvimento humano. O ensino da língua deve estar vinculado à realidade dos estudantes, articulando seus interesses, repertórios culturais e experiências prévias. Ao valorizar o papel do professor como mediador e promotor de ambientes significativos, o estudo aponta para a construção de práticas pedagógicas mais humanizadoras. Conclui-se que o sucesso do ensino de inglês, à luz da THC, depende da articulação entre os sentidos subjetivos dos aprendizes e os significados sociais do contexto escolar e cultural em que estão inseridos.

Palavras-chave: Teoria Histórico-Cultural. Processo de atribuição de sentidos. Ensino de língua inglesa.

RESUMEN

Este artículo propone una reflexión sobre la enseñanza del idioma inglés desde la Teoría Histórico-Cultural (THC), basada en los estudios de Vygotski, Leontiev y Luria. Fundamentado en una revisión teórica, el texto destaca conceptos centrales como mediación, zonas de desarrollo (real, proximal y potencial), interiorización, apropiación, pensamiento y lenguaje, actividad de estudio y conciencia. A partir del término ruso *obutchénie*, los autores defienden que la enseñanza y el aprendizaje son procesos interdependientes y dialéticos que requieren una actuación docente intencional y contextualizada. El trabajo enfatiza la importancia de los sentidos personales que los estudiantes atribuyen al proceso de aprendizaje del inglés, defendiendo que la motivación intrínseca y la afectividad son elementos fundamentales para el desarrollo humano. La enseñanza del idioma debe estar vinculada a la realidad de los estudiantes, articulando sus intereses, repertorios culturales y experiencias previas. Al valorar el papel del profesor como mediador y promotor de ambientes significativos, el estudio apunta a la construcción de prácticas pedagógicas más humanizadoras. Se concluye que el éxito de la enseñanza del inglés, a la luz de la THC, depende de la articulación entre los sentidos subjetivos de los aprendices y los significados sociales del contexto escolar y cultural en que están inmersos.

Palabras clave: Teoría Histórico-Cultural. Proceso de atribución de sentidos. Enseñanza de la lengua inglesa.

1 Introduction

This investigation originates from a doctoral study, characterizing itself, therefore, as an excerpt from a thesis (Bortolotti, 2025) that in its inaugural chapter presents the theoretical framework that grounds it: Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Theory - in Portuguese, *Teoria Histórico-Cultural* (THC) - and its concepts, especially those that apply to the teaching and learning process of English in childhood and adolescence. A literature review is proposed due to its potential to provide a broad understanding of the facts, encompassing a collection of findings from diverse sources. The research, also known as state-of-the-art, favors a comprehensive interpretation that would pose a challenge for a single author to investigate, reflect on, and write about (Gil, 2022).

Reservations regarding the use of central terms, such as the teaching and learning process and meaning and significance (in Portuguese, *sentido e significado*), dissociated from common sense or other theories, are gathered in this article. Emphasis is also placed on complementary concepts such as mediation, higher and lower functions (elementary); zones of development (proximal, actual, and potential); internalization; appropriation; thought and language; consciousness; study activity (including its motives and ends); and action. Furthermore, ties are woven with theories that align with the one in focus.

The initial glimpse of THC was the responsibility of Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934), who composed the group known as the Troika in synergy with Alexander Romanovich Luria (1902-1977) and Alexei Nikolaevich Leontiev (1903-1979). Anchored in Marx, Vygotsky was concerned with the methodological collapse of Psychology, which he believed lacked historical foundations that could be supplemented by sociological and economic concepts. He sought caution when relating sciences without stifling Psychology with the method and, not content with the description of reality, set out to explain and transform it (Asbahr, 2011).

THC is defined as a psychological approach theory, but not a psychologizing one, namely: it does not blame and label children precipitately, increasing the frequency of often undue diagnoses of developmental delay or, at its extreme level, medicalization. Instead of the idealized, individualized look that embraces each subject in their complexity, some approaches, in an attempt to singularize, trace profiles of students, teachers, families, and/or educational institutions (Asbahr, 2011).

2 Weavings of the Cultural-Historical Theory and English Teaching for Children and Adolescents

Since the last century, Patto (1992) sought to deconstruct historical markers imprinted in Psychology while it was being constituted as a science. Before the construction of psychological knowledge, the Anthropology of bourgeois ideologues used to busy itself with scientifically proving that some were born to think while others only to act. Later, Differential Psychology took charge of elucidating the innate intellectual superiority of white, civilized, and rich people in relation to non-whites, primitives, and the poor. Psychometry, through metric scales of intelligence and personality tests, explained the supposedly adjusted and winners in opposition to those named maladjusted and losers. This pejorative representation, from the point of view of the dominant class and in consonance with its interests, was initially embraced by Psychology and by the theory of cultural deprivation itself and applied by those who ignore the complexity of life contexts in peripheral neighborhoods, thereby ratifying social inequality.

Conversely, the theoretical conception based on history and culture inspires the understanding of learning as a joint mediation process of cognitive acts with social and cultural activities, looking at the context of the subjects and their subsidies as allies in the transformation of the interpsychic into the intrapsychic, in the continuous search for human development (Rubtsov, 2003).

In Vygotsky (2019), mediating - social relations - modifies higher psychological functions. First, it is convenient to start the explanation of functions based on the lower or elementary ones, such as involuntary attention. As the nomenclature itself suggests, they are less sophisticated and generally do not depend on the other, although they are strongly influenced by hereditary factors. The higher ones, however, are linked to the mediated and have little to do with genetic inheritance, which establishes itself as a simple precondition.

The richness of development is notable; it does not occur merely by realizing, combining, and modifying hereditary traits for the new to erupt, while still reflecting what is of the genetic load. With mediation, social relations evolve into psychological functions: primarily lower, then higher, natural, then cultural (Vygotsky, 2000). Cubero and Luque

(2014) emphasize the leap from one to the other as qualitative, non-progressive but innovative combinations for the constitution of the genuine human being.

Memory, consciousness, perception, attention, speech, thought, will, and emotion are characterized as higher, which continuously associate for the (re)formulation of the psychological apparatus. In the educational system, the teacher's promotion of situations with the potential to develop higher psychological functions leads to a reorganization of the subject in relation to their actions, their consciousness of themselves, and the reality to which they belong. This weaving establishes an inseparable unity, decomposed into social situations of development and experiences that relate through the facets of the environment and the subject (Andrada et al, 2019).

In his language, Vygotsky adopted the term *obuchenie* to refer to education. However, by using such a word in Russian, he intended to comprehend the tangle that is the teaching and learning process, always written separately. The translation of terms adopted in Russian to other languages can fail in precision, cause distortions, or even be limited to shallow descriptions. When written with a hyphen uniting the two words, teaching-learning can indicate a linearity that the author does not attribute to the process, since it is not an automatic learning of the student based on what the teacher teaches (Correia et al, 2020).

In Brazilian education, the initial milestone of THC application occurred through the work entitled Historical-Critical Pedagogy (Saviani, 2011), which rethought the role of the school in relation to its location and brought benefits mainly to the popular classes. Years later, the popularization of the use of this theory was guaranteed in the educational area by Gasparin (2020), in the work where the author introduced stages for teaching work under this bias. Among the five listed, the second, problematization, is worth citing for the connection it can establish with the meaning attribution process. In the practice of problematization, the sensitization of students to the reasons for learning the content is seen as indispensable; it propels the search for knowledge and imprints the need for meaning in the teaching and learning process.

Kramsch (2014) recognizes the tension between what is taught in schools and the knowledge needed for the real world, and embraces teachers' indecision about which format to follow. In Canagarajah's (2023) view, if the intention is communication,

teaching focused on norms and grammar is ineffective. The alternative would be the joint construction of knowledge, allowing emergent repertoires, contexts, and meanings for the language - after all, English is not homogeneous.

The school, through the educator, could not escape promoting the investigation of the reasons for the child to attend it, take its subjects, retain them, and apply their contents. The alignment of expectations regarding teaching must be built and maintained between teachers and students. In his study, Ramos (2003) invited trainee teachers to take the perspective of both parties regarding the relevance of English. The future professionals stated that, from the teacher's perspective, the importance would be summarized in teaching written and spoken language; working with vocabulary and idiomatic expressions; proposing new learning while also valuing old ones; and sparking interest and promoting student development.

When asked to think as students of the language, they highlighted the university entrance exam (vestibular); success in life; learning songs, swear words, and nicknames; access to other knowledge, video games, and the Internet; and even the possibility of students not considering English important. This research (2003) awakened undergraduates' empathy, who, even before entering the job market, were prompted to reflect. However, this exercise of thinking and rethinking the theme should integrate the daily life of active teachers.

Far from being responsible for bringing the answers, education professionals would have their role linked to stimulating students in search of pertinent reasons for themselves, remembering that knowledge is subject to clear and immediate applications or in a future tangle (Bock; Furtado; Teixeira, 2018). Consequently, the proposed approach, besides enabling children to represent the task for themselves and imprint a personal motive in learning, grants them a feeling of autonomy regarding integrating general learning objectives to theirs and promotes immediate and latent interest in knowledge, making a collaborative classroom environment viable and contributing to the teacher's performance in fulfilling their chair (Miras, 2014).

Far beyond a mere supporting role, the questioning, intentional, challenging, and planned presence of the education professional is considered crucial in the path between already matured functions and those in progress, presupposing the construction of a favorable zone of proximal development (ZPD) so that the

potential can be reached (Bolzan; Fighera, 2011). Erlo and Gregolin (2020) share techniques such as scaffolding to instruct and guide their learners so they can develop in their learning process. As in a construction, where the scaffold supports reaching higher levels, the teacher would be responsible for supporting the search for wisdom, which closely aligns with the ZPD concept.

In the ZPD, it is the dynamic between the interpsychological and the intra, shared by the being and the environment, determined by the subject's development level and the teaching and learning process they experience (Cubero; Luque, 2014). The conceptions of actual development zone (ADZ), in which the subject is carrying out certain activities with autonomy, and ZPD, in which the figure of the teacher or a more experienced peer supports the child's progress to the potential development zone, explain the relevance of the participation of other elements in learning (Vygotsky, 2012) and, thus, not only the school but equally the family emerge as fundamental pillars for the child's learning and development (Caetano; Yaegashi, 2014) - although this work opts for a cut of the school environment for data generation.

Allied to the zones, internalization and appropriation serve to transition from social to psychological phenomena. Also known as internalization, the reconstruction that builds the individual consists of a transformation, despite being mistakenly associated with a transfer. Basically, the process could be explained as an external, reconstructed operation that begins at an internal level, transforming into an interpersonal process that then becomes an intrapersonal one. To achieve the psychological result, group elaboration would consist of phases of instability caused by attempts to calibrate an accumulation of events towards evolution (Cubero; Luque, 2014).

In turn, adopting the comparison between concepts once more to explain, the appropriation of human culture by the subject would be described in opposition to adaptation, in which the subject adjusts to the demands of the environment (Cubero; Luque, 2014). By making the manifestations of the surroundings their own, actively reconstructing them, there is an overcoming of adaptation. We locate appropriation in the context; from it, for example, a word is not just internalized but also externalizes thought, subjectivating it (Vygotsky, 2012).

By dwelling on the theme of language subjectivation, Picanço (2021) names the classroom and everyday life outside it, pedagogical practices and resources, and the freely circulating discourses about the English language as elements of the process. In development, the child internalizes social language, making it personal; thus, language is a personal and, at the same time, social process, and the relationship between the individual and society is understood as a dialectical process, rather than a polarization.

Thought and language occupy notoriety on Vygotsky's stage of provocations, to the point of being assigned as the nomenclature of the work pointed out as primarily responsible for its diffusion in the West. Vygotsky (2012) describes how, initially, language is a lower function, emotive and of animal origin, and only later is it elevated to a higher, rational, and social order. Thought, however, is founded on language and, since its origin, assumes a higher function. When acquiring rational language (no longer the emotive one), it is capable of thinking and acting intentionally on the environment. If there was a phase in which the child only knew what was presented to them, later they begin to seek to fulfill their interests, their restlessness.

Through speech, the child overcomes the immediate limitations of their environment and prepares for future activity. Through systematized reasoning, they plan and control their behavior and that of others. These are ideas, concepts, and judgments that organize and integrate perception, memory, and problem-solving ability (Vygotsky, 2012).

To favor this development, in the classroom, a language cannot be taught with loose words and content; it must be proposed in relation to the environment in which the student lives, their interests, and the concepts they master in their mother tongue. This care refers to the meaning-attribution process, which occurs when the learner practices the foreign language through actions they perform in their daily lives. Furthermore, there must be an association with previously studied subjects, whenever possible, even in other disciplines, related to the field of interest of those involved (Costa, 2016).

The concept of personal meaning is fundamental in THC and is briefly addressed by Vygotsky (2012) himself, and is further developed by Leontiev. In Leontiev (1983), one can find support for starting a discussion of the definition of meaning, comparing it with the word significance (significado), since the two

expressions are often confused. First, it is worth highlighting the non-existence of one unassisted by the other: there is no pure meaning; they all come from a significance. Meaning expresses significance and is grounded in it. Asbahr and Souza (2014) point out the meaning expressed in the individual's subjective connection with social significance and human activities. While, in significance, a reasonable stability can be perceived, in meaning, modification is a constant based on the subject's life, translating the relationship of each one with the conscious phenomena.

The personal attribution, in turn, is composed of meanings of two orders: existing and possible. The palpable and already acquired results are called existing meanings, while the possible ones are still in the maturation phase of proximal development, moving toward mastering knowledge autonomously. Both are the result of the study activity, in this case, demonstrating the evolution of English appropriation. This rooting is part of the core of the present work because it is an indicator of learning; it is the difference in the child when entering and leaving school, which over the school days reflects in human development (Asbahr; Souza, 2014).

In this strand, the understanding of consciousness is broadened by being conceived as integral rather than a mere summation of basic processes such as perception, memory, and attention. The process of conscientization of a content permeates its place in the subject's activity, so that only the objects of actions integrating the activity's structure can be conscientized. Alternatively, the discordance between the end and the motive could be called the inauthenticity of consciousness (Leontiev, 1983).

When guided by third-party references, this develops alienation, as in the case of students bombarded with content that does not answer their real needs or interests, causing a feeling of duality for the subjects (Moretti, Asbahr, Rigon, 2011). This phenomenon was already noted by Marx (1989), who described the dissociation between the ideal theoretical activity and the material practical activity, imprinted by capitalist society, driving workers to respond with a struggle against the bourgeoisie. At that time, he exemplified the distortion of work driven by salary rather than by weaving, spinning, mining, and building. He conceived that such fragmentation propagated from the commodification of the individual to their class.

Still, for Moretti, Asbahr, and Rigon (2011), understanding consciousness enables understanding human activity, because the two unite in an inseparable dialectical unity. Consciousness would be formed by sensible content, social significance and personal meaning, while motives, actions, and operations would structure the activity (Leontiev, 1983). Activity in the Marxist perspective could be divided into three founding elements: orientation toward an objective, the use of mediating instruments, and a cultural element as the final product of physical or symbolic existence (Zanella, 2004).

In other words, Moretti, Asbahr, and Rigon (2011) consider intentionality the basis of the activity, which is executed to satisfy needs awakened in humans by the environments they live in. While for animals demands would be exclusively biological, for humans the continuous process of emergence and satisfaction of needs would add increasingly elaborated interests.

When it comes to children and adolescents, the main activity is usually schooling, which develops based on the place the child occupies in the system of social relations and the historical context they live in (Vygotsky; Luria; Leontiev, 2016). It is pertinent to distinguish between this activity (study activity) and the learning activity, which can mistakenly sound like synonyms, especially due to translation errors from Russian. While a study activity is structured based on delimited purposes and contents, the learning activity is found in all everyday activities of the being. Valuing the use of the former is even a political act, a recognition of the complexity of the teaching and learning process, rather than arguments that describe learning as intrinsic to the child's capacities, devaluing the work of education professionals (Davidov, 1988).

Aiub (2021) explains that encountering historical markers of the previous language is essential for learning a new language. When a student encounters new communicative aspects, they refer back to their accumulated prior knowledge to construct meanings. It is important to remember that it is not about imprinting old attributions but producing new ones with backing.

The concept of action is added, which, although not the focus of attention for Vygotsky, is described by Leontiev (2004) in opposition to activity. Activity is explicated by the latter author as of greater complexity since it satisfies a motive of the being,

whereas the function of action is merely to answer to the activity's motive. Zanella (2004) cites that although action structures the human psyche, it is the activity that transcends, expanding the potential for reading and intervening.

Thus, the conscientization of the study objects by children implies the relationship of the personal meaning of the activity with the activity's motive, the trigger of the attitude, as well as the end, the immediate purpose guiding the action. Vygotsky (1978) illustrates the concepts through the context of a study activity: a reading. As for its motives, hypothetically, it could be the pure achievement of a good grade, preparation for a professional future, or the end of assimilating the written content.

Motives can be associated with their genesis: meaning-generating motives (personal), truly effective motives, stimulus motives (external), or only understandable motives. It is precisely toward the first group of motives, of the personal sphere, that this study focuses on. External ones are understood as mere signalers, propelling negatively or positively, but without characterizing their own meaning. It is considering these facts that the present investigation focuses on the study of personal motives in order to support pedagogical practices in accordance with the principles proposed by Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev (2016).

In terms of the success of the teaching and learning process, Littlewood (2006) argues for the effectiveness of intrinsic motivation compared to external rewards or punitive strategies. Some pressures regarding the expressly objective motives of learning English and students' grades, rather than their human formation, can raise concerns. In counterflow, language teaching is defended in favor of cultural formation. Lemes (2019) fosters the critical evolution of human beings who speak more than one language, capable of primarily respecting and valuing the culture of origin, so as to then know others.

Orlando (2021) also values the opportunity to reflect on one's own customs in the face of new ones, approaching English classes as rich environments for debates on culture, identity, and discourse. However, the author goes further, outlining themes that permeate classes and warrant further work, such as the anti-racist struggle and the establishment of positive affective relations with foreign languages. Affectivity gains strength in her production within a broad context of critical linguistic education, where the cognitive dimension cannot be superimposed on the student's emotions and feelings, at the risk of maintaining social inequality.

In conclusion, it is stressed that addressing affect preserves the scientificity of Pedagogy. Fávero and Consaltér (2018) believe that recognizing teachers' formative processes is not questionable when addressing feelings, assuming an innate devotion or vocation of this profession. The authors' approach is validated by staying distant from the Pedagogy of Affect or Love and from the shallow interpretation of these as self-sufficient vehicles for the teaching-learning process.

This scientific production aligns with Carneiro and Costa (2021), a study that links affectivity to empathy and points out that both are primordial for more assertive education. In this, the professional teacher is capable of building a healthy relationship with their student body, to the point of eradicating coercive behaviors. With care for the students' affects, less resistance to proposed activities and a lower incidence of unpredictable behaviors can be observed. In the field of linguistic education, Quast (2003) notes the presence of other previously known repertoires as a means of involving emotions in the teaching and learning process. Therefore, over time, the valorization of the mother tongue is included to promote student security and avoid unnecessary frustration, as it tends to facilitate the teaching and learning trajectory.

3 Concluding remarks

For the sake of conclusion, an approach focused on the student's thinking about learning is suggested. It distances itself from concerns about what their guardians think of the school's role, a concern especially common in some contexts of private education, where a buying-and-selling relationship sometimes seems to be established with parents, who become the final consumers of the teaching merchandise (Scheifer, 2009).

By centering on the students' discourse, there is no intention, under any hypothesis, to diminish or discard the complex network of influences falling upon them. As Bronfenbrenner (2011) sustains in his ecological view of phenomena, understanding human development requires the interactional study of the process, the person, the context, and time. His approach is organized into four systems, beginning with the microsystem of daily face-to-face relations, where the subject spends most of their time and receives influences that can promote behavioral

changes, as well as development itself. In the mesosystem, such microsystems are superimposed, connected, after all we are exposed to diverse environments, and this summation outlines our contours.

The next two contexts have in common that they are not immediate, yet they print traces even if the subject is not effectively inserted into them. In the exosystem, two or more environments mesh and contribute to human development, even if the individual is not inserted in at least one of these. Finally, the macrosystem brings together all the previous ones within a given culture or social structure, which provide experiences similar to those that compose them. Beliefs, resources, opportunities, ways, and life trajectories, as well as their possible changes, are confronted. A fitting example for this study would be educational and linguistic policies, which unveil possibilities from the proposed services.

The location of participants involved in contextual processes and temporal interactions is a concern in this literature review, with the subjects themselves as the primary axis. An auxiliary explanation for Bronfenbrenner's (2011) ecosystem can be provided from Gestalt, the theory of psychotherapist and psychiatrist Fritz Perls that deals with the concepts of figure and ground, as well as the necessary harmony between both for the healthy functioning of the individual (Orgler; Lima; D'acri, 2012). By bringing this framework closer to the educational field, Morais and Brito (2018) conclude on the contribution of broadened pedagogical practices beyond the cut of the student presenting themselves in the classroom, contemplating their entire environment, their ground.

In conclusion, Miras (2014) helps synthesize the teaching and learning process in light of THC as a summation of two groups of factors. The interpersonal ones, like the relationships among students, with the teacher, and between both, and the concrete conditions: physical facilities, classroom organization, didactic methodology, evaluative activities, legislation, and policies. Intrapersonally, the attributions of cause through the eyes of the student as external or internal, and the self-systems: self-concept, academic self-concept, and possible selves.

From the THC perspective, the proposal for the educator would be to base their practice on situations pertinent to the students, promoting their dignity, courage, and self-confidence - feelings and emotions that are validated in this theoretical excerpt, but

whose space is not limited to the facet of theories, extending its greater relevance to pedagogical practices.

It is hoped that the study, concluding with these findings, will continue to inform pedagogical practices, the scientific field, and educational public policies. By addressing the meanings expressed by students, it is estimated that knowledge and promotion of such attribution lead to an integral and humanizing teaching of languages from the perspective of children and adolescents themselves. As a denouement, it is postulated that the intrapsychic conditions of personal meanings and the interpsychic patterns, revealed in the social significances of the sociocultural context, that is, in pedagogical practices and public policies (represented by laws and guiding documents), are linked to the construction of meanings for English.

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