The Pedagogical Imperative for Teacher Educators: A Constructive Reflection

Olga Esteve

Retired Tenured University Lecturer, University Pompeu Fabra, Barcelona, Spain

Abstract

A balanced interrelation between theory and practice is still often missing out in many (language) teacher education programs (Esteve, 2018; Lantolf & Esteve, 2019). Hence the need to critically analyze teacher educators' professional practice and rethink it. This paper presents a deep reflection upon the difficulties and the possibilities of promoting a balanced interrelation between theory and practice in formative practices and is primarily addressed to (language) teacher educators who are willing to engage in a transformative process. Along this process, teacher educators are to become aware both of the specific core teacher education competencies that are proved to be crucial for ensuring a dialectical relationship between practice and theory and their underlying core concepts, which eventually determine how the corresponding teaching actions related to those competencies are to be performed (Esteve & Alsina, 2024). Together, they make up the pedagogical imperative for (language) teacher educators I advocate for, in order to ensure the most fruitful dialectic relationship possible between theory and practice.

Keywords: *Teacher Education, Praxis-Based Perspective, Reciprocity, Pedagogical Imperative*

¹Introduction

The relationship between theory and practice can be reciprocal rather than one-way street whereby theory informs, or is applied to practice, but practice does not inform, or apply to, theory. In fact, from a praxis-based perspective, which is at the foundation

---

* Corresponding author.
E-mail address: olga.esteve@upf.edu

of Vygotsky's theory, the relationship is cyclic: theory-practice-theory, etc. or indeed, practice-theory-practice, etc. (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014, p. 5)

I start my reflection with the previous quotation, as the notion of *praxis* has been and is still being the backbone both of my work as a language teacher educator and of my research on teacher professional development. As I have repeatedly noted in several publications, *significant* language teacher education necessarily has to entail a balanced interrelation between theory and practice (Esteve, 2018; Lantolf & Esteve, 2019). To me, *significant* language teacher education involves two aspects. First, it identifies what language teachers (from now on both pre-service and in-service teachers, unless stated otherwise) know and can already do adequately with their internal resources. Second, it spots what they need to learn, and, on this basis, stimulates and helps them learn it well by pointing them in the right direction through well-organized systematic explicit conceptual mediation (Esteve, 2018; Esteve et al., 2018). Thus, significant language teacher education entails a dynamic process of knowledge co-construction qualitatively involving both teachers and teacher educators.

Unfortunately, this balanced interrelation between theory and practice is still often missing out in many (language) teacher education programs. Hence the need to critically analyze teacher educators' professional practice and rethink it. Thus, my reflection is primarily addressed to (language) teacher educators who are willing to engage in a transformative process.

To explore this process, I will start defining the very concept of *transformation*. To do so, I will draw on the Hegelian concept of *aufheben*, which in German refers to a sublimation process. In its course, something gets transformed, while still retaining its essence, which is now expressed in a different manner. This also applies to teachers' and teacher educators' professional development, where, by virtue of a dialectic relationship, something mutates from what is known into something new.

Language teacher educators' transformation requires much more than just the will to do, namely deep scientific knowledge not only about language and language learning and teaching, but also about teacher professional development (Esteve & Alsina, 2024). As for my own transformation as a teacher educator, it entailed a self-inquiry process in two phases. Its outcome is the *pedagogical imperative* for (language) teacher educators that I outline at the end of this reflection (conclusion section).

In the first phase, I analyzed my own formative practices and those of my teams on the basis of three reflective questions aimed to ascertain how teacher professional development unfolds, namely:

- *What does happen in the mind of pre-service language teachers throughout their initial training?*
- *What does happen in the mind of in-service language teachers throughout a formative intervention and beyond?*
- *How are teachers' knowledge, beliefs and emotions affected in both cases?*

First Discussion

Initial answers to the three questions above were brought about through contributions from two areas: *teacher cognition* and *sociocultural psychology*.

Olga Esteve

Teacher cognition contributed the conception of teacher professional development as entailing a dynamic interaction between cognition, context (whether professional, cultural, social or historical) and personal experience regarding schooling, contextual factors, training and classroom teaching practice (Borg, 2015). According to this conception, teacher professional development represents a complex process embracing the whole of the teacher's persona, i.e. their experiences and pre-understandings as well as their interpretations of the activities they engage in (Johnson, 2009; Korthagen, 2001). At the onset of formative programs for language teachers, though, these tend to show inadequate or superficial pre-understandings about language teaching and learning (Johnson, 2009). Accordingly, they must be provided by the teacher educator with adequate and deep scientific understandings not only about language teaching and learning, but also about language itself.

As for *sociocultural psychology*, two contributions proved crucial: first, the conception of learning (both as a student or as a teacher) as a *process of gradual conceptualization*; second, the role played in it by *concepts*, be they *spontaneous* or *scientific*, as knowledge structuring and orientation tools (Kozulin, 2024). The following example, presented by Vygotsky himself, helped me comprehend the essence of the interrelation between theory and practice. A child that apprehends the relationship between the term "apple" and the fruit denominated by it knows what an apple is, but he is not conscious of this knowledge. The reason is that the child lacks any capacity of abstraction and, therefore, of conceptualization. This, in turn, involves both *spontaneous everyday concepts*, such as "apple", and conscious *scientific concepts*, such as "exploitation". The difference between both is twofold: a) spontaneous concepts arise from the child's direct experience within a given situation; scientific concepts, on the contrary, are arrived at through abstraction from that very situation; b) spontaneous concepts are developed through experience along a bottom-up process that goes from concrete to abstract; scientific concepts, on the contrary, are instilled through instruction in a top-down process that goes from abstract to concrete.

Relating this example to teacher education made me aware of the reason for the asymmetric interrelation between theory and practice that still holds in most formative programs. In such programs, *scientific concepts* are introduced following a top-down process that goes from abstract to concrete. This prevents teachers from making these concepts their own, as they are not given the chance to interpret them from their own perspective. Following Arievitch (2017), it is assumed that, by merely presenting and explaining a scientific concept, this will be immediately internalized. But "internalization is not about the transfer of 'what is outside the mind or person' to 'inside' the individual" (Arievitch, 2017, p. 94). Rather, it encompasses a complex process of meaning reconstruction on the part of that individual.

Relying on these considerations, I realized that, if a *concept* is a universal mental construct organizing knowledge, the interpretation of this concept will necessarily depend on the image that it raises in the conscience of each individual, i.e. on their mental reconstruction of such concept. Hence the relevance of the fact that, as stated by Vygotsky, *sense* prevails over *meaning*.

I understand by *meaning* the culturally established denotation of a given term, whereas *sense* is broader and includes the connotative associations that this term evokes in our conscience. By virtue of such distinction, teachers will tend to perceive scientific concepts, especially if labelled in too specific and not immediately accessible terms, as too abstract and

far apart from their own mental representations, unless they are explicitly encouraged to instill *sense* relevant to them into such concepts.

This brought the first phase of my self-inquiry process to an end. Two conclusions about the interrelation between theory and practice were the outcome, namely:

1) (Language) teacher education programs must deal not only with *abilities* and *contents* but above all with *concepts*.

- *Abilities* are inborn or acquired aptitudes that are necessary to attain a certain goal and can be developed through practice. Abilities apply to concrete actions.

- *Contents* comprise the information provided to learners for them to reach their goals.

- *Concepts*, unlike contents, represent psychological tools that make conceptual knowledge possible and that orient the way actions are performed.

2) (Language) teacher educators must depart from the *spontaneous concepts* of language teachers, in order to link them to the *scientific concepts* validated by educational research. Only so will they promote efficient and significant teaching-learning. Thereby teachers will be enabled to informedly construct personal and practical knowledge by departing from their own spontaneous concepts, as they enrich or redefine them with the help of explicit conceptual mediation carried out by the teacher educator.

These two conclusions led on to the second phase of my self-inquiry process, which was now guided by the following two reflective questions:

- *What scientific concepts must be introduced by the language teacher educator, in order to ensure language teaching practices that promote efficient language learning?*

- *How must these scientific concepts be introduced and significantly worked on, so that language teachers can appropriate them as principles that regulate their own classroom practices?*

Second Discussion

What scientific concepts must be introduced by the language teacher educator? They are the so-called *core concepts*, which both teacher educators and teachers must appropriate, in order to ensure good language teaching practices. Core concepts related to language teaching and learning can be divided into four groups (Esteve et al., 2021):

a) Concepts related to a *holistic concept of language*. To them belong such concepts as *language as social practice, learner as social agent, communication, text genre and text type* (North et al., 2017).

b) Concepts related to the *socio-culturally based learning theory*. To them belong such concepts as *learning as development, learner agency, verbalization, conceptualization, internalization, creative reconstruction, self-regulation* and *perezhivanie*.

c) Concepts related to the *socio-culturally based teaching theory*. To them belong concepts about teaching as a whole (be at school or in teacher education) such as *affordance*, *prolepsis, double stimulation*, *mediation, Zone of Real, Proximal and*

Potential Development, spontaneous concepts, scientific concepts, contingent interaction, Intermental Zone, OBA, SCOBA and *dynamic assessment.*

d) Concepts that specifically ground a *language teaching theory.* To this last group belong concepts that: a) explicitly address competence-based language teaching (as shown in the CEFR), such as *action-oriented approach, competence and assessment for learning*; b) stem from sociocultural theory, such as *reflective action-oriented approach, (trans)linguistic conceptualization* and *didactic or pedagogical sequence* (Esteve et al., 2017), and finally *dynamic assessment.*

In my experience as a teacher educator, most of these concepts do not come up in any of the conventional standards that describe what a good language teacher is to do (well). Indeed, these mostly list up a series of language teaching actions that every teacher should possess to promote effective learning among their students. No mention is made of the underlying core concepts that will eventually determine how the corresponding teaching actions are to be performed. Instead, those standards seem to rely on tricks and strategies. Thereby, they overlook the fact that, as Arievitch (2017) points out, learners (in our case, teachers) will hardly achieve a genuine understanding of a given domain (in our case, language teaching) if solely provided with tricks and strategies. The reason is that both are used depending on one's own understanding of the domain in question (Esteve et al., 2021). Hence the overall relevance of *core concepts* as tools for conceptual self-mediation (Esteve & Alsina, 2024). Indeed, they regulate teacher performance and, thus, "consistently yield the intended professional outcomes of the teachers" (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014, p. 212).

Let us now see an example of core concepts that underlie the teaching actions related to a teaching competence. The example relates to the core concepts underlying the teaching competence *Creating a supportive atmosphere that invites learners to take part in speaking activities* (Newby et al., 2007). As noted in Esteve et al. (2021), this competence encapsulates such teaching actions as 'choosing work dynamics promoting significant learner participation' or 'involving learners in the selection of didactic materials.' Both actions, in turn, will be only adequately carried out, if teachers have previously appropriated the core concepts ensuring a deep understanding of what a *supportive atmosphere* means, i.e. concepts such as learner agency, perezhivanie, Intermental Zone and contingent interaction.

As demonstrated by Esteve et al. (2018) and Lantolf and Esteve (2019), language teachers that have thoroughly comprehended and internalized the mentioned core concepts will be enabled to engage in quality classroom practices far beyond the formative period. Both language teacher educators and language teachers are, thus, to master these concepts because of their orienting potential.

This applies especially to the core concepts in groups b and c above, which are related to a general theory about teaching and learning. As such, these concepts are by no means exclusive of the language classroom, but can orient teaching in other learning settings. One of them is teacher education, where such concepts prove relevant in that they regulate the teaching actions of teacher educators, as shown in table 2 below.

How must the core concepts be introduced by the teacher educator and significantly worked on, so that language teachers can appropriate them as principles that regulate their own classroom practice? The answer to this question can be found in Gal'perin's educational framework called *Systemic-Theoretical Instruction* (Gal'perin, 1992), and which L2-SCT

researchers generally refer to as *Concept-Based Instruction* (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014; Poehner & Lantolf, 2024).

Following Gal'perin's educational theory, one can state that in the learning process mental actions arise when students act upon external objects while performing learning activities. This happens along a four phase-process, as depicted in the graphic representation in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Spiral Model (Arievitch & Haenen, 2005, p.160)
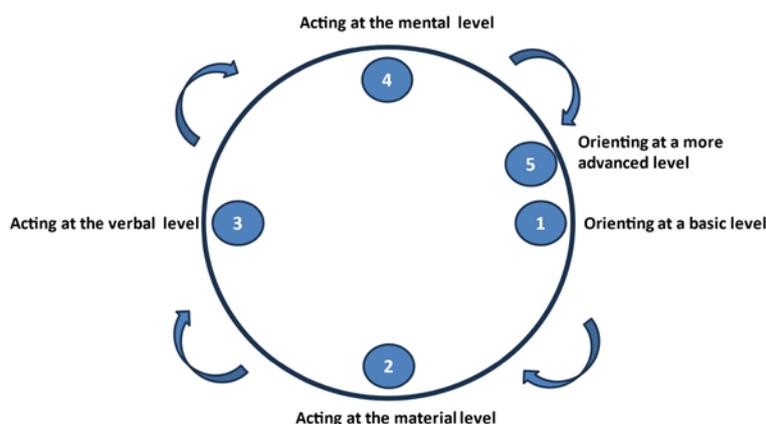
In the first phase, *orientation*, learners are presented with an 'orienting chart' (SCOBA: *Schema of a Complete Orienting Basis of an Action*). The SCOBA provides them with as complete as possible information both about the execution of an action and about its conceptual basis. In the second phase, SCOBAs help learners initially execute that action at the material level.

In the third phase, *verbalization*, learners engage in verbalized thinking. Thereby, they become aware of their reasoning and eventually come to self-regulate their own behavior. Verbalized thinking can be either *communicative* or *dialogic. Communicative thinking* helps learners bring out their own ideas about the very contents of the activity. *Dialogic thinking* allows for self-reflection as an inner tool enabling them to subjectively relate to themselves.

In the fourth phase, *mental action*, learners actually carry out the corresponding mental action. They do so through dialogic thinking about the concept that underlies that action. Once such thinking is no longer necessary for learners to use the corresponding concept, this can be considered as apprehended. Then, they will be able to creatively generalize its comprehension and, hence, to successfully apply it to new contexts.

The four-phase process just described represents a 'spiral model'. In it, "the spiral indicates the students' increasing internalization of an action while it passes through the sequence of levels in mastering a given task" (Arievitch & Haenen, 2005, p. 165). However, "in real learning situations (…) –depending on the action to be learned, the specifics of the learning task, and, in particular, the learners' prior knowledge'– the steps may be abbreviated, combined together, or some even skipped" (Arievitch & Haenen 2005, p. 165).

If we apply this spiral model to language teacher education, no steps need, in my opinion, to be abbreviated. Rather, if spontaneous concepts are to be adequately linked to the core concepts described and if these are to be successfully internalized by the teachers, it is necessary to make two changes in the previous model:

      a) To include a new phase, the 0 phase, that precedes the first one distinguished by Gal'perin and depicted in the spiral model of Arievitch & Haenen (2005).

      b) To expand the gal'perian first phase by including in it two steps.

These changes are visible in figure 2, which depicts the cyclical model that is characteristic of the so-called Barcelona Formative Model (BFM) for language teachers' education (Esteve, 2018):

Figure 2

Cyclical BFM Model for Language Teachers' Education (Esteve, 2018)
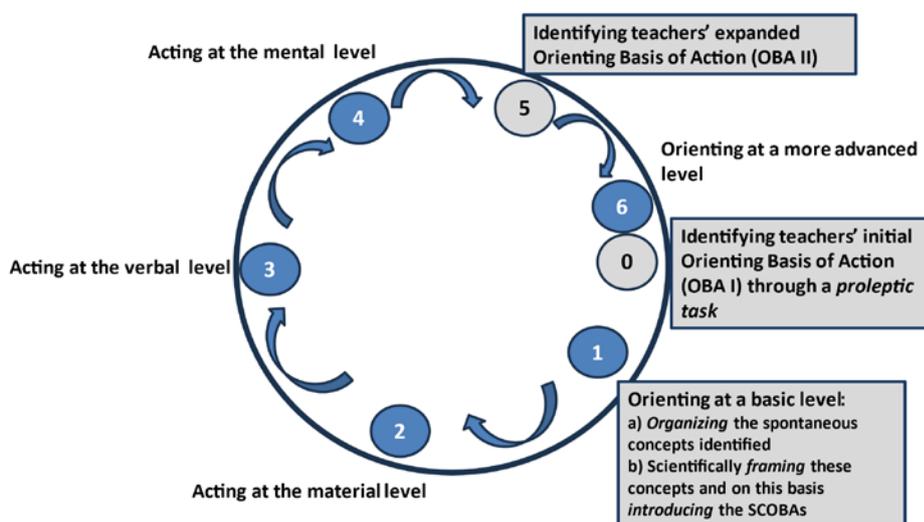
As can be seen from Figure 2, the first phase of the cyclical BFM model, which aims to orient teachers at a basic level, consists of two steps. This phase is preceded by a so-called 0 phase, which aims to identify the initial teachers' OBA. The 0 phase also specifies the kind of learning task through which the teachers are to become aware of their initial OBA, i.e., a *proleptic task,* as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Example of Proleptic Task in a Pre-Service Teacher Education Program

---

Context

During the classroom observation phase of your *practicum* you realize that learners mostly answer to the teacher's questions rather simplistically and memoristically. This raises your concern, as you think that they are *not sufficiently motivated.* In order to solve this problem, you should find out about the essence of motivating activities.

Task

You should come up with two motivating activities that will definitely work in classroom. They must be presented and justified in front of the teaching team that you are working with for them to choose the one that proves more adequate for the learners at their school. Both activities must fit in within the educational setting you are doing your *practicum.*

As can be seen from the example, the task raises the pre-service teachers' expectations about what is to come by confronting them with a daring and open-ended cognitive challenge. The cognitive challenge in question (in our case, coming up with motivating classroom activities) should be faced by them with no instruction whatsoever on the part of the teacher educator as for the underlying scientific core-concept(s) related to *motivation*. Instead, pre-service teachers should solve the task by solely relying on their internal resources. Accordingly, teacher educators should let emerge their own spontaneous concepts, as prompted by the corresponding cognitive challenge. This way, teacher educators can identify their initial Orienting Basis of Action and anchor it with the corresponding scientific core-concept(s). After phase 0, the hallmark of the BFM, there follows phase 1, whose two-step structure results from expanding phase 1 in Arievitch and Haenen's spiral model.

Through the first step, i.e. *organizing the identified spontaneous concepts,* the teachers' thinking about these concepts in phase 0 is brought into a structured group mind-map or any similar cognitive artifact by the teacher educator. Through the second step, i.e. scientifically *framing these concepts*, the teacher educator sets them in relation to the core concepts that are to be introduced.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude this reflection by presenting the overall outcome of my whole self-inquiry process. This represents my modest contribution to the pedagogical imperative for teacher education that Lantolf and Poehner advocated for already in 2014. Such contribution is summarized in table 2, which reflects the so-called *core teacher education competencies.* These have proved crucial for ensuring a balanced interrelation between theory and practice (Esteve & Alsina, 2024) and must be attained by means of the corresponding teaching actions. These, in turn, are informed and oriented by the core concepts in the right column, which must also be appropriated by teacher educators themselves.

Table 2

Competencies of Teacher Educators, Teaching Actions and Core Concepts from a Sociocultural Perspective

Corresponding Teaching Actions	Core Concepts
COMPETENCE 1. Creating a positive learning (social) environment during the formative intervention	
▪ Designing formative interventions confronting teachers with proleptic tasks right from the very beginning. ▪ Presenting proleptic tasks in a clear way and through specific cognitive pathways. ▪ Treating teachers as *potential experts* right from the very beginning. ▪ Considering and valuing contributions from all teachers, by respecting their original wording. ▪ Taking up terms created by teachers that identify them as a group. ▪ Promoting cooperative, peer-based learning. ▪ Being accessible while remaining assertive at the same time. ▪ Managing the emotions of the group members in a positive way.	▪ Prolepsis ▪ Intermental Zone ▪ Contingent interaction ▪ *Perezhivanie* ▪ Affordance
COMPETENCE 2. Adequately mediating teachers´ learning	
▪ Identifying the *Zone of Real Development,* both at individual and group level, through *proleptic tasks*. ▪ Providing teachers with suitable conceptual and procedural support (see competence 3) working in the *Zone of Proximal Development.* ▪ Embedding such support into interrelated activities of gradual conceptualization that conform the gal'perian based BFM cyclical model, which adopts the form of a pedagogical sequence (Esteve, 2018). ▪ Promoting in teachers critical reasoning and reflection along the whole pedagogical sequence, ▪ Helping teachers move on towards the *Zone of Potential Development* by providing them with self-regulation tools (such as dynamic self-assessment). ▪ Introducing constructive feedback along the whole formative process. ▪ Empowering teachers towards self-regulated learning through dynamic self-assessment as an orientation and learning tool	▪ Zone of Real Development / Zone of Proximal Development / Zone of Potential Development ▪ Mediation (structured, conceptual and interactional) ▪ OBA / SCOBA ▪ Verbalization ▪ Dynamic assessment ▪ Self-regulation
COMPETENCE 3. Significantly providing teachers with the conceptual support that has to adequately orient their classroom practices	
▪ Letting teachers address proleptic tasks by solely relying on their own inner resources (i.e., spontaneous concepts). ▪ Linking the core concepts to be worked on with the teachers' initial spontaneous concepts (i.e., teachers' initial OBA). ▪ Relating the core concepts to the teaching actions that language teachers must carry out. ▪ Helping teachers analyze classroom practices through reflective questions and the help of the core concepts. ▪ Ensuring a deep understanding of the core concepts through the work with SCOBAs embedded in the BFM version of the gal'perian cyclical model.	▪ Prolepsis ▪ Double stimulation ▪ Spontaneous vs. scientific concepts ▪ Verbalization ▪ OBA ▪ SCOBA (conceptual and procedimental) ▪ Conceptualization ▪ Intermental Zone

Finally, I would like to sum up the main differences that distinguish this contribution from the standards that describe what a good language teacher educator must be able to do. In my view, language teacher educators must not simply confront language teachers with language teaching actions that expectedly promote efficient language instruction, but enable them to experience and construct informed praxis through a balanced interrelation between theory and practice. For this to be possible, teacher educators both role model the teaching actions to be

worked on by teachers and relate these to a solid socio-cultural learning and teaching theory. This is to happen along an increasingly self-mediated, self-assessed and self-regulated bottom-up conceptualization process that has to help both teacher educators and teachers engage in a transformative process, which entails dealing with the complex contextual factors that influence the school settings such as the school syllabus and the educational policies.

ORCID

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5403-6848

Ethics Declarations

Competing Interests

No, there are no conflicting interests.

Rights and Permissions

Open Access

References

Arievitch, I. (2017). *Beyond the brain: An agentive activity perspective on mind, development and learning*. Sense Publishers.

Arievitch, I., & Haenen, J. (2005). Connecting sociocultural theory and educational practice: Galperin's approach. *Educational Psychologist, 40*(3), 145–165. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15326985ep4003_2

Borg, S. (2015). *Teacher cognition and language education*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Esteve, O. (2018). Concept-based instruction in teacher education programs in Spain as illustrated by the SCOBA-mediated Barcelona formative model. In J. P. Lantolf, M. E. Poehner & M. Swain (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Sociocultural Theory and Second Language Development* (pp. 487–504). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315624747

Esteve, O., & Alsina, A. (Eds.) (2024). *Hacia una formación transformadora de docentes. Estrategias eficaces para formadores*. Narcea.

Esteve, O., Farró, L., Rodrigo, C., & Verdía, E. (2021). Meaningfully designing and implementing SCOBAs in socioculturally-based L2 teacher education programs. *Language and Sociocultural Theory*, *8*(1), 8–34. https://doi.org/10.1558/lst.18398

Esteve, O., Fernández, F., & Bes, A. (2018). Pre-service teacher education from a sociocultural perspective: A case study on teaching learning through conceptual mediation. *Language and Sociocultural Theory, 5*(2), 83–107. https://doi.org/10.1558/lst.37792

Esteve, O., Fernández, F., Martín-Peris, E., & Atienza, E. (2017). The integrated plurilingual approach: A didactic model providing guidance to Spanish schools for reconceptualizing the teaching of additional languages. *Language and Sociocultural Theory, 4*(1), 1–24. https://doi.org/10.1558/lst.32868

Gal'perin, P. Y. (1992). Stage-by-stage formation as a method of psychological investigation. *Journal of Russian & East European Psychology, 30*(4), 60–80. https://doi.org/10.2753/RPO1061-0405300460

Johnson, K. E. (2009). *Second language teacher education: A sociocultural perspective*. Routledge.

Korthagen, F. A. J. (2001). *Linking practice and theory: The pedagogy of realistic teacher education.* Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.

Kozulin, A. (2024). *The cultural mind. The sociocultural theory of learning.* Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009327060

Olga Esteve

Lantolf, J. P., & Poehner, M. E. (2014). *Sociocultural theory and the pedagogical imperative in L2 education: Vygotskian praxis and the research/practice divide.* Routledge.

Lantolf, J. P., & Esteve, O. (2019). Concept-based instruction for concept-based instruction: A model for language teacher education. In M. Sato & S. Loewen (Eds.), *Evidence-based second language pedagogy: A collection of instructed second language acquisition studies* (pp. 27–51). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351190558

Newby, D., Allan, R., Fenner, A., Jones, B., Komorowska, H., & Soghikyan, K. (2007). *European portfolio for students teachers of languages. A reflection tool for language teacher education.* Council of Europe.

North, B., Goodier, T., & Piccardo, E. (2017). *Common European Framework of Reference for languages: Learning, teaching, assessment: Companion Volume*. Council of Europe.

Poehner, M. E., & Lantolf, J. P. (2024). *Sociocultural theory and second language developmental education.* Cambridge University Press.