In this insightful book, van Compernolle illustrates how a pedagogical unit based on Vygotsky’s Cultural-Historical or more commonly termed, Sociocultural Theory (SCT) may be applied in a second language (L2) classroom in order to both teach and learn French pragmalinguistics and sociopragmatics dialectically. A dialectical process has to do with the relationship or synthesis of ideas, concepts, or practices that provides a holistic understanding of the complex relation between the parts and the whole. van Compernolle relies on this process to reconceptualize the object of pragmatics instruction by changing the teaching/learning orientation from rules-of-thumb to concept-based approaches to teaching and learning. In this dialectic, specific systemic theoretical instruction supports students’ progress in using the language in practical and appropriate ways. Hence, no dichotomy is found between conceptual knowledge of the second language and its use in concrete ways to solve problems. van Compernolle argues that students need to learn metalinguistic knowledge and to realize its cultural meaning potential in order to communicate effectively in an array of sociolinguistic/sociopragmatic situations. In this SCT framework, meaning-based systematic conceptual knowledge promotes and emphasizes student language choices in communicative action.

The book consists of seven chapters that present a coherent application of SCT core principles in a French L2 setting. van Compernolle uses empirical research throughout the text which exemplifies instructional dynamics and student learning development in context.
Chapter 1 introduces a framework for teaching and learning pragmatics based on Sociocultural Theory. Pragmatics is defined and the relevance of designing concept-based instructional pragmatics in L2 classrooms is well described with supporting examples. An overview of the main tenets of SCT pedagogy for L2 instruction (Lantolf and Thorne, 2006) is provided, such as mediation and the mediated mind, internalization and Zone of Proximal Development, systemic-theoretical instruction, and concept-based L2 instruction. These concepts are clearly defined and provide a foundation that supports the central design of his study – a French language enrichment program.

In Chapter 2, van Compernolle elaborates on the notion of appropriateness and communicative competence, including how these concepts have been developed in traditional linguistic research. Such background is useful in understanding his perspective on social appropriateness, which takes into account audience, interlocutors, interpretations, etc. The author’s premise is that instructional pragmatics should not be based on rules-of-thumb but on conceptual meanings. The author asserts that the concept of appropriateness in communicative action can be systematically developed in students, in a formal setting, through concept-based instruction (Negueruela, 2008; Galperin, 1989, 1992) and the use of categories of meanings – as meditational tools in communicative acts.

Using the topic of French formal and informal second-person pronouns (i.e., tu/vous), the author provides salient examples of the interrelationship between people and relations. van Compernolle adds four pedagogical diagrams as an example of a pragmalinguistic form that can be both a systematic and personal way to understand potential and appropriate choices. As psychological mediational tools, the diagrams and categories, including descriptions of their use, represent a practical pedagogical method for how to present pragmatics as mediated action. With a continued nod towards Vygotsky (1978), van Compernolle emphasizes such concepts as transformation and internalization as an important part of the dynamic and individual learning paths created by the students’ interpretation and use of the pedagogical diagrams.

Chapter 3, concerned with understanding learners as people, demonstrates the importance of the SCT framework in realizing the dialectical unity between personality (i.e., self, identity, agency) and intellectual (i.e., conceptual thinking) development in educational settings. The author claims that the intellectual process of understanding and consciously applying systematic meaning-based knowledge in specific contexts, provides opportunities for transformation. Moreover, van Compernolle asserts that students with sociopragmatic conceptual knowledge as an orienting basis for appropriate action, may be able to apply linguistic forms based on categories of meaning while still exerting individual agency.
Chapter 4 provides a focus on pragmatic knowledge through verbalized reflections in students’ monologic and dialogic tasks. This chapter’s references and explications of Vygotsky’s work provide a stable context for understanding the somewhat complex concepts of language as a psychological tool, and the relationship between thinking and speech. Outlining multiple Vygotskian concepts, van Compernolle pays particular attention to the use of speech (e.g., verbal reflection tasks) as a meditational tool in the learning activity. The data excerpts demonstrate how speech was used intrapersonally (i.e., inwardly) in monologic tasks; while in dialogic tasks, students used social speech interpersonally in order to explain their understanding of concepts and diagrams. van Compernolle points out that during monologic tasks, students used oral speech to figure out the workings of the concepts at hand which in turn initiated the awareness process. Accordingly, dialogic tasks created a space for the tutor to work collaboratively with the student and within the student’s Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978). This space allowed the tutor to redirect mediation, promote deeper understanding with the student, and orient towards systematicity whenever necessary.

Chapter 5 argues for the relevance of the dialectical unity between teaching and assessing students within their ZPD. van Compernolle combines Appropriateness Judgment tasks and Dynamic Assessment (DA) in order to aid the process of personalizing pragmalinguistic concepts. The author argues that the assessing and teaching opportunity provided in this interactional frame allows the tutor to help students in disambiguating, understanding, and gaining more control of the concepts as thinking tools in communicative action. In his usual supportive fashion, tutor/student discourse transcripts continue to provide support for these arguments.

Chapter 6 illustrates how dynamically administered Strategic Interaction Scenarios (Di Pietro, 1982) prompted students to monitor their linguistic choices, with the help of their tutor, while applying their pragmalinguistic knowledge in speaking tasks. The aim was on promoting student self-awareness of difficulties and improving control in language performance. In presenting how to do this, van Compernolle provides evidence for how to shift from teaching that focuses on simple scaffolding techniques as a form of guidance and corrective feedback, to a focus on development oriented assistance to achieve mediation for all three stages of mental actions: orientation, execution, and control. This in turn provides the learner more appropriate tools for planning, performing, and monitoring their learning path.

Chapter 7, a summary chapter, provides future projections of Vygotskian approaches to instructional pragmatics. Beyond summarizing the previous chapters’ content, this chapter is also about pragmatic development through a triangular and dialectical relationship between conceptual knowl-
edge, practical activity, and application in problem solving. Furthermore, van Compernolle offers thought-provoking comments that could be used as recommendations for future research and classroom practice.

In summary, this book presents a pedagogical sequence to teach French pragmatics, based on SCT principles. It explains the relevance of SCT constructs in research methodology and pedagogical practice. Moreover, it depicts the workings of concept-based instruction, dynamic assessment and language development through empirical research. Of note, van Compernolle reverses the traditional practice of mapping forms (and functions) onto meanings in the second language. Instead, he advocated the appropriation of meanings of culturally constructed concepts as key to L2 teaching and learning. Hence, learning concepts about the language should precede attention to both form and function models. He proposes that teachers and students are able to raise their conscious awareness of new language conceptual framework, which results in their ability to use linguistic tools (i.e. form and function) in more meaningful and purposeful ways. To clarify, the central basis for instruction is the search for conceptual meanings rather than tasks based on linguistic tools as typically found in traditional L2 teaching and learning. By providing distinction from integrated bottom-up and top-down L2 teaching practices, van Compernolle’s approach provides a significant and contemporary contribution to second language pedagogical literature. As a result, I recommend this work as a significant contribution to the literature on current SCT pedagogical proposals for language classrooms.

The work is a significant source of knowledge for graduate and postgraduate students doing research in L2 instructional pragmatics, SCT theory and its application in language classrooms. Having previous knowledge of sociocultural theory is helpful in understanding the book but not necessary. Beginners to this theory are provided enough support to understand the main concepts. It is certainly a valuable resource for L2 teacher educators and practitioners who instruct in-service and pre-service teachers in how to incorporate an instructional language approach based on SCT principles.

References


