

Utilizing Sociocultural Theory Strategies to Develop Learners' ZPD: Perceived Effectiveness in Pakistani High School EFL Classrooms

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ABSTRACT: Sociocultural theory emphasizes the role of social interactions, cultural context, and language in cognitive development and learning. In second language acquisition, parents, proficient learners, and teachers provide support to develop learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This study investigates the utilization of various sociocultural theory strategies—including scaffolding, mediation, activity theory, and corrective feedback—to develop L2 learners' ZPD and examines their perceived effectiveness in high school EFL classrooms in Pakistan. A descriptive quantitative research design was employed. The population consisted of high school English teachers from District Bahawalnagar, Punjab Province. Using stratified random sampling, 160 teachers (80 male, 80 female) from urban and rural schools across five tehsils participated. A 5-point Likert scale questionnaire was used as the data collection tool. Findings revealed that teachers highly value sociocultural theory-based strategies. The most effective activities for developing ZPD were questioning (M=4.00), group discussion (M=3.98), corrective feedback (M=3.88), demonstration (M=3.82), and debates (M=3.77). Teachers reported frequent use of scaffolding strategies including breaking down complex tasks (M=3.89), providing clear explanations (M=4.56), and encouraging student interest

(M=4.36). The study confirms that sociocultural theory-based strategies—modeling, bridging, schema building, contextualizing, and feedback—significantly enhance language learning experiences, boost language growth, and increase student participation. These findings have important pedagogical implications for EFL instruction at the secondary level.

Keywords: *Sociocultural theory, Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), scaffolding, EFL classrooms, corrective feedback, collaborative learning, Pakistan.*

1. Introduction

Language serves as a fundamental tool through which individuals understand themselves, communicate with others, and learn cultural norms and values (Kramsch, 2014). It is not merely a system of communication but a semiotic network that enables people to construct, maintain, and transmit knowledge, ideas, and worldviews. Learning a second language (L2) is particularly important for personal growth, cognitive development, and academic success. According to Cummins (1981), building native-like proficiency in L2 typically takes school-going learners approximately five years. Beyond academic benefits, L2 acquisition enhances cognitive abilities including memory, problem-solving skills, and creativity, while also fostering cultural awareness and cross-cultural understanding (Vygotsky & Cole, 2018).

The process of L2 learning is complex and multifaceted. Ellis (1989) noted that learners acquire understanding of a second language over time, gradually adding new rules to their interlanguage grammar. Malpartida (2017) further argued that one's personality is influenced as one strives to move beyond the boundaries of their native language and into a new language, culture, and way of thinking. Effective L2 instruction, therefore, requires pedagogical approaches that recognize the social, cognitive, and cultural dimensions of language acquisition. Among the most influential theoretical frameworks for understanding L2 learning is Vygotsky's (1978) Sociocultural Theory. This theory posits that social interactions are central to cognitive growth, which varies across cultures. According to Vygotsky, learning and behavior are influenced by individual, interpersonal, and environmental factors. Humans are regarded as inherently interpersonal and reflective; thus, their ideas and

behaviors are sensitive to the complexities of their social environment. Three main themes summarize Vygotskian sociocultural theory. First, learning is fundamentally interpersonal rather than purely cognitive or biological in nature. Second, the process of human learning is mediated through cultural artefacts, activities, and concepts, which serve as "tools" for mediated learning (Ratner, 2002). Third, to understand human learning behavior, researchers must examine the individual's learning process holistically rather than focusing solely on internal mental processes or observable behaviors.

A key concept within sociocultural theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The ZPD refers to the gap between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance from a more competent individual (Vygotsky, 1934). Vygotsky described two levels of development: the actual developmental level (what a learner can do alone) and the potential developmental level (what a learner can do with assistance). The ZPD is the space between these two levels, where learning occurs most effectively when tasks are just beyond the learner's current ability but achievable with appropriate support. This support is often provided through a process known as scaffolding. Scaffolding, a concept introduced by Bruner (1960) and later integrated with ZPD, involves temporary support that teachers or more knowledgeable peers provide to help learners acquire new concepts and skills (Haider & Yasmin, 2015). Over the past two decades, researchers have elaborated on various scaffolding strategies applicable to L2 classrooms. Walqui (2006) identified key scaffolding strategies including modeling (providing written, oral, or visual samples), bridging (connecting prior knowledge to new content), contextualizing (using real objects, videos, or pictures), schema building (organizing concepts meaningfully), text representation (analyzing and summarizing), and developing metacognition (self-monitoring learning). These strategies have been successfully applied across diverse educational contexts, including mathematics (O'Toole & Plummer, 2004), reading and writing (Dixon-Krauss, 1996), and second language instruction (Hammond, 2001). Beyond scaffolding, other important perspectives within sociocultural theory include mediation, activity theory, and corrective feedback. Mediation refers to the process through which individuals acquire knowledge by interacting with others and utilizing

cultural tools (Lantolf, 2000). Material tools such as writing instruments, computers, and visual aids extend cognitive abilities, while social interactions with more knowledgeable individuals provide essential guidance (Donato & McCormick, 1994). Activity theory, developed by Leontiev (1981), provides a framework for understanding the social context within which individual learning takes place, conceptualizing activity as containing a subject, object, actions, and operations. Corrective feedback, including both implicit and explicit error correction, plays a crucial role in helping learners refine their L2 production (Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen, 2009).

In Pakistan, English holds significant status as a second language, influencing social, political, and economic opportunities (Mahboob, 2009). Since its introduction by British rulers in the 16th century, English has become a marker of education, social status, and professional success. Individuals fluent in English are often perceived differently and enjoy greater academic and career prospects. Consequently, effective English language instruction at the school level is of paramount importance. Several previous studies have examined aspects of sociocultural theory in the Pakistani context. Aslam et al. (2017) investigated the effects of scaffolding techniques on post-graduate students at Punjab University and found that students taught with scaffolding outperformed those taught through traditional methods. Jabeen and Akhtar (2013) conducted research on 10th-grade students using sociocultural approaches and reported significant improvements in group discussion, picture description, and dialogue presentation after scaffolded instruction. Rizve (2012) demonstrated the effectiveness of peer tutoring for 9th-grade English learners. However, despite these valuable contributions, no comprehensive research has systematically investigated the utilization of *multiple* sociocultural theory strategies—including scaffolding, mediation, activity theory, and corrective feedback—and their perceived effectiveness specifically in Pakistani high school EFL classrooms. Furthermore, the integration of various patterns of corrective feedback and their role in developing L2 learners' ZPD remains underexplored. This study addresses this gap by investigating the following research questions: (1) What are the various strategies of sociocultural theory used by teachers to develop ZPD of learners in EFL classrooms at the high school level? (2) What are the various

activities used by teachers to develop ZPD from the viewpoint of sociocultural theory? (3) What is the perceived effectiveness of various patterns of sociocultural theory used by teachers? (4) How are various patterns of corrective feedback integrated by teachers to develop ZPD of L2 learners?

By answering these questions, this study aims to provide empirical evidence on the practical application of sociocultural theory in Pakistani EFL classrooms and offer pedagogical implications for enhancing L2 instruction at the secondary level.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1 Sociocultural Theory and ZPD

Vygotsky's (1987) sociocultural theory rests on three main themes that collectively distinguish it from other cognitive and behavioral theories of learning. First, learning is fundamentally interpersonal rather than purely cognitive or biological in nature. This means that higher mental functions—such as attention, memory, and reasoning—originate in social interactions before being internalized by the individual. As Vygotsky famously stated, every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level (between people), and later on the individual level (inside the child). Second, human learning is mediated through cultural artefacts, activities, and concepts (Ratner, 2002). These artefacts—ranging from language and writing systems to physical tools like computers and visual aids—serve as "tools" that shape and support cognitive processes. Without such mediation, learning would remain rudimentary and context bound. Third, understanding learning requires holistic examination of the individual's process rather than focusing solely on internal mental events or externally observable behaviors. Researchers must consider the dynamic interplay between the learner, the social environment, and the cultural tools available.

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) represents the optimal learning zone where learners can accomplish tasks with appropriate support that would be impossible independently (Briner, 1999). Vygotsky (1934) conceptualized the ZPD as the distance between the actual developmental level (determined by independent problem-solving) and the level of potential development (determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers).

This concept fundamentally challenges traditional assessment practices that measure only what learners already know. Instead, the ZPD directs attention toward what learners are *becoming* capable of—their emerging competencies. For L2 instruction, the ZPD has profound implications. Learners are not expected to master all language structures immediately; rather, they progress through collaborative interactions in which teachers or peers provide just enough assistance to move the learner toward independent performance. The ZPD also recognizes individual variability: different learners may require different types and amounts of support. Effective instruction, therefore, involves diagnosing each learner's ZPD and tailoring scaffolding accordingly.

2.2 Key Strategies of Sociocultural Theory

Scaffolding

Scaffolding is the instructional mechanism through which teachers and more knowledgeable peers support learners within their ZPD. Walqui (2006) identified six scaffolding strategies essential for L2 acquisition. **Modeling** involves providing written, oral, or visual samples that demonstrate expected performance—for example, a teacher reading a passage aloud to model pronunciation and intonation before asking students to read independently (Emilia et al., 2018). Bridging connects learners' prior knowledge to new content, activating existing schemas and making unfamiliar material more accessible (Harraqi, 2017). Teachers might ask students to share what they already know about a topic before introducing new vocabulary. Contextualizing uses authentic materials—videos, pictures, real objects, or relevant stories—to embed language learning in meaningful situations rather than abstract rules (Tajeddin & Kamali, 2020). Schema building helps learners organize information conceptually, focusing on text structure, headings, key ideas, and the relationships between new and existing knowledge (Mahan et al., 2018). Text representation involves strategies such as summarizing, paraphrasing, and analyzing texts to deepen comprehension (Ajayi, 2015). Finally, developing metacognition encourages learners to monitor their own learning processes, set goals, and evaluate their progress (Coyle et al., 2010). Grossman (2011) reported that metacognitive strategies are used in approximately 72% of effective L2 classrooms.

Mediation

Lantolf (2000) describes mediation as the process through which individuals acquire knowledge by interacting with others and utilizing cultural tools. Mediation is not a supplementary feature of learning; it is the central mechanism through which cognitive development occurs. Vygotsky identified several forms of mediation. Social mediation involves guidance and support from more knowledgeable individuals—parents, teachers, or peers. Through social interactions, learners gain access to new knowledge, skills, and perspectives that would otherwise remain unavailable. For example, a teacher who explains the difference between past and present perfect tenses provides social mediation that enables the learner to grasp a concept beyond their independent reach. Material mediation involves tools that extend cognitive abilities, such as writing instruments, calculators, computers, or even language itself (Donato & McCormick, 1994). In the L2 classroom, bilingual dictionaries, grammar charts, and audio recordings serve as material mediators. Importantly, second language learning is socially mediated in that it depends on face-to-face interaction, joint problem-solving, and discussion (Wells, 1999). Even when learners study independently, the strategies and tools they use reflect prior mediated experiences.

Activity Theory

Activity theory, credited to Leontiev (1981) but rooted in Vygotsky's foundational ideas, provides a framework for understanding the social context within which individual learning takes place. Activity is defined in terms of sociocultural settings where collaborative interaction, intersubjectivity, and assisted performance occur. Leontiev conceptualized activity as containing four components: subject, object, actions, and operations. The subject is the learner engaged in an activity (e.g., a student learning English). The object is the goal or motive that directs the activity (e.g., achieving proficiency to pass an examination or communicate with native speakers). Actions are goal-directed behaviors taken to achieve the object (e.g., memorizing vocabulary, practicing pronunciation, completing grammar exercises). Operations are the automatic, routine procedures that support actions (e.g., forming letters while writing, recognizing common word patterns). In this

model, language learning strategies are understood as actions motivated by specific objectives. Different learners may employ different actions to achieve the same goal—some may guess meaning from context, others may read English newspapers, and still others may use bilingual dictionaries. Activity theory thus emphasizes that strategies cannot be studied in isolation; they must be understood within the broader activity system that gives them purpose and meaning.

Corrective Feedback

Winne and Butler (1994) explain feedback as information through which learners correct, reconstruct, and refine their target language understanding. In sociocultural theory, feedback is not simply a correction of errors but a mediational tool that guides learners toward more accurate and appropriate language use. Corrective feedback can be explicit (e.g., directly stating "You should say 'went' not 'goed'") or implicit (e.g., recasting the learner's utterance correctly without explicitly identifying the error). Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) found that positive feedback combined with corrective methods facilitates faster L2 acquisition than either approach alone. Effective feedback provides learners with information about not only what is incorrect but also why and how to correct it. Moreover, feedback within the ZPD is dynamic—it adjusts to the learner's current level of understanding, providing more explicit guidance when needed and gradually withdrawing as the learner gains competence. Deci et al. (1999) demonstrated that feedback also serves a motivational function; positive feedback such as verbal praise or written encouragement reinforces effort and persistence, while constructive criticism helps learners identify specific areas for improvement.

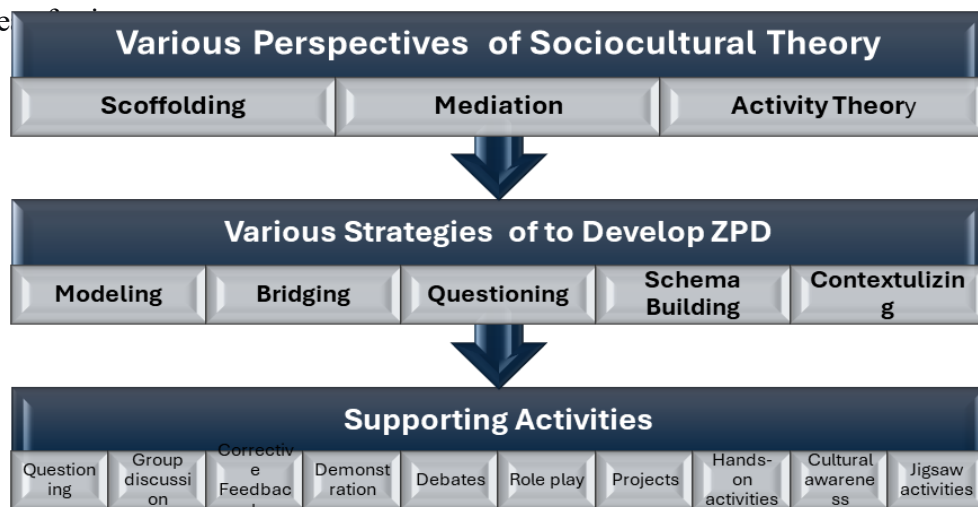


Fig: 1: Various perspectives of Sociocultural Theory adopted from Janneke, Volman & Beishuizen, 2010

Figure 1 illustrates the interrelationship between scaffolding, mediation, activity theory, inner speech, self-regulation, and corrective feedback within the sociocultural theory framework for L2 learning. The figure demonstrates how these strategies collectively support the development of learners' ZPD through socially mediated instruction, collaborative activities, and graduated assistance.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employed a descriptive quantitative research design. Descriptive research is particularly suitable for investigations that aim to systematically describe existing phenomena, practices, or beliefs without manipulating variables or establishing causal relationships (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). In the context of this study, the goal was to describe how high school EFL teachers utilize various sociocultural theory strategies and to document their perceived effectiveness in natural classroom settings. A quantitative approach was selected because it allows for the collection of numerical data from a relatively large sample, enabling statistical analysis and generalization of findings to the broader population of English teachers (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009). According to McCusker and Gunaydin (2015), quantitative research is particularly effective when the researcher knows precisely what is being investigated and when all aspects of the study can be carefully planned before data collection. The use of a survey questionnaire as the primary instrument aligns with this approach, as it facilitates efficient data collection from geographically dispersed participants and yields data that can be analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

3.2 Population and Sampling

The target population for this study consisted of all English teachers currently serving in Government High Schools and Higher Secondary Schools in District Bahawalnagar, Punjab Province, Pakistan. The total number of English teachers at the high school level—including both subject specialists and regular English teachers—comprised the accessible population.

A stratified random sampling technique was employed to ensure adequate representation across key demographic variables. Stratified random sampling involves dividing the population into distinct subgroups (strata) and then randomly selecting participants from each subgroup (Mackey & Gass, 2015). This method is particularly valuable in second language research when researchers need to balance important characteristics such as gender, geographic location (urban vs. rural), and regional distribution. For this study, strata were defined based on tehsil (administrative subdivision), gender, and school location (urban/rural).

District Bahawalnagar comprises five tehsils: Bahawalnagar (the district headquarters), Minchinabad, Haroonabad, Chistian, and Fort Abbas. From each tehsil, 16 teachers were selected—8 male and 8 female—with equal representation from urban and rural schools (4 male urban, 4 male rural, 4 female urban, 4 female rural per tehsil). This stratification yielded a total sample of 160 teachers (80 male, 80 female). Table 1 presents the detailed sampling distribution.

Table 1: Sampled High School English Teachers

Tehsil	Urban Male	Urban Female	Rural Male	Rural Female	Total
Bahawalnagar	8	8	8	8	16
Minchinabad	8	8	8	8	16
Haroonabad	8	8	8	8	16
Chistian	8	8	8	8	16
Fort Abbas	8	8	8	8	16
Total	40	40	40	40	160

3.3 Data Collection Tool

A self-administered, close-ended questionnaire was developed as the primary data collection instrument. Self-administered questionnaires are advantageous because they can be distributed to many respondents simultaneously, ensure consistency in question presentation, and allow respondents to complete them at their own pace

(Brown, 1997). A close-ended format—where respondents select from predetermined response options—was chosen to facilitate statistical analysis and to minimize ambiguity in interpretation (Dörnyei & Taguchi, 2009).

The questionnaire employed a 5-point Likert scale. For the sections measuring beliefs and effectiveness, the scale ranged from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). For the section measuring frequency of scaffolding strategy use, the scale ranged from 1 (Never) to 5 (Always). The questionnaire was organized into four distinct sections:

Section 1: Demographic Information (6 items) – Collected data on gender, school location, qualification, city of school, and teaching experience.

Section 2: Teachers' Beliefs about Sociocultural Theory Patterns (15 items) – Assessed teachers' agreement with statements regarding the role of teachers, parents, peers, real-life activities, cooperative learning, feedback, visual aids, and other sociocultural theory concepts in L2 learning.

Section 3: Utilization of Scaffolding Strategies (15 items) – Based on the framework of Janneke, Volman & Beishuizen (2010), this section measured how frequently teachers employ specific scaffolding techniques such as breaking down tasks, providing clear explanations, modeling solutions, adjusting support, and providing corrective feedback.

Section 4: Perceived Effectiveness of Activities (10 items) – Evaluated teachers' perceptions of the effectiveness of various classroom activities (e.g., group discussion, role play, debates, demonstration, questioning, jigsaw activities, projects, corrective feedback, cultural awareness) for developing learners' ZPD. Prior to full-scale data collection, a pilot study was conducted with a small group of English teachers (n=15) who were not included in the final sample. The purpose of the pilot study was to identify ambiguous or confusing items, assess the clarity of instructions, and estimate the time required for completion (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). Based on feedback from the pilot study, minor revisions were made to the wording of three items to enhance clarity. No items were deleted, as all were found to be relevant to

the research objectives. The final questionnaire took approximately 15–20 minutes to complete.

Data collection was conducted in person by the researcher, who visited each participating school during the summer vacation period. This timing presented a challenge, as many teachers were on leave; however, the researcher coordinated with school administrators to arrange convenient times. All participants were informed of the purpose of the study, assured of the confidentiality of their responses, and informed that participation was voluntary. The questionnaire was administered in English, as all participating teachers were proficient in the language.

3.4 Data Analysis

Upon completion of data collection, responses were entered into SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Descriptive statistics—including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations—were calculated for each questionnaire item. Means were interpreted as follows: 1.00–1.80 = very low, 1.81–2.60 = low, 2.61–3.40 = moderate, 3.41–4.20 = high, and 4.21–5.00 = very high. This interpretation guided the ranking of strategies and activities by perceived effectiveness.

4. Results

This section presents the findings of the study organized according to the three main areas of investigation: (1) teachers' beliefs about various forms of support for developing learners' ZPD, (2) the various patterns of scaffolding strategies actually used by teachers in EFL classrooms, and (3) the perceived effectiveness of different activities for supporting second language learning. Data were collected from 160 high school English teachers using a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire. Results are presented using descriptive statistics including means (M) and standard deviations (SD).

4.1 Teachers' Beliefs about Support for ZPD Development

Table 2 summarizes teachers' beliefs regarding various forms of support for L2 learning, ranked by mean scores. The data indicate that teachers hold generally

positive beliefs about the role of social support in language acquisition, with all items except one scoring above the midpoint of 3.00.

Table 2: Teachers' Beliefs about Support in L2 Learning (N=160)

Statement	Mean	SD
Explanations with examples help acquire vocabulary	3.87	1.25
Visual aids support deeper understanding	3.81	1.18
Storytelling activities help creativity and fluency	3.81	1.16
Skilled person enhances student's potential development	3.79	1.23
Visual aids facilitate learning process	3.77	1.17
Good language learning takes place with teacher support	3.75	1.13
Cooperative learning develops thinking skills	3.75	1.17
Real-life activities are mandatory for language learning	3.68	1.18
Speaking target language with peers improves learning	3.66	1.18
Teacher support fosters students' confidence	3.66	1.15
Better language learning occurs with parents' help	3.65	1.14
Strong peer connection helps language learning	3.63	1.14
Language material supports learning process	3.58	1.11
Teacher's feedback supports language learning	3.57	1.23
Temporary support helps reach higher competence	3.17	1.11

The highest mean scores were observed for explanations with examples (M=3.87, SD=1.25), visual aids supporting deeper understanding (M=3.81, SD=1.18), storytelling activities (M=3.81, SD=1.16), and skilled person enhancing development (M=3.79, SD=1.23). These findings suggest that teachers strongly

value concrete, illustrative instructional approaches that make abstract language concepts accessible to learners. Notably, the belief that a skilled person (teacher, peer, or parent) enhances student development received strong endorsement, directly supporting Vygotsky's concept of the more knowledgeable other.

The lowest means among belief items was for temporary support helps reach higher competence (M=3.17, SD=1.11). While still above the midpoint, this comparatively lower score may indicate some skepticism about the lasting effects of temporary scaffolding or perhaps reflects practical challenges in implementing gradual release of responsibility in large classrooms. Interestingly, teacher's feedback (M=3.57) and language material (M=3.58) received moderate scores, suggesting that while teachers recognize their value, these may not be prioritized as highly as interactive strategies like storytelling and visual aids.

4.2 Various Patterns of Scaffolding Used by Teachers

Table 3 presents teachers' reported frequency of using specific scaffolding strategies in EFL classrooms. Responses were measured on a 5-point scale where 1=Never, 2=Seldom, 3=Sometimes, 4=Frequently, and 5=Always.

Table 3: Scaffolding Strategies Used by Teachers

Statement	Mean	SD
Provide clear explanations and examples	4.56	0.74
Encourage student's interest in language practice	4.36	0.86
Cover gap between what students know and need to learn	4.30	0.92
Adjust support based on individual needs	4.26	0.93
Explain relevant features of each language task	4.06	1.02
Gradually increase task intensity	3.95	1.06
Demonstrate or model solutions to language tasks	3.94	1.05
Break down complex language tasks into smaller steps	3.89	0.99

Correct errors by providing actual words/grammar rules	2.68	1.59
Provide environment for mutual engagement	2.62	1.57
Promote cultural awareness for multicultural learners	2.46	1.28
Encircle or underline erroneous words/sentences	2.43	1.51
Correct errors by explaining reasons in lecture	2.36	1.34
Provide hints without all solutions	2.36	1.10
Provide constructive feedback	2.27	1.41

Teachers most frequently employed: providing clear explanations and examples (M=4.56, SD=0.74), encouraging student interest (M=4.36, SD=0.86), covering knowledge gaps (M=4.30, SD=0.92), and adjusting support based on individual needs (M=4.26, SD=0.93). These four strategies all fell within the "very high" frequency range (4.21–5.00), indicating that these scaffolding practices are deeply integrated into teachers' regular instructional routines. The low standard deviations for these items (0.74–0.93) suggest strong consensus among respondents.

In contrast, constructive feedback (M=2.27, SD=1.41) and various error correction strategies (ranging from M=2.36 to 2.68) were reported with much lower frequency, falling into the "low" to "moderate" range. The relatively high standard deviations for these items (1.34–1.59) indicate substantial variability among teachers—some use these strategies frequently while others rarely do. This finding suggests a significant area for professional development, as effective corrective feedback is known to facilitate L2 acquisition (Varnosfadrani & Basturkmen, 2009).

4.3 Perceived Effectiveness of Activities

Table 4 ranks the perceived effectiveness of various classroom activities for developing learners' ZPD. All activities were rated above the midpoint of 3.00, indicating generally positive perceptions.

Table 4: Comparative Effectiveness of Activities

Rank	Activity	Mean	SD
1	Questioning	4.00	1.11
2	Group discussion	3.98	1.10
3	Corrective feedback	3.88	1.07
4	Demonstration	3.82	1.09
5	Debates	3.77	1.03
6	Role play	3.76	0.99
7	Projects	3.75	1.14
8	Hands-on activities	3.69	1.09
9	Cultural awareness	3.67	1.11
10	Jigsaw activities	3.49	1.02

Questioning emerged as the most effective activity ($M=4.00$, $SD=1.11$), followed closely by group discussion ($M=3.98$, $SD=1.10$) and corrective feedback ($M=3.88$, $SD=1.07$). These three activities—all inherently interactive and dialogic—align closely with Vygotsky's emphasis on social interaction as the engine of cognitive development. Questioning, in particular, serves multiple functions in the ZPD: it assesses current understanding, prompts deeper thinking, and provides opportunities for scaffolded response.

Demonstration ($M=3.82$), debates ($M=3.77$), role play ($M=3.76$), and projects ($M=3.75$) formed a middle cluster of highly effective activities. These strategies involve active student participation and often require collaborative effort, consistent with sociocultural principles. Hands-on activities ($M=3.69$) and cultural awareness activities ($M=3.67$) received slightly lower but still strong ratings. Jigsaw activities ($M=3.49$) ranked lowest, though still above the midpoint, suggesting that while teachers find them useful, they may be less familiar or more challenging to implement.

Comparative Mean Scores

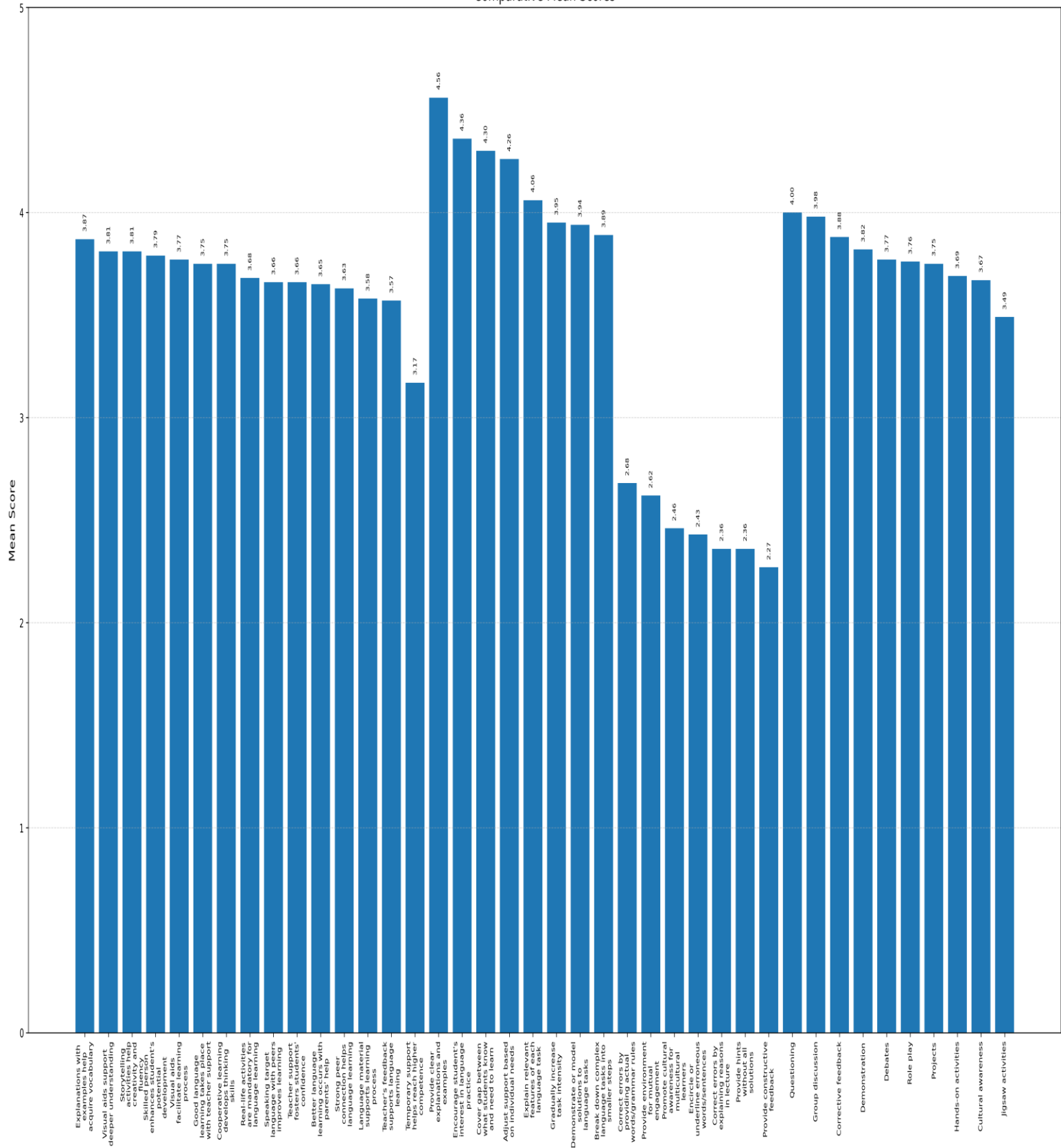


Fig 2: Comparative Mean Scores of Study Variables

Figure 2 illustrates the ranked effectiveness of ten activities for developing ZPD in EFL classrooms, with questioning, group discussion, and corrective feedback rated highest. The figure visually represents the descending mean scores from questioning (4.00) to jigsaw activities (3.49), highlighting the relatively close clustering of the top eight activities.

Table 5: Effectiveness of various activities

Sr.	Area of Priorities	Mean	S. D	Rank Order
1	Questioning is effective	4.00	1.11	1
2	Group discussion is effective	3.98	1.10	2
3	Corrective Feedback is effective	3.88	1.07	3
4	Demonstration is effective	3.82	1.09	4
5	Debates are effective.	3.77	1.03	5
6	Role play is effective.	3.76	.99	6
7	Projects are effective.	3.75	1.14	7
8	Hands-on activities are effective.	3.69	1.09	8
9	Cultural awareness is effective.	3.67	1.11	9
10	Jigsaw activities are effective.	3.49	1.02	10

5. Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrate that Pakistani high school EFL teachers recognize and value sociocultural theory-based strategies for developing learners' Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The results provide empirical support for the applicability of Vygotsky's theoretical framework in a Pakistani educational context, while also revealing specific areas of strength and opportunities for professional growth.

Alignment with Previous Research

The positive attitudes toward ZPD-based scaffolding techniques observed in this study align closely with the findings of Yusuk (2018), who investigated Thai university students' perceptions of scaffolding in English reading comprehension. Yusuk reported that students responded favorably to clear directions, proper

assistance, a relaxing classroom atmosphere, and continuous teacher support. The present study extends these findings to the Pakistani high school context and, importantly, focuses on teachers' perspectives rather than students'. The convergence of positive perceptions across different cultural and educational settings suggests that sociocultural theory principles have broad applicability, though local contextual factors—such as class size, resource availability, and examination pressure may influence implementation.

The Centrality of Social Interaction

The high ratings for questioning ($M=4.00$) and group discussion ($M=3.98$) as effective activities provide strong support for Vygotsky's fundamental assertion that learning occurs most effectively through social interaction. These findings resonate with Cazden's (1979) observation that teacher-student interaction improves ZPD more effectively than parent-child instruction, likely because teachers are trained to provide systematic, developmentally appropriate scaffolding. Questioning, in particular, serves multiple mediational functions: it activates prior knowledge, focuses attention on key concepts, elicits language production, and provides diagnostic information about the learner's current understanding. When teachers ask questions that are within but near the upper boundary of a student's ZPD, they create opportunities for the student to articulate thoughts, receive feedback, and revise understanding—a process central to cognitive development.

Group discussion similarly embodies sociocultural principles by allowing students to test the quality and worth of their knowledge through peer explanation (Bruffee, 1981). In the present study, teachers rated group discussion as the second most effective activity, reflecting their recognition that peer interaction creates a stress-free environment where learners gain confidence. This finding is particularly significant in the Pakistani context, where traditional teacher-centered instruction has long dominated classrooms. The willingness of teachers to embrace group discussion suggests a gradual shift toward more learner-centered pedagogies, though the extent and quality of implementation require further investigation.

Effective Scaffolding Practices

Teachers reported frequent use of several scaffolding strategies that reflect sound pedagogical practice. Providing clear explanations and examples ($M=4.56$) was the most frequently employed strategy, indicating that teachers prioritize making abstract language concepts concrete and accessible. This aligns with Engelmann and Carnine's (1991) argument that when learners fail, the problem lies in instruction quality rather than learner ability. Clear explanations and well-chosen examples reduce cognitive load, activate relevant schemas, and provide models for independent performance.

Similarly, breaking down complex language tasks into smaller steps ($M=3.89$) reflects an understanding that learners cannot master entire language systems at once. Task decomposition allows teachers to identify precisely where a student is struggling and to provide targeted assistance. This practice is directly analogous to Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD as a zone of emerging competence—by segmenting complex tasks, teachers can ensure that each step remains within the learner's reach with appropriate support.

The finding that teachers adjust support based on individual needs ($M=4.26$) is particularly noteworthy, as it acknowledges a core principle of sociocultural theory: each learner has a unique ZPD, and effective instruction requires differentiated scaffolding. This stands in contrast to one-size-fits-all approaches that assume all students benefit from identical instruction. In large Pakistani classrooms (often exceeding 40 students), individual adjustment is challenging but evidently valued by teachers. Future research might explore what strategies teachers use to manage differentiation in such settings.

Gaps in Practice: Feedback and Error Correction

A concerning finding is the relatively low reported use of constructive feedback ($M=2.27$) and various error correction strategies ($M=2.36$ – 2.68). These practices fell into the "low" to "moderate" frequency range, with substantial variability among teachers ($SD=1.34$ – 1.59). This suggests that while some teachers

provide regular, systematic feedback, many do not—or may not recognize their current practices as constituting "constructive feedback."

This gap is significant because feedback is central to the mediation process within the ZPD. Winne and Butler (1994) describe feedback as information through which learners correct, reconstruct, and refine their target language understanding. Varnosfadrani and Basturkmen (2009) found that positive feedback combined with corrective methods facilitates faster L2 acquisition than either approach alone. Effective feedback provides not only identification of errors but also explanations and opportunities for revision. The low reported use of such strategies in this study suggests a critical area for professional development. Teacher training programs in Pakistan should emphasize the value of timely, specific, and constructive feedback, and provide practical strategies for implementing it even in large classes (e.g., peer feedback, focused error correction, feedback codes).

The Role of Visual Aids

The finding that visual aids support deeper understanding ($M=3.81$) and facilitate the learning process ($M=3.77$) aligns with Mayer's (2014) cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which posits that combining words with relevant visuals enhances learning by enabling dual coding. Antonova et al. (2019) further demonstrated that information learned through visual aids tends to be stored in long-term memory, whereas information presented through words alone often remains in short-term memory. In the Pakistani EFL context, where English is often not spoken at home, visual aids can bridge the gap between abstract linguistic rules and concrete, memorable representations. Teachers' recognition of this effectiveness is encouraging and suggests that investment in visual resources (charts, pictures, videos, real objects) could yield significant returns.

Consistency with Previous Pakistani Studies

The present findings are consistent with earlier research conducted in Pakistan. Aslam et al. (2017) found that postgraduate students taught with scaffolding techniques outperformed those taught through traditional methods, demonstrating that sociocultural strategies are effective across educational levels. Jabeen and

Akhtar (2013) reported that 10th-grade Pakistani students showed substantial improvements after scaffolded instruction: group discussion scores increased from 35% to 42.1%, picture description from 36% to 45.6%, and dialogue presentation from 31.8% to 41.1%. These gains, achieved over only one month of intervention, underscore the potential of sociocultural approaches to produce measurable improvements in a short time. Rizve (2012) similarly demonstrated that peer tutoring significantly improved 9th-grade students' English achievement. The current study complements these intervention studies by documenting teachers' existing beliefs and practices, providing a baseline understanding that can inform future professional development initiatives.

Implications for Theory and Practice

The findings reinforce Vygotsky's core premise that social interaction mediates cognitive development. However, they also highlight that not all forms of social interaction are equally effective. The high ratings for questioning and group discussion suggest that structured, purposeful interaction is valued over unstructured conversation. This nuanced understanding can guide teachers in designing interaction patterns that are most likely to promote ZPD development.

Practically, the results suggest that while Pakistani high school teachers already employ many effective scaffolding strategies, there is room for improvement in feedback and error correction. Professional development programs should address this gap, perhaps by introducing techniques such as recasting (implicitly correcting errors by reformulating the student's utterance), clarification requests, and metalinguistic feedback. Additionally, given the high value placed on visual aids, schools should be encouraged to provide adequate visual resources and training in their effective use.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated the utilization of various sociocultural theory strategies to develop L2 learners' ZPD and their perceived effectiveness in Pakistani high school EFL classrooms. The findings conclusively demonstrate that sociocultural theory-based strategies, including scaffolding, mediation, activity theory, and corrective

feedback—significantly enhance language learning experiences. The most effective activities identified were questioning, group discussion, corrective feedback, demonstration, and debates. Teachers reported frequent use of scaffolding strategies such as providing clear explanations, breaking down complex tasks, encouraging student interest, covering knowledge gaps, and adjusting support based on individual needs. These findings have important pedagogical implications for EFL instruction at the secondary level. The integration of sociocultural theory strategies provides solutions to language tasks, bridges gaps between current and desired knowledge, provides helpful feedback, and corrects errors through clear explanation. Real-life supportive activities, jigsaw activities, and storytelling contribute to breaking traditional teaching methods. The use of visual aids not only makes learning easier but also broadens students' perspectives. Collaborative learning enables students to learn in stress-free environments and discuss their concerns with peers.

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