

# Socio-Cultural Theory, Language Learning, & Juggling for Life

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Sociocultural theory is a theory of learning and being which connects our social environment to our personal development. Language learning is a life-long process that originates in social environments and is continually internalized in the individual. Learning anything has certain common characteristics: beliefs, attitudes, background skills, fear of error, scaffolding, etc. Learning to juggle can be a visible analogy for learning about learning processes that are often hidden from normal awareness. Juggling can also appeal to many “intelligences” that normal schooling ignores. And it’s a hoot!

社会文化理論とは、生きるための学習理論であり、我々の社会環境を自己発達に結びつけるものである。言語習得は、社会環境を発端とし生涯にわたり継続的に内面化される過程である。何かを学ぶということには、共通する特徴が見られる。例えば、基礎を身につけ、過ちを恐れなくなる。そして、技能を習得し、態度や自己信念を変化させることである。ジャグリングを学ぶことは、普段我々が意識していないこの学習過程を気付かせてくれる。ジャグリングは、また、一般的に学校教育が無視しているマルチ能力の大切さを強調する。とにかく、楽しいんです！

*As language teachers we are the most fortunate of teachers—all subjects are ours. Whatever the children want to communicate about, whatever they want to read about, is our subject matter... The essence of language teaching is providing conditions for language learning—using the motivation which exists to increase our student’s knowledge of the new language; we are limited only by our own caution, by our own hesitancy to do whatever our imagination suggest to us, to create situations in which students feel involved... We need not be tied to a curriculum created for another situation or another group. We must adapt, innovate, improvise, in order to meet the student where he is and channel his motivation. (Rivers 1975, p. 96)*

## Socio-Cultural Theory, Language Learning, & Juggling

**Tim Murphey (Ski Juggler!)**

In the beginning of the spring semester, I thought juggling is too hard for me and I won’t do it. But this semester, I practiced a lot and now I can juggle! Why? ... I practiced 3 or 4 hours and I asked Mr. Murphey and friends for help and I listened their advice and I just did it without thinking. Now I can juggle. And I taught my dad, my mom and my sister, they will be good jugglers soon I am sure. (2<sup>nd</sup> year Female English major. Action Log Entry, Oct.04)

Honestly I was a little embarrassed to be seen [juggling] by people at first. However, after I borrowed some balls I kept practicing almost every day. I became absorbed in juggling... And now I can do more tricks than before at a higher level. Now I can understand why you let us juggle. Learning English has the same processes as learning juggling. In other words, if I believe my success with strong passion I can become a good learner. Then I can have good strategies and try in many different ways, and make small steps considering my level. I can be a good learner. (2<sup>nd</sup> year Male English major, Action Log Entry June, 04)

Neo-Vygotskian Socio-Cultural Theory (SCT) looks at the big picture of how humans develop (*phylogenetically*) and cope with life on an anthropological scale, learning to change and adapt with the tools they create (language, writing, printing, computers, etc.). SCT also seeks to describe how the individual develops (*ontogenetically*) through learning in a variety of environments with their own mediational tools. The local and contextualized learning process, or event, is referred to as *microgenesis* and attempts to catch “learning on the fly.”

We can often see microgenesis when students scream “Yata” or “I did it!” in the middle of our classes after having juggled a couple of rounds for the first time. It is at that moment that self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura 1996) are strengthening and new identities are forming. On the ontogenetic scale, the two students’ quotes at the beginning of this article exemplify how they have changed and developed over time. It may be too soon to realize a phylogenetic change through juggling (even though I have been dreaming lately of a third hand to help me juggle more and faster), however it was only a few hundred years ago that juggling was widely thought to be magic and not possible for normal people. Today, most people can achieve a two round juggle after only 15 minutes of practice. Kinesthetic learners who associate well into others bodies often pick it up in a manner of minutes.

Learning also involves a change of identity, according to Lave and Wenger (1991) and a repositioning of learners in the world as they gain more agency and power (Bourdieu 1991; Norton 2000, 2001; Day, 2002). Through the social turn in second language acquisition (Block, 2003; Dornyei & Murphey, 2003), we are finding that addressing these wider issues seems to facilitate students joining social groups, and identifying and learning more. Watson-Gegeo (1988) goes so far as to say, “The substitution of socialization for acquisition places language learning within the more comprehensive domain of socialization, the lifelong process

through which individuals are initiated into cultural meanings and learn to perform the skills, tasks, roles, and identities expected by whatever society or societies they may live in” (p. 582).

Some of mainstream SLA research has been pointing in this direction for some time. For example, Hatch’s suggestion, via Long, that “rather than grammatical knowledge developing in order to be put to use in conversations at some later date, ‘language learning evolves out of learning how to carry on conversations’ (Hatch, 1978, p. 404),” (cited in Long, 1996, p. 445). Bateson (1994) captures the essence of the need for socialization when she says, “Participation precedes learning” (p. 41), i.e. we need to join in groups and group activity in order to learn something. Learning it before joining the group usually is not very effective. Or in the words of Nike, “Just do it!”

We might ask ourselves if students are being held back on the peripheral of learning too long by teachers teaching too much and not allowing students to participate in learning more fully. Creating suitable environments conducive to intense, multiple, and safe participation in foreign language interaction would seem to be one of the main jobs of language teachers. We have found that juggling, as a learning/teaching metaphor, puts the balls in the hands of the students so that they participate more in classes—participating at first on the *peripheral* and slowly identifying themselves as *legitimate participants* capable of action and agency (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

### ***What I do with Juggling in Classes***

In SLA or Methods classes I teach Krashen’s famous five hypotheses through juggling. All my students learn to juggle as a metaphor for learning English. We also do whole and small group passing that they enjoy as well. I often loan out the balls with an assignment to teach friends and family members. Sometimes we have speaking games with the balls in which students in pairs build sentences one word at a time and pass the ball (many varieties to this). We may spend half of one class on juggling initially and then just occasionally at the end for 5 or 10 minutes when we have time. Students who come early to class often juggle before class a bit. Then I get them to juggle on one of their videoed conversations (Murphey 2001).

### ***Benefits***

Some students get the meta-cognitive connection between juggling and language learning, but certainly not all. Beyond that, the balls add variety, fun, humor, and color to the class, inspire kinesthetic learners (perhaps mainly me!), enhance group dynamics, and relax people. Juggling seems to “save” some learners from feeling hopelessly nailed down to their academic seats.

### ***Why it Works***

Adult language use is rarely about concrete things in the “here and now.” The balls and juggling are extremely physical and “here and now” which can help them to talk more and make communication clearer à la TPR. It’s refreshing. In group-dynamics terms, learners have a common goal and they learn how to help and teach each other. Juggling permits an alternative form of socialization in the classroom and alternative forms of identity building, giving many students agency, allowing them to position themselves differently. Or in the words of one of my students the other day, “Juggle, it’s blast me!”

## **Pre-school and elementary school juggling I**

**Linda Wittig (Smiley the Clown)**

### ***Success Story at Our Presentation***

Kathy Kampa learned to juggle at the JALT ’04 Juggling for Life workshop and immediately incorporated juggling into her classes. Kathy wrote an e-mail saying, “I did ‘scarf juggling’ for my first graders and they ‘oohed’ and ‘aahed’. One even said, ‘Ms. Kampa, you are really a risk taker’.”

### ***What I do with Juggling in Classes to teach English to children***

Juggling can be an exciting, entertaining, and interactive way to teach language to young learners. My students’ age range is from three to ten years old. They love throwing, catching, and dropping many things: scarves, rings, balls, eggs (rubber), and cat toys. Three year olds are capable of throwing and catching two scarves or two small lightweight balls for several rounds. Below I catalog the ways in which we can use juggling in our teaching related to Howard Gardner’s seven intelligences.

#### **1. Musical (sounds, rhythms, music, and dance)**

Two kinds of pet toys have recently become my students’ favorite juggling equipment. Small plastic balls with bells inside designed as cat toys are easy to hold in small hands and the balls make a “jingle sound.” Catching and dropping fuzzy toy light bulbs is an unforgettable experience. When the fuzzy toy light bulb hits the palm of the hand or drops on the floor, a “glass shattering sound” is heard. “I Want to be a Juggler” by Carolyn Graham in the *Longman Children’s Picture Dictionary* is a hit song with my students.

#### **2. Verbal-Linguistic (reading, writing, speaking)**

I say with enthusiasm juggling **affirmations** to help students believe they can juggle.

For example: “I can juggle. I love juggling. I juggle everyday. I have numerous juggling friends. I enjoy teaching others how to juggle.” Children can learn **directions** (right-left, up down, front-back, higher-lower) with the art of juggling. The **body parts** (eyes, head, arms, hands, knees) are common words used in learning to juggle. We read together *Put Me in the Zoo* and *The*

*Foot Book*, which both feature juggling. Using funny **personal stories** is of high interest to my upper elementary students. I tell them my story about teaching airport security agents how to juggle when they asked me why I had so many balls in my carry-on luggage.

### **3. Interpersonal (group work, peer sharing, discussion)**

To help students learn the names of their classmates, we used the **greeting** with a toss of one ball. “Hi, my name is Linda. (Toss a ball to another student) “What’s your name?” Learning to juggle can be easier when two students become one body. One student uses her right hand and one student uses his left hand. The students switch sides to practice the other hands.

### **4. Math-Logic (calculations, classifications, critical thinking, shapes)**

**Numbers** (number of balls, number of throws), **sizes** (little ball, medium ball, big ball) and **sequencing** (first, second, third, fourth) are concepts that can be taught with juggling. I have used glow in the dark rings and rubber koosh balls to teach the **time of day**. We turn out the lights and close the blinds to pretend it is night. **Weight** (light yellow scarf, heavy blue bouncing ball), **money** and **numbers** can be learned through pretend shopping of juggling equipment. For example: “I want to buy this green and red ball. How much is it?”

### **5. Bodily-Kinesthetic (movement, exercise, crafts)**

Making the numerous colors of **origami balls** develops the small motor skills and is very inexpensive and safe for young children. With the popularity of soccer, many elementary students want to be able to juggle with their feet. Juggling improves eye-hand coordination.

### **6. Spatial (colors, visuals, art, photographs, videos)**

**Colors** (red ball; blue ball; black and white ball; red, blue, yellow and green ball), **shapes** (round, cube, ring) and **textures** (rubbery string balls, smooth peach fuzz balls, slick silicon bouncing balls, scratchy nylon scarves) can provide visual learning experiences.

### **7. Intrapersonal (private learning time)**

Watching videos, reading books, and looking at photographs can allow young learners to have some **personal time** to study and analysis by themselves. My students liked learning about **famous jugglers** from around the world. Jugglers can be found at circuses, carnivals, zoos, and street arcades. Juggling **career** options can also include being an English teacher.

### ***Why does juggling work for teaching English to children?***

Children like to **touch** things. They like things that **move**. They like to **imitate**. They like to **sing**. They like to **repeat...repeat.... and repeat**. They like to act **silly**. They like to **explore**. They like to change the **sound** of their voices. They like **surprises**. They like to **make** things. They like to have **fun**.

## **Pre-school and elementary school juggling II**

### **Chris Hunt (Wise Hat)**

#### ***What I do with Juggling in Classes and the Benefits***

Juggling is eye-smiling attention-catching fun. With large groups (fifty or more) it can be a very useful way of attaining focus. Performance skills of any kind are useful for the moments when we feel we need to teach. Juggling skills can keep tired classroom routines fresh. For example, when I use flashcards I go through them by shuffling-juggling. I can encourage children to take control through calling out, “Stop!” and “Next!”. I can also bemuse them and introduce valuable repetition by shuffling the same card to the top over and over again. I can extend this game by removing the offending card and tucking it under my arm. Repeat the procedure a few times and I can end up with cards tucked in all kinds of places. This seriously undermines the traditional teacher-student top-down model. I find that the more this illusion erodes, the more the spontaneous use of English by children occurs.

#### ***Why does juggling work for teaching English to children?***

Juggling skills are one thing, and a juggler’s mind is another. Of course, they go together and from some perspectives are one and the same, but we can also learn to see the entire class as one beautiful, harmonious, inter-playful juggling moment. With a juggler’s mind we become more aware and more spontaneous, more in tune with the mood of the group and of the individuals within it. We can relax and make adjustments and learn where and when any plan we might have made no longer serves its purpose. We can teach from within the now. As Tim says, now is the best time to be happy. And now is the time from which learning springs.

## **Juggling with junior and senior high school students**

### **Rohini Deblaise & Daniel Stewart (Dancer Dreams)**

#### ***What we do with Juggling in Classes***

We find juggling particularly useful at the start of the year when it can be used as an icebreaker. It helps get students comfortable with a classroom style that can be very different from what they are accustomed to. Very few of our students have ever been taught

English by a teacher who uses English only. In addition, juggling introduces them to other facets of our teaching style such as not being afraid to make mistakes and helping each other improve.

### ***The presentation***

Our presentation at JALT 04 showed the audience how this is done. Three volunteers were chosen to learn how to juggle by a teacher (Rohini) speaking only Swedish. This language was picked as very few people in Japan can speak it giving the audience a real feel for what our students go through when first learning English. Rohini taught the lesson while Daniel acted as a near peer helping the volunteers using key Swedish words already mentioned by Rohini. The three volunteers made great progress in juggling in the ten minutes allotted to teaching them. They were not perfect jugglers by the end that served to show juggling, like language learning, is a step by step process which takes time.

After the lesson, all attendees were given a paper on which they wrote any Swedish words they could remember and the English equivalents. After two minutes, the crowd was prompted to call out any words they had learned. All of the target vocabulary that had been introduced was mentioned by one audience member or another. This showed that vocabulary was picked up without any use of the L1 and audience members could recognize words that they themselves had not written down. This showed different people learn different things from the same lesson. The vocabulary they picked up included basic words in any language such as the numbers 1 to 3, left and right, up and down, thank you, oops and it's okay.

This sample lesson showed that it is possible to have complete beginners leave their first class with a feeling of accomplishment as they have learned approximately 20 words in a new language, survived a class taught only in the target language, understood it is all right to make mistakes and experienced a different way of teaching where the students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning and that of their classmates. The balls are then literally in their hands.

### ***Why it works***

It is unlikely the participants would remember many of the twenty words in the long term without further contact with the Swedish language. Rather the purpose of this exercise was to demonstrate how teaching juggling and teaching English actively, with students actually "doing it," are similar and effective. This however is very different from the teaching going on in many language classrooms in Japan. The concrete activity of juggling obviously leads kids to do it and risk making mistakes. We need more of the "doing it" and the permission to make mistakes in our English classes.

Rohini and Patrick (her husband) also made a short CD of our juggling presentation that we hope is on the Proceedings CD. Watching it will help you get a much better understanding of the process and benefits.

## **Juggling with university students**

### **Brad Deacon (Oshuntwelve)**

Juggling, for me, is a rich metaphor that allows students to reflect deeply on their experience and then notice the parallels to learning English. It's also a lot of fun! (2nd year student on video)

### ***What I do with juggling in English classes***

I teach juggling to first year English majors and non-English majors as part a content-based workshop entitled "Alternative Learning Forms", and in my other Oral English classes. When teaching juggling I follow a similar pattern: first I show videoed examples of students in previous years who demonstrate and talk about the value of juggling as a learning metaphor (as in the first quote above); then I write useful language gambits on the whiteboard (e.g., Wow I dropped the ball! Let's try 1-2-3 balls. Please throw higher/lower/closer/more inside. Hey, we did it!); next I model pair juggling in increments of one, two, and three balls with a student; finally the group break into pairs and the pairs practice. I circulate and provide group and individual feedback on juggling techniques, peer interaction/feedback tips, and language assistance. For homework students reflect and note their own parallels between juggling and language learning. I then collect their feedback, comment on, and share some of the common insights that emerged within the group. We continue to practice in pairs and by ourselves as time allows both within and outside of class. I often loan balls to students to take home to practice and to teach their friends and family.

### ***Benefits***

Students and teachers can take advantage of juggling in the language classroom for many valuable reasons. For example, juggling student pairs can practice real language for real interactive purposes (assuming, of course, that they don't get too excited in the process and forget to use the target language!) as they need to negotiate in English in order to successfully throw, catch, and interact together with the balls. Moreover, students can become aware of, validate, and/or challenge their assumptions about language learning that naturally parallel juggling. To illustrate, notice the rich student comments below, all from a recent class:

- *The relationship between juggling and English is practice I think. If we practice many times, we'll become better.*
- *I think the similarity between juggling and learning English is to be able to progress by practice. I learned that we don't need to worry about mistakes and it is the same too.*

- *We can become a good juggler if we continue to make efforts. I believe I can succeed so I learn English hard.*
- *Like juggling, if I don't use English at all, I will come to be unable to use English. But if I use English everyday I will be better at English. Continuing practice is very important.*
- *I realized my weak point when I was juggling. My weak point is ignoring my weak points and doing the next things in a hurry. I have to be careful...*
- *I realized that there are a lot of similarities between juggling and learning something. I think the expectation of success is important. We should be positive.*
- *Today I could juggle perfectly for the first time. I was very happy!! And at the same time I realized that I could do it because I enjoyed juggling itself. If I felt it wasn't fun then I couldn't succeed I think. This idea will apply to foreign language learning.*

As the above comments illustrate, students develop meaningful insight into the connections between learning juggling and learning language. Among other benefits, practicing and reflecting on juggling helps students to challenge their learning beliefs, enhance self-esteem, build greater rapport together, and enjoy their learning. As a teacher, I feel rewarded in that many students discover these rich learning insights on their own.

### **Why it works**

In traditional learning, students assume a rather passive role as they listen to their teachers. They rarely reflect on either their own learning or the learning process in general. Thus, they rarely develop insight into ways that they might better approach their learning. They also learn more about themselves on a deeper level. Juggling offers an alternative approach and allows students to explore their learning through action and reflection, using auditory, visual, and kinesthetic modes. Students can also model and provide meaningful feedback to each other in English. Most of all, they can enjoy feeling successful as my student Keiko notes below:

The more I tried juggling the better I could do it. When my partner asked if I could do it, I answered, "Yes, I can!" The answer ran around in my head after I said so.

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