

## Psycholinguistic Dimensions of Intercultural Bonding in *A Thousand Questions*: A Lens from Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

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### Abstract

This study explores the dynamics of language acquisition and emotional development within cross-cultural friendship, as portrayed in the novel *A Thousand Questions* by Saadia Faruqi. Anchored in the framework of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1962) and approached through a qualitative lens, the research investigates how two main characters, Mimi and Sakina, engage in reciprocal language learning shaped by social interaction, cultural exchange, and emotional support. Using textual analysis as the primary method, this study identifies and interprets moments of scaffolding, mediation, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) within the characters' dialogue and interactions. The analysis reveals that code-switching, pragmatic negotiation, and context-sensitive lexical choices serve as psycholinguistic markers of evolving empathy, trust, and identity formation. These findings underscore that language development in intercultural youth contexts is driven not only by cognitive processes but also by affective-social mechanisms rooted in lived experience. By framing the novel as both a cultural artifact and a pedagogical resource, this study illuminates how fictional narratives can model principles of bilingual education, emotional literacy, and peer-mediated learning. The results have practical implications for educators and curriculum designers seeking to foster inclusive, culturally responsive language environments, especially in settings with diverse linguistic backgrounds.

**Keywords:** *Cross-cultural communication; Language acquisition; Interpersonal interaction; Psycholinguistics; Second language acquisition*

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## INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly interconnected world, where migration, global mobility, and multicultural exposure are becoming daily realities, the intersection of language learning and cross-cultural friendships has emerged as a powerful domain for understanding human communication and identity formation. Literature, especially children's and young adult fiction, has proven to be a compelling medium through which such themes can be both reflected and examined. One such example is *A Thousand Questions* (2020) by Saadia Faruqi, a novel that intricately weaves the story of two girls from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds—Mimi from the United States and Sakina from Pakistan—who form a profound friendship despite their initial language and cultural barriers. The novel's portrayal of this interaction offers a unique opportunity to study how language learning unfolds not in a classroom, but in the lived, emotional terrain of friendship and cultural exchange.

The significance of *A Thousand Questions* lies not only in its literary merit but also in its psycholinguistic and educational relevance. Through vivid storytelling, the novel offers an emotionally resonant and naturalistic depiction of language acquisition and identity negotiation, positioning it as a valuable artifact for sociocultural language research. Unlike many psycholinguistic studies that centre on structured classroom settings or standardized assessments (N. C. Ellis, 2008; Spada et al., 2013), this research foregrounds language learning as it unfolds in lived, interpersonal spaces—specifically through the cross-cultural friendship between two adolescents. Drawing from Vygotsky's (1978), emphasis on social interaction and emotional context in cognitive development, the study aligns with recent findings that highlight the role of affective factors—such as empathy, motivation, and emotional resonance—in second language acquisition (Dewaele, 2015; Dewaele et al., 2018; S. Mercer & Kostoulas, 2018). Furthermore, this analysis contributes to the growing field of narrative-based language pedagogy, which advocates for the use of fiction not merely as cultural content but as a scaffold for linguistic, emotional, and intercultural growth (Kramsch, 2009; Lather, 2008). By turning attention to emotionally rich, dialogic interactions in fiction, the study expands current understandings of how language is acquired and lived in bilingual, bicultural contexts—particularly among youth navigating multiple identities.

This study builds upon Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 2012), which emphasizes that cognitive development, including language acquisition, is fundamentally mediated through social interaction and cultural tools. The diagram below illustrates the central idea of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, emphasizing that human development is a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of culture, language, and social interaction. At the core is "Development," which is not a product of individual effort alone, but emerges from the rich interplay between one's cultural background, communicative practices, and social experiences (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). Culture sets the framework within which individuals learn, shaping values, expectations, and the very structure of thought (Daniels, 2015). Language, in turn, is both a product and a tool of social interaction—it allows individuals to share meanings, express ideas, and mediate learning experiences (Lantolf & Poehner, 2014). Social interaction is the zone where learning is actively negotiated, and through dialogic processes such as questioning, feedback, and collaborative problem-solving, learners internalize knowledge and transform participation into understanding (Swain et al., 2015).

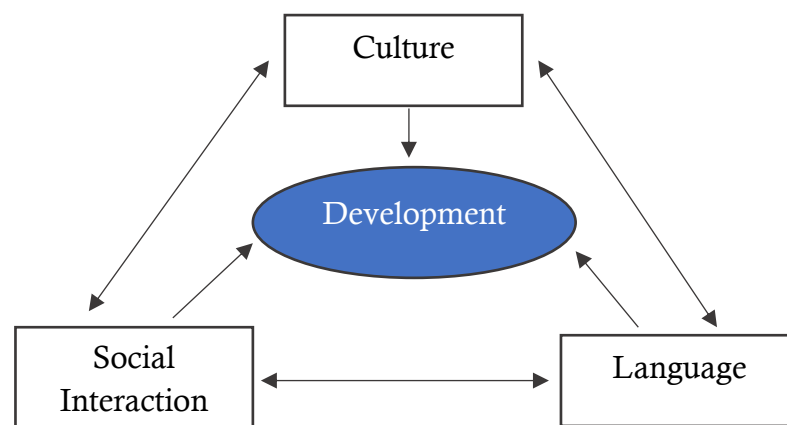


Diagram 1. Vygotsky's concept of Sociocultural Theory

Thus, development is not linear, but socially mediated, where language and culture serve as the primary instruments through which cognitive and emotional growth take

place. This interconnected system underscores the belief that we learn best not in isolation, but through meaningful engagement with others in a cultural context. Recent research continues to affirm that cognitive and emotional development is socially mediated and culturally grounded. For instance, Wertsch (2021) reiterates that psychological tools like language serve to regulate thinking and behavior, while Hammond (2021) highlights how culturally responsive pedagogy leverages social and cultural capital to deepen engagement and learning. This interconnected system underscores the belief that we learn best not in isolation, but through meaningful, culturally-situated engagement with others.

Vygotsky argued that learning occurs most effectively within the ZPD, where a learner performs a task with the guidance of a more knowledgeable other (Lantolf, 2000; Swain, 2000). This diagram illustrates Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which defines the range between what a learner can do independently (Zone of Actual Development, ZAD) and what they cannot do even with help (Out of Reach Zone). The ZPD, shown as the middle layer, represents the tasks a learner can accomplish with guidance from a more knowledgeable other, such as a teacher or peer. According to Vygotsky, this is the most effective zone for learning because it challenges the learner just beyond their current abilities but within reach through scaffolding and support.

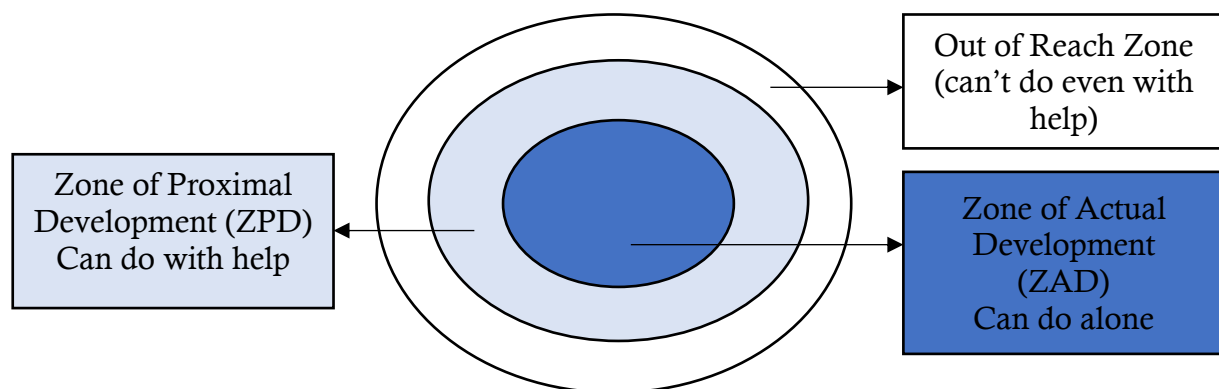


Diagram 2. The concept of Zone of Proximal Development

In Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (R. Ellis, 1997; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991), learning is seen as a socially mediated process where interaction with a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)—such as a teacher, mentor, peer, or even digital tools—plays a crucial role in helping a learner move through the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The MKO provides scaffolding, which refers to temporary and adjustable support tailored to the learner's current ability level. This support might include modelling a task, giving cues or hints, breaking down complex problems, or providing feedback. As the learner gains confidence and competence, the MKO gradually reduces the level of help, allowing the learner to become more independent—eventually moving from the ZPD into the Zone of Actual Development (ZAD), where they can perform tasks alone. The ultimate goal is not just to complete the task but to internalize the skills and knowledge needed to tackle future challenges independently. Without such guided support, a learner might either remain stagnant within their comfort zone (ZAD) or struggle and disengage when faced with tasks that are too far beyond their current capabilities (Out of Reach Zone) (Fani & Ghaemi, 2011; Gehlot, 2021; Margolis, 2020; Xi & Lantolf, 2021).

In the novel, Mimi and Sakina take turns occupying the roles of learner and teacher, creating a dynamic ZPD that fuels their mutual growth. The emotional closeness

of their friendship amplifies this process, offering fertile ground for scaffolding, cultural mediation, and internalization of new language forms. By applying Vygotsky's theory to a literary context, this research presents an innovative approach that not only expands the application of sociocultural theory but also bridges the gap between psycholinguistic theory and narrative fiction.

Despite growing interest in sociocultural approaches to language acquisition, few studies have analyzed fictional narratives using Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, particularly in the context of young adult literature that represents cross-cultural friendships. Previous research exploring language acquisition within social contexts has primarily focused on classroom-based interactions, particularly examining teacher-student dynamics and structured peer collaboration. For example, studies by Lantolf and Thorne (2006) and Swain (2006) applied Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory to analyze how learners develop linguistic competence through mediated dialogue and collaborative tasks. Similarly, Mercer (N. Mercer, 2002) emphasized the importance of discourse and scaffolding in group learning environments. However, these studies often overlook the informal, emotionally driven spaces where language learning naturally occurs—such as in friendships or everyday social encounters. While a few scholars have explored narrative fiction as a lens for language development Norton (2013), very limited research exists that uses young adult or children's literature to examine how language is acquired and shaped through intercultural relationships outside the classroom. This study addresses that gap by positioning *A Thousand Questions* as both a literary and psycholinguistic case, offering fresh insights into how Vygotsky's principles operate in informal, emotionally rich learning environments.

This study offers a novel contribution to psycholinguistics by applying Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory to the analysis of informal, fictionalized language acquisition within a fictional novel. While most psycholinguistic studies emphasize structured, empirical contexts, this research foregrounds everyday dialogue and emotional exchange between young characters as valid and revealing sites of linguistic development. By analyzing how language learning unfolds organically through narrative interaction, cultural negotiation, and mutual scaffolding, the study bridges the gap between literary representation and real-world language acquisition processes. This innovative lens not only expands the scope of Vygotskian application but also positions fiction as a fertile space for understanding the sociocultural dimensions of bilingual and cross-cultural development in youth.

What distinguishes this study is its interdisciplinary approach: combining psycholinguistics, literary analysis, and sociocultural theory to examine how fictional narratives can mirror authentic language acquisition processes. This novel is not merely a work of fiction—it is a reflection of how language, culture, and identity intersect in the lives of young people. It serves as a narrative case study that brings Vygotsky's theory to life, demonstrating how language learning becomes a collaborative, emotional, and socially mediated process. Through this analysis, the research underscores the importance of looking beyond formal education and recognizing the transformative role of human relationships in shaping language development.

That gap is significant because such literature reflects the emotional and cognitive realities of bilingual or multilingual learners in globalized settings. Moreover, most previous research tends to isolate the learner's journey in formal academic environments, underestimating the influence of peer relationships and informal social interaction in shaping language proficiency and intercultural competence. *A Thousand Questions*, therefore, fills an important void in psycholinguistic research by showcasing how language is acquired and internalized through deeply personal, informal, and culturally layered interactions. Thus, the research question is formulated as: How do interactions between



characters in *A Thousand Questions* reflect psycholinguistic processes of language acquisition and emotional development within a cross-cultural friendship, as interpreted through Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory?

## RESEARCH METHOD

### Research Design

This research employs a qualitative descriptive design with a textual analysis approach, grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Silalahi, 2019; Vygotsky, 2012). According to Sandelowski (2000), qualitative descriptive studies offer a low-inference lens for understanding human experiences and are particularly suited for summarizing and interpreting events as they are naturally expressed. Textual analysis, as defined by McKee (2003) allows researchers to examine how meaning is constructed and conveyed through language, making it an appropriate tool for exploring the dialogic and cultural dimensions of the novel *A Thousand Questions* by Saadia Faruqi. The purpose is to explore how language acquisition and sociocultural learning occur within the context of cross-cultural friendship as depicted in the novel *A Thousand Questions* by Saadia Faruqi. Qualitative design is appropriate for this study because it allows an in-depth interpretation of characters' experiences, interactions, and language development as mediated through social and cultural exchanges.

To ensure methodological rigor, excerpts were purposively selected based on three key criteria: (1) the presence of explicit language-learning interactions between Mimi and Sakina; (2) episodes that reflected core concepts of Vygotsky's theory, such as scaffolding, mediation, ZPD, MKO, cultural mediation, self-regulation; and (3) emotionally charged moments that revealed shifts in empathy, identity, or cultural awareness. Thematic coding was conducted inductively and iteratively, with emerging themes cross-validated through peer debriefing and alignment with existing literature in sociocultural psycholinguistics. While the novel itself served as the sole data source, its rich, character-driven narrative offered sufficient depth for a focused case analysis. However, the study acknowledges the absence of triangulation via participant input (e.g., reader-response or educator perspectives), which may limit the scope of generalizability. Nonetheless, the intentional focus on literary text as both a cultural and pedagogical artifact justifies the singular-source approach, especially for a study aimed at modelling how fiction can reflect real-world language learning processes within youth intercultural friendships.

### Data Source

The primary data source for this research is the novel *A Thousand Questions* (2020), which centers on a bilingual and bicultural friendship between two adolescent characters—Mimi, an English-speaking Pakistani-American girl, and Sakina, an Urdu-speaking Pakistani girl. The analysis focuses on the characters' dialogues, internal monologues, and narrative descriptions that reflect key processes of language acquisition, emotional bonding, and cultural negotiation. Although no real-world research participants are involved, Mimi and Sakina are treated as literary case study subjects whose interactions are examined through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. This interpretive approach allows for a close reading of character behaviour and discourse as a simulated model of authentic language learning and social development. Key excerpts were purposively selected based on their illustration of scaffolding, mediation, ZPD, MKO, cultural mediation, self-regulation enabling a psycholinguistic analysis of how fictionalized social interaction can mirror real-world principles of language learning and intercultural understanding.

### Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected through purposive sampling of textual elements from the novel *A Thousand Questions*. The researchers systematically identified key scenes involving language use, misunderstanding, translation, and code-switching—particularly those in which characters assist or interpret for one another, reflecting sociocultural learning processes. These excerpts were then organized into thematic clusters, including scaffolding, mediation, ZPD, MKO, cultural mediation, self-regulation through language. Analytical grids were developed to map the relationship between dialogic instances and theoretical markers, allowing for systematic categorization and interpretation. Excerpt saturation was determined when thematic recurrence became evident and no new categories emerged from additional text segments. This iterative approach ensured that the data set was both rich and theoretically aligned, offering a coherent foundation for interpreting the novel's psycholinguistic dimensions.

### Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by Vygotsky's sociocultural concepts. Each selected excerpt was examined for indicators of mediated learning, scaffolded interaction, and socially constructed meaning. The analysis unfolded in four stages: (1) identifying language-related interactions between characters; (2) coding these interactions based on core sociocultural constructs such as the scaffolding, mediation, ZPD, MKO, cultural mediation, self-regulation; (3) interpreting the influence of cultural context, emotional dynamics, and social relationships in these interactions; and (4) synthesizing the findings into overarching thematic categories. While the analysis was interpretive, it remained closely anchored to the theoretical framework to ensure conceptual consistency. To enhance analytical transparency, peer debriefing was conducted to cross-check coding decisions and mitigate potential researcher bias. Although inter-rater reliability was not formally measured due to the solo-authored nature of the study, steps were taken to maintain reflexivity and theoretical fidelity throughout the interpretive process.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

In *A Thousand Questions* by Saadia Faruqi, the evolving relationship between Mimi and Sakinah provides a meaningful lens through which to explore Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. As Mimi, an Urdu-speaking girl from the United States, interacts with Sakinah, a local Pakistani girl with limited English proficiency, their conversations become more than just cultural exchanges—they become a collaborative learning process. Sakinah learns English through her dialogue with Mimi, who unknowingly takes on the role of a more capable peer, offering support and encouragement within Sakinah's ZPD. These dynamic highlights the importance of social interaction in language acquisition, where scaffolding—Mimi's explanations, corrections, and modelling of English—plays a crucial role in helping Sakinah gradually build her linguistic competence and confidence. Here are details of the findings:

Table 1. Vygotskian Principles-Based Findings on *A Thousand Questions*

Source	Scene/ Dialogue Context	Vygotskian Principle	Psycholinguistic Insight
Excerpt 1 – Page 28	<p>Halfway through the third game, a loudspeaker crackles to life, and a melodious sound fills the air around us. <i>Allahu Akbar. Allahu Akbar.</i> God is great. God is great. “<b>What is that?</b>” I ask Nana, looking around me for the source. He waves his hand. “Oh, it’s just the <i>azaan</i> from the mosque down the street. Very loud, I know, but it can’t be helped. You’ll get used to it in a few days.”</p> <p>“<i>Azaan?</i>” I know this word, although it’s a hazy memory in my mind of visiting a mosque in Houston a long time ago, watching the worshippers prostrate themselves in a steady line in front of me.</p> <p>“<b>The call to prayer. The mosque puts it on the loudspeaker five times a day, every day.</b>” Nana adds, “In Urdu, we say <i>azaan</i>. The Arabic word for it is <i>adhaan</i>.”</p> <p>I decide I like <i>azaan</i> better. The word flows smoother, like caramel over ice cream</p>	<p><b>Mediation &amp; Cultural Tools</b></p> <p>Language is learned through social interaction where cultural tools (words, meanings) are mediated by others, supporting cognitive development within the ZPD</p>	Emotional resonance and phonological appeal influence word learning and retention; language acquisition is shaped by personal connection and preference, not just semantic meaning.
Excerpt 2 – Page 32	<p>The only thing I can’t seem to master is speaking English. I know what it is: <b>I need someone to speak to, someone who’ll correct me when I’m wrong, tell me what to say and how to say it.</b> I may be able to teach myself the basics, but if I’m to pass the admission test, <b>I need a teacher.</b></p>	<p><b>ZPD &amp; Scaffolding:</b></p> <p>Learning is optimized through guided interaction with a more knowledgeable other who provides support within the learner’s ZPD.</p>	Social feedback and conversational practice facilitate acquisition of pragmatic and syntactic skills, which self-study alone may not fully develop. The need for corrective input highlights the importance of communicative interaction in language fluency.
Excerpt 3 -Page 40	<p>“The lunch your father made was very good. My mom says she needs a nap after such delicious food.” I nod. Anyone who praises my abba can’t be all bad.</p> <p>“Thank you. He <b>work</b> very hard.” “<b>Works very hard.</b>” I pause. “What?” “<b>Works very hard, not work . . .</b>” She stops and bites her lip.</p>	<p><b>Scaffolding and Mediation</b></p> <p>Mimi acts as the MKO, guiding Sakina’s language development through corrective feedback within the ZPD.</p>	Corrective feedback helps Sakina notice and internalize correct syntactic forms, crucial for second language acquisition and grammar development. The hesitation shows cognitive processing of new linguistic input.
Excerpt 4 – Page 47	<p>Then she turns to me and says too brightly: “English, anyone?” She’s right: it’s the perfect time to learn some English. I’m so</p>	<p><b>ZPD &amp; Scaffolding</b></p> <p>Mimi provides real-time, supportive linguistic</p>	The shift from English to Urdu supports comprehension monitoring and lexical

Source	Scene/ Dialogue Context	Vygotskian Principle	Psycholinguistic Insight
	<p>excited I almost forget to chop the potatoes for dinner. I tell Mimi to wait while I get things done.</p> <p><b>"I'll help you,"</b> she says cheerfully, and I stare at her. Maybe she said something else. I often mistake the simplest of English words. <b>She laughs and translates in Urdu. "I. Will. Help. You."</b></p>	<p>assistance, adjusting her help based on Sakina's comprehension level—this reflects learning within the ZPD, where the presence of a more capable peer enables progression.</p>	<p>access. Mimi's repetition with slower articulation also reinforces phonological awareness, aiding Sakina's receptive skills in a low-stress, emotionally supportive context.</p>
Excerpt 5 – page 49	<p>We peel the rest of the potatoes. At intervals I take little glances at her, and at other intervals I catch her doing the same thing.</p> <p><b>"Ready to practice your English?"</b> she asks when all the potatoes are chopped and the table is as clean as it was before we started. My stomach gives a rumble, as if I've eaten something left out in the sun too long. Ready? I suppose I'm as ready as I'll ever be. I nod once. Then again, more firmly. She takes out a notebook with a pink cover. <b>"I'll say a sentence and then you copy it."</b></p> <p>"What is your name?"          "What is your name?"          "My name is Mimi."          "My name is Sakina."          "How are you?"          "How are you?"          "I'm very well, thank you."          "I'm very well, thank you."          "What's the weather like outside?"          "What's the weather like outside?"          "Not too bad today."          "Not too bad today."</p> <p>She grins at my accent, until I turn the tables on her and ask her to speak in Urdu. Her accent is so bad it's like she's acting in a spy movie whose trailer I sometimes catch on Sahib Ji's television.</p>	<p><b>Scaffolding and Reciprocal ZPD</b></p> <p>Mimi acts as a more knowledgeable peer, offering scaffolded linguistic input within Sakina's ZPD through controlled repetition. The roles reverse when Sakina challenges Mimi's Urdu, showing reciprocal scaffolding and peer-mediated learning.</p>	<p>Sentence repetition enhances phonological processing and syntactic pattern acquisition. Social reinforcement (laughter, accents) creates a low-anxiety environment that promotes affective motivation and increases working memory retention of new language forms.</p>
Excerpt 6 – Page 50	<p>I pause and stare at her, my laughter gone. "You learn different languages at school?" She nods. <b>"Hola is Spanish for 'hello.' Or . . . salaam, I guess."</b></p> <p>I file this in my brain for future reference. "Hola. Salaam. Hello. Now I know how to say this in three languages." She beams at</p>	<p><b>ZPD &amp; Mediation</b></p> <p>Mimi facilitates Sakina's lexical expansion by introducing multilingual greetings within a supportive, low-pressure interaction. Encouragement acts as social mediation,</p>	<p>Sakina's brain forms semantic associations between equivalents across languages, enhancing mental lexicon connectivity. Emotional reinforcement (praise) lowers the affective filter, supporting motivation and long-term retention.</p>



Source	Scene/ Dialogue Context	Vygotskian Principle	Psycholinguistic Insight
	me like a proud amma. "Excellent! You'll pass that test in no time!"	boosting confidence and reinforcing learning.	
Excerpt 7 -Page 50	<p>"So tell me more about your school," I say.</p> <p>"What do you want to know?" She shrugs as if it's such a boring, unimportant thing. "It's just like any other school."</p> <p>Sometimes I wonder about this girl. "I haven't been to school, so I wouldn't know what that's like," I say. I try not to sound harsh, but my bitterness must show because she immediately looks downcast. "Oh, yeah, sorry." She taps her pencil to her chin, thinking. "Well, it's a big brown building with lots of rooms to study in. And long hallways with lockers for the older kids . . ."</p> <p><b>"What are lockers?"</b> Her brow wrinkles as if working on a puzzle. <b>"Uh, they look like narrow closets with locks on the doors, and each student gets one to keep all his or her books and stuff inside.</b> Lots of elementary schools don't have them, but mine was different."</p>	<p><b>Mediation &amp; Meaning-Making through Social Interaction</b></p> <p>Mimi serves as a more knowledgeable peer, helping Sakina build understanding by mediating unfamiliar cultural concepts through shared dialogue—core to Vygotsky's idea that learning is socially constructed.</p>	Sakina encounters new vocabulary ("lockers") and constructs mental representations based on Mimi's analogical explanation, illustrating how new lexical items are mapped onto existing cognitive frameworks to aid comprehension.
Excerpt 8 – Page 83	<p><b>"We're going sightseeing!"</b> Sakina announces the next day as she clears away the breakfast plates.</p> <p>I'm busy inhaling my fifth (or is it sixth?) French toast cooked desi style in fresh ghee, so I think I haven't heard her correctly. <b>"Going where?"</b></p> <p>She stops, uncertain. "Isn't that what you say? Sightseeing? When you want to see the sights?"</p> <p>I nod, remembering my pledge to be her teacher. In the avalanche of emotions of the previous few days, I've forgotten about her English lessons. "Oh yeah, that's absolutely correct. Good job!" Then I pause. "What sights? I didn't know there were any sights to see in Karachi.</p>	<p><b>ZPD &amp; Scaffolding</b></p> <p>Mimi acts as a supportive peer in Sakina's ZPD, offering affirmations and gentle correction. Sakina tests language use in a real context, and Mimi scaffolds her learning by validating and encouraging her language attempt.</p>	Sakina displays emerging metalinguistic awareness by checking if her language use fits the context. Her question shows active language monitoring, and the successful use of "sightseeing" indicates lexical acquisition through contextual and emotional engagement.
Excerpt 9 – Page 107	<p>She looks serious. "What's happened—everything okay?" I ask her.</p> <p>She sighs louder than a cow with too much milk. <b>"I spilled the</b></p>	<p><b>Mediation &amp; Scaffolding</b></p> <p>Mimi acts as a more capable peer by clarifying the idiom's metaphorical</p>	Sakina encounters a culturally bound idiom, and her moment of confusion reflects the cognitive challenge in

Source	Scene/ Dialogue Context	Vygotskian Principle	Psycholinguistic Insight
	<p>beans about Dad's columns," she admits, twisting her hands around her scarf. Today it's a bold red polka-dotted one, over a plain black T-shirt. She's hunched over in the car, so I can't see what the T-shirt says. Something strange and not even remotely funny, I'm sure.</p> <p>Spilling beans doesn't sound like a great catastrophe. <b>"It means tell everyone a secret,"</b> Mimi adds, seeing my confusion.</p>	meaning, providing linguistic mediation that helps Sakina move from literal interpretation to figurative understanding.	second language acquisition where literal vs. figurative language must be distinguished. Mimi's explanation supports semantic decoding and helps build idiomatic competence.
Excerpt 10 - page 130	<p>Mimi and I are practicing English in the family room, using the Wimpy Kid book she's given me. It's about a boy who's sad because everyone picks on him, but then he does the most obnoxious things for fun. <b>Pranks, the Americans call it.</b> I'm horrified by everything in this book, but also fascinated.</p>	<p><b>ZPD &amp; Cultural Mediation</b></p> <p>Mimi scaffolds Sakina's language learning through culturally embedded literature, expanding her understanding within the ZPD by providing exposure to new vocabulary, expressions, and cultural norms.</p>	The reading experience enhances lexical acquisition and pragmatic awareness through emotionally charged content. Sakina's emotional reactions (horror and fascination) deepen engagement, aiding semantic retention and helping her navigate cultural pragmatics in L2 (second language) learning.
Excerpt 11 – Page 138	<p>I've forgotten what I'd thrown on this morning. It's a white-and-black striped T-shirt with a big pink donut in the middle, and the words <b>DONUT JUDGE ME</b> written around it in a circle. She's trying to figure it out with a tight wrinkle between her eyes. <b>"Do not is spelled wrong,"</b> she tells me, concerned.</p> <p>I give her a little smile. <b>"It's a pun, with donut,"</b> I explain</p>	<p><b>Mediation and Language Play in the ZPD</b></p> <p>Mimi acts as a mediator by guiding Sakina to understand the double meaning (pun), supporting learning within Sakina's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Humor and language play serve as cultural tools in the learning process.</p>	This moment enhances Sakina's metalinguistic skills—her ability to reflect on language as a system. The pun illustrates lexical ambiguity and phonological overlap, showing how semantic flexibility is key in decoding humor and idiomatic expressions in a second language.
Excerpt 12 – Page 159	<p>I should practice my accent, make it sound more high-class. I should read Diary of a Wimpy Kid all over again, just to make sure <b>I remember all the idioms and slang. Kidding is joking. Dude means person, usually a male. They say sidewalk in American English, but footpath in British.</b> If that's on the admission test, I have to use the British word.</p>	<p><b>Self-Regulation and Internalization</b></p> <p>Sakina is internalizing language learning strategies and regulating her own progress, a core Vygotskian milestone. Her shift from social learning (dialogues with Mimi) to independent reflection shows development through the ZPD.</p>	Sakina demonstrates growing sociolinguistic awareness—understanding that language varies by context, culture, and dialect (e.g., American vs. British English). Her metacognitive strategies reflect deep lexical processing and concern for register and pragmatics in communication.

Source	Scene/ Dialogue Context	Vygotskian Principle	Psycholinguistic Insight
Excerpt 13 – Page 161	I pick up all the cards and shuffle them. <b>“You’ll do great! Your English has improved so much since I first met you.”</b>	<b>ZPD and Scaffolding</b>  This moment reflects the outcome of effective scaffolding within Sakina’s ZPD. The encouragement signifies the withdrawal of support as Sakina reaches greater independence in her language ability.	Positive reinforcement boosts Sakina’s confidence, reinforcing motivation and self-efficacy—two key factors in successful second language acquisition. It also signals perceived competence, which can accelerate language retention and fluency.

## Discussion

Lev Vygotsky’s sociocultural theory has undergone significant reinterpretation in recent decades, evolving from its foundational emphasis on socially mediated cognition into a robust, interdisciplinary framework that accounts for the complex interplay of language, culture, identity, and emotion in development. Recent scholarship emphasizes that cognitive growth is not only socially situated but also deeply influenced by digital literacies, translanguing practices, and culturally sustaining pedagogies (Rogoff et al., 2016; Wei & García, 2022). Vygotsky’s original assertion—that learning precedes development—remains central, but contemporary studies suggest that this learning is now embedded in globalized, hybridized contexts, where cultural tools are increasingly multimodal and shaped by youth culture, migration, and digital connectivity.

A salient example of this theoretical evolution can be seen through the lens of *A Thousand Questions* (2020) by Saadia Faruqi, a novel that subtly enacts Vygotskian principles through the intercultural relationship between the protagonists, Mimi and Sakina. Mimi, an American girl of Pakistani descent, navigates linguistic and cultural dissonance as she immerses herself in her ancestral culture. Her language learning journey—particularly her emotional preference for “*azaan*” over “*adhaan*”—epitomizes the kind of affective-linguistic interplay modern scholars have identified as pivotal to second language acquisition (Kramsch, 2021; Pavlenko, 2014). This case exemplifies how emotional resonance can mediate internalization, reinforcing Vygotsky’s view of language not only as a cognitive tool but as an emotional and identity-forming one.

The characters’ exchanges, especially Mimi’s interactions with Sakina and other Pakistani interlocutors, embody the principles of scaffolding and the ZPD. However, rather than a static dynamic of knowledge transfer from a more knowledgeable other (MKO), their relationship reflects *reciprocal mediation*—each girl learns from the other through sustained, culturally grounded dialogue. This aligns with recent conceptual extensions such as mutual scaffolding (Brooks & Donato, 1994) and co-construction of knowledge in dialogic teaching (N. Mercer & Littleton, 2007). Their mutual engagement highlights how learning is not a one-way street but a participatory and emotionally charged negotiation of meaning.

Moreover, the narrative’s bilingual and bicultural landscape supports current research emphasizing *translanguaging*—the flexible deployment of multiple linguistic repertoires—as both a pedagogical strategy and a mode of meaning-making (García et al., 2017). Mimi’s gradual fluency in Urdu, fueled by context-rich interaction and personal motivation, illustrates how language learning in real-life contexts often defies linear models and instead thrives in dynamic, socially situated environments. These insights support sociocultural theorists like Lantolf and Poehner (2014), who argue that effective

language learning is driven by meaningful participation in socially authentic tasks, not abstract drills or decontextualized instruction.

Importantly, the emotional and motivational dimensions of cognitive development, long underexplored in traditional readings of Vygotsky, are now being recognized as central to the learning process. Studies in affective neuroscience and educational psychology (Immordino-Yang & Damasio, 2007) show that positive emotional connections, such as Mimi's sense of belonging or Sakina's growing confidence, significantly enhance memory retention, vocabulary acquisition, and learner agency. *A Thousand Questions* illustrates how empathy, identity negotiation, and interpersonal connection fuel linguistic and cognitive growth—reinforcing the argument that cognition is deeply entwined with the social and emotional fabric of the learner's world.

Expanding on Vygotsky's idea of cultural tools, today's scholars also include not just language and physical artifacts but narratives, media, and personal histories as mediational means. The diary Mimi keeps becomes a form of internal speech—a Vygotskian mechanism by which external discourse is transformed into internal regulation and reflection. Through her writing, she makes sense of her shifting identity, beliefs, and emotions, demonstrating how literacy practices enable cognitive transformation in culturally rich contexts.

Finally, this revised sociocultural perspective demands a shift in pedagogy and assessment. Instead of measuring isolated competencies, educators are called to observe learners within their ZPD, using collaborative, reflective, and multimodal approaches that mirror the complexity of learners' lived experiences. *A Thousand Questions* thus serves as both a narrative and pedagogical artifact, illustrating how culturally responsive education, grounded in Vygotskian theory, can empower learners to navigate, negotiate, and reimagine their identities through language.

In sum, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory continues to evolve as it intersects with research in language acquisition, emotion, identity, and digital culture. Contemporary applications, such as those seen in *A Thousand Questions*, reveal that learning is not merely cognitive development in a vacuum but a socially orchestrated, emotionally textured, and culturally embedded phenomenon. Through dialogic exchange, cultural immersion, and emotional resonance, learners co-construct knowledge and reshape their cognitive landscapes—proving that the most powerful learning happens in community, in context, and in conversation.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that *A Thousand Questions* by Saadia Faruqi offers a rich, narrative-based representation of language acquisition within a cross-cultural friendship, aligning closely with the principles of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. Through the evolving relationship between Mimi and Sakina, language learning is revealed as a socially mediated, emotionally driven, and culturally embedded process. The characters' mutual scaffolding, engagement within the ZPD, and use of language as a tool for cultural mediation bring Vygotsky's core concepts to life. Unlike traditional classroom-based studies, this analysis highlights how authentic interpersonal relationships—especially among youth—can foster both linguistic development and intercultural empathies.

By situating this research at the intersection of literature and psycholinguistics, the study fills a notable gap in scholarship and repositions fiction as a powerful pedagogical tool. Importantly, the findings carry practical implications for EFL educators, language curriculum designers, and multicultural education programs. For instance, incorporating narrative texts like *A Thousand Questions* into classroom activities can support language



learners in exploring cultural identity, practicing dialogue with emotional nuance, and building empathy. Educators can design scaffolded peer-interaction tasks, reflective journaling, and role-play based on literary models to mirror the reciprocal learning observed between Mimi and Sakina. Ultimately, this study advocates for more humanistic and culturally responsive approaches to language education—where language is not merely taught, but lived through connection, curiosity, and compassion.

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