

THE RELEVANCE AND IMPLICATIONS OF VYGOTSKY'S SOCIOCULTURAL THEORY IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM

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Abstract

Sociocultural theory has made a great impact on the learning and teaching profession. The theory advocates learning, including L2 acquisition, as a semiotic process where participation in socially mediated activities is essential. It regards instruction as crucial to L2 development and should be geared to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that is beyond the learner's actual development level. It believes that learning in an L2 context should be a collaborative achievement and not an isolated individual's effort where the learner works unassisted and unmediated. This literature review discusses the relevance and implications of this theory to L2 teaching.

Keywords: *Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), Metacognition, Scaffolding, Mediation, Internalisation*

Introduction

Vygotsky (1896-1934) is one of the Russian psychologists whose ideas have influenced the field of educational psychology and the field of education as whole. For him, although biological factors constitute the necessary pre-requisite for elementary processes to emerge, sociocultural factors are indispensable for elementary natural

processes to develop. He argues for the uniqueness of the social milieu and regards socio-cultural settings as the primary and determining factor in the development of higher forms of human mental activity such as voluntary attention, intentional memory, logical thought, planning, and problem solving. However, his most outstanding work is the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which is regarded as a remarkable contribution to the field of education and learning process.

The Basic Concepts in Sociocultural Theory

One of the fundamental concepts of sociocultural theory, according to Lantolf (2000), is its claim that the human mind is mediated. Lantolf claims that Vygotsky finds a significant role for what he calls 'tools' in humans' understanding of the world and of themselves. According to him, Vygotsky advocates that humans do not act directly on the physical world without the intermediary of tools. Whether symbolic or signs, tools according to Vygotsky are artefacts created by humans under specific cultural (culture specific) and historical conditions, and as such they carry with them the characteristics of the culture in question. They are used as aids in solving problems that cannot be solved in the same way in their absence. In turn, they also exert an influence on the individuals who use them in that they give rise to previously unknown activities and previously unknown ways of conceptualising phenomena in the world. Therefore, they are subject to modification as they are passed from one generation to the next, and each generation reworks them in order to meet the needs and aspirations of its individuals and communities. Vygotsky advocates that the role of a psychologist should be to understand

how human social and mental activity is organised through culturally constructed artefacts.

According to Vygotsky (1978 cited Lantolf 2000), the sociocultural environment presents the child with a variety of tasks and demands, and engages the child in his world through the tools. In the early stages, Vygotsky claims that the child is completely dependent on other people, usually the parents, who initiate the child's actions by instructing him/her as to what to do, how to do it, as well as what not to do. Parents, as representatives of the culture and the conduit through which the culture passes into the child, actualise these instructions primarily through language. On the question of how do children then appropriate these cultural and social heritages, Vygotsky (1978 cited Wertsch 1985) states that the child acquires knowledge through contacts and interactions with people as the first step (interpsychological plane), then later assimilates and internalises this knowledge adding his personal value to it (intrapsychological plane). This transition from social to personal property according to Vygotsky is not a mere copy, but a transformation of what had been learnt through interaction, into personal values. Vygotsky claims that this is what also happens in schools. Students do not merely copy teachers' capabilities; rather they transform what teachers offer them during the processes of appropriation.

Vygotsky (1978 cited Lantolf 1994, 2002) argues that the field of psychology has deprived itself of crucial information to the understanding of complex aspects of human behaviour by refusing to study consciousness. This refusal, according to him, has restricted the role of psychology to just the explanation of the most elementary connections between a living being and the world. Consciousness in his view

distinguishes human behaviour from other living beings and links the individual's knowledge to his/her behaviour. It arises, functions and develops in the process of people's interaction with reality on the basis of their socio-historical practices. He insists that socially meaningful activity has to be considered as the explanatory principle for understanding consciousness and he rejects any attempt to decouple consciousness from behaviour.

Lantolf *et al.* (1994) indicate that the latter understanding of consciousness in the field of teaching is embodied in the concept of metacognition, which, according to him, incorporates functions such as planning, voluntary attention, logical memory, problem solving and evaluation. Williams and Burden (1997) claim that sociocultural theory advocates that education should be concerned "not just with theories of instruction, but with learning to learn, developing skills and strategies to continue to learn, with making learning experiences meaningful and relevant to the individual, with developing and growing as a whole person". They claim that the theory asserts that education can never be value-free; it must be underpinned by a set of beliefs about the kind of society that is being constructed and the kinds of explicit and implicit messages that will best convey those beliefs. These beliefs should be manifest also in the ways in which teachers interact with students.

Sociocultural theory has a holistic view about the act of learning. Williams & Burden (1997) claim that the theory opposes the idea of the discrete teaching of skills and argues that meaning should constitute the central aspects of any unit of study. Any unit of study should be presented in all its complexity rather than skills and knowledge presented in isolation. The theory emphasizes the importance of what the learner brings to any

learning situation as an active meaning-maker and problem-solver. It acknowledges the dynamic nature of the interplay between teachers, learners and tasks and provides a view of learning as arising from interactions with others. According to Ellis (2000), socio-cultural theory assumes that learning arises not through interaction but in interaction. Learners first succeed in performing a new task with the help of another person and then internalise this task so that they can perform it on their own. In this way, social interaction is advocated to mediate learning. According to Ellis, the theory goes further to say interactions that successfully mediate learning are those in which the learners scaffold the new tasks. However, one of the most important contributions of the theory is the distinction Vygotsky made between the child's actual and potential levels of development or what he calls Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Then, what is ZPD?

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Lantolf (2002), Wertsch (1985) and Shayer (2002) claim that Vygotsky's introduction of the notion of the ZPD was due to his dissatisfaction with two practical issues in educational psychology: the first is the assessment of a child's intellectual abilities and the second is the evaluation of the instructional practices. With respect to the first issue, Vygotsky believes that the established techniques of testing only determine the actual level of development, but do not measure the potential ability of the child. In his view, psychology should address the issue of predicting a child's future growth, "what he/she not yet is". Because of the value Vygotsky attached to the importance of predicting a child's future capabilities, he formulated the concept of ZPD which he defines as "the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent

problem solving, and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” Wertsch (1985, P. 60). According to him, ZPD helps in determining a child’s mental functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that are currently in an embryonic state, but will mature tomorrow. Moreover, he claims that the study of ZPD is also important, because it is the dynamic region of sensitivity in which the transition from interpsychological to intrapsychological functioning takes place.

Shayer (2002) claims that a crucial feature of learning according to Vygotsky is that it creates a ZPD, that is to say, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalised, they become part of the child’s independent developmental achievement. Vygotsky advocates that ZPD is not the role of instruction alone, but developmental (biological) factors do have a role to play. It is jointly determined by the child’s level of development and the form of instruction involved. According to him, instruction and development do not directly coincide, but represent two processes that exist in a very complex interrelationship. He argues that the child can operate “only within certain limits that are strictly fixed by the state of the child’s development and intellectual possibilities”. Vygotsky in Shayer (2002) advocates that good instruction should proceed ahead of development and should awaken and rouse to life an entire set of functions, which are in the stage of maturation and lie in the ZPD. It is in this way, as he claims, that instruction can play an extremely important role in development. This suggests, according to Shayer, that the “natural or spontaneous” thinking lags behind the intellectual challenge of

schooling, however, at the same time; this natural thinking provides children with new tools for thinking to meet the learning demands of the school. It also suggests that teachers are responsible for offering learning contexts in which the instruction marches ahead of the development and leads it. Vygotsky claims as Shayer reports, that good instruction must always be aimed not so much at the developed but the developing functions.

Shayer (ibid) claims that despite the attractiveness of the concept of ZPD in its simplicity, its application in practice is more problematic. He claims that Vygotsky himself did not offer much practical advice as to how ZPD might be successfully applied in classrooms. Shayer says that Vygotsky left it to others to find effective ways of doing so. It is also important to note that the concept of ZPD does not imply that these levels of learning are hierarchically ordered or neatly sequenced. In fact, Shayer claims that Vygotsky explicitly stated that they are not.

An issue that arises in school contexts is what are the means that can help learners progress from one level to the next and what is the teacher's role in facilitating this progress. Two important concepts are discussed, one is the concept of mediation, which is central to sociocultural theory, and the second is the concept of scaffolding that was engendered by cognitive psychologists.

Mediation

As in Feuerstein's theory (Williams and Burden 1997), mediation is central to Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Mediation according to Vygotsky refers to the part played by other significant people in the learners' lives, people who enhance their

learning by selecting and shaping the learning experiences presented to them. Vygotsky (1978 cited Wertsch 1985) claims that the secret of effective learning lies in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different levels of skills and knowledge. This involves helping the learner to move into and through the next layer of knowledge or understanding. Vygotsky also regard tools as mediators and one of the important tools is language. The use of language to help learners move into and through their ZPD is of great significance to sociocultural theory.

Kozulin *et al.* (1995) claim that Vygotsky considers the learning process as not a solitary exploration of the environment by the child on his own, but as a process of the child's appropriation of the methods of actions that exist in a given culture. In the process of appropriation, symbolic tools or artefacts play a crucial role. Kozulin (2002) categorises mediators into two categories: human and symbolic. According to him, human mediation usually tries to answer the question concerning what kind of involvement on the part of the adult is effective in enhancing the child's performance, while symbolic mediation deals with what changes in the child's performance can be brought about by the introduction of the child to symbolic tools-mediators.

Scaffolding

According to Donato (1994) scaffolding is a concept that derives from cognitive psychology and L1 research. It states that in a social interaction, a knowledgeable participant can create by means of speech and supportive conditions in which the student (novice) can participate in and extend current skills and knowledge to a high level of

competence. In an educational context, however, scaffolding is an instructional structure whereby the teacher models the desired learning strategy or task then gradually shifts responsibility to the students. According to McKenzie, (1999) scaffolding provides the following advantages:

- a) It provides clear directions for students
- b) It clarifies purpose of the task
- c) It keeps students on task
- d) It offers assessment to clarify expectations
- e) It points students to worthy sources
- f) It reduces uncertainty, surprise and disappointment
- g) It delivers efficiency
- h) It creates momentum

According to Rogoff (1990 in Donato, 1994), scaffolding implies the expert's active stance towards continual revisions of the scaffolding in response to the emerging capabilities of the learner, and a learner's error or limited capabilities can be a signal for the adult to upgrade the scaffolding. As the learner begins to take on more responsibility for the task, the adult dismantles the scaffold indicating that the child has benefited from the assisted performance and internalised the problem-solving processes provided by the previous scaffolded episode. Wertsch (1979a cited Donato 1994) claims that scaffolded performance is a dialogically constituted interpsychological mechanism that promotes the learner's internalisation of knowledge co-constructed in shared activity. Donato (1994) advocates that in an L2 classroom, collaborative work among language learners provides the same opportunity for scaffolded help as in expert-novice relationships in the everyday

setting. Van Lier (1988 cited Donato 1994) states that L2 teaching methodology can benefit from a study of L1 scaffolding to understand how classroom activities already tacitly employ such tactics. The study of scaffolding in L2 research according to Donato has focused exclusively on how language teachers provide guided assistance to learners.

The Implications of Sociocultural Theory on Second Language Teaching

Vygotsky's ideas have been widely applied in the field of education. The implications of these ideas in the field of L2 teaching therefore, are well founded and can be summarised as follow:

The traces of Vygotsky's ideas can be seen in the process approaches, which appeared as a reaction against the dominant product approaches in the 1960s and 1970s. The product approaches are grounded on behaviourist principles and relate language teaching to linguistic form, discrete linguistics skills and habit formation. They claim that language consists of parts, which should be learned and mastered separately in a graded manner. The learner's role is to receive and follow the teacher's instructions; an example of these approaches is the audio-lingual approach. However, process approaches came up with views emphasising the cognitive aspect of learning and acknowledge the contributions that the learner brings to the learning context. According to these approaches, students should be taught what Horrowtiz (1986) terms as 'systematic thinking skills'. As a result, planning, setting goals, drafting and generating ideas became part of teaching strategies in L2 classroom, particularly in the field of writing. In addition, the social aspect of teaching L2 became an important part of L2 classroom literature, as spearheaded by Genre Approach (Gee 1997; Badger *et al.* 2000). Proponents of Genre

Approach believe that language should be made accessible and accepted as a practical tool for teachers to use in their teaching. Therefore, the theoretical basis of Genre Approach is firmly premised in the systemic functional model that refers to the theory of genre as theory of language use, description of relationship between the context in which language occurs and the actual language being used (Gee 1997). Here, the emphasis is on social uses of language according to context, which tally with Vygotsky's ideas of the role of language as a social tool for communication.

The importance of meaning construction in the act of learning (reflecting Vygotsky's claims) is a hot topic in L2 classroom interactions. The rise of approaches such as integrative teaching of reading and writing is nothing but a recognition of the importance of meaningful interaction of L2 students with texts in classrooms. Zimmerman (1997) argues that enhancing students' competency in L2 should not be seen to be located in mastering skills. Too much concentration on skills could deprive students from engaging with what he refers to as aspects of literacy such as meaning construction, competency, fluency and flexibility with dealing with texts as readers and writers.

Marshall (1987) asserts that if these aspects are ignored, teachers will be inculcating in students what Kennedy (1997) and Kubota (1998) term as fixed routines and dogmatic treatment of skills (what Vygotsky calls 'fossilisation'). They argue that such skills make students develop one-way thinking that rejects whatever does not conform to the existing knowledge. Students will develop a convergent type of thinking that will hinder their abilities to deal with tasks that require complex thinking. This, in turn, could retard students' abilities to develop multiple skills required for their success in their academic life (Spack, 1988). It is advocated that once the focus of teaching is on

meaning construction, students would be able to assimilate, internalise and integrate the new information with the information they already possess, and thus understand the new information better and add personal values to it. Sociocultural theory believes that true learning occurs when the learner actively transforms his world and does not merely conform to it (Donato, 1994). Seedhouse (2004) echoed the importance of meaning construction and fluency in L2 classrooms when he suggested simultaneous dual focus on form-and-accuracy together with meaning- and-fluency in L2 classroom as the best way of enhancing L2 students' level of proficiency.

A clear application of sociocultural theory principles in L2 classroom is obvious in the task-based approach. This approach emphasises the importance of social and collaborative aspects of learning. Ellis (2000) claims that sociocultural theory focuses on how the learner accomplishes a task and how the interaction between learners can scaffold and assist in the L2 acquisition process. Shayer (2002) postulated that collaboration and interaction among peers create a collective ZPD from which each learner can draw from as a collective pool. Ellis advises teachers to give more attention to the properties of task that aim to promote communicative efficiency as well as L2 acquisition. Nunan (1988 cited Seedhouse, 1999) assumes that task-based contexts “stimulate learners to mobilise all their linguistic resources and push their linguistic knowledge to the limit” a point that Seedhouse seems to question. However, a more optimistic view comes from Kumaravadivelu (1993b cited Kumaravadivelu 2006) who advocates that task-based activity is not linked to any particular approach, and is therefore a useful method for the teaching of language-centred tasks, learner-centred tasks and learning-centred tasks. He recommends sequencing of tasks in a suitable manner to

ensure that the demand on language is compatible with learners' levels of proficiency. The central focus of task-based approach is on the role of interaction and collaboration among peers and how learners scaffold each other through interaction, a point that is essential in Vygotsky's concept of learning.

The issue of internalisation is crucial in Vygotsky's theory as well as in L2 classrooms. Vygotsky encourages teachers not to concentrate too much on teaching concrete facts but to also push their students into an abstract world as a means to assisting them to develop multiple skills that will enable them to deal with complex learning tasks. Simister (2004) recognizes the importance of the student's personal voice and claims that emphasis on the regurgitation of facts and repetition of accepted ideas will only produce dull and uninspired students. This implies that students should be taught how to create, adjust their strategies and assimilate learning activities into their own personal world. As a result of the recognition of the role of abstract thinking in students' intellectual development, nowadays there is a call for the introduction of literature in L2 classrooms. The teaching of literature is believed to enrich students' vocabularies and support the development of their critical thinking, thus moving them away from the parrot-like types of learning, instead focussing on language structure into abstract thinking, whereby students can have personal appreciation of the language, consequently developing a self-motivated attitude to learning the language. Lack of motivation experienced by some L2 students could be partly attributed to over-emphasis on teaching language structure which is ineffective in setting to motion students' intellectual abilities.

The concept of ZPD is a challenge for second language teachers. It's a call made by Shayer (2002) stressing the need for teachers to know the limits of their students and

teach to the limits of their ZPD and no further. Wertsch and Hikmann (1987 cited Ohta 2000) claim that determining a learner's ZPD is an act of negotiated discovery that should be realised through interaction between the learner(s) and the teacher. This interaction helps the teacher to determine precisely what the learner can achieve alone and what he/she needs assistance to achieve. Shayer (2002) advocates that more research is needed to enable teachers in each school subject to know how far ahead of development the learning they choose for their students should be. Shayer claims mere cognitive level matching leaves the children's mental development stagnant, but on the other hand, conceptualising too high above students' ability may lead to frustration and disappointment and that therefore it is the teacher's role to create the balance. In terms of language learning, Williams *et al.* (1997) claim that ZPD can be seen as complementary to interlanguage theory. This theory conceives of each learner's understanding of the language system as being gradually reshaped as it develops and more closely approximates towards the target language system. The ZPD can thus be seen as the next level of understanding in the learner's interlanguage.

The concepts of scaffolding and mediation are very essential in L2 contexts. They imply that explicit instruction in L2 learning is still needed. For example, there is an outcry against emphasis on teaching grammar in L2 classes. It is advocated that despite much time spent on teaching grammar, texts produced by L2 students are ungrammatical (Zamel 1985; Miller 1996). Even though this is a fact acknowledged by many including L2 learners, it would be a mistake for people to think that these learners will acquire the language the way children acquire their L1. Second language learners need coaching and explicit instruction in order to appropriate the fundamental skills of L2. Lack of such

skills as Carson and Leki (1997) claim, can hinder their progress and improvement as competent readers, writers and language users. In L2 context, there is still a need for learning tasks and stages to be graded to facilitate easy understanding and knowledgeable persons (teachers, instructors) to take L2 learners through different layers of knowledge and understanding before being left on their own. These are tasks they cannot handle independently, particularly at the early stages of their learning.

Conclusion

As Donato (2000) indicates, sociocultural theory differs from cognitive approaches in that while the cognitive approaches ascribe language learning to various internal processes, and the individual is seen as the sole channel through which knowledge is gained, sociocultural theory considers learning, including L2 acquisition, as a semiotic process where participation in socially-mediated activities is essential. This mediation becomes the means for mediating the individual's own mental functioning. Through socially mediated activities and the eventual individual(s)-acting-with-mediational-means, the social and individual planes of human psychological activity are interwoven.

The theory regards instruction as crucial to L2 development in the classroom. Instruction should be geared to the zone of proximal development that is beyond the learner's actual development level. In L2 classes, the theory asserts that learning is a collaborative achievement and not an isolated individual's effort, where the learner works unassisted and unmediated. The theory emphasizes that during instruction, awareness of the structure and function of language is developed by using it socially. Donato advocates

that the theory adds greater clarity to the issue of modified interaction and the negotiation of meanings in classroom settings. Teachers and learners are given opportunities to mediate and assist each other in the creation of zones of proximal development in which each party learns and develops (Donato 2000).

The theory regards negotiation and creation of meanings as a collaborative act, and through this negotiation and creation; the gap between the interpsychological/social and intrapsychological/individual is bridged. The theory believes that emphasis on collaboration during instruction helps learners to understand and see how interactions within a social instructional network are crucial for an individual's cognitive and linguistic development. According to Vygotsky, "social instruction actually produces new, elaborate, advanced psychological processes that are unavailable to the organism working in isolation" (Vygotsky 1989 cited Donato, 2000, p. 46).

Lastly, the theory emphasizes the importance of metacognition and insists that education should be concerned with learning to learn, developing learners' skills and strategies to continue to learn, making learning experiences meaningful and relevant to the learner's life and with the development and growth of the learner as a whole person (Williams and Burden 1997).

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