

Vygotsky's Influence on Teaching

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Abstract

Born in the 19th century at a time when psychology was developing and making new discoveries at a fast pace and pedagogy was still in its infancy, the young psychologist with no formal training Lev Vygotsky made history with his innovative sociocultural theories. These are still valid and in use today. This article tries to offer a background of the vygotskian theoretical approach and highlight its connection to teaching.

Keywords

Vygotsky, theory, psychology, pedagogy, teaching

Lev Vygotsky was an influential teacher turned psychologist without having any formal education in the field. In his short life, he managed to get into the Moscow University where he founded the Institute of Experimental Psychology. Further on, he gave lectures and conducted research primarily based on his original published theory which created the premises for the combination of two scientific fields: psychology and pedagogy. His theory is called developmental psychology and focuses, for the first time, on the conscious processes of personality formation, more specifically on the interaction of factors that determine the formation of personality in a child. His influence in the field of pedagogy was substantial and this article aims at highlighting some of it and its relation with teaching English, even today.

The vygotskian concept of the zone of proximal development, (ZPD) constituted a revolution at the time. This concept refers to the range of tasks that are too difficult for the child to manage alone but can be learned with adult guidance or assistance from more-skilled children. Thus, the lower limit of the ZPD represents the level of skill reached by the child working independently, whereas the upper limit is the level of additional responsibility the child can accept with the

assistance of a competent instructor. The ZPD captures the child's cognitive skills that are in the process of maturing and can be accomplished only with the assistance of a more-skilled person, as Daniels explains.¹

Teaching in the ZPD draws upon the theories of Piaget and that of the communicative approach – it implies that the teacher should adapt his or her teaching to the students' level and be aware of where students are in the process of their development while also taking into consideration what they already know. It is also about teaching to enable developmental readiness, not just waiting for students to be ready.²

Closely related to the idea of the ZPD, in Vygotsky's theory on learning, is the concept of scaffolding. Scaffolding means changing the level of support. Over the course of a teaching session, the teacher should adjust the amount of guidance to fit the child's current performance. When the student is learning a new task, the expert may use direct instruction. As the student's competence increases, less guidance should be given. Scaffolding is often used to help students attain the upper limits of their ZPD, explains Santrock.³ Asking probing questions is an excellent way to scaffold students' learning and help them develop more sophisticated thinking skills. A teacher might ask a student for examples that would explain what is being taught, or ask them what could be the following task, or even for their own explanations for certain new notions in class. In time, students should begin to internalize these kinds of analyses and improve monitoring their own work.

Many teachers who successfully use scaffolding circulate around the classroom, offering 'just-in-time' assistance to individuals, or detecting a common mistake and then leading a discussion to correct it. They also give 'children time to grapple with problems'⁴ and guide them when they observe that the child can no longer make progress. Vygotsky considered that language plays an important role in the development of the young learner who should also use speech in their solving of different class tasks, not just for social communication. The communicative approach is very

¹ Daniels, Harry, *Vygotsky and psychology*, in *Wiley-Blackwell handbook of childhood cognitive development*, 2nd ed., New York: Wiley Blackwell, 2011

² Horowitz, F. D., Darling-Hammond, L., Bransford, J., Comer, J., Rosebrock, K., Austin, K., & Rust, F., *Educating teachers for developmentally appropriate practice*, in Darling-Hammond & J. Bransford (Eds.), *Preparing teachers for a changing world*, Jossey-Bass, 2005

³ Santrock, W., John, *Educational Psychology*, 5th edit., McGraw Hill, New York, 2011, p. 91

⁴ Ibid., pp. 108-109

much in line with this theory, as it encourages young learners of a new language to use the target language for regular class talking situations, not just for solving language tasks. For example, students are advised to use the target language when addressing each other, when asking for clarifications, for a certain object or for certain needs. This creates real life situations for children to learn, even in the artificial class environment. Vygotsky further argued that young children use language to plan, guide and monitor their own behavior. This use of language for self-regulation is called *private speech*. For example, young children talk aloud to themselves about such things as their toys and the tasks they are trying to complete. Thus, when working on a puzzle, a child might say: 'This piece doesn't go here; maybe I'll try that one.' A few minutes later the child might say: 'This is so hard.'⁵ If encouraged to speak in the target language even in such moments, the learner will make quick and visible progress.

Vygotsky said that language and thought initially develop independently of each other and then merge. He emphasized that all mental functions have external, or social, origins. Children must use language to communicate with others before they can focus inward on their own thoughts. Children also must communicate externally and use language for a long period of time before they can make the transition from external to internal speech. This transition period occurs between 3 and 7 years of age and involves talking to oneself. After some time, this self-talk becomes second nature to children, and they can act without verbalizing. When this occurs, children have internalized their egocentric speech in the form of *inner speech*, which later becomes their own thoughts, explains Santrock⁶.

Vygotsky argued that children who use private speech are more socially competent than those who do not, as it represents an early transition in becoming more socially communicative. For Vygotsky, when young children talk to themselves, they are using language to govern their behavior and guide themselves⁷.

On the other hand, the acquisition of foreign or second languages could benefit from further future studies and research. Riikka Alanen discusses⁸ the new-Vygotskian sociocultural approach to mind. Alanen argues that there is no monolithic Vygotskian research paradigm, as younger

⁵ Vygotsky, L. S., *Thought and language*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1962, pp. 39-40

⁶ Santrock, W., John, *Educational Psychology*, 5th edit., McGraw Hill, New York, 2011, p. 91

⁷ Vygotsky, L. S., *Thought and language*, Cambridge, MIT Press, 1962

⁸ Alanen, Riikka, *A sociocultural approach to young language learners' beliefs about language learning*

researchers have developed new ideas starting from the Vygotsky's sociocultural paradigm. Moreover, there is also the cognitive approach to be taken into consideration - the cognitive approach to the study of metacognition has started with Jean Piaget and his developmental psychology and was also shaped by the information processing theories developed by authors like Brown or Garner. In addition, Alanen claims that the cognitive and sociocultural approaches are not incompatible: 'In fact, contemporary cognitive psychology and cognitive science are evolving in ways that the study of cognition encompasses more and more of the social aspects as well', like 'the more recent approaches to the study of metacognition such as children's theory-of-mind development by Astington.'

Important aspects like learner beliefs and metacognitive strategies or skills have been supported by the above mentioned approaches. For example, self-regulation (planning, monitoring and learning evaluation) represents a significant link between metacognitive knowledge and learning and plays an important role in the psychology of Vygotsky, who stresses the importance of the external, social world on the inner cognitive development of the mind of children. Self-regulation is regarded as very important by the author and its role in learning is being taken into consideration. Self-regulation represents the state of being in charge of one's own learning process and evaluating it: a learning process guided by metacognition, strategy and motivation. Nowadays this type of learning is called SRL (self-regulated learning) and has been extensively researched and discussed. A self-regulated learner has a certain degree of autonomy, is aware of his or her strong or weak points and is able to develop strategies to deal with the challenges of learning. Perry states that 'students who are self-regulated learners believe that opportunities to take on challenging tasks, practice their learning, develop a deep understanding of subject matter and exert effort will give rise to academic success'.⁹

References

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⁹ Perry, N.E., Phillips, L., & Hutchinson, L.R., *Preparing student teachers to support for self-regulated learning*, in *Elementary School Journal*, 106, 2006, 237-254

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Biodata:

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