

Vygotskian approach to second language learning: Sociocultural and whole language perspective on learning another language

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Kim, Dae Jin 1998. **Vygotskian approach to second language learning: Sociocultural and whole language perspective on learning another language.** *Linguistics*, 6-1, 437-458. The Vygotskian psycholinguistic approach has had a profound impact on many disciplines in social sciences and education. In this sociocultural paradigm, the nature of human mind is regarded as inherently developmental and dynamic because culturally and historically mediated sign systems including human language are believed to mediate human activity. This approach also has immense potential for the area of first and second language learning with its insight into collaborative learning strategies and constructive development of second language learners' linguistic competence. In this paper theoretical issues of interpreting second language development in Vygotskian paradigm were discussed. As a practical pedagogical suggestion, the whole language instruction for second language learning was also elaborated. (University of Georgia)

1. Introduction

In this paper the relationship between Vygotskian psycholinguistic concepts and sociocultural issues in second language learning is discussed. The Vygotskian psychological paradigm regards the human mind as inherently developmental and dynamic (Frewley & Lantolf, 1984) because "culturally developed sign systems, e. g.,

language mediate human activity" (Wertsch, 1980, p. 150). The Vygotskian perspective has had a profound impact on many disciplines in social science and education (e. g., the whole language approach to language learning and dynamic language intervention practices as in Schneider & Watkins, 1996). Vygotskian-based theories also have immense potential for the field of second language learning with their insight into collaborative learning strategies and the constructive development of linguistic competence for second language learners.

2. Language development and thought:

Social origin of speech

One of the most immense and important contributions Vygotsky made to contemporary discussions of learning is his analysis of the relationship between thought and language with regard to the influence of social and cultural factors on higher psychological processes. According to Vygotsky (1986), thought and language have different genetic roots. Thought is initially nonverbal while speech is nonintellectual. Vygotsky argued that the interaction between thought and language occurs when children first realize that everything has a name. At this point language becomes thoughtful and thought is elaborated verbally. Vygotsky emphasized that the interactive and profound relationship of thought to word when he states, "A word is a microcosm of human consciousness" (1996: 256). Vygotsky explained that when learning words, what children grasp is adult's understanding and reference for the words. As children become able to think without relying on the adults' objective reference for words, they are able to use the words independently. Based on this idea, Nelson (1981) suggests that children's language acquisition depends on the extent to which they make sense of information around them on their own.

As children internalize the speech structures related to the

social functions of language, that language becomes the basic tool of thinking. Vygotsky argues that verbal thought is not a behavior for humans, but a cultural process, which is governed by historical development of human society. Vygotsky states that the inner relationship between thought and word is a result of the development of human consciousness as dictated by historical variables. This dynamic relationship changes and develops with the evolution of thinking and language across time and societies.

Vygotsky distinguishes two aspects of independent linguistic development in children. He believes that phonetically children build the whole with parts, but semantically children begin to learn as a whole and later masters smaller and basic meaning units for further production. This is consistent with the findings of several researchers (e. g., Hickey, 1993; Vihman, 1980; Wong-Fillmore, 1976) showing that children depend on unanalyzed semantic clusters in their initial efforts to acquire first and second language.

Criticizing Piaget's failure to explain the origin and occurrence of children's egocentric speech, Vygotsky claimed that egocentric speech reflects the children's transition and development from interpsychological to intrapsychological functioning, i. e., the social, collective activity of children to the more individualized activity. This egocentric speech is a precursor of inner speech. Vygotsky believed that inner speech originates in children's social interaction with adults. With development, children use these formats of adult language themselves, first overtly, then covertly, for self-regulating functions. According to Luria's (1961) experiment and explanation, the initial form of self-regulation is characterized by inner speech that accompanies actions. The next, and higher, form of self-regulation has inner speech that precedes action initiation. Vygotsky hypothesized that the amount of this self-regulating inner speech declines and becomes syntactically abbreviated as children grow older and become proficient at the tasks in which they are engaged in. In second language learning, Saville-Troike (1988)

documented that learners actively use inner speech in their first and second language as a process of assimilating linguistic input from peers and teachers even while they do not engage in full-fledged communication activities with peers in the second language.

Vygotsky emphasized that advanced knowledge of the native language plays an important role in the study of the foreign language. This view is largely accepted by many researchers (e. g., Hakuta & Diaz, 1985). However, with regard to foreign language processes, Vygotsky (1986) suggested that "while learning a foreign language, we use word meaning that are already well developed in the native language, and only translate them" (p. 159).

3. Social interactive view of learning another language

The ultimate objective of learning another language is to use that language in order to participate adeptly in various sociocultural communicative activities. In other words, language learning guides learners' efforts to be genuine members of the communities to which they want to belong (Hall, 1995). Children learning another language have the dual tasks of mastering the linguistic rules and the cultural conventions of the group in which that language is used. Therefore, language learning goes beyond merely learning a set of linguistic structures for conveying messages because communication is a complex and dynamic phenomenon. Wertsch (1980) explains this point:

It would be totally incorrect to reduce communication to the transfer of a coded message from one individual to another. We would be likely to renounce such a simple approach if we subscribe to a notion of communication which corresponds more closely with our contemporary level of knowledge about the nature and concrete facts of

speech process. (p. 153)

Moreover, recent researchers concerned with children's L1 learning argues that language is not merely transferred to children through imitation. Instead it is assumed that children build up the grammar of their language through internalization and generation of rules. Therefore, what the children learn is not a set of utterances, but a set of rules for processing utterances in social situations (Lipson & Wixson, 1991).

Thus in order to fully explore the dynamic and interactive processes of children's language learning, both the social context and children's competence to communicate properly within each setting should be taken into account. Hymes describes children's language learning processes as " a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others" (1972: 277). Goodman & Goodman's explanation (1990) that language is learned through social participation also supports this point. Even infants "sense" the social functions of the language before they completely comprehend the communication functions (Bruner, 1983). For example, as children began to express their own needs and experiences using symbols, they are eager to be understood and understand others. At this point, they are ready to obtain the conventional uses of language in society as a means of communication. Language learning is a product of the socialization process (Halliday, 1978) through the web of social interaction (Bornstein & Bruner, 1989) where the process of acquiring language and the process of becoming competent members of a society deeply affect each other. In addition, Bruner (1983) states that social processes, e. g., turn-taking and role exchange, once acquired, remain constant from prelinguistic to linguistic communication.

Conversely, the process of becoming a competent member of society is realized to a large extent through language: through acquiring knowledge of its functions, its social distribution and interpretations of

socially defined situations (Ochs & Schieffelin, 1982). This means that we are learning language and using language to learn simultaneously. One interpretation of Vygotsky's view on language development is that social experience is individually internalized and molds the individual language use (Vygotsky, 1978). Moreover, according to Vygotskian sociocultural theory, language plays a central role as a culturally mediated system and remains the most potent tool for communicating with and extracting information from the outside world (Lantolf, 1993).

In connection with this idea, Vygotsky believed that thought has a social, external origin and that language functions as a semiotic tool in the development of individual cognition. It should be noted that, in the Marxist paradigm which formed the context within which Vygotskian theory was constructed, language serves as the medium both for the current collective sharing and long-term transmission of new forms of consciousness. At the same time, language is a historically conditioned instrument, i. e., it evolves under historical and institutional constraints (Lantolf & Apple, 1993). As a symbolic mediation link between sociocultural practices and mental functions, language plays a central role in the sociocultural interpretation of social and psychological phenomena. Therefore, any introduction of new language forms into a culture requires that the current way of thinking be assimilated into a different thought system (Bruner, 1983). For example, the transition from prelinguistic to linguistic stages presupposes the assimilation of qualitatively different perspectives in thinking. This is also true for second language acquisition.

Furthermore because culture is constituted of symbolic procedures, concepts, and distinctions that can be accessible only through language (Bruner, 1983), mastery of a language means the thorough understanding of cultural settings and conditions. Children's cultural learning requires the cognitive ability of being able to acquire the perspective of those with whom the children are interacting (Tomasello, Kruger & Ratner, 1993). Because every language act is

accompanied by socially relevant and "culturally prescribed" (Bruner, 1983: 127) conventions, one of the indications of children's cognitive and linguistic development is to identify these culturally authentic practices, e. g., taking turns or knowing what to do at the table in children's language. In addition, because of the close relationship between the social use of language and culture, Vygotsky (1978; 1986) argues that children's intellectual growth is contingent on their mastering the social means of thought, i. e., language, because the mechanism of individual developmental change is rooted in society and culture. Elaborating further, Bruner (1973, 1985) states that children develop language in the context of interacting with society particularly in collaboration with more competent partners. Placing children's psychological and cognitive development in a social perspective, Vygotsky (1981) stresses that:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes, first it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane, first it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, and the formation of concepts, and the development of volition. (p. 153)

Human speech also undergoes this transformation. Once internalized from outer sources, speech becomes a pervasive and profound part of the higher psychological processes; speech acts organize, unify, and integrate many disparate aspects of children's behavior, such as perception, memory and problem solving (Wertsch & Tulviste, 1992). These higher mental functions are socially formed and culturally transmitted. Rogoff and Wertsch (1984: 3) stated that "culture is mastered and internalized." They asserted that variations in the social organization will result in variation in individual psychological functioning. This is much stronger than the conventional statement that

an individual's mental processes develop within a social milieu. It also suggests that to understand individual cognitive growth, it will be necessary to explore specific patterns of social interaction.

As discussed, the notion of cultural learning is inextricably associated with the conditions (contexts) in which the child is placed. Bruner (1983: 129) points out that "contexts for young children cannot be taken as a given, as simply being there. operative context for he child or adult is selected and constructed. In the Vygotskian paradigm, the development of children is preceded by learning through internalization (Vygotsky, 1986). This process of internalization, also called appropriation (Rogoff, 1990) is a learning process. What is being learned is the point of view of another person, i. e. voice (Wertsch, 1991), who can guide a dialogic process. In this dialogic process the internalized voice is usually that of an adult or more advanced learners. The adults or more competent peers adjust and negotiate their assistance from moment to moment as they interact with children. This negotiation with children has been termed semiotic mediation (Wertsch, 1984), scaffolding (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976) and assisted performance (Tharp, Gallimore & Calkins, 1984). For children to profit from such joint cognitive activity, it must be linked to the potential developmental level, surpassing their actual developmental stage. This area of potential development was named the 'Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) by Vygotsky (1978). More recently, Bruner (1984) provides a lucid explanation of the ZPD and its relation to the social origin of our cognitive capacity:

Realization of one's individual powers through the utilization of knowledge and shared consciousness depended not on the individual child but on society's capacity to provide the child with the symbolic tools that the child needed in order to grow: on providing opportunity for the child to enter into relationship with somebody wiser or abler than himself who would provide the necessary concepts and

consciousness that would enable him to make an epistemic leap forward that Vygotsky saw as the promise of the revolution. The ZPD was its instrument. (p.96)

In sum, the transition from other-regulation, or interpersonal activity, to self-regulation, or intrapersonal activity, occurs in the Zone of Proximal Development. This is where the child and adult participate in a dialogic process in which the adult initiates the directions the child and later adjusts the directions based on the child's responses and the degree of task completion. The main purpose of this process is to teach the child how to tackle and solve problems strategically. What should be noted in this process, on the basis of Vygotskian developmental notion, is that "good learning" surpasses children's current developmental level. The more accurate developmental indicator for children is what they can do in the Zone of Proximal Development with adults and that will be the children's actual competence level in the near future (Vygotsky, 1978).

4. Strategic collaboration with more competent partners

Vygotsky was interested in tracing the process which "children incorporate semiotic systems into their cognitive activity in order to mediate that activity in tasks that are beyond their capabilities at a given moment" (Vygotsky, 1978: 74). This process is possible in the Zone of Proximal Development and has major pedagogical implications. This idea can be restated as "the difference between a child's actual level of development as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance" (Vygotsky, 1978: 86).

Wertsch (1984) further elaborated upon this idea by emphasizing the interaction that later plays an important role in children's independent performance. Wertsch (1984) suggested that if the task is

not in the children's Zone of Proximal Development, the children may not actually have been helped by adults. Children do not have or make a ZPD alone. A ZPD is created whenever children interact with more capable others to accomplish particular tasks. The key to successful development in children is how to create such a ZPD and help them move through the ZPD to a more independent performance stage. In order to make instructional collaboration more effective, it is necessary for capable adults to adjust their level of interaction in response to children's actual level of performance rather than the apply predetermined pedagogical strategies. Accordingly, the effective classroom analysis of children's cognitive functioning also requires that a teacher study children's social interactions with more experienced peers to determine what is happening in the various ZPD's created from these interactions.

According to Rommetveit (1979), "intersubjectivity," i. e. common understanding between adults and children can be achieved through reciprocal attempts to understand each other's perspective and through the negotiation of shared meanings. In the earlier learning stages, children are not good at taking the perspective of adults, and passively take the adult's definition of the situations. It is adults who help children come closer to the adult's perspectives. In the case of children's language learning processes, children's acquisition of language is not restricted to what is negotiated at a prelinguistic or early stage, but at a later age, the negotiation is developed into the activity of taking the perspective of adults (Tomasello et al., 1993).

While learning the language, children can develop metalinguistic skills or strategies by internalizing the adult's skills and strategies of language use. For example, in joint book reading between children and more capable adults and peers, researchers (e. g., Lipson & Wixson, 1991) found that children obtain not only specific knowledge from the book, but also strategic ways to solve the problem of how to read a book. Several researchers (Snow & Ninio, 1986; Strickland &

Taylor, 1989) contended that during interactive book reading with adults, children observe and practice the comprehension strategies of adults. This process is transactional (Bruner, 1983) and it implies that the child is not a passive recipient of information, but an active participant in this negotiation process.

5. Second language learning: Continuous access to self-regulation

For Vygotsky (1978), social interaction is crucial as a means for ensuring the psychological development of children. Moreover, when children successfully internalize these processes of social interaction they develop strategies to perform various social functions independently. In other-regulation, adults guide the operations of children using strategic interactive dialogue, e. g., "What comes next to make sense?" While children are gaining independent problem solving ability incrementally, Vygotsky (1986) found that this type of dialogic utterances is internalized by children. Whenever children are confronted with other difficult tasks, they use these internalized dialogic utterances, a form of "private speech (Vygotsky, 1986), in an attempt to regain self-regulation in cognitively demanding situations.

In children, the cognitive function proceeds from the other-regulation to the self-regulation stage. In the self-regulation stage children begin to take over a large portion of the independent cognitive decision until completely independent strategic function is achieved (Frawley & Lantolf, 1985). De Guerrero and Vilamil (1995) define the state of self-regulation as being when "the learner is capable of independent problem solving." However, self-regulation is a relative phenomenon. If children achieve self-regulation in a specific kind of task, it does not necessarily mean that they have self-regulation in all tasks. It is also important to note that self-regulation is not achieved at

a particular point of ontological maturation (Lantolf & Appel, 1993). According to Vygotskian model, when confronted with difficult or ambiguous situations, adults also may return to an immature or childlike strategy in order to regain self-regulation. For example, adults may demonstrate 'private speech' when solving difficult problems or making crucial decisions.

When explaining the second language learning process through the Vygotskian model of a continuous path to self-regulation, the syntactic or phonetic mistakes made by second language learners can be interpreted as reflecting their attempts to gain self-regulation in a task by reverting to linguistic strategy already internalized. Similarly, in first language literacy acquisition, Goodman (1990) points out the miscues made by learners demonstrate the learner's efforts to develop a strategic balance between their linguistic invention and social conventions until mastering socially and contextually appropriate linguistic forms. Therefore, attempts to directly inculcate rules into children may instead interfere with their learning. Children invent rules and try them until they work, i. e., "until they come into balance with social conventions." (Goodman & Goodman, 1990: 234). Over time this invention conforms to the social conventions by moving the children's cognitive development from social to individual levels.

Analogously second language learners under go this trial-and-error process until they reach the level which enables them to achieve self-regulation in the target language. Frawley and Lantolf (1984) argue that the relationship among second language speakers, adult native speakers, and native children is a continuous one; the communication strategies of each group can be interpreted as movement from regulation by adults, i. e. from the other-regulation, to the self-regulation stage. They claim that as in first language acquisition, even though adults are at the self-regulation stage linguistically, they always need access to other-regulation when recognizing that the task is too difficult to handle independently. This principle of continuous

access is frequently employed to explain second language discourse (Frawley & Lantolf, 1985) as an effort to find the strategies and conditions to facilitate second language learning process. In order to create an effective social and cultural milieu for second language learning, Donato and McCormick (1995) reconceptualize the language classroom as an emerging and dynamic culture. And the culture of the language classroom plays an important role in fostering strategic learning. They argue that the culture of the classroom should consist of a mediated, dialogic cycle of self-assessment, goal-setting, strategy evaluation, and strategy reconstructing. In this culture, the students should be purposefully socialized into constructing their own strategic learning through dialogue with themselves, teachers, and capable peers in connection with actual evidence of their development. Classroom teachers should be designed to move students beyond "thoughtful consumption to reflective construction of language learning strategies in their own Zone of Proximal Development" (Donato & McCormick, 1995: 463).

While elaborating on his whole language approach, Goodman (1990) emphasizes that language is learned most efficiently and easily in whole, functional, and relevant contexts. In this process the teacher plays the role of mediator between the learners and the learning environment. Thus the teacher facilitates the learners' transaction between language and the society to which learners belong or to which they aspire to. Goodman asserts that when learners are empowered and recognize that they are in control of their learning process, authentic and powerful learning can occur. A similar claim can be made for the teacher's role in a second language learning situation. A second language teacher's duty is to liberate and empower learners by working through the each child's own Zone of Proximal Development (Hudelson, 1994). Teachers should teach second language learners that language is not a mastery but a tool which can be effective in learning, controlling and accomplishing various tasks in social environment.

6. Whole language approach

The concept of whole language approach to language learning is based on the following idea of Vygotsky (1978) on language learning. He states:

The method [for teaching reading and writing] is one in which children do not learn to read and write but in which both these skills are found in play situations. ...In the same way as children learn to speak, they should be able to learn to read and write (p. 118).

Proponents of whole language (e. g. ,Goodman, 1989) believe that language, oral and/or written, is most efficiently learned in the context of use. It means that when language is whole, adequate to the contexts and functional, language learners have authentic purpose to use language and through the use, they develop the control over the language processes (speaking, listening, writing and reading). In terms of reading, Edelsky (1986) explained that in literacy events that have personal significance to the learners enable transactions between the reader and the text. In this relationship, the reader incessantly solve the new problems and extend psycholinguistic strategies and it will consequently serve to develop reading and writing competence of the reader.

The language development in the whole language environment is thus possible through immersion in language environment and activity. The school should provide environment rich in language learning opportunities. The teacher should serve as mediator between the learners and this language learning environment. The good teacher encourages the learner participation and facilitates the students' transactions with language and the environment. One scholar (Goodman, Y., 1989) emphasized the importance of teacher's role in whole language classroom in view of Vygotskian concept of Zone of proximal Development:

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development emphasizes the important role teachers play in students' learning, even though learners are ultimately responsible for their own conceptual development. The student does not learn in isolation but is supported, and, unfortunately sometimes thwarted, in language and thinking development by others in the school environment. (p. 116-117)

In the case of second/foreign language development, as previously emphasized, the process of becoming proficient in another language is a continuous one from other-regulation to the self-regulation. Many second and foreign language programs have begun to abandon dual views on first/second language and are trying to devise instruction methods in which the authentic, natural and contextualized learning is possible. In these learning modes the knowledge of the first language plays a crucial role in acquiring the second language. Vygotsky (1986) emphasized this point, too. He argues that:

to learn a foreign language at school and to develop one's native language involve two entirely different processes... the advanced knowledge of one's own language also plays an important role in the study of the foreign one, as well as those inner and outer relations that are characteristics only in the study of a foreign language. (p. 159-161)

In association with this discussion, Mills and Clyde (1990) eloquently summarized theoretical foundations of whole language approach to speech and literacy learning.

a) In whole language instruction, authentic language use is emphasized. Teachers strive to have learners encounter language that reflects language use in real contexts.

b) Whole language instruction encourages risk taking. In whole language, errors and miscues are a part of learning process and demonstrate evidence of learner's growth in learning and cognitive capacity.

c) A Whole language curriculum presupposes mutual trust between teachers and learners.

d) A Whole language curriculum is established in collaboration between teachers and learners.

e) A whole language approach utilizes social nature of learning. In this learning method, it is believed that the best learning occurs between learners when the Zone of Proximal Development is developed.

f) A whole language curriculum uses multiple methods to optimize learning effects. "Teachers incorporate music, art, dance, drama, and math into the curriculum. ...naturally expands the communication potential of the curriculum" (p. 25).

g) There is no fixed forms of whole language curriculum. Everybody who participate in the program help each other to build the curriculum.

In an effort to provide authentic and functional language use and to ensure that learning of all second language skills can occur efficiently in children's Zone of Proximal Development in , following pedagogical strategies are proposed based on the several studies (Hudelson, 1994; Peyton & Staton, 1993; Gee, 1990; Weaver, 1988).

6.1. Creation of language acquisition-rich environment: Establish a classroom milieu that demonstrates and encourages the multiple functions of target language. Included in this environment are charts

written in English, a library filled with books relevant to students' interest and levels, and play and writing centers consisting of various contexts (restaurants, post office and hospital).

6.2. Encouragement of collaborative learning: Promote a classroom environment in which children regard other children as resources. In this classroom learners work together to solve the problems together and are encouraged to use oral and written language together.

6.3. Creating and using oral and written personal narratives: In this method, learners and teachers are involved in sharing their own personal stories. Calkin(1986) documented advantage gained through Writer's Workshop with the teacher's guidance and demonstration. He recorded that after the program, the children became able to a) make stories on the basis of their personal experiences, b) engage in writing process over a period of time, c) share their stories with their peers in order to improve the quality of writing, d) correct their writing based on the comments offered by their peers, and e) make final changes for their work with the help of the teachers.

6.4. Use of predictable books: Heald-Taylor (1987) showed that for beginning learners of English, predictable books can be used as a strategy to help the learners develop their abilities to understand and utilize semantic, syntactic and semantic systems of language. Many studies (e. g. Holdaway, 1979; Strickland & Morrow, 1990) showed that repeated readings of predictable books help language learning children develop their understanding of contexts and confidence in predicting the contents.

6.5. Reading aloud to children daily: Interactive book reading can contribute to the development of oral and written language (Kim, 1998). Citing Peterson & Eeds (1990), Hudelson (1994) argued that:

Like native speakers of English, second language learners need to be read to, on a daily basis, by fluent models of English reading. They need to be read to from varied genres in order to hear and enjoy the richness and variety of English language, begin to develop knowledge of the literary and story heritage of varied cultures, and begin to see literature as one way of coming to understand the world and the relationship of the individual to that world. (p. 146)

7. Conclusions and implications

This article explored the positive complementary connections between Vygotskian psycholinguistic principles and the application of the whole language methods to the second language learning in an attempt to establish appropriate pedagogical approaches to second language learning. Several researchers (e. g., Wertsch, 1991) pointed out that in order to implement the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development in instruction, psychologists and educators must collaborate in the analysis of the internal developmental processes which are stimulated by teaching and which are needed for subsequent learning. When teaching methods are formulated so that instruction occurs in the learners' appropriate Zone of Proximal Development, then learners can reach their optimal developmental stage. The whole language approach to language learning can present a good instruction activity which fits this purpose.

During the continuous processes involved in second language learning, the key transition from other-regulation to self-regulation takes place in the dialogically co-constructed Zone of Proximal Development between learners and more advanced individuals. Therefore, teaching methods need to be constructed so that second language learners can keep modifying, elaborating, and developing their linguistic and cultural capacity through this interactive and dialectic process.

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