Learning in the Social Constructivist Perspective

by Dr. Teresita Juan Bunyakarte

Abstract

This paper discusses the social aspects of Vygotsky’s theory of constructivism and its applications in the classroom. The writer focuses on the two principles of cognitive development: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The discussion reiterates Vygotsky’s position that learning must culminate in learner autonomy and provides an overview of how it can be applied in the classroom.

Introduction

The work of Vygotsky and other developmental psychologists has become the foundation of much research and theory particularly of what has become known as social constructivism.

In the social constructivist perspective referred to in Vygotsky’s work (1978), thinking processes and knowledge growth are seen as the result of personal interactions in social contexts and of appropriation of socially constructed knowledge. Vygotsky stresses the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition.

He expounds the notion that the process of making meaning is strongly determined by community. Studies have been made investigating the basic assumption that cognitive reasoning in children is shown in the externalized form of reasoning, that is, arguing with someone else. This basic assumption finds its way in educational settings in the form of collaborative work. In the classroom, it takes place through group discussions aimed at motivating group inquiry. The result is transformed into knowledge (Mason, 2001).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky’s own research on cognitive development is centered on two main principles: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). The Zone of Proximal Development is defined as the distance between the “actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” A metaphor puts it in another way (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Marsh II & Ketterer: 2005:78):

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The Zone of Proximal Development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be termed the “buds” or “flowers” of development rather than the “fruits” of development. The actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively.

When learners are at the Zone of Proximal Development for a particular task, Vygotsky believes that being provided with the appropriate assistance or scaffolding, the learners achieve mastery of the task which means that the scaffolding can then be taken away so that they will then be able to perform the task, again on their own.

For Vygotsky, learning must culminate in learner independence. He believes that autonomous knowledge neither depends on a specific place nor situation. Abstract knowledge is transformed knowledge. It should not be limited by the context in which it was originally constructed. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that in situated cognition, the learners are dependent on the environment. From this can be deduced that real learning occurs only when the learners are the master of their own behavior.

**The More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)**

The learning process, however, needs to be facilitated and guided. This is realized by assigning the role of an MKO.

According to Dahms, Geonnoti, Passalacqua, et al. (2007), the MKO is anyone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, particularly in regard to a specific task, concept or process. Traditionally, the MKO is a learners’ teacher or an older adult. However, it is not always the case. Peers or children much younger than the learners may be the individuals who are more knowledgeable or experienced than the learners are. Combined, the Zone of Proximal Development and the More Knowledgeable Other are the basis of scaffolding model of instruction.

**The Four-Stage Zone of Proximal Development**

Probing deeper into the learning process, Vygotsky believes that what the learners are able to do in collaboration with others at a given time, they will be able to do independently later. This is part of his social constructivist theory which refers to the notions of social interaction learning and cognitive Zone of Proximal Development. Vygotsky theorizes that guidance and support by an adult come in the form of modeling and corrective feedback (Byrnes, 2001). When this is done, the Zone of Current Development (ZCD) increases as the Zone of Proximal Development decreases. Tharp and Gallimore (1988:183) describe the four stages of the Zone of Proximal Development. They are illustrated in Figure 1:
Figure 1: ZPD Four-Stage Process

According to Tharp and Gallimore’s illustration, Stage One is assistance provided by an MKO. Stage Two is assistance provided by self. Stage Three is automatization through practice. Stage Four is de-automatization; recursiveness through the previous three stages.

Application of Vygotsky’s Social Constructivism

The successful application of Vygotsky’s social constructivism depends on a learning environment that is conducive to its principles. It has been pointed out that in social constructivism, a more collaborative classroom environment may motivate learners to create their own meaning and apply them to learned material (Hausfather, 1996). In addition, individuals taking the role of MKO’s must be familiar with the learners’ ZPD.

Applications of the social constructivist theory in educational research and practices laid down by Vygotsky emphasize how meanings and understandings emerge from social interactions.

Social constructivist strategies are known to promote student-centered learning, where the teacher helps students discover their own meaning instead of lecturing and controlling all classroom activities. Learning awakens a variety of developmental processes only when the students are interacting with people in their environment and in collaboration with their peers (Vygotsky, 1978, cited in Lerman, 2000).
Behind this social constructivist perspective is the assertion that higher mental functioning exists in conversation and collaboration among individuals (Slavin, 1997). This advocates the focus on the social nature of learning, which makes it possible for learners to be exposed to their peers’ thinking processes and thereby making the learning outcome available to all students as well as making other students’ thinking processes available to all. Equally important is how it engages students in dialogue with the teacher. This makes them participants rather than recipients of information. Forerunners of the theory share Vygotsky’s belief that higher mental processes can be elaborated by challenging learners with complex situations and tasks found in the world outside the classroom.

Learning as a Social Act in the Language Classroom

The advocacy of the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development is crucial to the modern sociocultural theory that views learning as a “fundamentally social act, embedded in a specific cultural environment” (De Guerrero & Villamil, 1996: 2-3). This notion of learning as a situated social phenomenon has influenced the way that language learning is viewed and taught today, laying the groundwork for cooperative learning (Johnson & Johnson, 1994), reciprocal teaching (Palincsar & Brown, 1984), and team-based learning (Michaelsen, Knight & Fink, 2004).

The physical classroom based on Vygotsky’s theory, provides work space for peer teaching, collaboration, and small group instruction. The instructional design of material is structured to advance student interaction and collaboration. Thus, the classroom becomes a community of learning.

Universally, schools are basically organized around lecturing. Traditionally, the teacher disseminates knowledge to be memorized by the students, who in turn recite the information back to the teacher (Hausfather, 1996). However, Vygotsky has challenged this traditional teaching method and studies now show that strategies based on social constructivism are far more effective than other instructional strategies.

Scaffolding, reciprocal teaching, and guided instruction are effective strategies that implement Vygotsky’s theory in the language classroom. Scaffolding, a temporary supportive structure, can be created by the teacher to assist students to accomplish a task that they could not complete alone. Reciprocal teaching, is an instructional strategy used to teach reading by making the students take turns being the teacher for a small group. The teacher’s role is simply to clarify or ask questions. Finally, guided instruction can be used to involve the teacher and the students in exploring problems and then sharing their problem solving strategies in an open dialogue (Hausfather, 1996).
Scaffolding through Comprehensible Input

An approach that has derived support from the learning theories of Vygotsky is content-based instruction. Providing comprehensible input, content-based instruction has been widely acclaimed for its successful results in L2 programs.

As students gain experience with comprehensible input from content-based materials, the teacher assesses their understanding and offers feedback. Verifying and clarifying student understanding is the same as offering affirmative feedback to reasonable understandings or corrective feedback to unreasonable understandings (Hogan & Pressley, 1997).

Scaffolding techniques are provided in conjunction with instructional materials. These materials fit into three kinds of scaffolds: (1) reception scaffolds, (2) transformation scaffolds and (3) production scaffolds (Dodge, n.d.). Dodge describes these three kinds of scaffolds. Reception scaffolds, he maintains, help the students gather information from the materials. They prompt them to organize and record what they see. For example, a web-like graphic organizer called a concept map might be provided to the students. On the other hand, according to Dodge, transformation scaffolds help the students change the information they have received into some other form, imposing structure on the information as in the case of a blank chart which prompts the students to categorize information logically. Finally, production scaffolds are tools that prompt the students to convey what they have learned in something observable. They may follow the conventions of some genre, publication or presentation format. Here, the teacher might prepare an outline to help students organize their work, for example, their book reports or business reports.

In sum, this article argues that learning is a social act and using the physical classroom as a work space for peer teaching, collaboration, and small group instruction can create the condition and atmosphere which will motivate the students to participate actively in the learning process.

References


Dr. Teresita received her B.S.E. in English (Cum Laude) from Philippine Normal University and her M.A. in English Literature from Chulalongkorn University. She obtained her Ph.D. in English as an International Language (EIL) also from Chulalongkorn University.