

VYGOTSKY & LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

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Words play a central part not only in the development of thought but in the historical growth of consciousness as a whole. A word is a microcosm of human consciousness…Thought undergoes many changes as it turns into speech. It does not merely find expression in speech; it finds its reality and form…The structure of the language one habitually uses influences the way he perceives his environment. Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) studied at the University of Moscow to become a teacher of literature. His first research as a young scholar focused on artistic creation. It was only from 1924 on that his career changed dramatically as he started working in the areas of developmental psychology, education and psychopathology. He pursued these interests at a highly productive pace until he died of tuberculosis in 1934 at a very young age (Murray Thomas, 1993). In his brief life-span he acquired vast knowledge not only of psychology but also of the social sciences, philosophy, linguistics and literature.

Due to different factors, including those related to the particular political relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union, Vygotsky's work remained unknown in the Americas for decades. When the Cold War ended, the incredible wealth of Vygotsky's work began to be revealed. Nowadays, it is difficult to exclude Vygotsky from any serious discussion of learning processes. The origins of thought and language according to Vygotsky Like in animals, thought and speech have different roots in humankind, thought being nonverbal and language being nonintellectual in an early stage. But their development lines are not parallel - they cross again and again. At a certain moment around the age of two, the curves of development of thought and speech, until then separate, meet and join to initiate a new form of behavior. That is when thought becomes verbal and speech becomes rational. A child first seems to use language for superficial social interaction, but at some point this language goes underground to become the structure of the child's thinking. Word meaning and concept formation... a problem must arise that cannot be solved otherwise than through the formation of new concepts. (Vygotsky, 1962:55)

Once the child realizes that everything has a name, each new object presents the child with a problem situation, and he solves the problem by naming the object. When he lacks the word for the new object, he demands it from adults. The early word-meanings thus acquired will be the embryos of concept formation. Vygotsky's social constructivism According to Vygotsky, all fundamental cognitive activities take shape in a matrix of social history and form the products of sociohistorical development (Luria, 1976). That is, cognitive skills and patterns of thinking are not primarily determined by innate factors, but are the products of the activities practiced in the social institutions of the culture in which the individual grows up. Consequently, the history of the society in which a child is reared and the child's personal history are crucial determinants of the way in which that individual will think. In this process of cognitive development, language is a crucial tool for determining how the child will learn how to think because advanced modes of thought are transmitted to the child by means of words (Murray Thomas, 1993). Thought and language, and intellectual development To Vygotsky, a clear understanding of the interrelations between thought and language is necessary for the understanding of intellectual development. Language is not merely an expression of the knowledge the child has acquired. There is a fundamental correspondence between thought and speech in terms of one providing resource to the other; language becoming essential in forming thought and determining personality features. Zone of proximal development One essential tenet in Vygotsky's theory is the notion of the existence of what he called the "zone of proximal development".

Zone of proximal development is the difference between the child's capacity to solve problems on his own, and his capacity to solve them with assistance. In other words, the actual developmental level refers to all the functions and activities that a child can perform on his own, independently without the help of anyone else. On the other hand, the zone of proximal development includes all the functions and activities that a child or a learner can perform only with the assistance of someone else. The person in this scaffolding process, providing non-intrusive intervention, could be an adult (parent, teacher, caretaker, language instructor) or another peer who has already mastered that particular function. An interesting analogy comes to my mind when I think of zone of proximal development. In mechanics, when you adjust the timing of an engine, you set it slightly ahead of the highest compression moment in order to maximize power and performance. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development has many implications for those in the educational milieu. One of them is the idea that human learning presupposes a specific social nature and is part of a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), an essential feature of learning is that it awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is in the action of interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Therefore, when it comes to language learning, the authenticity of the environment and the affinity between its participants are essential elements to make the learner feel part of this environment. These elements are rarely predominant in conventional classrooms.

Vygotsky's influence on Krashen's second language acquisition theory

Although Vygotsky and Krashen come from entirely different backgrounds, the application of their theories to second

language teaching produces similarities. Influence or coincidence, Krashen's input hypothesis resembles Vygotsky's concept of zone of proximal development. According to the input hypothesis, language acquisition takes place during human interaction in an environment of the foreign language when the learner receives language 'input' that is one step beyond his/her current stage of linguistic competence. For example, if a learner is at a stage 'i', then maximum acquisition takes place when he/she is exposed to 'Comprehensible Input' that belongs to level 'i + 1'. Krashen's acquisition-learning hypothesis also seems to have been influenced by Vygotsky. Although Vygotsky speaks of internalization of language while Krashen uses the term language acquisition, both are based on a common assumption: interaction with other people. The concept of acquisition as defined by Krashen and its importance in achieving proficiency in foreign languages, can be a perfect application of Vygotsky's view of cognitive development as taking place in the matrix of the person's social history and being a result of it. Even the distinct concepts in Krashen's acquisition theory and Vygotsky's sociocultural theory are not conflicting but complementary in providing resources for language teaching methodology. By explaining human language development and cognitive development, Vygotsky's social-interactionist theory serves as a strong foundation for the modern trends in applied linguistics. It lends support to less structured and more natural, communicative and experiential approaches and points to the importance of early real-world human interaction in foreign language learning.

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