INQUISITION AND CRITICALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION: FROM VYGOTSKY INTO CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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Introduction

Providing quality-education for adults has been a primary pillar of higher education. English Language Teaching (ELT) has similar concerns. ELT departments in universities aim to improve language skills of learners as well as improve learners' critical thinking skills. Universities provide space for widening our knowledge base with theoretical and practical insights. For such an environment, we need curious minds ready to attain knowledge, question the given information and seek out alternative positions. Empirical experience in higher education as an adult educator and language practitioner showed that there are few such inquisitive learners as we hope to find in the regular university classrooms. This paper utilizes Vygotsky's principles of zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding in Sociocultural Learning Theory (SCT). These concepts are utilized in order to instill critical thinking skills and stretch language proficiency of learners to higher levels of performance. Social approach to education assumes the mediating role of language in our everyday interactions with others. According to Sociocultural Theory (SCT) ''human mental functioning is fundamentally a *mediated* process that is organized by cultural artifacts, activities, and concepts'' (Ratner, 2002 cited in Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p.197). Vygotsky's key concepts such as *Scaffolding, Zone of Actual Development (ZAP) and Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)* are utilized in this paper as an experimental study in order to stretch learners' actual capacity to a higher level of performance.

Background

Sociocultural Theory (SCT) had considerable impact in education field due to influence of psychology in education. Language has an important place for SCT because of the mediating role of language in our everyday interactions. Importance of language as a sociocultural concept comes from the ''*role signs/symbols play in the mediation of human activity''* (Mahn, 2013, p. 1). Social approach to education highlights language as one of the primary means of mediation in our everyday life regulated by cultural artifacts, activities and concepts. According to Lantolf and Thorne (2006, p. 201) language is ''*the most pervasive and powerful cultural artifact that humans possess to mediate their connection to the world, to each other, and to themselves*''. These artifacts especially language acts as a buffer between the person and his/her environment. There is an interrelationship between *thinking processes* and *language processes* as the individual participates in meaning making in the social world; the concept, *thinking process* relates to perceiving and processing data received from the environment whereas the second concept, *language processes* relate to the use of signs and symbols to communicate in social relationships. Relationship between thinking and speaking processes can inform communicative capacities in a second language (Mahn, 2013). In the use of a second language, thinking and language processes unite to mediate communicative activities, and activities and teaching styles that utilize zone of proximal development (ZPD) can exercise higher psychical processes.

Vygotsky's Socio- cultural theory is utilized in a first year English Language Teaching (ELT) university class, Oral Communication Skills course. There are thirty-four students in this class. Vygotsky did not directly write about Second Language Acquisition (SLA). However, his analysis of how people acquire cognitive development and develop communicative abilities in their first languages hints implications for SLA (Blake & Pope, 2008). Vygotsky's learning theory studies cognitive development, and the impact of socio-cultural factors on the individual's learning potential. The individual's learning process according to their biological capacity can be amplified with the support of social and cultural factors. The class aims to create an educational experience which requires students to interpret, criticize and form their opinion as opposed to a memorization-based student teaching style. Students participated in a series of classroom activities: an individual presentation task, reaction paper writing assignments, in-class group activities and midterm exam. Content and form of their performance are discussed to evaluate their proficiency of language and criticality. Vygotsky's popular concepts such as 'scaffolding' and 'zone of proximal development' will be specifically discussed as potential assisting devices to consider language development and criticality development of learners. These concepts are referred to as tools for assessing critical thinking skills as well as evidence of language proficiency.

Socio-cultural circumstances play an essential role in the cognitive development. Private speech in our first language regulates mental functioning. ''*When we communicate socially, we appropriate the patterns and meanings of*

this speech and utilize it inwardly to mediate our mental activity'' (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p.202). The trio social-cultural- biological factors in the learning environment need to be thought together as part of an interconnected system. Hence, human beings can "nurture" and "scaffold" their cognitive and communicative functions by being a part of social learning experiences or joining in the interactive processes. People learn from social interactions through mediation of symbolic tools (i.e. languages) and internalize mentally what they learned socially to formulate their thinking patterns. A reconsideration of the social positioning of our learners needs to be considered in the learning context to actualize deeper cognitive development. It is promising for educators to build social support systems to nurture learner potential and reach the highest learning optimum for their learners.

SCT encourages some reflections and considerations in the second/foreign language development. This perspective provides some pedagogical implications for foreign language teaching and calls for re-consideration of some of the perceived challenges in second language acquisition. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a particularly significant concept for second language praxis and theory. The most common definition of ZPD is *''the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers''* (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Vygotsky studied ZPD in the learning context of children, teaching them skills or tasks that go beyond learners' actual development level. These challenging tasks are achieved by the assistance of a more capable person or guide. Actualization of ZPD in children's cognitive development is a context for children's learning, but its implications for learning is relevant to different learning contexts of all ages. ZPD encourages a pedagogical style which provides a higher level of instruction, proficiency or task beyond the capability level of the learner. This is enabled via the guidance of a more knowledgeable other. Assisted performance is what draws the attention of educators to the ZPD. It highlights a connection between the '*development achieved*' and '*development potential*' (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 206). In the collaborative and guided learning, the learner will accomplish the task socially and cooperatively, and from then onwards, the learner will be able to achieve the task on his/her own. As with other social transactions, the learner will internalize the social speech, and engage in private-speech, and finally inner-speech will be a verbalized thought.

Language and Learning Context

Everyone learns their first language with a fair degree of competence because we are born with an innate ability to learn a language and then grow up in a community where functioning in that community is possible through language. In western tradition thinking is considered as an intra-mental activity that takes place in the individual's mind whereas Vygotskian psychology does not separate individual and social in a clear-cut way (Robbins, 2013). Similarly thinking and speech unite in verbal thought and contribute to the cognitive development processes. In Vygotsky's studies, the term "*semiotic mediation*" plays an important place in social interaction. This mediation carries social-cultural-physical and historical information to the present context. Language is one of the most powerful symbolic tools a person utilizes to mediate his/her thoughts to the world (Mahn & Steiner, 1996). Communication among people is only possible through the social functions of language. However, language goes beyond the task of a tool for communicating, and represents a tool of inter-generational and inter-historical heritage implying several social functions. Sociocultural theory conceptualizes improvement of human cognitive development to higher mental function via social interaction. Vygotsky interpolated complex effects schooling has on cognitive development. It included learning through '*participation in socioculturally and institutionally organized practices*' (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 207). Learning collaboratively with others 'precedes' and 'shapes' development, indicating that they can '*stimulate qualitatively developmental changes*' (p. 207). SCT proposes a new perspective to be envisioned for the SLA (second language acquisition) process.

ZPD in a second language context can be utilized as a diagnostic conceptual tool to realize student potential and create the circumstances for maximum development. If learning starts with the social interaction and continues with internalization, then, we can deduce that language and thought are closely connected and inter-dependent in second language learning (Read, 2013). Social communication thus has an immense role in learning in the language classroom. Language pedagogy needs to be organized with this conceptualization in mind. Sociocultural perspective of language acquisition portrays the cognitive and social factors in the acquiring of a second language (Robbins, 2013). To construct both cognitive and emotional connection requires that we use social interaction and cooperative learning in our teaching program or learning environment. It is believed that learning is the result of "shared" experiences in different social settings (Blake & Pope, 2008). Only after the collective functioning of group activities does the expression of the individual become possible (i.e. unification of language and thought in L2). This explains the presupposition to think and speak in the target language in the language classroom in order for effective language learning to take place. We can infer that there is a relationship between thinking and language processes in communicating meaning in a second language. This gives us a different perception about Communicative language classroom. To have an actual communicative classroom atmosphere, it is our duty to create our students several opportunities in which they can

interact with one another and learn from each other in social networks.

Student Performance versus Expected Potential

According to sociocultural research *''single snapshots of learner performance do not constitute appropriate evidence of learning and development''* (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 207). Development in learners is a continuous process that stretches over days, weeks, and months. This makes us re-consider our test-based curricula and the standardized-tests for centralized university-exams. How acceptable is it to expect learners show their best performance in one shot instance. If learning is a continuing process so should the assessment of learning. In Oral Communications class, I expected learners to show their understanding of the topic in several ways: a quiz, multiple reaction paper assignments, presentations and a midterm exam. The expectations from the tasks assigned as well as student performance are included in the following section:

Text book consists of various articles about English language communication from different linguists. Language of the book is above first year English language teaching student proficiency. I purposefully composed a challenging reading pack to activate scaffolding in learners' reading processes. I aimed to stretch student performance through my explanatory descriptions and visual powerpoints in the class. These pedagogical styles aimed to take students from their actual performance level to a higher performance level, ZPD. Also, engaging students in whole class discussions targeted social learning processes.

 Reaction papers are explained to students by the teacher as a piece of writing to be written by learners to show their understanding of the unit/reading with summary and synthesis. Students are explained to write their response papers in their own words with their own responses. Students were told that they could try to analyze the quality of the article studied. Students produced a series of reaction papers analyzed by the teacher. Interestingly majority of students submitted papers which consisted of copied pasted text from the textbook. Their summaries were directly taken from the textbook verbatim. In terms of analysis students all chose to agree with the author. Nobody chose to challenge the author's point. Student reaction papers were disappointing because they failed to meet the criticality standards of the course expectations.

I prepared one quiz, which consisted of interpretation questions. Students mainly wrote down what they memorized from the book. Except a few successful students class complained about the quiz questions arguing that they were not prepared for such interpretation oriented questions. These two instances (reaction paper and quiz) of low student performance made me prepare easy definition questions for the midterm exam hoping that students would not to fail. With few interpretative and creative questions, I was able to create a more anticipated exam for the students. Majority of students succeeded in the test. Yet, educator's expectations for a higher level of criticality definitely failed.

In the presentation task students were asked to create a descriptive powerpoint about their dream job or any topic they liked. Despite few creative students who went above and beyond their performance capacity and created creative presentations, majority chose to present an average performance, directly reading from slights. In order to increase student exploration and encourage a higher level of performance, I asked them to prepare a small group presentation. This group presentation required learners to meet a few times outside of the class to create the presentation dialogue, practice and eventually present in front of the class. This collaborative homework brought forth more effective results.

Outcome and Implications

Student performance in various class activities and assignments was less than expected. Only a handful of students produced the kind of critical work the instructor expected. Learners did not produce analysis of texts desired by the instructor. They simply reiterated what the author pointed out. Almost all students chose to agree with the author, rarely challenging the author's view. Learners' language proficiency varied from low intermediate to high intermediate proficiency levels in the English language. Regardless of the language level of learners, all students chose to agree with the author and repeat the text as it is presented. There was a deep loyalty to the text, with great hesitation to question it. This showed that learners lacked criticality which is an essential aspect of university level learning. This type of questioning should be applied in all levels of education to familiarize learners to this type of learning. Criticality lacks in many levels of education, which appears as one of the challenges observed in this class.

 In the first quiz I did, more than half of the class failed, because they didn't know how to respond to the interpretation questions posed to them. Most of them wrote the memorized sentences from the book, which I still marked as partially correct, because I wanted to give some marks as generously as I can. Half of the class preferred to keep some questions blank because they did not understand what I expected when I asked them to form their own opinion. In the midterm exam, I asked students easy to answer, basic definition questions and now they are able to have

higher grades. The reaction papers and the quiz showed me where students stood on the criticality plane and I did my exam preparation according to this information. Thus, my goal has to consider improving student criticality as well as language proficiency. Adjustment of the class planning syllabus as well as tailoring learning goals of each class according to specific learner needs increased their possibility of success. My class preparation definitely changed according to student preferences and realities.

Conclusion

Two aspects of learner performance analyzed in this paper ; (1)scaffolding in language proficiency and (2) scaffolding in criticality. Language level of the text was purposefully higher than learners' actual level, because only in the strive to create meaning in a complicated text can students go beyond their actual performance level to a higher level of proficiency. Scaffolding in language level aims to improve language skills of learners. Despite the challenges students expressed in understanding the text, instructor guided collaborative meaning making in the classroom proved to be effective. Since students expressed a lot of complaints about writing reaction papers, this assignment changed into a collaborative text analysis via teacher support. Hence, zone of proximal development can take different forms and styles. I experimented different homework and assignment types until finding the best match for the class in question. Second important aspect of this study was criticality. Critical positioning of learners in the educational system are studied paying particular attention to the learner attitude, performance style and performance quality in terms of critical disposition. Learners are encouraged to criticize the text through teacher guided collaborative reading sessions, which is followed by meaning making and deconstruction of the text. The qualitative insights from this study contributes to a better understanding of our learners so as to better meet their learning needs and better assist learners in reaching their utmost potential.

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