ENHANCING THE SPEAKING SKILL OF SECOND LANGUAGE LEARNERS THROUGH ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT (ZPD)

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Abstract

The English language which was the langua Franca of the British Commonwealth countries in the past is now becoming more important in the global scene. There are various ways and methods in acquiring English Language: through natural development as a mother tongue, formal classroom lectures and self-development learning. However specifically for the oral communication, the only way to acquire is to speak and continue to practice the language. Hence, this research study is to apply Vygotskian's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) method that may provide an effective way for students to develop their English oral communication skill successfully.

Key Words: Second Language Learners, Speaking Skill, Zone of Proximal Development,

Introduction:

This article develops a theoretical understanding of the processes involved in developing Second Language speaking from a Vygotskian perspective. Lev Vygotsky is a seminal psychologist, who introduced the theory of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). It refers to the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with the assistance of more able peers. Lev Vygotsky defines ZPD as:

the distance between the actual developmental 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 (Vygotsky, 1978)
Vygotsky goes on to describe the ZPD as "a tool through which the internal course of development can be understood" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 87) and argues that "the only good

kind of instruction is that which marches ahead of development and leads it; it must be aimed not so much at the ripe as at the ripening functions" (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 188). Vygotsky distinguishes between the mediating functions of tools that are "externally oriented" and "serve as the conductor of human influence on the object of activity" and signs that are "internally oriented" and "aimed at mastering oneself" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 55).

Teaching in the Zone of Proximal Development:

The second language classroom is an excellent environment in which to apply the Zone of Proximal Development theory. While having a student work with a more capable peer is an essential part of the process, it is only the initial step in Vygotsky's theory. Vygotsky (1978) believed that "what the child [or learner] is able to do in collaboration today, he will be able to do independently tomorrow."

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By understanding what children are able to achieve alone, as well as what they are able to achieve with assistance from an adult, educators can develop plans to teach Speaking skills in the most effective manner possible, giving students a gradual release of responsibility to perform tasks independently, the way in which an adult helps the child learner to move from the inability to perform a task to being able to do so through guidance, interaction and questions. For English language teachers, the ZPD means that they should provide comprehensible input (the spoken or written language that learners are exposed to) which is slightly above their ability. Besides, they should be willing to assist their students only when necessary and taper off this aid when there is no need for it. The role of the teacher is to give assistance, guide or only observe. As it is cited by Scott Thornburry:
Teaching is optimally effective when it "awakens and rouses into life those functions which are in the stage of maturing, which lie in the zone of proximal development." (Vygotsky, 1934, quoted in Wertsch 1985, p. 71).

When analyzing the process of acquiring speaking skill, it follows that as teachers and researchers we should play close attention to the ZPDs of students, the meditational tools that we provide to help scaffold their learning development, and the range of social interaction and activities involved in the process of developing second language speaking which include feeling and thinking, listening, observing and acting. Vygotsky argues that human mental functioning is inherently social because it "incorporates socially evolved and socially organized human tools" (Wertsch &\ Tulviste, 1992, p. 551). Vygotsky (1981) states that: the word social when applied to our subject has great significance. Above all, in the widest sense of the word, it means that everything that is cultural is social. Culture is the product of social life and human social activity. That is why just by raising the

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questionof the cultural development of behavior we are directly introducing the social plane of development. (p. 164)

Methodology

To apply the concept of the zone of proximal development in acquiring speaking skill in Second Language, teachers instruct in small steps according to the tasks a student is already able to do independently. This strategy is referred to as scaffolding. The teacher should also support and assist the student until he or she can complete all of the steps independently. Before teachers can begin guiding students through the steps necessary to learn a concept, they should get a grasp of how these tasks, referred to as scaffolds, are applicable to everyday life. The teacher then builds on these scaffolds to develop the

student's zone of proximal development. To most effectively teach by using the zone of proximal development, teachers should stress the connections between the learner's prior knowledge of a task in everyday contexts with the new task or concept being learned. Connections between the task being learned and how it's applicable to the skills needed in everyday life might not become apparent immediately; in fact, they might take several lessons to develop. Through further reading and coursework, students continue to make associations between ideas and everyday experience.

Dynamic Grouping procedures.

Appropriation and internalization in this model take place within a fluid process of interaction and negotiation within the learner's ZPD:

Phase 1: Where performance is assisted by more capable others such as a teacher or more advanced peer (Assisted Performance).

Although the psychological function has begun to emerge, the student cannot progress at this point without either more expert assistance or other contextual stimuli such as peer

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collaboration. The student's response to instructions or modeling may be defined as imitative or acquiescent (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1985a).

Phase 2: Where performance is assisted by the self through the phenomenon of self-directed speech (Self-Assisted Performance).

At this point, performance is not fully developed but control of the cognitive process is starting to move from instructor to learner. This phase is linked to tool usage and social interaction with either peers or between student and teacher.

Phase 3: Where performance is developed and becomes automatic (Developed Performance).

The cognitive process has now been appropriated and developed by the learner, and assistance at this point is no longer helpful.

Phase 4: Where a change in context leads to recursion back through the ZPD (Recursion through ZPD).

This is a situation whereby the cognitive process may have been forgotten for some reason (such as environmental or social change) and the learner goes through elements of the previous phases in order to recall the cognitive process.

The first three phases describe the learner's progression through a ZPD in terms of a transition from assisted performance to self-assisted performance and finally to a level of developed performance. For any individual, learning over time consists of a mixture of psychological processes at various stages of assisted performance, self-performance, and automization. Although not inevitable, the fact that recursion occurs so often suggests that this constitutes a separate phase of development (Tharp & Gallimore, 1998). This analysis leads to the questions of what types of assistance can be offered within the ZPD to improve

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student performance and how Vygotskian teachers can assess the appropriate form of help for different types of ZPD.

Here's a look at the step-by-step process by which a teacher can apply the zone of proximal development:

- First, a teacher should identify what a student already knows. By identifying this prior knowledge, the teacher can build on that skill set when introducing new concepts.

- Next, the teacher can build on this knowledge through scaffolding; the scaffold will help students move from what they already know to what they should know by the end of class. When planning lessons, teachers should keep in mind the scaffolding process by integrating guided practice in their lesson plans.
- Last, teachers can help students connect their new learning to their prior knowledge. For example, if a math teacher has just taught children how to master dividing decimals, the teacher might then relate this concept back to multiplying decimals.
- All in all, through applying the concept of the zone of proximal development, the teacher identifies what a child already knows, teaches him or her something new to add to it, and then relates this back to his or her prior knowledge so that he or she can now understand the new concept with assistance.

In order to develop the overall analysis of the functions of different types of assisted performance, the following framework was created for investigating collaborative learning within a ZPD and specifically while speaking. In order to get quiet students involved in speaking, the teacher may want to use the following strategies:

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- Learners differ in the way they process learning, some may feel excluded. The teacher's mission is to try to engage those students by giving them the opportunity to do what fits their interests.
- There are many ways to motivate the unmotivated students. This may include making them curious and challenge them. Another way to engage them is by devolving responsibility.
- The teachers should have a talk with the quiet students.
- Teachers have to work hard to foster a supportive atmosphere, and be non-judgmental during error correction. Reducing high affective filter may encourage shy students to participate in class activities.
- Some communicative activities can be helpful in making quiet students talk. This involves giving students thinking time engaging them to think about a topic of interest. When students become confident that they have grasped what the topic is all about and jotted down enough ideas that will help them in the discussion, they are willing to engage in a peer-to-peer discussion. At this stage, misunderstandings about the topic are often revealed and resolved and the student is ready to share his findings in a whole class discussion.
- Talking chips works well when there are multiple answers to a question and all learners can then cooperate. It prevents students dominating group discussions or not participating in discussions. It involves providing students with an equal number of coins and then when they make a point they put their coin in the middle of the table. When they have no more coins they may keep silent. The whole class may engage in a general discussion later.

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- Students work in groups and are given time to think about a topic. Each is given a limited time (e.g. three minutes) to have their say. When everyone has made a point a general discussion is opened.
- In role-plays students are encouraged to speak by putting themselves into somebody else's shoes, or by staying in their own shoes but putting themselves into an imaginary situation. This may open the door for shy students to participate as they will have to pretend that they are acting a social role which creates amusement and a lot of fun.

- Students may be allowed to draw a personal experience or an imaginary situation. When they have finished the teacher asks them to write a comment about their drawing and share it.

Recommendations

- ✓ Teacher should construct a variation of English speaking activities which motivate the students to learn.
- ✓ Communicative activities such as discussion, problem solving, and role-playing can be effected in the language classroom.
- ✓ In breaking the students into small groups, optimal group size is four individuals. This leads to better success and achievement in learning foreign languages.
- ✓ Teacher roles should be changed as a provider, an assistant, a consultant to increase effectiveness in the learning environment.
- ✓ Interaction in the language classroom can decrease students' anxiety in learning English speaking skills.
- ✓ Students should change the role from passive to active learners.

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Conclusion

Thus the successful application of Vygotsky's theories in acquiring the speaking skills in second Language requires a learning environment dedicated to these principles. Students acting as capable peers must be highly involved, must work in collaboration with other students to facilitate learning, and must be familiar with the ZPD's of other students. It is a very effective way of developing communicative competence, Developing a positive 'can do' attitude towards learning languages and makes it more purposeful and therefore more motivating for the learner.

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