

APPLYING VYGOTSKY TO ADULT LEARNING

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Abstract

This paper intends to give an overview of Vygotsky's those core concepts that could possibly be extended and plausibly applied to adult learning. Discovering how adult learners learn is not a new thing among academicians. Since centuries, researchers have been exploring and investigating the impacts of various theories of learning and development on adult learning in various contexts because these theories, by and large, have revolutionized the world and their impacts can easily be seen in academia today. Such theories have not just provided information about and insight into learning attitudes and aptitudes of the learners only but also expanded the horizon of knowledge and learning. Many researchers and educators believe that the processes of learning and understanding exist at the interface of people's biography and the sociocultural environment in which they live. However, only a few studies have addressed adult learning through sociocultural lens. While Vygotsky centered on the development of children from birth through adolescence, his core concepts are also being extended and applied to adult learning as well in the arenas of both formal and informal learning. This paper, divided into three parts, discusses the central concepts of Vygotsky's Sociocultural theory, particularly, focusing its those major components that could be extended to adult learning, in its first part, while throws light on the relationship between Sociocultural theory and adult learning in general context, in the second part, and deals with sociocultural theory and two common aspects of adult ESL learning in its final part.

Key Words: Sociocultural theory, Adult learning, ZPD, Scaffolding, Sense, feedback

Introduction

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (1896 – 1934), also known as “*The Mozart of Psychology*” (Toulmin, 1978) was a Soviet developmental psychologist of early 20th century. His interests were quite diverse ranging from law to the psychology of art and language development but he often focused on issues related to cognitive development of the children and education. Despite being a contemporary of psychology top brass including Pavlov, Skinner, Freud, and Piaget, he, largely remained unknown to the world until 60s largely because of the Stalin bureaucracy and partly because of his early death. He could never reach their level of eminence during his lifetime. However, his work has grown in influence since 60s, particularly in the fields of educational and developmental psychology.

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He contributed a lot to the field of child psychology but his sociocultural theory of child development brought him a landmark success. This theory is designed to account for the indelible influence of culture on a child's growth and development. The Russian psychologists first systematized and applied sociocultural approaches to learning and development (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). While Vygotsky focused on development of children from birth through adolescence, few of his central concepts, like sociocultural theory, are being extended and applied to adult learning as well.

Discovering how adult learners learn is not a new thing among academicians. Instead, the study is an important endeavor in many school programs today. Researchers have been exploring and investigating the impacts of various theories of learning and development, proposed by the well-known theorists of 19th and 20th centuries, on adult learning and adult learners in various contexts in academia for centuries. These theories, by and large, have revolutionized the world and their impacts can easily be seen in academia. Such theories have not only provided information about and insight into learning attitudes and aptitudes of the learners but also expanded the horizon of knowledge and learning. Jarvis (1992) believed that “the process of learning is located at the interface of people’s biography and the sociocultural milieu in which they live, for it is at this intersection that experiences occur” (p. 17). Only few researchers or educators, however, actually address adult learning from a sociocultural perspective (Forman & McPhail, 1993).

Sociocultural Theory

Lev Vygotsky is best known for his sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory relates the mental functioning of an individual to historical and cultural context; hence, it focuses the roles of participation – on the part of an individual in the activities and interactions organized socially and culturally – in influencing the psychological development. A recent application of his theories in the field of education is "reciprocal teaching", that helps students to learn from text. Four important key skills titled “predicting, questioning, summarizing, and clarifying” are learnt through collaboration and practice among teachers and students in this method. The teacher's role, particularly, is reduced in the process gradually. Sociocultural theory differentiates itself from Constructivism

focusing on the ways that see learning as an act of enculturation. Its lens is broader than constructivism as it attends broader social system where learning of an individual happens in social interaction and culturally arranged activities. Some of its following key concepts can be extended and applied to adult learning.

Zone of Proximal Development

Mahn (1999) states that “the concept of the zone of proximal development was developed late in Vygotsky’s short life and was not fully elaborated; therefore, it is important to situate the zone of proximal development within his theoretical framework” (p. 347). ZPD is probably one of Vygotsky’s influential and well-known ideas that have tremendous influence in the realm of education, particularly related to child learning and development. Despite its popularity and influence, it faces some serious reservations as Mahn (2015) claims that “it (ZDP) has been referred to as the most over-used, least-understood concept in educational studies” (p. 252). Vygotsky (1978) defines it as “the distance between the actual development level as determined through independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (p. 86). In simple terms, it is the difference between two doings - what a person can do independently and what s/he can do with more or less help or guidance. It’s the region that is achievable only with the right support from an expert. ZPD offers many educational implications. The ZPD, for example, is a principle that facilitates teachers and educators not to just focus on testing static (i.e., fossilized) skills or belaboring what is currently wrong with the learning performance but to what a learner can become (Brown & Reeve, 1987); or as Vygotsky (1978) defined it. “what children can do with the assistance of others might be in some sense even more indicative of their mental development than what they can do alone” (p. 85). In effect, the ZPD urges educators to think of such skills that are easily workable to instructions along with the ways that determine how social interaction improves one’s performance to developmental levels that was earlier unobtainable (Forman and Cazden, 1985).

Scaffolding

The terms scaffolding and ZPD have become synonymous to each other in literature. However, Vygotsky throughout his works has never used the term *scaffolding*. The term was coined by Wood et al. (1976). Wood et al. define it as “those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner’s capacity, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence” (p. 90). Interestingly, various terms including scaffolding, cooperative learning, and guided learning, are prevalent in literature with synonymous meaning. It is a method of teaching that helps a learner in solving a problem or completing a task which would not have been possible to do or master without help. Rogoff (1990) states that its functions include: recruiting the interest of a learner in a learning task, recognizing discrepancies, minimizing the complexity of the task while controlling frustration and where and when necessary, demonstrating the expert performance. The purpose here remains to help and engage the learner in activity with aids as and when needed and eventually stopping these to make him do things without help. Scaffolding can occur in the form of cues, clues, elaborations, prompts, linking, probing, suggestions, requests, simplified solutions, and emotional support (Stone, 1993; Teles, 1993). A learner heads toward his utmost goal of completing the tasks with the help of all these forms of assistance that would not be possible with his sole efforts (Palincsar, 1986). Scaffolding fosters internalization and promotes collaboration (Paris, 1988). Its degree and nature can vary by prior exposure and domain along with the level of individual level of development (Brown and Palincsar, 1989).

Intersubjectivity

Intersubjectivity in its simple sense refers to the psychological relation between people. Gallimore and Tharp (1990) put that it is the way people make perception of the world and share meaning. Scaffolding is seen at its best when learning participants share and experience Intersubjectivity. Intersubjectivity achieves effective communication and collaboration when participants essentially work towards the same goal. It is only temporary shared goal, content, values or ideas. These shared goals and values assist learners in building new body of knowledge, negotiate meaning and rethink or restructure problems and

tasks in consonance with the perspectives of another learner (Diaz, Neal, and Amaya-Williams, 1990).

Cognitive Apprenticeship and Assisted Learning

Scaffolded instructions and intersubjectivity are at first used in the domain of cognitive apprenticeship to model the activity and later gradually yield control of the task to the learner (Brown, Collins, and Duguid, 1989). It is an interactive relationship that is socially constructed and is like the master-apprentice relationship in skilled trades (Rogoff, 1990), but here the mentor using the authentic learning experiences closely works with the learner in order to develop his skills (Brown and Palincsar, 1989). Brown and Collins (1989) suggest that an ideal cognitive apprenticeship has six methods: coaching, scaffolding and fading, reflection, articulation, modeling, and exploration. The cognitive apprenticeship views teaching as the different ways through which one can “assist” a learner in learning (Gallimore and Tharp, 1990). That’s why teachers and mentors cannot ignore the activities and types of assistance that can take learners towards new cognitive heights. Bonk and Kim (1998) has stated Tharp’s (1993) seven dependable forms of learning assistance as “modeling, contingency management, feedback, questioning, instructing, task structuring and cognitive structuring” (p. 72). They further say that learners engage them in conversation and construct new meanings only when these processes are orchestrated effectively. Therefore, teaching is a sophisticated “instructional conversation” (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988, p. 111).

Internalization

Vygotsky (1986, Ch. 7) states that our concept of internalization recognizes unique human minds which owe their existence to and are inextricably intertwined with social, historical, cultural, and material processes (including brain activities). Internalization is conceived of as a representational activity, a process that occurs simultaneously in social practice and in the human brain/mind. Sociocultural researchers include the learners’ appropriation of socially elaborated symbol systems as a critical aspect of learning-driven development. This appropriation of symbol systems was a central focus of Vygotsky’s work, particularly as applied to educational pedagogy, and led to his most fully elaborated application of the concept of internalization -- the

transformation of communicative language into inner speech and further into verbal thinking (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 196). Vygotsky's idea of the development of higher mental functions and understanding of learning within the ZPD depend on this process that is called internalization (Brown and Ferrara, 1985). Internalization at its crux proposes that social interaction creates ZPDs to encourage skills that in the beginning work effectively only within collaborative activities, but gradually with the practice internalize as self-regulatory processes (Palincsar and Brown, 1989). Internalization, in effect, occurs only when the first performed externally patterns of social interaction are executed on an internal plane (Wertsch, 1985). Vygotsky (1978) suggests that during development every function appears twice, at first it appears between the people at social plane and then inside the person at the interpsychological or individual plane. Rogoff (1990) puts it "in this process of development, the learner takes new information or skills experienced in a social context and develops the necessary understanding to apply or *appropriate*" (p. 150). Thus, sociocultural perspective sees human development as a gradual internalization of those processes that were shared between the learners initially and later were seen as independent problem-solving skills.

SCL Theory and Adult Learning

The application of SCL theory to adult learning demands us to recognize the patterns of learning assistance that are present in the environments of adult learning. Bonk and Kim (1998, p. 72) consulting with Tharp's ideas of assisted learning and Collins et al. (1989) apprenticeship techniques has presented ten teaching techniques based on sociocultural theory:

- I) Modeling to illustrate performance standards and verbalize invisible process
- II) Coaching to observe and supervise students in guiding them towards expert performance
- III) Scaffolding and fading to support what learners cannot yet do and gradually removing that support as competence is displayed
- IV) Questioning to request a verbal response from learners by supporting them with mental functions they cannot produce alone

- V) Encouraging student articulation of their reasoning and problem-solving processes
- VI) Pushing student exploration and application of their problem-solving skills
- VII) Fostering student reflection and self-awareness (e.g., through performance replays)
- VIII) Providing cognitive task structuring by explaining and organizing the task within students' ZPDs
- IX) managing instructions with performance feedback and positive reinforcement
- X) using direct instruction to provide clarity, needed content, or missing information

Sociocultural research in relation to the adults indicates that examples of these (above mentioned) techniques are quite evident in the field of adult learning (Bonk and King, 1995). Many adult learning experts (Apps, 1991; Brookfield, 1990; Jarvis, 1995) adopt and support a unique range of teaching techniques and approaches for adult learners that encourage discussion, role play and reflection. These people want to shift adult education curriculum from the acquisition and memorization of facts to more collaborative, active, and authentic learning experiences (Millis, Davidson, and Cottell, 1994). Because of the nature of learning which is largely a social enterprise, group collaboration is central for these educators. Moreover, in addition to collaboration, adult learning researchers argue for such teaching techniques and approaches that caters for adult's dignity and self-directedness. At the same time, these techniques must be respectful and sensitive to students' prior knowledge and experience (Jarvis, 1995). Fortunately, sociocultural theory is uniquely positioned to inform and integrate these trends in adult education.

Sociocultural opportunities are not just restricted to formal ways of education these days. They are extending to informal adult learning settings (e.g., recreational activities, sporting events and theme park visitations) (Kearsley, 1991; Lave, 1991) to the workplace (Froman, 1994; Marsick, 1998). Wagner and McCombs (1995) are of the view that arenas of adult learning are clearly encouraging more learner-centered avenues. As adult learning is becoming more self-directed along with expansion of learning resources, the chances have

also been increased to assist and scaffold adult learning. Salmon (1988) stresses that researchers should search and find more and more avenues to observe and understand scaffolded learning. The educators need to be more sensitive to the recent emerging institutional settings and cultural artifacts within adult learning environments in order to understand adult learning.

Johnson (1994) states that rapid changes in the world on economic avenues and technological advances are not just increasing excitement but challenging young adult learning possibilities. Education has travelled beyond the walls of formal schools to informal learning environments such as libraries, museums, and zoos as these institutions have gone under significant changes and renovation due to technological advancement and have become the seats of learning. Librarians and museum educators these days have realized that adult learning is enriched in interactive and collaborative learning communities with site visit, small group discussion, candid conversation and reflection. Some museums have started to explore the learning potential of virtual reality (Brill, 1994). Collaborative and interactive learning features of sociocultural theory have reached informal settings now and are being used to teach adults.

Adults who have gone out of formal seats of learning like schools and entered workplace or parenthood have to confront with new types of learning alternatives and obligations. Bonk and Kim (1998) state that “mediational learning aids of middle adult professional and home life include company brochures, fliers on bulletin boards, computer help manuals, strategic planning documents, job aids, notes to spouses, magazines in dentist waiting rooms, repair manuals, fax machines, voice-mail devices, and school newsletters” (pp. 79-80). The two important features of sociocultural theory – apprenticeship and scaffolded learning – here might come from seniors while drafting a report, an automobile mechanic pointing out why one’s headlights need to be replaced, or a doctor explaining to distressed parent how to look after a sick kid. Given this range of sociocultural settings in adult life, it is no wonder that research in this area lacks focus.

Even the older adult learning avenues are expanding. Bonk and Kim (1998, p. 80) state that there was a time when these older adults (above 60) have been labeled as unproductive (Hayslip and Panek,

1993), provided with minimum learning opportunities (Cross, 1981), and offered an array of memory and retrieval compensation strategies (Craik and Jennings, 1992). This kind of deficit views are now changing because of new trends of the present day. Good physical and mental health and balanced life styles are emerging to build a more positive and learning related conception of such adults. With increase in learning possibilities, these adults can maximize their contribution to their society through participation. A sociocultural view on learning, therefore, will not only promote older adult learning but will also better utilize the experience and wisdom of older adults as learning activity experts and mentors (Bonk and Kim, 1998; pp. 80-81).

SCL Theory and Adult ESL Learning

Using Vygotsky's Concept of Sense Inside the Classroom

Vygotsky wrote about sense in the context of inner versus outer speech in *Thinking and Speech* (1987) since “inner speech we find a predominance of the word’s sense over its meaning” (p. 275). The phenomenon also occurs in outer speech but only in the egocentric speech of the child and between people who have “lived the same life” (p.279). This establishes a foundation for the argument that inner speech is egocentric speech. Children using their personal experience develop “sense”. They develop it through their personal attachments. Vygotsky gives credit to Jean Paullhan (a French literary critic) who for the first time made distinction between sense and meaning. Vygotsky (1987) takes sense as “the aggregate of all the psychological facts that arise in our consciousness because of the word” (p.275). His view is that there is the word and there is an internal complex the word evokes in the mind. While meaning is the source through which thought is realized. Vygotsky sees sense more fluid, more amorphous. For Vygotsky (1987), it is “characterized by different laws of unification and fusion” (p. 277). The relationship between word and meaning is more directly dependent while sense and the word are less dependent. A word can change its sense (e.g. “Mirasi”, one who sings and belongs to a lower cast in Pakistan. “Mirasi” in Pakistani context is an abusive term); and a concept can change its expression (e.g. Artist). Thus, it is quite different from the traditional representation of “sense” as interchangeable with word meaning.

ESL tutors can amass sense at personal level through the concept of *perezhivanie* – a term that describes that how individuals experience, perceive and unfold the emotional aspect of social interaction, while at cultural level it becomes more intersubjective and shared. Personal sense of everyone involves *perezhivanie* as Vygotsky (1987) states that “the sense of a word depends on one’s understanding of the world as a whole and on the internal structure of personality” (p. 276), while, on the other hand, above mentioned example of the word “Mirasi” can easily convey the sense at cultural level, too. Sense becomes more constricted as it moves from cultural to personal, because the individual’s sense of “Mirasi” could add to a lot more to it based on his personal and emotional contents. So, keeping in view the goals of adult ESL learners, the ESL instructor must teach towards that sense. It is the concept that is not catered in adult ESL classes under the pretext that adults do not bother about such thing as they are grown up enough. But this misconception can lead to grave concerns. The purpose of teaching is to convey “sense” in its right direction and level, therefore, applying Vygotsky’s idea of “sense” while teaching can lead the learners towards not just knowledge but understanding.

Vygotsky and Adult ESL Writing Classroom

As discussed in the above portion of the paper, the essence of ZPD is the working collaboration between teacher and learners, that helps the learners restructure everyday concept into scientific concepts. Mahn (2015) points out that Vygotsky encourages teachers to utilize learning activities that engage learners’ conscious awareness and volition that will enable them to take control of their attention and memory which is essential to the learning process. John Steiner and Mahn (1996) emphasize the importance of “meaning negotiation” through social interactions stating that “... internalization is simultaneously an individual and a social process. In working with, through, and beyond what they have appropriated in social participation and then internalized, individuals co-construct new knowledge (p.197).

Although Vygotsky studies the utilization of the ZPD mainly with child and adolescents, ZPD also has been widely used in the field of education, ESL and EFL fields (Alavi & Taghizadeh, 2014; Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Colby & Atkinson, 2004; De Marsico, Sterbini, & Temperini, M., 2013; Nassaji & Swain, 2000; Rassaei, 2014). Aljaafreh

and Lantolf (1994) identified three principles for providing assistance and feedback utilizing within the learner's ZPD: graduated, contingent, and dialogic. The following implications for utilizing feedback in adult ESL writing courses are based on these three principles and other related thinking and languaging theory.

Dynamic assessment (DA) is an integrated instruction and assessment method that is modeled after Vygotsky's idea of ZPD. It allows instructors to evaluate their learners' potential development and skills through sociocultural theory. Alavi and Taghizadeh (2014) narrate the dialogic nature of DA by saying "interactionist DA follows Vygotsky's tendency for dialogic interaction in which the extent of assistance/mediation is determined during the interactions with the learners in an effort to provide the most appropriate and adequate portion of assistance to the learners" (p.3).

The findings of various empirical studies reveal the success of negotiated feedback on second language development within the learners' ZPD (Alavi & Taghizadeh, 2014; Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; and Nassaji & Swain, 2000). For example, Alavi and Taghizadeh (2014) found that mediated feedback between teachers and adult English EFL learners was facilitative of learning content and organization skills in an EFL context in Iran. Nassaji and Swain (2000) studied two Korean adult ESL learners and found that the learner who received the ZPD-based feedback improved her use of English articles as compared to the learner who was given random feedback. Therefore, instructors of adult ESL writing courses should evaluate their learner's existing understanding of a developing linguistic concept before providing feedback using Aljaafreh and Lantolf's graduated, contingent, and dialogic feedback approach as well as using and allowing the learner to use his/her native language in the feedback activities.

Conclusion

The application of sociocultural theory in recent years have crossed the borders of learning in formal and informal settings and reached the doors of adult online distance education programs. It is now being used in adult online technology based distance education programs in the recent years. This new mode of adult education differs from traditional set up. Research on the social context of learning suggests that traditional approaches would be inappropriate for online distance

programs. Here again the interactive and collaborative mode of learning could be offered to such programs to bring expected results. Though this would not be physical collaboration and interaction (it can also be managed to some extent through the mode of video), still it would be offering some sort of sense of collaboration. Certainly, there is a lot more to explore. Adult learning avenues look towards sociocultural logging and analysis to explore those untapped environments.

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