Lev S. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Chinese Language Teaching

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Abstract: *In spite of the fact that several studies have lead to significant advances in understanding the influence of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory on second language learning, few have paid attention to the relationship between Vygotsky's theory and Chinese teaching. This article's main purpose is to explore the possible application of Vygotsky's theoretical perspective to Chinese language teaching. Conceptually, the zone of proximal development and scaffolding are employed to develop a theoretical framework to explain how sociocultural theory influences Chinese language teaching. This paper also emphasizes that Vygotsky's theory provides a valuable perspective in Chinese teaching, particularly as it relates to cultural-social context in which students' cognitive development can take place; the teacher as a guidance role, the interdependence of teacher and student in co-construction of knowledge, and the change of teaching strategies.*

1. Introduction

The Impact of Lev S. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory on education has received considerable attention in the philosophy of education and pedagogy. Several studies have led to significant advances in understanding the influence of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory on second language learning (Ajayi, 2005; Fox, 2001; Lantolf, 2000). Generally, these studies have taken two directions: some studies provide a complete understanding of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory at theoretical level and its methodological implications (Fox, 2001; Parkes, 2000a; 2000b; Vogel, Davison, Shroff & Qureshi, 2001). Other studies focus on how Vygotsky's sociocultural theory serves as a theoretical foundation for second language learning (Ajayi, 2005; Lantolf, 2000). Those studies have offered many significant insights into the relationship between Vygotsky's sociocultural theory and second language learning.

However, there are two limitations of the current research on Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. First, many of these studies lack a concrete conceptual analysis of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. Without such a badly needed analysis, it is difficult to explain how Vygotsky's sociocultural theory made a significant influence on pedagogy and second language learning. Second, although Vygotsky's contributions to the field of education are apparent, what has not been specifically addressed is how to convert sociocultural theory to pedagogical practice in general, and to teach Chinese as a second language in particular.

On the basis of the above considerations, the aim of this article is to explain the impact of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory on Chinese language teaching. To do this, this paper will first discuss the theoretical assumptions and methodology of Vygosky's sociocultural theory. Sociocultural theory is based on the assumption that human activities take place in social-cultural contexts and each individual constructs knowledge in a social setting. It is posited that teachers and students interact with one another in social situations to socially negotiate meaning. In Section 3, the paper examines two central concepts of

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, that is, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Scaffolding. Vygotsky believes that any pedagogy creates learning processes that led to development and this sequence results in zones of proximal development. The concept of scaffolding is closely related to the ZPD, which refers to the way the teacher guides the students' learning via focused questions and positive interactions. Section 4 discuses the implications and possible applications of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in Chinese as second language teaching with focuses on the three central notions of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, i.e., the social setting, the concepts of ZPD, and scaffolding, which are found to be particularly relevant to Chinese language teaching.

2. Methodology and Theoretical Assumptions

Does each individual construct knowledge in a social setting? Or is individual cognitive development separated from social-cultural setting? According to behaviorists' view of learning, one set of observable conditions (stimuli) can be related to another set of observable conditions (responses) with emphasis on what the learner responds to and does. For instance, the key principle of the Skinnerian law of operant conditioning is that the correct or desired behavior is reinforced. Similarly, constructivist Piaget believes that the most important source of cognition is the individuals themselves. He places importance on the learner as an active participant in the learning process, structuring individual experience and knowledge. Learning of this sort emphasizes underlying understanding, rather than response to a situation. In this approach, new experiences are related to existing knowledge, which in turn is derived from previous experiences.

It is obvious that both behaviorism and constructivism tend to promote learning as an individual endeavor. Behaviorism can be characterized as a way of describing how people learn in terms of individual thoughts and actions, while constructivism refers to how individuals adapt to the complexities in which they operate. A weakness of any individual model of learning is that it takes no account of the social interaction of learning processes. Using this model in educational practice, it leads to a linear, one-sided model of student learning. It has been typical to consider students responsible for learning. In this model the teacher provides an information conduit to a student, who is solely responsible for receiving and later retrieving this information.

The inclusion of social interaction separates Vygotsky from behaviorism and Piaget's cognitive development theory. Vygotsky's approach emphasizes co-construction and collaboration; both are characteristics of goal-oriented interaction. This model requires mutual effort and responsibility on the part of learner and teachers in a social context. Vygotsky notes that individuals interact with one another in social situations and underscored the dynamic interdependence of social and individual in learning.

Vygotsky stresses a holistic qualitative methodology which sheds light on learning processes as they occur in interactive setting. Rogoff, Matusov, and White (1996, p. 389) propose to call this a 'community of learners' model in that, as Vygotsky suggests, it involves both active learners and more expert partners, usually adults, who will provide leadership and assistance to the less skilled learners as they engage together in a community of practice. In other words, the learning is not about transmitting or acquiring knowledge, but is about transformation, namely, about transforming the nature of one's participation in a collaborative endeavor.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is based on the following theoretical assumptions:

Assumption 1: Individuals' cognitive development can only be understood within a social-cultural framework. The culture and individual cognitive development are not viewed as separate domains, rather than being joined and interactive. In comparison with other models, such as Bronfenbrenner's ecological model, which insists that culture should be analyzed in macro level, Vygotsky stresses that culture exists in social setting of individuals' daily life.

Assumption 2: The person and the culture are intricately interwoven through the process of social interaction. This interaction is at an interpersonal level between two individuals, such as a child and an adult, a student and a teacher. The students learn by interacting with the teacher who can answer their questions and show them how to solve problems. Vygotsky recognizes the new levels of understanding begin at an interpersonal level as two individuals. Social-cultural factors directly determine and affect the formation and contents of interaction between two persons.

Assumption 3: Individuals' cognitive development must take the person in an activity setting as its unit of analysis. This assumption may include two aspects: On the one hand, the child or the student learns to act not just in response to external stimuli but also in accord with internal ideas. An individual's belief system plays an important role in the process of learning; On the other hand, when the student develops in a society and culture in which sign systems are already available, the nature of cultural background needs to be understood because these environments directly or indirectly affect his belief system.

Assumption 4: Cognitive development undergoes movement from the intermental to the intramental. Vygotsky explains that high-level mental functions begin in external activity that is gradually reconstructed and internalized. This process consists of an endless stream of dialectical conflict and resolutions, with the resolutions then internalized to form the students' sophisticated knowledge.

3. The Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory is based on the belief that human cognitive development, including higher-order learning, is rooted in social interactions and mediated by abstract symbols, which he refers to as tools. Vygotsky emphasizes the important role of social interaction in the construction of knowledge. Within the sociocultural theory, the concepts of a zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding are particularly relevant to Chinese language teaching.

ZPD is a major concept in Vygotsky's works. He offers the concept as the immediate framework through which learning and development converge. The zone is "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). Vygotsky does not deny that knowledge construction is individual or that learning is a manifestation of the hardwiring of the brain. He argues that the guidance given by more capable others allow the child to engage in levels of activity that could not be managed alone. This guidance occurs in ZPD which is the difference between what a learner can do independently and what he can accomplish cognitively with scaffolding from more knowledgeable others.

With the notion of ZPD, Vygotsky develops a more general conviction that "human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (Vygotsky, 1978, p.88). One of Vygotsky's most important findings is that learning collaboratively with others, particularly in instructional settings, precedes, and shapes development. The relationship between learning and development is not directly causal. Intentionally designed learning environments can stimulate qualitative development changes.

Vygotsky believes that ZPD is a crucial time for full social engagement of the child in order to achieve maximum learning. However, the functions of ZPD have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation. "The actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively" (Vygotsky 1978, p. 87). Thus, in order for ZPD to be such a success, it must contain a crucial feature: scaffolding, which refers to a change in the social support over the course of a teaching session. If scaffolding is successful, a child's or a student's mastery can change, which means that it can increase the individual's performance on a particular task.

Scaffolding is another major concept of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. It is closely related to ZPD, although Vygotsky himself never mentions the term. Instead, scaffolding is developed by other sociocultural theorists applying Vygotsky's ZPD to educational contexts. Scaffolding is a process through which a teacher or more competent peer gives aid to the student in her ZPD as necessary, and tapers off this aid as it becomes unnecessary, much as a scaffold is removed from a building during construction. According to education expert Nancy Balaban, "scaffolding refers to the way the adult guides the child's learning via focused questions and positive interactions" (Balaban, 1995, p. 52). Vygotsky's theory of scaffolding describes the assistance that a teacher gives to a student to help her safely take risks and reach higher than would be possible by the student's efforts alone. Vygotsky believes that when a student is in ZPD for a particular task, providing the appropriate assistance (scaffolding) will give the student enough of a "boost" to achieve the task.

As a parallel concept of ZPD, scaffolding may be characterized as follows: (1) Teaching and learning are social, not individual activities. Learning takes place when novices and experts work together to solve a common problem or produce a common product. (2) The student-teacher relationship is collaborative, with the learning experience becoming reciprocal. In this model the roles of the student and the teacher are more permeable and flexible than those in the model of professional development practice which relies on outside experts. (3) Scaffolding is a dynamic process, which guides a teacher's analysis and decision on planning instruction and their actions during instruction. If scaffolding is successful, a student's mastery level of performance can change, which means that it can increase the student's performance on a particular task. (4) The scaffolds are temporary. As the learner's abilities increase the scaffolding provided by the more knowledgeable other is progressively withdrawn. Finally the learner is able to complete the task or master the questions independently. Therefore, the goal of the teacher when using the scaffolding teaching strategy is for the student to become an independent and self-regulating learner and problem solver. As the learner's knowledge and learning competency increase, the teacher gradually reduces the supports provided.

4. Implications and Application in Chinese Teaching

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory can help us to develop a coherent instructional model and then to scrutinize, converse about, and adjust our teaching in ways that hold powerful benefits for both teachers and students. Within the sociocultural theory, the social setting, the concepts of ZPD and scaffolding are particularly relevant to Chinese language teaching. I will address those three aspects separately below.

4.1 The Social Setting and Chinese Language Teaching

According to Vygotsky's view, individuals' cognitive developments are embedded in a specific social and cultural setting. Applying this idea to the Chinese teaching, social settings may contain two components: first, social setting is related to students' family economic situation and family relationships. The teacher should understand and know the students home environment because family background is a most powerful factor in determining the school learning of students-their level of achievement, their interest in learning. In my first year Chinese class for Japanese students, an oral test was used through one-on-one interview in fall 2008. The topic was on "my family and my future". I hope that it would help me to understand students' life expectations from their social settings. Student answer were surprising, among 26 students of my class, two students worked very hard to create a life for their single mother. One student, her mother passed away one year ago, worked many hours at the restaurant. Half of these students also hold a "regular job". These earnings undoubtedly help to alleviate some of families' financial struggle to pay for University in the short run. I was stunned to find that a great number of the young Japanese students lived in depressed and harsh situations. Second, here social setting can be seen as the relations between teacher and students. In order words, classrooms are social setting in which teaching and learning occurs through

social interaction. As teaching and learning take place, they become complicated and negotiated processes. I will address this issue in more detail later.

4.2 The ZPD and the Guidance Role of the Teacher

Vygotsky's most influential ideas are those related to Zone of Proximal Development. He describes the ZPD as the difference between the actual development level as determined by individual problem solving and level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance. In Chinese language education, teaching in the ZPD may be interpreted as providing guided assistance and meaningful interaction. According to Tharp and Gallimore (1988, p. 26), "teaching in the ZPD is assisted performance, that is, teacher provides the assistance necessary to bring the leaner to a higher level through the zone and to a greater independent capacity." The question is how does the teacher mediate or support students' learning?

Based on my opinion, the guidance role of the teacher does not simply mean that there is additional work required of the teacher, but that the teacher takes on the role of guidance on the teaching site. The teacher needs to engage in joint effort with learners, mainly through interaction, to advance the students' intellectual development. Therefore, classroom setting should be an egalitarian one, rather than a teacher-centered setting where the authority solely determines curriculum. Vygotsky encourages students to participate in the classroom with the teacher as curriculum planner. In my Chinese class, students were given the opportunity to express their feeling about the course. For instance, a question asked "What could be improved in this class?" All the students' feedback included both positive and negative comments. Responding to negative feedback, I was willing to let students' views influence and change what I do in my teaching. I felt student comments were extremely important. A prerequisite condition for a teacher to make improvements to her teaching as a result of student feedback is that she considers student opinion worth listening to.

4.3 Scaffolding and Teaching Strategies

Vygotsky's theory of scaffolding describes the assistance that a teacher gives a student to help her safely take risks and reach higher than would be possible by the student's efforts alone. Therefore, scaffolding refers to teaching strategies in which the teacher assists her students in achieving new abilities and skills. The scaffolding strategies that could be used in Chinese classroom may include the followings.

(1) Teacher presented ideas that stimulated students' interests in their Chinese learning. Indeed, China's economic transformation has stunned the world. The country has become one of the world's main exporters of manufactured goods and sits for transnational corporate investment. But what many Japanese companies have learned by disappointment, is that you have to speak Chinese language in order to get into the Chinese marketplace. The ability to speak Chinese is essential to business success. Those with a grasp of the Chinese language will be in an advantageous position to benefit from the ascension of the Chinese economy.

(2) Combined listening, speaking, reading, and handwriting skills in the process of learning: Chinese is one of the most difficult languages in the world to learn, especially its phonetics and semantics. Chinese is a tonal language, which means if you say a word with a wrong tone, you can be misunderstood. Based on this characteristic of Chinese language, the teacher should strongly address the importance of speaking the target language and encourage students to open their mouths both inside and outside of classes.

(3) Providing the different treatments for the students with different abilities. In my class, 26 students were assigned to two treatments in which resulted in increased learning for high ability students. For example, high ability students were assigned more difficult homework. I found that different treatments were best for students at different levels of intelligence or other aptitudes.

5. Conclusions

    Vygotsky uses a social-cultural viewpoint when he formulates his cognitive development model. Individual cognitive development can only be understood within a social and cultural framework. In comparison with behaviorism and constructivism, the sociocultural theory emphasizes the important role of social interaction (teacher and student, student and student) in the construction of knowledge. Vygotsky describes that individuals interact with one another in social situations. He underscores the dynamic interdependence of social and individual process. Students often learn by interacting with the teacher who can answer their questions and show them how to solve problems. Finally, the learner is able to complete the task or master the concepts, grammar and words independently. Therefore, the goal of the teacher when using the scaffolding teaching strategy is for the student to become an independent and self-regulating learner and problem solver.

    Vygosky's sociocultural theory and its main concepts, such as ZPD and scaffolding have made a valuable contribution to our understanding of what it means to teach and learn a second language. Teaching in the sociocultural perspective means that the teacher should establish a meaningful social context, seeing herself in the role of giving guidance in the learning process, recognizing the interdependence of teacher and student in the co-construction of knowledge and changing and developing teaching strategies. However, there exists a sizeable gap between theory and practice in teaching. Even if we tried to understand and develop Vygosky's theoretical model, we still are facing a lot of problems in teaching. I believe that there are many issues in Vygosky's model worth considering further. For example: how to construct a social context in which students' cognitive development can take place? How can the teacher play a guidance role? What can the teacher do to help students who are experiencing difficulties in learning? We, therefore, need to continually enrich our understanding of theory and improve teaching methods and strategies.

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