Towards Vygotskian Approaches in Teaching English in Vietnam

Le Pham Hoai Huong, M.S.

How and why to apply the interactive and cooperative theories of an important Russian linguist and educator.

L.S. Vygotsky was a Russian psycholinguist who devoted his life to research on human psychology and education, especially children's education. Addressing the impact of his theories, Dixon-Krauss (1996) comments: “His ideas have been a powerful force in educational practice in the former Soviet Union, but [it is] only during the past few years that his work has become an important influence on Western education in the areas of human development and learning” (p. 1). In particular, his work on social, cognitive, and behavioral science radically accelerated research on the practice of teaching and schooling (Gallimore and Tharp).

While Vygotsky's theories in these fields have attracted the attention of quite a lot of researchers and educators in many countries, they have remained unknown to most Vietnamese teachers and learners of English. As an attempt to integrate his ideas into the teaching of English in Vietnam, this paper sets out to describe and analyze which of his theories in psychology and education are most relevant and helpful to that purpose. Which elements can most profitably be used within the context of teaching and learning English with more collaboration among teachers and students in interactive environments. Specifically, it points out how to empower and assist Vietnamese teachers and learners of English when they work in the “Zone of Proximal Development” (ZPD) (Vygotsky).

English Learning and Teaching in Vietnam

As the need for communication with other countries in which English is used as a second or foreign language and the integration of Vietnam into the mainstream of Asian countries grows, so does the need for learning and teaching English in Vietnam. Vietnamese people want to acquire English for a variety of purposes. Denham found that Vietnamese people study English to read technical materials or to communicate with English-speaking foreigners, including native speakers as well as those for whom English is an international language. Eyring and Silverman also notice that Vietnamese learners study English to communicate with native speakers, to read English professional journals, and to pass national secondary school exams (p. 3).

The role of English in Vietnam also goes beyond individual purposes, for it is a tool for accelerating relationships and cooperation between Vietnam and other countries. “English in Vietnam is extremely important in Vietnam’s promotion of international development programs and its participation in international organizations” (McKay, p. 1). Since a good command of English promises future professional advancement, everyone from elementary pupils to high-ranking government officials is presently taking intensive or extended English courses.

With such a great need, finding effective approaches in teaching English, ones that enhance learners' communicative competence, can be seen to be of immense practical importance and should be a primary focus for classroom teachers and curriculum administrators.

Vygotsky’s Theories

The most crucial idea that Vygotsky has contributed to education is his emphasis on the role of language in development and learning. He considers that signs (words) function as mental tools that enable humans to engage in the higher mental functions of voluntary attention, memory, and control. Thus, words have two functions: mediating human behavior and communicating socially.

Hickmann (in Wertsch) and Frawley and Lantolf point out that for Vygotsky, language is a distinctively human sign system that plays a primordial role in development. That is, it is socially constituted and
historically developed, making possible the child’s participation in the surrounding intellectual and social life.

Vygotsky (as quoted in Wells) also places emphasis on the co-construction of knowledge by more mature and less mature participants engaging in activity together. Thus, his theory proposes a collaborative community in which, with the teacher as leader, all participants learn with and from each other as they engage together in dialogic inquiry (p. xii). He holds that the development of higher mental functions in children originates from the child’s interactions with other social agents.

Perhaps it is his concept of the ZPD that has most interested educators and linguists alike. He defines the ZPD as (Vygotsky, p. 86):

The distance between the actual development as determined by independent solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance in collaboration with more capable peers.

Vygotsky believes this hypothesis can be broadly applied in education. He remarks (p. 90):

An essential feature of learning is that it creates the zone of proximal development; that is, learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes that are able to operate only when the child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers. Once these processes are internalized, they become part of the child’s independent developmental achievement.

These ideas demonstrate that Vygotsky is an interactionist, holding that speech can be used to communicate to establish or maintain social relationships among members of a culture. Speech also becomes the primordial sign system that mediates the internal thought processes of individuals, the structuring of their conceptual and reasoning activities, and generally their reflective abilities (Hickmann, in Wertsch). Vygotsky’s theories show a great potential to improve the teaching and learning of English in Vietnam, because they would stimulate learners to be more interactive and to develop cognition when studying English.

Applying Vygotsky in Vietnam

Teachers and Students in the ZPD

It is clear that the ZPD seeks to promote a collaborative teaching and learning environment. “The ZPD in which the teacher works with each learner is created by both the participants, in the situation, as they construct meaning together” (Wells, p. 215). Though originally Vygotsky developed this theory for teaching children, it has since been broadly applied to students at all levels, and the idea of the ZPD not only to educating students but also to assisting teachers. Teaching in the ZPD means that teachers are ready to assist students through their instructions in order to move them to a higher level of development. Thus, modeling, feedback, questions, cognitive structuring, and microteaching can lead students beyond their current levels of competency (Gallimore and Tharp, p. 188).

In addition, the teacher must on the one hand mediate learning through social interaction, and on the other hand develop and maintain students’ confidence and independence. Teachers should become facilitators who are attentive to feedback from learners and who engage learners during classroom activities. The classroom in this sense is student-centered and functions as a supportive learning environment. Sometimes, teachers find it hard to stimulate Vietnamese students to speak up, as they are accustomed to passive roles in class. To facilitate more interaction, the teacher’s responsibility is to select broad topics for study that are intellectually challenging and interesting to students. This will initiate and foster increased interaction.

The key to the relation between social and internal processes in Vygotsky’s writings is that the same sign system mediates both types of processes in development, the actual and the potential. Thus, in the potential level of development, the uses of linguistic signs—for example, hints, leading questions, or Socratic dialogues—will foster cognitive thinking by students as well as teachers (Wells).

Administrators and Teachers in the ZPD

The ZPD concept can help classroom teachers and program administrators improve performance. Within the hierarchical system of Vietnamese culture, senior teachers usually have more authority than junior ones. Professional meetings or settings for professional development, such as workshops and conferences, provide social contexts where teachers can reduce the distance in authority and exchange knowledge more freely. Meetings should be good opportunities to discuss classroom problems and administrative tasks. They should be carried out in a comfortable and supportive environment so that teachers find it easy to share their opinions and problems and to ask others for help or suggested
solutions. Gallimore and Tharp state that the system should be to assist the performance of the person next down the line. Authority should be used to create settings in which joint productive activity produces the type of mentoring or assistance that increases the skills and teaching abilities of individuals lower down in the hierarchy.

If this is done, what is at the potential level today will be at the actual level tomorrow. Working in the ZPD, both teachers and students are continuously developing.

**Prior Knowledge and Filling in the Gaps**

According to Vygotsky, as a child engages in verbal interaction, she develops the higher thinking abilities of awareness, abstraction, and control. Words function as the “thinking tool,” and language is used by the child to center attention while she progresses through the process of abstract synthesis, which becomes the main instrument of higher mental functioning (Dixon-Krauss).

This view of development provides some insights into the importance of vocabulary knowledge to reading comprehension. A reader who does not understand important words that convey meaning in a passage is not likely to comprehend the passage because she lacks the appropriate tools (signs) to engage in abstract synthesis during reading. Thus, building up schemata and activating prior knowledge before reading are essential. Pre-reading activities, such as concept-mapping, webbing, brief discussions of content, and introducing key words accelerates the process of decoding and comprehending texts. In addition, learners should be aware of the structures and uses of language and speech, as well as of culturally-established meanings conveyed by reading materials.

For Vietnamese readers, unfamiliar cultural elements of reading materials might significantly hinder the interactive reading process, which uses both prior knowledge of the subject and the linguistic knowledge of the text (Eskey). Readings reflect and are influenced by an author’s cultural background. Therefore, it is usually necessary for Vietnamese learners of English to build up schema and backgrounds for reading. If texts deal with specific cultural aspects of American or British society, Vietnamese learners perhaps will not be able to employ context-guessing (Goodman, 1978). Examples include jokes, references to historical events or personalities, and allusions to culturally-familiar stories or values. To address this issue, native speakers might give workshops to evaluate or fill in the gaps of certain materials before they are taught. This would provide classroom teachers with necessary background information for reading texts, which they later use to help learners in the interactive reading process. Workshops on the cultures or literatures of native-speaking countries would similarly make it easier for Vietnamese teachers in gaining knowledge necessary to their teaching of English. Short visits to native-speaking countries, when possible, would definitely help Vietnamese teachers broaden their knowledge and raise their awareness of different aspects of life and culture that are reflected in their curricula.

**Social Interaction and Learners’ Self-Discipline**

According to Vygotsky, language and thought originate from social interaction and are influenced by institutional instructions, and it is through interaction that cognition develops. To employ this idea in Vietnam would require some changes in the current methods employed in teaching English. Instead of teacher-centered classrooms with a focus on grammar and translation, there should be more pair work and group work, with more competent students working with lower-level ones to enhance interaction. Project work, field trip reports, interviews with native speakers, or pen pal (letter or e-mail) projects would also create a more communicative learning environment to develop students’ cognitive thinking and to enhance practice of the language they want to master.

Dixon-Krauss states: “Teaching in the ZPD means [we must ask] how to provide a supportive instructional environment that focuses on social interaction” (p. 20). According to Pica, Hatch, and Long (in Lightbown...
and Spada), negotiation in learning and teaching in an interactive environment accelerates the process of language acquisition. Thus, school instruction should provide appropriate social and cultural contexts for developing learners' higher mental functions. In addition, learners can also benefit from extra activities such as visiting tutoring centers and seeing teachers during office hours. These models have not been much developed in Vietnam; hence, they should be a primary concern for program administrators at this time. Speaking and reading clubs can also promote learners' cognitive and affective development.

In all these settings, teachers and tutors function as promoters of self-discipline by nurturing the emergence of personal planning and initiative-taking. They do this by gradually surrendering or modifying a dictatorial style so that learners' confidence and independence can be maintained and developed (Hickmann, p. 282).

**Empowering Students**

Working in the ZPD does not mean that teachers merely transplant knowledge to learners, but that they understand them as human beings by acting as caring persons to empower them. Culturally speaking, Vietnamese students often are not very expressive, but this does not indicate that they do not want to speak. Acting as caring guides within the ZPD requires classroom teachers to be sensitive and proactive in stimulating students. In other words, teachers can empower students, helping them build up confidence so that they feel eager to speak out. Encouragements—such as “I believe you can do it” or “I will be there to walk you through it”—or direct initiative-spurring—for instance, “Tell me what you think about this” or “What are you planning to do?”—will help learners have a sense of importance and develop language identities.

According to Zukowski-Faust, developing a language identity is of great importance: “It seems that the circumstances in which one learns a language have a great deal to do with the persona that is developing with the language” (p.77). Addressing the same issue, Brown points out: “Your self-identity is inextricably bound up with your language, for it is in the communicative process—the process of sending out messages and having them bounced back—that such identities are confirmed, shaped, and reshaped” (pp. 62-63). For this reason, supportive attitudes of teachers toward students are necessary and beneficial.

**Conclusion**

Vygotsky’s theories have had a tremendous influence on education. His theories on learning and development and the concept of the ZPD can be employed in teaching not only children but students at any level.

When implemented in Vietnam, Vygotskian approaches may face certain difficulties, such as those described by Bock and Pham. Difficulties may arise due to resistance from administrators, inaccurate or inappropriate applications of Vygotsky’s theories, or inadequate proficiencies of teachers. Implementation of Vygotskian approaches will require some changes in the Vietnamese cultural idea of “first emperor, second teachers” and cultural values of “social order, hierarchical respect, [and] collective face-saving” (Ting-Tomey, p. 74). These result in teacher-centered classrooms and passive students. However, when adequately trained and possessing a good understanding of Vygotskian models, Vietnamese teachers and program administrators will find it worth their time to try these new approaches. They can foster interaction among teachers and students in and out of the classroom, leading to a more excellent English education system nationwide.

**References**


Teacher’s Edition — 30 — September 2001

Resource Bulletin Board

6th ESEA Conference

Dates: November 29-December 1, 2001

Organizer: Department of English, School of Humanities, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University

Location: Quezon City, Philippines

ESEA – English in Southeast Asia

Theme: Learning to Teach, Teaching to Learn: Issues, Options, and Directions in Language and Literature Education

Conference topics include: “The South East Asian Teacher of English”; “English in a Multilingual Environment”; and “Curriculum and Syllabus Design.” Keynote addresses will be given by Christopher Brumfit, from the University of Southampton in the U.K.; Edna Z. Manlapaz, from Ateneo de Manila University in the Philippines; and Malachi Edwin Vethamani, from the University of Putra Malaysia in Malaysia. Registration is USD $150 and includes a reception, lunches, morning and afternoon snacks, a conference kit, and a conference certificate.

For more information, please contact: Ma. Luz C. Vilches, 6th ESEA Conference Director, Ateneo Center for English Language Teaching, School of Humanities, Loyola Schools, Ateneo de Manila University, Loyola Heights, Quezon City, Philippines. Telephone and fax: (632) 426-43-22. E-mail: mvilch@admu.edu.ph. Or visit the following Websites: www.ateneo.edu/soh/news.htm and acelt.faithweb.com/esea.htm.

WANTED: YOUR PHOTOS

For possible use on the cover of Teacher’s Edition, we invite you to send us photographs of yourself and your colleagues with students.

See page 2 for mailing information.