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REVIEW OF VYGOTSKY'S SOCIO-CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper outlines main issues in Vygotsky'ssocioconstructivism. It reviews different concepts like the zone of proximal development, private speech, regulation and language. The zone of proximal development is also linked to similar concepts, primarily scaffolding. The paper, then, draws important implications of the different theoretical concepts for teaching, curriculum and assessment.

Key words: costructivism, ZPD, scaffolding, regulation, mediation, private speech.

1. Introduction

To begin with, language acquisition takes place through interaction with other people (Vygotsky, 1978). Such interaction happens by means of two modalities: writing and speaking, the focus of the present study. Traditionally, researchers have been investigating language acquisition processes from the cognitive perspective at the neglect of other factors. They have been using different theoretical frameworks to investigate second and third/foreign language learning. Foremost among these frameworks are behaviorism and information processing theories, interest in which waned in the 1980's and 1990's. Behaviorism was criticized for being mechanical, intrapersonal and isolationist while the information processing theory was denounced for being reductionist in its analogy of mind and computer. Both approaches failed to take account of the learner's active role as well as the role of context and environment in learning. Having been mechanistically underpinned by an orderly, predictable, and controllable perspective of the universe (Phillips, 1995), the two theories missed the active and social characteristics of the learners.

Such neglect yielded an incomplete fragmented picture of the mechanisms underlying the learning process. Therefore, researchers working within the field of language learning felt that there was an urgent need for a shift in paradigm in education. Hence, educationalists looked for different alternative approaches to the study of language instruction mechanisms. Six different approaches, for instance, have been suggested: sociocultural, complexity theory, conversation-analytic, identity, language socialization, and socio-cognitive (Atkinson, 2011), of which the sociocultural one is gaining the widest currency. Researchers are beginning to strongly feel and recognize the importance of examining the context where the language is developed.

Socio-cultural theory has shifted the focus in second language development from psychological individual factors to the context of language learning. It underscored the importance of cultural variables and the school setting. Vygotsky (1978) who pioneered this theory viewed learning as a socially situated activity. From his perspective, mental functions in the individual first unfold in the social realm, and only then do they appear on the psychological plane. Consequently, we should

approach the study of the development of mental functions not in a cultural vacuum as it has been accomplished traditionally, but from a socially mediated approach. Socio-cultural theory, therefore, is expected to provide us with a broader position from which to explore second and foreign language learning. It is also expected to provide us with more practical and effective analytical tools with which to examine language learning as a social practice.

2. Defining socio-cultural theory

Socio-cultural theory is a variant of constructivism. It is also referred to as social constructivism. Different definitions of constructivism abound in the literature according to one's perspective. However, a common thread running across the different definitions is that the concept of understanding and knowledge is not passively passed from the teacher to the learner, but rather constructed by the learner him/herself. Such a view underscores knowledge as a process rather than as a product. Additionally, the over-arching concept hinges upon the active role of the learner. This is supported by Glasersfeld (1995) who asserts that knowledge is not passively received but built up by the cognizing subject on the basis of their experience. In the same vein, Brooks and Brooks (1993) define constructivism in the following terms: "Constructivism is not a theory about teaching…it is a theory about knowledge and learning… the theory defines knowledge as temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated, and thus, nonobjective," (Brooks & Brooks, 1993, p. vii). This way, knowledge as defined within constructivism does not exist outside of the learner.

Two major variants of constructivism are widely espoused: cognitive, or radical constructivism, and social or realist constructivism. The first variant is associated with Piaget (1972), and it holds that knowledge is individually and idiosyncratically constructed with the social being restricted to a stimulant role. This variant has been in use in education for several decades. But Piaget did not consider school and instruction to be driving forces in the conceptual development of children. Maturation or biological factors were believed to be the main forces at play in intellectual functioning. This is the major difference with the second variant of constructivism which derives from Vygotsky's work (1978). This alternative variant emphasizes the central role of the social environment in learning. School, instruction and social interactions among teachers and students are the primary forces in cognitive development.

Vygotsky's constructivism has profound implications for instruction and education. It is a praxis-based approach the challenge of which "was to create a psychology that would promote the development of new processes rather than continuing to focus on observing existing ones" (Lantolf, 2011, p. 35). This way, the approach marks itself as intending to bring a change in education and to move away from the principle of merely observing what happens in the learning process. Second and in connection with the first reason, in contrast to Piaget's variant of constructivism, socio-cultural theory recognizes the pivotal role of the context within which the language is taught and learnt. It highly underscores the mediation role of the context in learning. Third and also in connection with the previous reasons, the theory constitutes an improvement upon some issues that are considered problematic in Piaget like the inflexibility and the universality of the developmental stages. Fourth, it has been widely adopted and empirically tested in second language learning. Finally, it is relevant not only to learning and teaching, but also to assessment and curriculum development.

3. Vygotsky's constructivism

Pioneered by Vygotsky, social constructivism is a theory of learning that highlights the role of culture and context in shaping understanding. For second language development to occur, instruction should be geared to the zone of proximal development (ZPD) which is beyond the learner's actual development level. Social constructivism also views learning in an L2 context as a collaborative process rather than an isolated individual's effort. Vygotsky (1978) argues that learning is neither a purely internal process, nor is it a passive shaping of behaviors but a social process which is embedded within social events. Although elementary natural processes cannot come into being without biological factors, they develop and

mature only in the socio-cultural environment. Learners learn by interacting with the people, objects and events in their environment.

3.1. The zone of proximal development

One of the main reasons behind the introduction of the zone of proximal development is Vygotsky's dissatisfaction with the way assessment was conducted. Vygotsky believed that assessment as it was administered only tested learners' actual level of development at the neglect of their potential ability which was, in his view, equally important, hence the term "zone of proximal development". Vygotsky suggests that

> the Zone of Proximal Development is the space between the actual development 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, p. 86).

According to Vygotsky, any function in the child's cultural development appears on two planes: first on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. This means that cognitive development does not result merely from biological factors but also and mainly as a result of interactions with the environment. The zone of proximal development explains how this development occurs. Teachers and more capable peers cooperate with learners to help them move from their current level of learning to the target level using their zone of proximal development (Shepard, 2005). ZPD helps determine a child's mental functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturing; they constitute "buds of development" which are to open up yet.

This way, learning is associated with the concept of ZPD, in the sense that it causes a variety of internal developmental functions to develop. This process is mediated by the learner's interaction with the people in his/her environment as well as his/her more capable peers. Such an interaction causes the development of higher mental activities like voluntary attention, intentional memory, logical thought, planning and problem solving (McLeod, 2007). These potential abilities are eventually internalized and become part of the learner's independent developmental functions.

However, Vygotsky acknowledges that the ZPD is not the responsibility of instruction alone as developmental biological factors are not ruled out altogether. In point of fact, learning in the ZPD "depends upon outside social forces as much as inner resources" (Palmer, 2001, cited in Blake and Pope, 2008, p. 61). While biological factors take care of lower mental functions, culture and instruction assume the role of developing higher mental structures. Therefore, both the learner's stage of development and the form of instruction delivered cooperate in a complex interrelationship to determine the ZPD. But instruction should go ahead of development in such a way as to awaken the functions in the ZPD which have not yet matured. In this context, Shayer (2002) advocates that good instruction should target not so much the developed but the developing functions.

Thinking about the ZPD in terms of boundaries, one extreme consists of problems beyond the learner's grasp while the other end comprises problems that the learner can solve on his/her own. The range of problems to be given to the learner is in-between the two boundaries as the tasks in this range require mental functions that are in the process of being developed and internalized. This is the area where instruction should go because it will help the learner to develop skills s/he will eventually internalize and use on his/her own, thereby developing higher mental functions. The figure below illustrates the point in concrete terms:

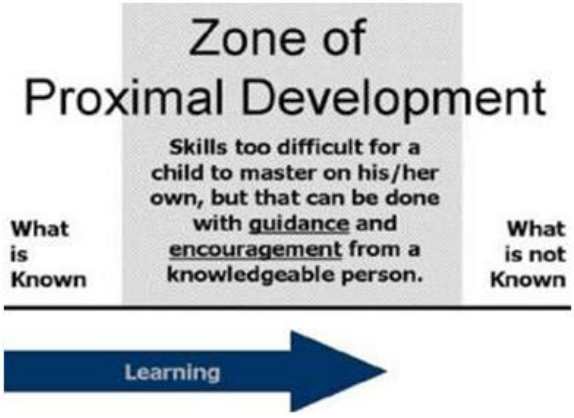

Figure 1: The range of the ZPD (McLeod**, 2007)**

According to the figure, learning moves from what is known to what is not known with help from a more knowledgeable other. But an important piece of information about the ZPD is the idea that it is not static, but rather dynamic, in the sense that the boundaries change as the child internalizes more and more mental functions. The range of the learner's ZPD is in a constant flux because what the learner can do with help today, s/he can do alone at a later time. So long as the learner is provided with help, particularly quality social interaction from a more capable individual, any problem can be solved and any skill can be internalized, and therefore a new ZPD is created.

3.2. Scaffolding and ZPD

The concept of scaffolding was introduced by Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) to account for mediation within ZPD. It originally referred to social assistance given to the child in learning the mother tongue. Using Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory, Lantolf (2007) extended the notion to collaborative interaction between learners saying that they scaffold each other (Fahim&Haghani, 2012, p. 696). In so doing, the learners construct linguistic knowledge together; they "scaffold one another as they take part in collaborative activity and such collaboration would lead to the co-construction of linguistic knowledge" (Fahim&Haghani, 2012, p. 696).

Scaffolding suggests that the more knowledgeable person provides help to the less knowledgeable one in accomplishing a task that s/he would not otherwise accomplish. It also stands for any help that the less knowledgeable learner resorts to; it may therefore, by extension, take the form of feedback, a dictionary, a grammar book, or a computer. But scaffolding has also been connected with Vygotsky's ZPD (the difference between what a learner can do unaided and what s/he can do with the aid of a more capable peer). In order to play a facilitating role in the learning of language scaffolding needs to be within the range of the ZPD. In this context, Vygotsky holds that education should march ahead of and lead development which accrues through internalizing the society's culture and social relationships.

In connection with scaffolding, Brown (2007) compares Vygotsky's ZPD to Krashen's (1982) "comprehensible input hypothesis". Krashen describes the input which is conducive to acquisition of the language as "i+1", with "i" standing for the learner's current level. The equation means that the material has to be only a bit above the level of the student. However, the ZPD is different from the "input hypothesis" in that it originates from interaction with more capable others. In this context, Lantolf (2011) cites a study by Dunn and Lantolf (1998) in which they describe the similarity between the two concepts as a misconception. They claim that Krashen's concept implies "a common internal syllabus for interlanguage development across all learners provided they receive sufficient comprehensible input, while development in the ZPD differs for different learners depending on the quality of mediation negotiated with others" (Lantolf, 2011, p. 30).

Crucially, the more knowledgeable other, a teacher or a more capable peer, helps the learners acquire what is not yet within their reach through interacting with them within the limits of their ZPDs. Such assistance offered by more capable others bridges the gap between the learners' developmental level and functions not yet internalized. Social interaction is, therefore, the scaffold that leads to the internalization of knowledge beyond the learners' grasp. The following figure illustrates how scaffolding works within the ZPD:

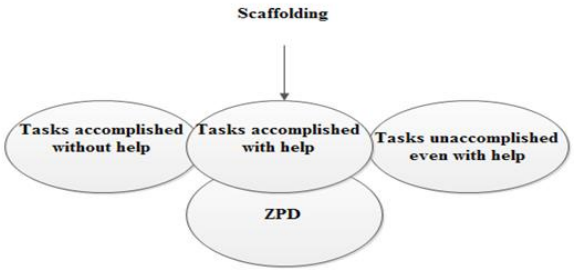

Figure 2: Scaffolding and ZPD (adapted from Campbell, 2008; cited in Shabani et al, 2010)

The teacher's role in a constructivist classroom consists in providing scaffolding in the form of collaborative interaction with the learners to assist them on tasks within the ZPD (Hamilton and

Ghatala, 1994). The first step in this direction according to Hamilton and Ghatala (1994) is interest building and task engagement. Then, the teacher helps the learners stay on task by preventing boredom and frustration. The teacher also models possible ways of completing tasks, a process which the learners can eventually internalize. The ultimate goal is to achieve autonomy.

However, scaffolding does not come only from a more knowledgeable person. In an extension of Vygotsky's ZPD, Lier (2004) draws a model of four different opportunities for scaffolding. All forms of scaffolding help the learner attain high level competencies and eventually achieve self-regulation/independence:

Figure 3: Lier's model of scaffolding (cited in Walqui, 2006)

The figure shows that scaffolding goes four ways, with equal, less capable, more capable learners, and own resources. The learner learns by working with more capable others who scaffold him/her, but also from working with equals as interaction helps both grow cognitively. Interacting with a less capable person also helps the learner as one learns by teaching others. The fourth scaffolding strategy is drawing on own inner resources. According to Lier (2004), the benefit is guaranteed in all participation contexts.

A further type of scaffolding that has been identified in the literature is collective scaffolding (Donato, 1990; Gibbons, 2002; Mercer, 1995; Rogoff, 1995, cited in Walqi, 2006, p. 167). This means that learners working in groups scaffold each other and as a result create ZPDs that help them produce work that none of them would accomplish in isolation. The ultimate goal of all these types of scaffolding is the development of an autonomous self-regulated learner. This is attainable by gradually removing the help and moving the responsibility for learning to the learner, thereby enabling him/her to regulate his/her behavior.

3.3. Regulation and ZPD

Regulation is an important concept in Vygotsky's theory that is responsible for cognitive development. It refers to the way learners come to regulate their behaviors. Regulation occurs in three developmental stages. The first stage is object regulation during which the child is regulated by physical artifacts around him/her. These artifacts stimulate the mental functions and help them operate. In the transition to other-regulation, stage two, behavior is regulated by a more capable individual who helps the child regulate his/her actions and thoughts. The last stage is self-regulation during which a qualitative change occurs in the cognitive development of the learner. Such a change enables the learner to plan activities and thoughts and to self-organize. Self-regulation is a characteristic of higher-order behaviours. At this stage, the learner can accomplish an activity without help based on his/her internalization of his/her developed cognitive and emotional functioning.

Self-regulation has been connected with meta-cognition which supports it and which figures in the sense of self-consciousness in Vygotsky. Self-regulation implies an intentionality which requires consciousness and control of one's thoughts and activities. Such meta-cognitive knowledge refers to the ability to think at a high level of abstraction. It also refers to "the knowledge of one's own mental powers, particularly considered in relation to a given task" (Fox &Riconscente, 2008, p.383), a skill which is not attainable to children.

Meta-cognition, therefore, is not developed until at least adolescence wherein the learners start to think about their own thinking. Adolescence is also the stage during which the capacity to engage in abstract thinking is created. Social interaction with others is a key driving force in this direction; so is imaginative play. "From the point of view of development, creating an imaginary situation can be regarded as a means of developing abstract thought" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 103). This is so because

imaginative play moves the child from reality to an imagined situation, thereby teaching him/her to think at a level that is beyond the concrete.

Self-regulation can also be defined as the capacity to self-organize one's behavior. A basic form of self-organization is voluntary attention which refers to the ability to direct one's attention intentionally to a given task. Control of thoughts and control of actions are two other forms which develop in parallel with voluntary attention (Fox &Riconscente, 2008). All forms of self-organization involve internalization of "language-based social interactions" (Fox &Riconscente, 2008, p. 385). While such social interaction begins at home, it also needs to be extended in the context of the school. Types of tasks and kind of stimuli to which learners are introduced play a pivotal role in developing control of behavior and actions.

3.4. Language in Vygotsky

Vygotsky (1962) holds that development is inseparable from its social and cultural context. The latter provides tools that mediate development. One of the most complex and important tools is language. It is believed to be the primary means of mediation because complex concepts are conveyed to the learner through language. Two major functions of language can be identified in Vygotsky's theory. First, language is the means through which the learner receives information from more knowledgeable individuals. Second, language serves as a very powerful tool in the process of intellectual adaptation. Language development in Vygotsky (1986) is a process which begins with social contact with others and is then gradually internalized through stages that end up with the development of inner speech.

Vygotsky holds that individuals learn best in cooperation with others through interaction. Thus, great emphasis goes to spoken language which is a powerful psychological tool that leads to the development of basic cognitive structures. Vygotsky explains that speech is the first psychological tool children use to communicate with those around them. Children acquire concepts and cognitive structures from their culture through interacting with members of their family or people around them. Speech, therefore, is a social phenomenon which serves communicative purposes. Of this social phenomenon children adopt an important part turning it into their own "private speech". This is the speech that they repeat to themselves and which is responsible for the concepts and cognitive structures that they acquire. These concepts, then, become the "psychological tools" (Vygotsky, 1962) that help them process information, make meaning and acquire further knowledge.

From Vygotsky's perspective, private speech serves the function of mediating the internalization of thought. For instance, it helps regulate ongoing cognitive activities. As such, it is at its utmost in early childhood (about age three) when a child's behavior is regulated by an external party and it wanes as regulation becomes internalized. In the context of learning, it is believed that private speech is influenced by the difficulty level of the task. In Vygotsky's view, private speech increases according to the difficulty of the task as more self-regulation is required. An interpretation of this is that for easy tasks, regulatory capacities have already been internalized rendering private speech redundant.

In addition to social speech and private speech, there is a third form of language which follows from private speech after it is internalized. Private speech diminishes at around age seven as the learner is empowered to self-regulate giving way to inner speech. This is social speech internalized turning the interpersonal into an intrapersonal. The speech, here, is directed to the self in lieu of to the social other. Gradually as it is internalized, speech undergoes a qualitative change both at the syntactical as well as the semantic level. It becomes more elaborate and varied in terms of vocabulary. Even so, it is still interactional. Internalized social speech results in higher-order thinking. "When the cultural signs become internalized, humans acquire the capacity for higher order thinking (Huiitt, 2000, cited in Blake and Pope, 2008, p. 61). Therefore, the duality of thinking and speaking is also related to language.

In Vygotskyan psychology, thinking and speaking do not constitute a unified process in sociocultural theory, nor are they independent phenomena. The theory also rejects the

communicative view of language that speaking serves the function of transmitting pre-existing thoughts. Contrariwise, sociocultural theory holds that thought precedes speaking. But even if the two phenomena arise separately, they are closely connected. Language intermingles with thought and the two undergo a transformation process as a result. Vygotsky (1978) holds that the two overlap to produce what is called "verbal thought"; yet, verbal thought is not inclusive of all forms of thought. What is meant is thought represented by the tool of language which plays a mediating role through which learning is obtained, a process which goes on into adulthood.

Not only is language a tool in the hands of the learner that mediates the process of learning, but it also leads to the development of more elaborate forms of mental functioning. The learning of a language broadens the horizon of the individual as it offers a perspective not only for self-regulation, but also for higher mental functions. Learners can also appropriate this tool by acting upon it to serve a multiplicity of purposes. This is all done in a context of cooperation and interaction with their environment. All language, therefore, is dialogical in Vygotsky, not monological.

4. Implications of social constructivism for language learning

To reiterate, the theory of social constructivism offers principles which prepare learners for everyday tasks better than traditional ones through equipping them with skills instead of knowledge which can be forgotten. As such, it is learner-centered in opposition to traditional theories which are more teacher-centered. Researching language learning can also benefit from socio-cultural theory. The latter is helpful not only in promoting understanding of the processes involved in language learning but also in suggesting ways whereby language learning can best be taught and researched. In what follows, implications of different tenets of the theory for instruction are presented.

4.1. The zone of proximal development

An important tenet of the theory is the concept of ZPD, the benefit of which is locating each student in his/her developmental stage. An implication of the ZPD for instruction is the range between the actual developmental stage as determined by the learner's linguistic production and the level of potential development as determined through collaborative work. Student grouping is advocated to be based not on same ability but mixed ability so that more able learners help less able ones. This heterogeneity of abilities leads to joint scaffolding and a capitalization on the ability of more capable peers in scaffolding their less capable classmates. This has an implication also for seating arrangements which must be so flexible as to allow for group work and whole classroom interaction. In this mode of learning, spoken language is pivotal as it constitutes the tool through which skills are internalized. It is an essential part, therefore, in proficiency development of the language. A further implication of the ZPD is that teaching students what they already know and what they cannot know even with assistance is a waste of time. Teaching should be located in the ZPD, the zone where students can make progress and build more knowledge and skills.

With an increased focus on the importance of differentiating instruction, the concept of ZPD is helpful also in determining where to meet each student. Learners in a classroom have different paces of learning and different styles that offer a challenge to the teacher as to how to deal with them. Vygotsky coined the term "ZPD" as if to provide an answer to this challenge. The ZPD describes where instruction should be targeted; namely, just beyond the current developmental level of the student. The teacher's role is therefore to locate each student's ZPD by knowing what students know and what they do not know. An important step in this direction could be creation of tasks that enable the teacher to gather information through observing, monitoring, and assessing students' behavior as they accomplish the given tasks. Much interaction is also required in the classroom because it can determine the learner's ZPD (Turuk, 2008). Such interaction identifies what a learner can do unaided and what s/he can do with the aid of the teacher and more capable peers, thereby identifying his/her ZPD.

Following the identification of the learners' ZPD, instruction should be individualized. Tasks need

to be sequenced so as to meet learners in their proficiency development stage, and emerging capabilities should receive more importance than already developed ones. This way, the teacher caters for each student's needs, thereby optimizing learning. Yet, interaction which helped identify the learners' ZPD should go on in the language classroom, partly because a common belief within the framework of social constructivism is the notion that effective learning occurs when students interact with the teacher and with one another in foreign language classrooms. In this context, Ellis (2000) assumes that "learning arises not through interaction but in interaction" (Turuk, 2008, p.246), thereby advocating that social interaction should mediate learning.

4.2. Mediation and scaffolding

Mediation works through scaffolding as suggested by Bruner, Wood and Ross (1976). To cause learning to move towards independent problem solving and the level of potential development, teachers use scaffolding. The term refers to the support that teachers and more proficient learners provide to the learners in a collaborative process and which is gradually withdrawn as the learners become more knowledgeable. Learners form groups to scaffold each other in jointly accomplished tasks. In such a collaborative climate, Shayer (2002) says that "peers create a collective ZPD from which each learner can draw from (sic) as a collective pool" (cited in Turuk, 2008, p. 255). In this process, the teacher makes a shift from someone who "teaches" to someone who facilitates learning.

In the context of second and foreign language learning, the concepts of scaffolding and mediation are very essential.They imply that the teaching of language items has yet to be explicit (Turuk, 2008), particularly that second language learning is not identical to mother tongue learning. In the latter, the child is immersed in his/her culture but in the former, the child is only partially exposed to the foreign culture. Therefore, rather than being left on their own, learners need to be coached through different developmental stages of language learning. Such a coaching, which can obviously be received also from one another in joint scaffolding, takes care of helping the learners upgrade their inter-language (a form of language that is midway between the learners' first language and the language they are learning) to make it approach the target language. Towards this direction and as a means of enhancing L2 students' level of proficiency, Seedhouse (2004) highlights the importance of focusing on both accuracy and fluency in L2 classrooms.

4.3. Private speech

Also important in the context of second and foreign language learning is the concept of private speech. Although intended by Vygotsky to be an aspect of children's speech, several researchers found it applicable to adults learning a new language, too. Lantolf and Thorne (2006), for instance, defined it as a "form of externalized speech deployed by adults to regulate their own mental (and possibly physical) activity" (Lantolf& Thorne, 2006, p. 75). In the same way that ego-centric speech is maximized in children when they face difficult tasks, research showed that adult learners, too, verbalize their thought when the task is cognitively demanding. The function that private speech has been found to serve is that it helps learners gain control over the task (Duncan &Cheyne, 2002). This finding is in parallel with Vygotsky's claim that private speech is "a form of thinking, problem-solving, and self-regulation," (Duncan &Cheyne, 2002, p. 890). An implication, therefore, is that both interpersonal and intrapersonal language forms play a pivotal role in mediating the development of higher mental functions, and thus the language teacher has to take them into consideration.

The socio-cultural theory also helps researchers of foreign language development look into the mediating roles of previously learnt languages. The question is in which language does private speech figure in the multilingual learner? Adopting a Vygotskyan perspective will help answer the question of whether other languages help or hinder the learning of English. It also help identify the functions of these languages in the development of higher mental functions; namely, those that relate to more effective language learning.

4.4. Regulation

The concept of regulation has been applied to the study of language development in an interconnection with the ZPD. Learning occurs in the zone of proximal development when a more capable individual, be it a teacher, an adult, or a peer, helps, or scaffolds, the student in accomplishing learning tasks. The learner is other-regulated during this assistance. Other-regulation refers to the assistance and scaffolding that others provide initially to the student. As the student internalizes the skills and knowledge required for the accomplishment of the tasks, other-regulation develops into self-regulation and self-organization. It is, therefore, the school's role to provide the students with tasks that are likely to awaken and develop self-organizational functions and reflective abstraction.

Strategies that can develop this high level function include brainstorming, planning, evaluating and revising. These are reflected mostly in the writing component of the proficiency development of students. They also coincide with the higher levels of Bloom's taxonomy (1956); namely, analyzing, synthesizing and evaluating at the cognitive level; and valuing, organizing and conceptualizing, and characterizing by value at the affective level. Such skills are the ones demanded by real life tasks, and thus they should replace low level skills like knowledge and comprehension.

4.5. General implications for the curriculum

The theory has also implications for the curriculum. The content of the curriculum in a social constructivist classroom should challenge the learners' competence. In Vygotsky's view, the most effective instruction involves assigning challenging material, along with help provided to learners in mastering it. Challenging material promotes cognitive development, provided that it is not beyond the top boundary of the learner's ZPD. The curriculum should also be designed in such a way as to emphasize interaction as learners learn most effectively through interaction. Consequently, a sense of community is created in the classroom. Further, the curriculum should be an emergent process in the sense that it must rely on and proceed from the learners' interests (Turuk, 2008). Tasks should therefore be authentic in the sense that they must be related to the tasks awaiting the learners in everyday life. In such a social context, rote learning is to be rejected. Vygotskians concur that rote learning has no place in their theory of learning. The curriculum should also incorporate tasks that promote abstract thinking. In this context, Turuk (2008) advocates incorporating literary passages in the curriculum. Literature helps students move away from the structure of language to an appreciation of subtle elements of the language. This way, it could train students in thinking analytically and critically since it acts as a cultural tool that mediates the development of higher mental functions.

The theory also provides teachers with a set of best practices for the development of their students' language skills. For instance, following the tenets of this theory, teaching units are advocated to be presented not in discrete points but in their complexity (Williams & Burden, 1997). A possible interpretation of this is that proficiency development is complex and inclusive of a multiplicity of competencies: strategic, grammatical, discourse and sociolinguistic (Canale and Swain, 1980). Also emphasized is the importance of what the learner brings to the learning situation as an active meaning-maker and problem-solver. This offers the foundation upon which new learning should be built. The teacher needs to start with what students know and coach them towards that which they do not know in an atmosphere of collaboration and partnership.

By and large, the constructivist based approach is learner-centered as it underscores the learner's role in building knowledge and skills while the teacher is merely a guide who facilitates the process, who scaffolds learning, and who is required to remove this scaffolding with time. In short, the teacher is not a sage on the stage but a guide on the side, coaching and suggesting. S/he is also a guide who assumes the responsibility of providing multiple modes of representations/perspectives on content in order to meet each learner's style of learning.

4.6. General implications for assessment

A related implication from the ZPD for assessment is that the most informative assessments are not tests of independent

performance but tests of assisted performance. The latter type of tests incorporates not only the already developed mental functions but also the functions that are only developing. Because abilities in Vygotskyan terms are emergent and dynamic rather than fixed and stable, Vygotsky argued against the use of academic, knowledge-based tests to determine students' intelligence. He was of the opinion that, rather than examining what a student knows to determine intelligence, it is more appropriate to examine his or her ability to solve problems independently and his or her ability to solve problems with an adult's help.

Vygotsky believed education's role was to give children experiences that lie within their zones of proximal development, thereby encouraging and advancing their individual learning. As the zone of proximal development defined functions that have not matured yet, but are in a process of maturing, emphasis in assessment tasks should be put on the process not on the final product. Merely "determining the actual level of development not only does not cover the whole picture of development, but very frequently encompasses only an insignificant part of it" (Vygotsky 1998, p. 200, cited in Shabani et al, 2008, p. 240). Obviously, Vygotsky attaches primordial importance to the learner's responsiveness to the assistance provided to him/her as an indication of cognitive ability which is yet to unfold. Teachers, then, should build on the process to bring the student to the desired end.

To capture the notion of the process in assessment, the literature identified a type of assessment termed "dynamic assessment". The term was first introduced by Luria (1961) in reference to "the systematic integration of the ZPD into educational praxis as the dialectical unity of instruction and assessment (Haywood &Lidz, 2007; Sternberg &Grigorenko, 2002; in Lantolf, 2011, p. 30). Accordingly, assessment is not separable from instruction but integrated into it in an attempt at understanding what each student can do with the help of others. It also refers to intervention within assessment, because it is believed that assisted achievement will internalize in the near future. In Lantolf and Thorne's views (2006), feedback and intervention are a key component of dynamic assessment. In contrast, non-dynamic assessment involves merely presenting testing items to the student without any feedback or help. Dynamic assessment is obviously grounded in Vygotsky's ZPD which suggests that an individual's potential development is more important than "past development" (Lantolf, 2011, p. 30).

Building on the concept of the ZPD, two other types of assessment have been identified in the literature, formative and summative assessment. Sadler (1989), for instance, contrasted the two terms, noting that formative assessment is geared towards improving learningwhereas summative assessment is concerned with summarizing students' terminal status. Obviously, the type of assessment aligned with the ZPD is formative assessment that is supposed to scaffold learning rather than measure it. Formative assessment is designed to deliver information on learning and teaching during the learning process so that decisions are taken to adjust and improve teaching/learning. Corrective feedback and intervention is a key characteristic of this type of assessment. Formative assessment, like dynamic assessment, has a profound effect on learning.

In such a framework, testing is integrated into learning. Errors inform students of progress, and teachers of areas where further work needs to go. The result is evaluation practices that are liable to foster learning goals, high motivation levels and higher-order thinking skills. From a socio-cultural perspective, these evaluation practices are subsumed under formative assessment which works like scaffolding. Likewise, it is a strategy that involves teachers and students in a collaborative process with a view to improving learners' performance. In a constructivist classroom therefore, the teacher's role is to create opportunities for formative assessment such as self-assessment, peer assessment, asking probing questions to check understanding, opportunities for reflection on own work, negotiation of meaning, etc.

5. Conclusion

This paper provided the constructivist framework within which we think language teaching/learning is to be situated. It started with an overview of the emergence of constructivism which

was associated mainly with Piaget and Vygotsky. It elaborated on socio-cultural theory associated with Vygotsky's name. The paper also offered implications for classroom instruction and assessment.

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