RESEARCH ARTICLE

Application of the Mechanisms of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) For Achieving Learner Centeredness in Large-sized classrooms: Prospects and Challenges for Indian Language Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

We know that teaching any foreign language in India with large sized classrooms is not an easy task. It has been observed that in Indian classrooms students assume that classroom teaching is entirely dependent on the teacher. Our students are reluctant to try out some innovative learning methods and they assume that the teacher, the course books and the audio-visual aids are the only source of learning. As language teachers we need to guide our students to reconsider their assumptions and transform our challenges into our resources. By working on the rubrics of ZPD or the Zone of Proximal Development, a concept introduced by Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) we can lead the stronger students to become a teacher figure and guide the students who are slightly weaker by working in pairs or groups. The application of ZPD along with its related concepts like scaffolding, mediation and peer collaboration, serves as a basis for achieving learner centeredness in big classrooms. The ZPD of a learner moves forward from a lower to a higher level when interaction takes place where a novice learner and an expert person work in a collaborative environment to complete a given task (Newman & Holtzman, 1993). The paper attempts to bring out the best from the learners and make the teaching and learning process a collaborative effort so that neither the teacher nor the learners work unassisted and unmediated. After introducing the mechanisms of ZPD, the paper briefly reviews the application of ZPD in language classrooms to promote learner's autonomy. Then it states some prospects and challenges of applying ZPD in large sized classrooms. Finally, the paper attempts to provide some useful strategies and activities which can be applied practically in Indian language classrooms.

Keywords: large sized classrooms, zone of proximal development, scaffolding, mediation, peer collaboration, learner's autonomy.

Introduction to the Mechanisms of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

The phrase 'zone of proximal development' or ZPD in short refers to the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he/she can achieve through proper guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner. The concept of ZPD was developed by Soviet Psychologist Lev Vygotsky who defines ZPD as "*the*

distance 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" (1978, p.86). The term 'proximal' refers to those skills that the learner is 'close' to mastering. So when a learner is in the zone of proximal development or when he/she is in a stage of learning any skill, for instance learning to speak English as a second or foreign language then providing them with some sort of guidance would add to the students' current ability to acquire a particular language skill. In simple words, ZPD is a learning process which incorporates a range of abilities which an individual can perform with appropriate guidance but yet cannot perform independently. The success of ZPD, to a great extent depends upon its related concepts like the 'More knowledgeable Other', 'social interaction' and 'scaffolding'.

- The MKO- The 'More Knowledgeable Other': it refers to the cooperation of someone who possesses a higher level of knowledge than the learners, who can guide or instruct the learner during the learning process. It may be a teacher, peers, parents or it may be any other adult.

- Social Interaction: it simply refers to interacting with the teachers, peers, parents or any other adult during the learning process. At times, peers provide valuable assistance and instruction especially, during the teen age, students are more comfortable interacting with peers for seeking information or advice about learning anything new and look forward to their friends or siblings for getting information about how they perform or undertake any task.

- Scaffolding: a term coined by Dr. Jerome Bruner, suggests that some kind of support or back up to the learners can boost them in completing the task effectively. Scaffolding in language classrooms can be in the form of prompts or linguistic clues, any audio visual aids, worksheets or hand outs, sample activities or demonstration, any learning strategy used by a competent peer in the class who can assist a novice learner 'to solve any task or achieve any goal that would be beyond his unassisted efforts' (Wood et al., 1976, p. 90). Once the learner acquires the concerned skill, the scaffolding is withdrawn so that the learner can take charge of his learning. It is essential to control "those elements of the task that are initially beyond the learner's capability, thus permitting him to concentrate upon and complete only those elements that are within his range of competence" (Wood et al., 1976, p.90).

Aims and Objectives

- To highlight the concept of Zone of Proximal Development

- To explore the prospects and challenges of employing ZPD in Indian classrooms

- To list some of the possible activities for Indian ESL learners

A brief Review of the Application of ZPD in Language Classrooms

In the last few decades, numerous studies have been reported claiming the success of using ZPD as effective teaching methods. An early study carried out by Wood and Middleton (1975) illustrates the effectiveness of ZPD on four-year children who were working on building a 3D model using sets of blocks and pegs. The result of the study showed that those children were more successful whose mothers were adapting different strategies based on how well their child was completing the task than those who worked alone. Variation in strategies by the mothers like minimal encouragement, specific instructions or direct demonstrations based on the progress of the child made all the difference. In another study, Freund (1990) compared the effects of scaffolding over discovery learning on a group of children ranging from 3-5 years. The study showed similar results when children were given sorting task of furniture in doll house. Children who performed under the guidance of their mother were better at sorting the furniture than the children who worked alone. Schinke- Llano provides a growing body of evidence from different countries related to both first and second language acquisition that are based on the framework of ZPD. Clay and Cazden (1990) highlight the success of the Reading Recovery program in New Zealand where interactional support increases the "growth of the child's intra-psychological functioning" (p. 219). Formen and Cazden (1985) also appreciated the concept of 'MKO' and pointed out that in large sized classrooms, it is not only a novice who benefits from interacting with

an expert peer but the teacher also benefits as explaining helps to internalize the information. In one of the experimental study, the concept of ZPD was employed to develop the writing strategies of 30 EFL learners who showed remarkable progress in their writing strategy with the help of their peers and mediation from their instructors (Shooshtri and Mir, 2014).

Although we have enough evidence of the success of ZPD and its related concepts from foreign talk literature but it still remains a virgin field in India educational scenario. Not much work has been done on the application of ZPD in Indian classrooms. If we are to accept the emerging trends as that of ZPD and wish to enable our learners to progress, then it behooves us to reconsider our traditional teaching techniques and look beyond the usual teacher-student interaction to peer-peer interaction.

Prospects of Employing the Rubrics of ZPD in Indian Language Classrooms

After the advent of CLT, language experts from all over the world including India have started incorporating pair work or group work activities, skill based games, and various audio visual aids to develop the communicative competence of the learners in the target language. But, as language instructors, we need to reconceptualise the classroom situation as well as the process of assessment. Initially a novice learner starts moving from *object-regulation* (phase during which the facts of environment control the learner) to achieve *self-regulation* (phase during which the learner takes control over the learning activity) in between they require other-regulation (in which an 'expert' mediates by proving required strategies). It is at this point that the focus should be on assessing the type of assistance learners require while working in their ZPDs (Schinke-Llano, 1993).

It is a well-known fact that Indian classrooms are largely populated and learners come from different educational and cultural background with different cognitive level. So the first step is to identify the current competence of the individual learner which could be achieved by conducting a diagnostic test of the learners. For ESL learners, it can be done through entry language behavioural test or ELBT in short. Once the teacher comes to know the cognitive level of each n every learner, the teacher can employ guided practice through more advanced learners to assist the weak learners. If the strength of weak learner exceeds that of expert learners, the teacher can divide the class into different groups where each group would include at least one advanced learner who can lead other weaker students in their group.

Van Lier (2004) lists some important features of scaffolding applicable to the field of language learning: These are:

1. **Continuity:** Language learning, like any other skill can be acquired through continuous practice. Whenever any new linguistic item is being introduced, some kind of reinforcement of previously taught items by more advanced learner will help the novice learners to activate their prior knowledge. It is advisable to integrate some new language items along with the repetition of previous items taught. For example, listening skills can be integrated with the teaching of speaking skills.

2. **Contextual Support**: communication can't take place in isolation. Students should be provided with some kind of situational clues as scaffolding to use language for interactional as well as transactional purposes.

3. **Inter-subjectivity**: when a more advanced learner collaborates with a novice, the knowledge is transferred from the more knowledgeable to the weaker student and they progress mutually.

4. **Contingency**: these are comprehensible inputs provided to the learners or withdrawn from them depending upon their needs and their ZPDs. It can be any audio-visual aids like set of pictures, verbal clues, prompts, or any other authentic material like newspapers, magazines calendar or brochures etc. that can act as mediators and enhance the effectiveness of the language learning process. The inputs should be comprehensible i.e. neither too easy nor too complex for the learners, if the competence of the learner is 'i' then the input should be 'i+1' (Krashen, 1982).

5. **Handover/Take over**: After providing some kind of scaffolding, learners are expected to reach the final stage when they become skilled learners and take control of their learning i.e., *self- regulation*.

6. **Flow**: After mastering the different skills of language, it is essential that learners participate in the communication process and use the particular skill in a natural way which they have acquired over time.

Challenges in the application of ZPD in Indian Classrooms

- One of the most important challenges in India is overcrowded classrooms. It is extremely difficult for the teacher to assess the current competence of the leaners as well as to keep a track of their transitions and development in learning. It depends on the teacher to act according to the classroom situation and take advantage of it by employing more mature learners to guide others which would reduce the teachers' work load.

- In large sized classrooms, it becomes difficult to observe each learner while they are working individually. So it is suggested that activities should be structured in such a way that students work in pairs or groups where they need each other to complete their common task and evaluation can be done group wise.

- Indian education system is mainly exam-oriented, where the main focus is to assess the achievement of the students towards the end of the session. But ZPD aims to give equal weightage to dynamic assessment to identify the individual's learning potentials. Equal attention should be given to process-oriented instructions rather than simply assessing the final product of the learners' performance.

- Lack of trained teachers is another challenge in the implementation of ZPDs in Indian classroom context. In this regard Tharp and Gallimore rightly points out that "*teachers, like their students, have ZPDs*" (1988, p. 190). Therefore, it is equally essential for the teachers to move through their own ZPD and enable language learners to move through theirs.

Possible Activities for Indian ESL Context

Keeping in mind the current scenario of Indian classrooms some possible activities have been suggested which can be incorporated in ESL classrooms:

- **Story Telling**: teachers can divide the classroom in groups of 5-6 students depending upon the strength of the class. Each group would include one advance learner who can lead other group members. Each group would be provided with a set of pictures that tells a story. Members of each group would interact with each other to weave a short story on the basis of the picture and one of them would have to narrate it in front of the class. This would enable social interaction among the learners where they would be using the target language to complete the activity.

- **Locate me:** this activity is about giving directions where students would be working in pairs. Each pair would be given maps of different locations. Both the students from each pair would be given the same map but in one of them, the names of some places would be missing while the one would be complete. The incomplete map can be given to the novice learner who would ask for directions from the 'more knowledgeable other' learner. The expert would help the novice learner to locate the missing places and write the names of on the map. The teacher can provide some kind of guidance while they would be performing depending upon their progress. The more mature learner could apply various types of scaffoldings like minimal encouragement for e.g. 'yes', 'go ahead', 'you are going right'; specific instructions like 'go straight, then move to your left' , 'it's opposite to the park', 'it's in between', 'take right' to support the partner.

- **Paint the town**: after dividing the students into pairs, teacher would give a picture to one of the member which the other partner would not see. One member (novice) who has the picture would be describing it while the other (expert) would follow the directions and draw the picture on the board. The teacher could act as a mediator and help the pairs to complete the task.

In order to achieve inclusive learning atmosphere in the class teachers need to hunt for specific activities and strategies like peer collaboration or random mediation. They can design their own set of tasks depending upon the dynamics of their classrooms. It's evident that learners would be committing errors while working in their ZPDs. But teachers should be tolerant towards learners' errors and it should be perceived as a sign of learning.

Conclusion

Learning any new language or skill requires a lot of practice and to achieve that, learners must possess the willingness to take part in the learning process, they must have the motivation as well as the ability to manage exchanges, the readiness to take part in the social interaction, and a positive attitude towards the learning. It is obvious that nothing can replace a teacher but a teacher can replace the traditional teaching norms and resort to stimulate the learners' capabilities. Vygotsky asserts that "*the main function of education is to teach a child something new. Therefore, the zone of proximal development, which defines this area of transition accessible to a child, presents the main moment with respect to education and teaching*" (1982, p.250).

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