

THE ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT: A TOOL OF TEACHING

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Abstract

The current paper examines the instructional implication of Vygotsky seminal notion of Zone of Proximal Development, originally developed to account for the learning potential of children. There is a consensus that the notion of the zone of proximal development is a very widely used concept of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. This term paper highlights the use of imitation, collaboration and instruction to assess the zone of proximal development. The present paper tries to provide a more tangible account of ZPD. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) provides an important understanding of learning, but its implications for teachers are often unclear or limited and could be further explored in instructional context. The Researcher finds that research on this area is scanty and further explorations and investigations are needed to reflect the implications of ZPD.

Keywords: *Zone of Proximal Development, Semiotic tool, Actual Development, Potential Level, Subjective Zone, Objective Zone, Imitation, Instruction, Collaboration, Mental Age*

Introduction

The zone of Proximal development has been a latest tool for psychologists and educators to understand the development level. The concept of Zone of Proximal Development was originally developed by Russian psychologist, Lev Semenovich vygotsky, as an

opposition to the use of standardized psychometric testing in Russian schools, as a means to measure student intelligence. “Although the term was already available in the 1962 translation of *Thought and Language*, it was primarily the appearance of chapter 6 in *Mind and Society* (1978) that marked a transition to sustained attention to the concept by an English reading audience”, (Seth Chaiklin 2003). As the traditional tests reflected only the current level of learner’s achievement, rather than learner’s potential for development in future, so Vygotsky suggests that one should test not only the actual development level of a child but also the next level which a child can attend through the use of mediating semiotic and environmental tools and capable adult or peer help. Vygotsky defined the **zone of proximal development** (ZPD) *"the distance between the actual developmental 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)

The term ‘zone of proximal development’ no doubt is one of the most popular term associated with Vygotsky’s scientific production yet there is debate about his clear meaning because of Vygotsky’s premature death. It explains those functions which are in their embryonic position i.e. those have not matured yet but in the process of maturation and will mature in coming future. So by using ZPD we not only know about the maturation process that already completed but also about that processes that are yet to mature and currently are in a state of formation. So what is the zone of Proximal development today will be the actual development tomorrow. Mercer and Fisher (1992) believe that “ there is a danger that the term is used as little more than a fashionable alternative to Piaget terminology or the concept of IQ for describing individual experiences in attainment or potential”(p.342)(Chaiklin,2003). To perceive Vygotsky’s original concept of ZPD, a theoretical explanation of how ZPD serves to evaluate an individual learner is required. Classical psychology, in evaluating mental development considers the solution of only those problems which the child reaches without the support of others.

The zone of proximal development is used for two different purposes in the analysis of psychological development. There are two zones, objective and subjective zone of proximal development. The objective zone is objective in the sense that it does not refer to any individual child but reflects the psychological functions that need to be formed during a given age period in order for the next age period to be formed. The subjective zone is called 'subjective' to indicate that one is speaking about the development of an individual person in relation to the objective, historically formed period of next development.(Seth Chaiklin,2003)

Role of Different Tools of Development for the Assessment Of Zone of Proximal Development

1. Using Imitation to Assess the Zone of Proximal Development

To understand the concept of zone of proximal development more precisely it is important to know the role of imitation in learning. According to Classical Philosophy, mental development of a child can only be assessed by his independent activity and not by his imitation activity. According to Vygotsky, "imitation and learning are thought of as purely mechanical process" (vygotsky, 1978).Vygotsky notion of "imitation" is not copying but *emulation* of an activity as part of the learning process. Effective imitation within the ZPD pushes learning development to a higher level, with successful emulation indicating the level of development of a maturing function (Chaiklin, 2003).Vygotsky considered imitation to refer to situations in which a child is able to engage in interaction with more competent others for a task that the child otherwise not be able to perform alone because of the presence of maturing psychological functions (Chaiklin, 2003). According to vygotsky, it is a kind of imitation that is not mindless copying of actions. Rather, Vygotsky wants to break from a copying view, to give a new meaning to imitation- reflecting a new theoretical position-in which imitation

presupposes some understanding of the structural relations in a problem that is being solved (Vygotsky 1987, p. 210).

Now researchers have shown that a child can imitate only that which is within the boundary of his development level. For example, if a child is facing difficulty in understanding the question of a book belongs to the class in which he was studying and the teacher solves the problem, the child immediately imitates it but if the question belongs to a higher level, no matter how many times the teacher solves but the child would not be able to imitate.

The kind of teacher assistance that Vygotsky (1986) advocated even extends to imitation, but not the kind of simple imitation that one might use in training an animal. "Intelligent, conscious imitation comes instantly in the form of insight, not requiring repetition" (p. 188). It is a kind of imitation that, according to Vygotsky, is strictly human and stands opposed to "persistent training", which results in meaningless mechanical action of "habits" (p. 188). "To imitate, it is necessary to possess the means of stepping from something one knows to something new" (p. 187). In other words, a student must have already developed certain function to meaningfully interpret and imitate a new function. (Norton & Ambrosio 2008).

We can now see how the concept of imitation gives a theoretical justification for how to judge a learner's zone of proximal development. Vygotsky wants to break from a copying view, to give a new meaning to imitation – reflecting a new theoretical position – in which imitation presupposes some understanding of the structural relations in a problem that is being solved (Vygotsky 1987, p. 210). Vygotsky holds that a learner is not able to imitate "The area of immature, but maturing processes makes up the child's zone of proximal development" (Vygotsky, 1998b, p. 202).

2. Use of Instruction in Assessing Zone of Proximal development

Instruction and development seem to be related in the same way that the zone of proximal development and the level of actual development are related. The only instruction which

is useful in childhood is that which moves ahead of development, that which leads it. However, it is only possible to teach a child when he is able to learn. Instruction is possible only where there is a potential for imitation. This means that instruction must be oriented to the lower threshold of the developmental cycle which has already occurred. Still, development depend not so much on matured as maturing functions, since it always begins with what has not yet matured in the child. The potentials for instruction are determined by the zone of proximal development. Returning to our example, we can say that the potentials for instruction will be different with these two children even though their mental ages are identical. Their potentials for instruction will be different because the zones of their proximal development are so different. As the research cited above has shown, any subject of school instruction always builds on a foundation that has not yet fully matured. *The teacher must orient his work not on yesterday's development in the child but on tomorrow's* (Vygotsky, 1978). Only then will he be able to use instruction to bring out those processes of development that now lie in the zone of proximal development.

Instruction is only useful when it moves ahead of development. When it does, it impels or wakens a whole series of functions that are in a stage of maturation lying in the zone of proximal development. This is the major role of instruction in development. This theory resolves this basic issue of sequence with its assumption that instruction rides on the tail of development, that development must complete certain cycles or stages or bear certain fruits before instruction is possible. (Vygotsky, 1978)

3. Use of Collaboration in Assessing the Zone of Proximal Development

The term collaboration is used very often by Vygotsky in assessing the zone of proximal development. The term should not be understood as a joint, coordinated effort to move forward, in which the more expert partner is always providing support at the moments when maturing functions are inadequate. It seems that this term is being used to refer to

any situation in which a child is being offered some interaction with another person that is related to a problem to be solved (Chaiklin, 2003). The learner's zone of proximal development is appraised through interaction of collaboration with a learner because it provides an opportunity for imitation, which is the way for identifying maturing psychological functions that are still inadequate for independent performance. In collaboration the child can each and every time do more than he can autonomously. The child's potential for moving from what he can do to what he can do only in collaboration is the most sensitive index of the dynamics of development and the degree of success that will come to characterize the child's mental activity(Vygotsky).

ZPD as a tool in classroom to determine the potential level of the child

Vygotsky gives an example to show that how we can found the zone of proximal development. Let us suppose that there are two children that are in the same age, say both are 8 years old and their mental development is also same. This means both of them independently can solve the problems that belong to their age group and mental development. We try to discover how each of these children will figure out tasks that were meant for elder children. We help each child through illustration, leading questions, and by introducing the introductory components of the task's solution. With this aid or collaboration from the adult, one of these children answer problems characteristic of a twelve year old, while the other untangles problems mere at a level of a nine year old. Now the difference between the child's mental ages, the distinction betwixt the child's actual level of development and the level of performance that he accomplish in collaboration with the adult, explains the zone of proximal development. In this example, the zone can be articulate by the number "4" for one child and by the number "1," for the other. The distinction between these two children reflected in our measurement of the zone of proximal development is more important than their similarity as reflected in their actual development. Research indicates that *the zone of proximal development has more significance for the dynamics of intellectual development and for the success of*

instruction than does the actual level of development. (Vygotsky, Thinking and speech, chapter 6). It develops that one child solves problems cooperatively that standards relate to, let us say, age twelve. The zone of proximal development moves his mental age forward by four years. The other child shifts advance with cooperation only to the standard age level of a nine-year-old so his zone of proximal development is only one year.

Conclusion

Tools are the strategies used by a teacher in a class so the children can understand the concept more clearly. Vygotsky provide us a tool-the zone of Proximal development that allows us to understand and enable learning. In my view Zone of Proximal Development is an excellent tool which can provide the approximate assistance and can give the children providing the appropriate assistance will give the student enough of a "boost" to achieve the task. Teachers, parents, and mentors attached to a learner can recognize whether they are recognizing the learner's individual learning style. Thus, the zone of proximal development enables educators and parents to define the learner's immediate needs and the shifting developmental status, which allows for what has already been achieved developmentally, and for what the learner will be able to master in the future.

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