Title:

Perception, Practice and Progress

–   Significance of scaffolding and zone of proximal development for second or
foreign language teachers

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Perception, Practice and Progress

The Significance of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development for second or
foreign language teachers

Abstract

Vygotskian approaches to second or foreign language (L2) learning and teaching have been
gaining momentum in the field of L2 studies. This paper examines the significance of these
approaches, especially scaffolding and the zone of proximal development (ZPD), in the
perception, practice and progress of L2 learning and teaching. It also focuses on the

applications of scaffolding and ZPD on L2 development in two perspectives: (i) feedback strategies in task-based language learning and (ii) assessments *of* ZPD and *in* ZPD in language teaching.

[Keywords]

scaffolding, zone of proximal development (ZPD), feedback, assessment

Introduction

Language teachers' different views of language and language learning will profoundly influence the practice of their language teaching in school settings, and ultimately make differences to their learners' learning progress. Many schools of psychology hold different views on language development, both first language (L1) and second/foreign language (hereafter L2). Vygotskian approaches to L2 learning have been gaining momentum in the field of L2 learning studies (Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994; Donato & McCormick, 1994; Foley, 1991; John-Steiner, 1988; Lantolf, 2000; Lantolf & Appel, 1994; Schinke-Llano, 1993; Wells, 1999). This paper will examine the significance of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development (ZPD), in influencing and shaping/reshaping the perception, and practice of teaching and assessment, as well as the learning and professional progress of both learners and teachers respectively in the interactive, reciprocal, and dynamic processes of language learning and teaching. It will focus on the applications of scaffolding and the ZPD in L2 development in two perspectives: (i) feedback strategies in task-based language learning and (ii) assessments *of* ZPD and *in* ZPD in language teaching.

Perceptions

1. Importance of perception

Teachers' perceptions of what is meant by L2 learning, and what affects learning will influence everything they do both within and beyond classroom situations. In order to make informed decisions in their day-to-day teaching, teachers must be consciously aware of what their beliefs about learning and teaching are. They must heighten their "perspective-consciousness" to make them more aware of the other individuals' or groups' perspectives, which might be justifiably different from their own. They must make their own personal sense of their implicit and explicit ideas/theories and practices. Finally, they must increase their tolerance and understanding of diverse opinions and viewpoints in order to make the language classroom a more welcoming environment encompassing dignity and respect for both students and teachers alike (Williams & Burden, 1997).

In a sociocultural view of language learning, learners are seen as "active constructors" of their own learning environment (Mitchell & Myles, 1998, p.162). In this sense, learners are trustworthy, and responsible for their own learning environment. Actually, teachers are to some extent also "learners." They are also active constructors of their own teaching environment. Teachers' perceptions of language learning will, with no doubt, influence their constructions of the teaching environment, even though learners are the focus of the teaching activities. Learner-centered does not mean that learners are "loners". They are in the social community of learners and teachers who help and foster each other in the co-constructions of the learning and teaching environment. The inter-relationships among teachers' perception, practice, and progress are illustrated in Figure 1. Teachers'

perceptions "construct" their practices which in turn lead to whatever progress both the learners and the teachers achieve. Practice and progress in language learning and teaching will re-construct teachers' perceptions of L2 development. The progress to be achieved is, to certain extent, determined by teachers' perceptions and practices, which however does not mean learners do not have right to construct their own learning environment. In fact, this is one of the reasons why there are very often silent or sometimes overt "style wars" between teachers and some learners while constructing their own teaching and learning environments respectively. The "style wars" reflect the urgent needs of teachers' "appropriate" perceptions of L2 development.
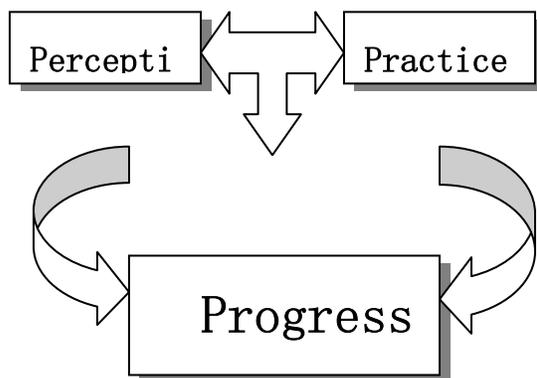

Figure 1. Inter-relationships among perception, practice and progress

Teachers need to reflect upon their own ideas and practices to be better informed. Dewey (1933) argued that teachers should be reflective-practitioners through questioning the beliefs and methods in their own experimental approach to schooling – psychology and sociology being tools or resources for the construction of new educational hypotheses to be

tested against experience. Reflection is both an attitude and a practice (Dewey, 1933). Reflection is also embodied in the work of Bailey and Nunan (1996), Brown (1994a, 1994b), Reid (1995), Richards and Lockhart (1994), Scarcella and Oxford (1992), and Spolsky (1988).

2. Perception of the Zone of Proximal Development

L2 teachers also need to reflect upon what they are doing and what they will do. There are many and various approaches to L2 learning and teaching from which teachers may choose. For example, there are psycholinguistically-oriented approaches, sociolinguistically-oriented approaches, and pedagogically-oriented approaches. Certainly, increasing understanding of these approaches is necessary and invaluable. As Brown (1994a) suggests, different aspects of language are better treated by different psychological approaches. Which is most appropriate will differ from one situation to another, from one teacher to another, and from one learner to another; each individual constructs his or her own reality and therefore learns different things in very different ways, even when provided with what seems to be very similar learning experiences (Williams & Burden, 1997). Mitchell and Myles (1998, p.162) assert that "learners are seen as active constructors of their own learning environment, which they shape through their choice of goals and operations." They highlight the uniqueness of sociocultural theory in contrast to the predominant above mentioned conceptualizations of L2 learning, because those approaches do not address directly the interactive, reciprocal, and dynamic features of language teaching and learning in and out of the classroom (Wu, 1998). Vygotsky's

sociocultural views on language learning provide a *psycholinguistic* explanation of the *sociocultural* circumstances and processes through which *pedagogy* can foster learning that leads to language development (Nassaji & Cumming, 2000). The basic theme of the Vygotskian sociocultural perspective is that knowledge is social in nature and is constructed through a process of collaboration, interaction, and communication among learners in social settings (Vygotsky, 1986, 1978). The quintessence of Vygotskian and neo-Vygotskian approaches to L2 learning is complementary and asymmetrical scaffolding and the evolving ZPD.

Vygotsky (1978, p. 86) defined the ZPD as "the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." He employed a gardening image to describe the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86).

> The ZPD defines those functions that have not yet matured, but are in the process of maturation; functions that will mature tomorrow, but are currently in embryonic state. These functions could be termed the *buds* or *flowers* of development rather than the *fruits* of development. (emphasis in the original)

In the writings and research of Vygotsky and the neo-Vygotskians such as Cole (1996), Lantolf and Appel (1994), and Wertsch (1998, 1991, 1985), one finds a theoretical perspective in which language is understood as a mediating tool in all forms of higher-order mental processing, such as attending, planning, and reasoning. Furthermore,

language derives its mediating cognitive functions from social activities, that is to say, not in isolated individual activities. While human beings are born with certain abilities, only social, or collective and collaborative, behaviors can activate innate abilities through individuals' being actively involved from birth in constructing their personal meanings from experiences, and "subsequently [becoming] internalized as the individual's own 'possessions' " (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 1997, p.161). Kelly's (1955) personal-construct-psychology (PCP) posits a similar perspective, i.e., language is not learned by the mere memorization of discrete items of grammar, discourse, function, or other linguistic aspects. Rather, learners are involved in an active process of making sense, of creating their own understanding of the world of language that surrounds them (Robert, 1999).

The ZPD is not fixed. Rather it is an emergent, "open-ended," "reciprocal" trait of a learner (Wells, 1999). The ZPD is the place where learning and development come together. It is a dialectic unity of "learning-leading-development" – "a unity in which learning lays down the pathway for development to move along and which in turn prepares ground work for further learning, and so on" (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998, p. 422). Wertsch (1985) also argues that, for Vygotsky, the ZPD is "jointly determined" by the child's (learner's) level of development and by the adequacy of the proposed collaboration or instructions; "it is a property neither of the child nor of the interpsychological functioning alone" (pp.70-71). The ZPD is created by social interaction, but the child's (learner's) current level of development determines the type of interaction in which he or she can become involved and from which he or she can profit.

3. Perception of Scaffolding

How can individuals profit from social interactions? In the Vygotskian perspective, it is "under guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" that learners move from one lower level to a higher level. This guidance or collaboration is "scaffolding" in Vygotskian social interactionist constructivism.

The concept of scaffolding comes from the building construction trade. A scaffold is a temporarily erected structure used to support a building that is under construction. The scaffolding is gradually removed bit by bit as the building itself emerges and grows stronger and more stable (Collins COBUILD English Dictionary). Donato (1994, p. 40) compares it to a "situation where a knowledgeable participant can create supportive conditions in which the novice can participate, and extend his or her current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence." Donato's definition of scaffolding is unfortunately too much confined to "skills and knowledge." Language development, in a sociocultural view, is the whole development of the human being; it covers much more than skills and knowledge. Nassaji and Swain (2000, p. 36) defines scaffolding, in a broader sense, as "the collaboration of both the learner and the expert operating within the learner's ZPD". Bruner's (1983, p. 60) remarks on first language development are also relevant to L2 development:

[The teacher] provides a scaffold to assure that the [learners'] ineptitudes can be

rescued or rectified by appropriate intervention, and then removes the scaffold

part by part as the reciprocal structure can stand on its own.

In L2 learning, an interesting type of scaffolding or tool is the comprehensible input provided by language teachers. Comprehensible input is at least to some degree comprehensible to the specific learner but at the same time a bit above the learner's current level of development or proficiency. This would seem to relate to Krashen's notion of $i+1$, but not exactly (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998). In this way, the learner is challenged to push beyond the current level of development but is not totally overwhelmed by the input. The input should be authentic, interactive, and purposeful, as required in communicative approaches to language teaching and learning (Savignon, 1991). The difficulty gradient gradually changes as the learner evolutionarily proceeds to a higher level of development. Another kind of scaffolding involves shifting teachers' instructional style when students need something they are not currently receiving. Teaching is an "assisted performance," as followers of Vygotsky call for (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 12). Oxford (1990) also states that an important aspect of scaffolding is the provision of learning strategies or tools which students can use on their own, that is to say, aiding the learners to "learn how to learn" (Bruner 1960, p. 4). One of the oldest Chinese sayings notes that "to give one a fish is not as good as to teach one to net a fish" (writer's translation).

Confucianism also emphasizes "more capable peers," as Confucius put it in his famous saying that "one of you three must be my teacher" (writer's translation). What he

means is that anyone could be his teacher in certain respects or fields, even though he was considered as the most knowledgeable man at that time. Anyone can scaffold anyone else and himself or herself in collective and collaborative activities, such as group work in language learning. However, it should be noted that sometimes peer scaffolding in group work may have a negative, rather than positive learning effect on the learners (see Mattos, 2000). In a Confucian sense, learners do not have to be inferior to teachers. Teachers are not omnipotent knowers; they are also learners. Learners are not loners, everyone is interwoven into a learning community, where every member (and usually the teachers) can function as scaffolders who only provide help or scaffolding with the right amount at the appropriate times and remove it when no longer essential. Every learner (including the teacher) can be seen as active and adept co-constructors of their own learning (or teaching) environment with their own specific goals and purposes.

Practices

Understanding of the social factors in language learning and teaching is essential for all language teachers. Language education is not a unidirectional information flow from the more knowledgeable to the less knowledgeable in a vacuum. It is a dynamic, interactive, and reciprocal ongoing progression in and beyond the classroom.

The implications of Vygotskian perspectives to L2 learning began to emerge about two decades ago, such as in John-Steiner (1988), Foley (1991), Schinke-Llano (1993), Aljaafreh and Lantolf (1994), Donato and McCormick (1994), Lantolf and Appel (1994),

Wells (1999), and Lantolf (2000). This section will examine the applications of the scaffolding and the ZPD in L2 development in two perspectives: feedback strategies in task-based language learning and assessments in language teaching.

1. Vygotskian feedback strategies in language learning tasks

Willis (1996, pp. 35-36) identifies eight purposes of task-based language instruction (Figure 2). These eight objectives do not state clearly how they are to be achieved. However, a sociocultural view of L2 development argues that achieving these objectives must involve teachers, learners and many other social factors in the learning community. This section briefly examines what teachers, in the light of scaffolding and the zone of proximal development, can do to achieve the eight purposes identified by Willis. One facet of teachers' practice is about how teachers provide feedback, if any, about learners' errors/mistakes in teaching and assessment.

1. to give learners confidence in trying out whatever language they know

2. to give learners experience of spontaneous interaction

3. to give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meaning

4. to give learners chances for negotiating turns to speak

5. to engage learners in using language purposefully and cooperatively

6. to make learners participate in a complete interaction, not just one-off sentences

7. to give learners chances to try out communication strategies, and,

8. to development learners' confidence that they can achieve communicative goals

Figure 2. Eight purposes of task-based instruction

There is general agreement among researchers that corrective feedback plays a role in L2 learning (Bley-Vroman, 1986; Carroll & Swain, 1993; Chaudron, 1988; Mackey, Gass & McDonough, 2000; Rutherford, 1987; White, 1991, 1989). What researchers disagree upon is "the extent and type of the corrective feedback" (Nassaji & Swain, 2000, p. 34). For example, Williams and Burden (1997, p. 136) assert that

> If feedback actually provides information to learners that enables them to identify specific aspects of their performance that are acceptable and capable of improvement by some specified means, it should prove both motivating and helpful to them to move into the zone of the next development. If on the other hand, the feedback fails to provide this kind of information, it could have entirely the opposite effect.

Brown and her co-workers (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara, & Campione, 1983; Brown & Campione, 1986; Palincsar & Brown, 1984) have drawn upon the Vygotskian zone of proximal development in their research on teaching and assessment of learners with

learning difficulties by means of "reciprocal" teaching. The teacher and the learners begin by working together, with the teacher initially doing most of the work, but gradually passing on more and more responsibilities to the learners as they become a bit more confident and competent, and finally the learners are able to work independently.

Aljaafreh and Lantolf's (1994) regulatory scale (Figure 3) provides L2 teachers with practical guides, from the implicit to the explicit, on how to gradually scaffold their learners. The scale is also applicable to peer scaffolding, so the "tutor" may be replaced by the peer. Aljaafreh and Lantolf state that feedback is social and dialogic in nature, noting that "… in this framework, error correction is considered as a social activity involving joint participation and meaningful transactions between the learner and the teacher" (Nassaji & Swain, 2000, p. 35).

This 13-point scale of scaffolding or feedback strategies begins by giving "learners confidence in trying out whatever language they know" as in Scale 0. The integration of Willis's eight purposes and Aljaafreh and Lantolf's 13-point scale provides a much more insightful and practical guide for L2 teaching. In Scale 0 – 9, the tutor (the peer) never gives up developing the learners confidence by gradual scaffolding through narrowing down "the location of the error," indicating "the nature of the error," identifying "the error," and providing more "clues to help the learner arrive at the correct form" until the learner has totally failed. And then the tutor (the peer) provides "the correct form," "some explanation for use of the correct form," and "examples of the correct pattern" to "give learners the chance to benefit from noticing how others express similar meaning" (No.3 of Figure 2). Certainly, the integration of these two Figures and its implications and

applications are not so simple as explained above. Further explorations are needed. However, such integration provides us with an enormous repertoire of types of feedback strategies in a social context.

0. Tutor asks the learner to read, find the error and correct them independently, prior to the tutorial

1. Construction of a 'collaborative frame'* prompted by the tutor as a potential dialogic partner.

2. Prompted or focused reading of the sentence that contains the error by the learner or the tutor.

3. Tutor indicates that something may be wrong in a segment (e.g. sentence, clause, line): 'Is there anything wrong in this sentence?'.

4. Tutor rejects unsuccessful attempts at recognizing the error.

5. Tutor narrows down the location of the error (e.g. tutor repeats or points to the specific segment which contains the error).

6. Tutor indicates the nature of the error, but tries not to identify the error (e.g. 'There is something wrong with the tense marking here.').

7. Tutor identifies the error ('You can't use an auxiliary here.').

8. Tutor rejects learner's unsuccessful attempts at correcting the error.

9. Tutor provides clues to help the learner arrive at the correct form (e.g. 'It is not really past but some thing that is still going on').

10. Tutor provides the correct form.

11. Tutor provides some explanation for use of the correct form.

12. Tutor provides examples of the correct pattern when other forms of help fail to produce an appropriate responsive action.

 * A 'collaborative frame' refers to the collaborative setting constructed between the tutor and the learner as the tutor is introduced into the situation as a potential collaborative partner.

Figure 3. Regulatory scale – implicit (strategic) to explicit (from Aljaafreh & Lantolf, 1994, p. 471)

2. Vygotskian assessments of language learning

Gipps (1994) says the field of evaluation is undergoing changes, and to a large extent, moving from psychometric testing and into educational assessment, as a result of the developments in how learning and teaching are perceived in social contexts. Assessment functions as a link between learning and teaching. As Wertsch (1985, p. 67) also indicates, Vygotsky "introduced the notion of the zone of proximal development in an effort to deal with two practical problems in educational psychology: the assessment of children's intellectual abilities and the evaluation of instructional practices." The ZPD links

instructions and assessments by means of regulating learning (scaffolding) and thereby fostering development in school settings. As we know, two learners of the same IQ score are supposed to have achieved the same developmental level and readiness for instruction, but one of them might well be able to perform one task under someone else's guidance (scaffolding) than the other could with the same assistance. This difference between the actual IQ and the potential IQ was referred to by Vygotsky as the zone of proximal development.

> Some children might have a high IQ but a small ZPD and others might have a
> low IQ but a large ZPD. On the other hand, some children might have a high IQ
> and a large ZPD and, likewise, others might have a low IQ and a small ZPD.
> (Dunn & Lantolf, 1998, p. 418)

This situation shows the urgent need of the assessments *of* the ZPD and the assessment *in* the ZPD of the learners to create a better setting for language learning and teaching.

The ZPD is "jointly determined" by the learner and the scaffolder, but in our common practices of language assessments, tasks and "right" answers are usually set by the scaffolders. It may be unfair to the learners, for example, that in reading comprehension tests, the learners and the scaffolders are not equal in their rights of constructing the understanding of the passages. Learners may well have different understandings of the passages than the examiners. In performing the same proposed tasks, learners might have different interpretations of the proposed objective, according to their own sociocultural

contexts, and might decide to perform the task in a different way. So, it may be reasonable for the examiners to assess their learners on the basis of the activities learners set for themselves, not on the basis of previously examiner-set objectives, which might be external to the learners.

Assessments *of* learners' ZPD can provide scaffolders (examiners) more information of learners' learning processes, skills, knowledge, achievements, cognitive abilities, predictions of their future learning, and many other factors. This dynamic assessment integrates teaching in the assessment sequence (Allal & Ducrey, 2000). A major portion of the research on the dynamic assessment was directly stimulated from the outset by Vygotsky's conception of the ZPD (Day, 1983; Poehner & Lantolf, 2003). In contrast to traditional language tests, the object of this dynamic assessment in the light of the ZPD is the learners' modifiability, progression on a task under an examiner's guidance (Feuerstein, 1979), gains due to instruction intervening between a pretest and a posttest (Budoff, 1987), and the number of graduated hints or prompts required to reach a performance criterion.

Assessment *in* the learners' ZPD integrates assessment into teaching (Allal & Ducrey, 2000). Assessment should be ultimately regarded as a component of instruction, as "an integral part of intervention and not as an end in itself" (Feuerstein, Miller, Rand & Jensen, 1981, p.202). The conception of "test-acquisition" emphasizes that each task has both a testing and a training function. On the other hand, assessment *in* the ZPD also gives learners confidence as the difficulty level of the tasks is not above the learners' ZPD. This

is also one of the cherished advantages claimed by self-adaptive testing, and computer-adaptive testing as well.

Progress

Hopefully, appropriate perceptions and practices of the scaffolders can facilitate learning progress by means of teaching and assessing in the light of Vygotskian scaffolding and the zone of proximal development. However, as the sociocultural view of language learning shows, it is not easy to predict learning success. L2 teachers have to take many and various social factors into consideration to co-construct with learners a better and welcoming learning and teaching environment. Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into the study of what progress can be achieved, the aim has been to provide L2 teachers with some insights into language teaching and assessment that may assist them in their own development as teachers/learners.

Conclusion

This paper examined the inter-relationship among perception, practice, and progress of language learning and teaching in the light of Vygotskian scaffolding and the zone of proximal development. It further investigated scaffolding and the zone of proximal development, and their implications and applications in L2 development, particularly in the L2 teaching and assessment in two perspectives: feedback strategies in task-based instruction and assessment *of-* and *in-* the zone of proximal development.

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