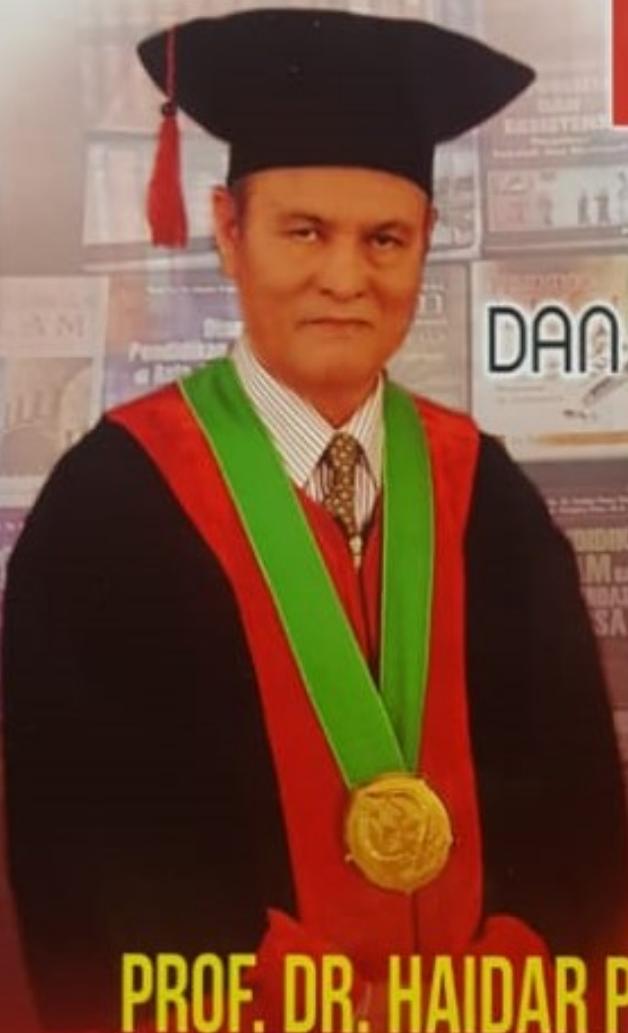


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DAN KONTEMPORER

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ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE STUDY OF FEEDBACK IN SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING

Rahmah Fithriani, M. Hum., Ph.D

A. Introduction

A major justification for including feedback as part of L2 writing instruction is the Vygotskian theoretical framework of socio-cultural theory (SCT). SCT is a theory about how humans think through the creation and use of mediating tools. According to Vygotsky (1978), human development is inherently a socially situated activity, thus the source of learning and development is found in social interaction rather than solely in the mind of an individual. Vygotsky furthermore claims that the secret of effective learning lies in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different levels of skills and knowledge.

Social interaction helps a learner to develop her mental functions (hereafter referred as psychical functions) within the ZPD as she co-constructs knowledge with a more able peer or adult through guided learning. During this collaboration, the peer provides the learner with the appropriate level of assistance which helps stretch her beyond her current level towards potential level of development. Such assistance is now commonly referred to in the literature as scaffolding. This metaphor, however, does not fully capture the interactive teaching/learning process captured in the Russian term *obuchenie* that Vygotsky (1978) originally used. It neither captures the concept of meaningful, intellectual imitation that Vygotsky considered essential in understanding the dynamic process of the ZPD (Vygotsky, 1987). He drew a sharp distinction between mechanical imitation, such as that involved in training animals, and intellectual imitation. The whole process

of mental, or intellectual imitation, within the ZPD as explained by Vygotsky is also reflected in feedback process in L2 writing.

This article describes the concept of ZPD and why it can be used as the theoretical framework in studies of feedback in L2 writing. It will be divided into three main sections; the first section describes the misinterpretation of ZPD, the second explores the original context of ZPD, and the last section elaborates some salient aspects of feedback in L2 writing which are based on the concept of ZPD.

B. Misinterpretation of Vygotskyan Concept of ZPD

The ZPD is perhaps the most popular legacy to education by the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky. It has been widely used across disciplines, particularly in educational studies; from critical pedagogy to child's language acquisition and second/foreign language learning. However, as Mahn (2015) argues, the concept of ZPD has also been referred to as "the most over used, least understood concept in educational studies" (p. 252). Most of the time, the misinterpretation of ZPD is the result of an incomplete understanding of the concept which is caused by partly quoting its definition without reading thoroughly the whole context when Vygotsky used the concept of ZPD in his writings.

The most common citation of ZPD is "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). In many articles citing this definition, the main point which is emphasized from this definition is the importance of how a teacher or a more advanced peer (also known as more knowledgeable other or MKO) might provide an explanation to enable a learner to attain a higher level of achievement with support. This furthermore leads to the misinterpretation of ZPD as an educational model by saying that ZPD has already been developed when a learner is finally able to do a task which she is previously unable to do through the scaffolding provided by the MKO.

The main issue with this understanding is not only it misinterprets the term 'development' to refer to what actually is 'learning' but also fails to correctly catch the concept of ZPD as proposed by Vygotsky. Before providing the definition of ZPD as cited previously, Vygotsky (1978) states:

The zone of proximal development defines those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state. These functions could be termed the "buds" or "flowers" of development rather than the "fruits" of development. The actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively. (p. 87)

The explanation above shows how the common understanding of the ZPD as an educational model is wrong, because Vygotsky defines it as an area of maturing psychological processes and a construct for understanding social influence in ontogenesis. In other words, it can be said that ZPD is not concerned with the development of skill (learning) of any particular task (instruction) as how it is commonly interpreted in many articles using ZPD as their theoretical foundation, but must be related to development as a process that is characterized by a unity of material and mental aspects, a unity of the social and the personal during the child's ascent up the stages of development (Chaiklin, 2003).

Vygotsky also posits that learning and development takes place in society and in culturally shaped contexts.

Any function in children's cultural development occurs twice, or on two planes. First, it appears on the social plane and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category and then within the individual child as an intrapsychological category. (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57)

Thus, in order to develop the ZPD, the scaffolding provided by the MKO needs first appearance on a learner's social plane (social context) which is followed by the appearance of cognitive maturation in the psychological plane (individual context).

C. The Original Context of ZPD

In order to refute the common misinterpretations of the ZPD, it is important to explore the concrete context of the definition of ZPD. To gain a better understanding of ZPD, it is useful if we look back to the original contexts when Vygotsky used the term in his extensive writings. Mahn (2015) explains that Vygotsky uses ZPD as an analytical tool in his three

investigations; (1) his critique of intelligence and diagnostic tests because they fail to measure children's real mental function, (2) his analysis of the internal logic of the process of children's development, and (3) his analysis of the relationship between everyday concepts and academic concepts.

Other scholars who also have attempted to investigate the original context when ZPD was first used are Van de Veer & Valsiner (199) and Veresov (2004). They explained that the concept of ZPD was first mentioned by Vygotsky in his lecture at Leningrad Institutes in 1933, titled "Mental development of children in a process of instruction", only 15 months before his death. The main focus of this lecture was the problem of the relationship between learning (instruction) and the child's development. Criticizing the traditional approach to the problem that the level of instruction should correspond to the level of development the child has, Vygotsky rejects the use of intelligence tests as central guides for teaching because these types of test only measure children's independent problem solving without any attempt to facilitate students to reach their potential for future learning (Mahn, 2015). Vygotsky thus proposes the term 'ZPD' to show that the child development is dialectical not a linear process. At each age there are functions, which are already matured (developed) and there are functions that are in a process of maturation of development. This means that there are three levels of development of mental functions in child (see figure 1). The first level is called "the actual level of development" which can be detected by the learning tasks the child can solve individually and independently. The second one is "the potential level", detectable by the tasks the child can solve in cooperation with the teacher or with the more competent peers. The distance lies between these two levels is known as ZPD (Veresov, 2004). Finally, the last one is 'the beyond level of development' which refers to what the child cannot do at a certain age with or without the help from others.

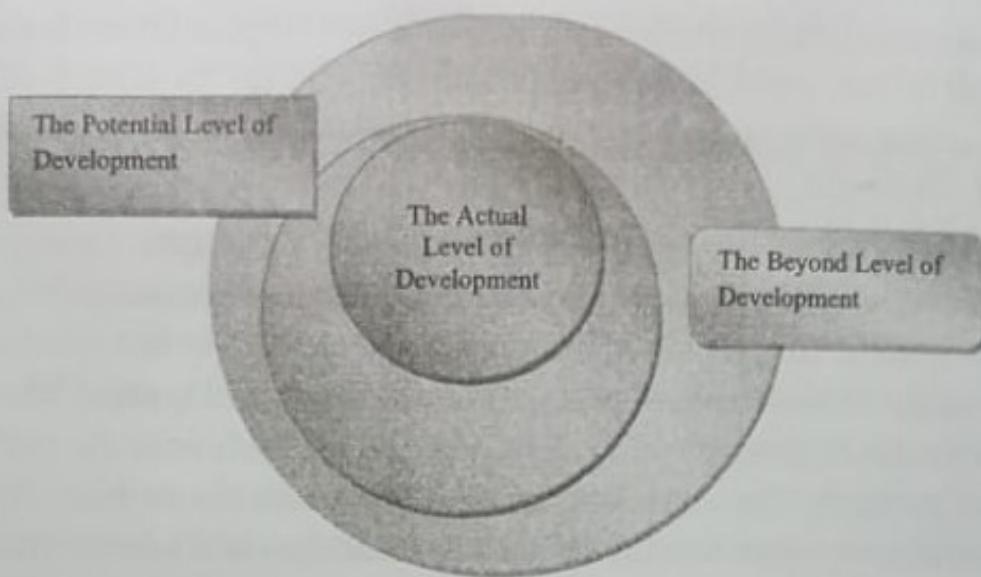


Figure 1. A model of child's development of psychical functions

D. The Concept of ZPD in L2 Writing Feedback

Vygotsky's concept of ZPD has been used extensively as the theoretical basis for various studies investigating the role of feedback in L2 classrooms (e.g. Altstaedter & Doolittle, 2014; Chuang, 2009; Galvis, 2010; Lundstrom & Baker, 2009; Wakabayashi, 2013; Yu & Lee, 2014). As explained previously, Vygotsky viewed the development of human psychical functions as their transition from elementary/lower mental functions into higher psychical forms. The differences between the two processes lie in four major criteria: (1) the shift of control from environment to the individual, that is, the emergence of voluntary regulation; (2) the emergence of conscious realization of mental processes; (3) the social origins and social nature of higher mental functions; and (4) the use of signs to mediate higher functions. (Wertsch, 1985: p. 25). While Wertsch uses higher mental functions, Vygotsky uses the formulation of higher psychical functions (Mahn: 2015).

Vygotsky also explains that the transformation of the human mind during the child development process, from elementary mental functions to higher psychical processes results from the unification of thinking processes and those involved in the reception and production of language (Mahn: 2012). A key aspect in development process of psychical functions is interaction emphasizing the social aspects of assistance and guidance through scaffolding activities. Furthermore, to operate at the level of higher intellectual processes, the individual needs to go through a transformational process from social mediation to internalization, which "entails a long

series of developmental processes resulting in the radical alteration of the nature of psychological activity on the basis of sign mediation" (Vygotsky, 1978: p. 57).

Aspects of the process of the transition from elementary mental forms to higher psychical processes as explained by Vygotsky are also present in feedback activities in L2 writing classrooms involving the following key aspects; social interaction, scaffolding and intellectual limitation, mediation, and internalization.

E. Social Interaction

Vygotsky explains that the development of higher psychical processes stems from social interactions from guided learning within the zone of proximal development as children and their partners co-construct knowledge. This means learning and teaching in the ZPD is clearly dependent on social interaction that entails meaningful, intellectual imitation. Vygotsky (1978) claims that the secret of effective learning lies in the nature of the social interaction between two or more people with different levels of skills and knowledge. This involves helping the learner to move into and through the next layer of knowledge or understanding. Although this claim suggests that mental development may only occur when children are assisted by either an adult or a more competent peer, some research shows that interaction between children of the same cognitive level can also be beneficial, as long as interpersonal conflict is engendered (Hogan & Tudge, 1999). Considering the importance of social interactions with other people of higher or the same cognitive level, activities in educational settings most typically involve peer-to-peer or student-teacher interactions.

When the concepts of social interaction and intellectual imitation are applied in the feedback process in writing classrooms, a learner can work with a peer to provide comments or critiques on each other's drafts in both written and oral formats in the process of writing. This process is known as peer feedback. Another type of social interaction can be found in the teacher feedback process, through which teachers give comments and/or revision on students' writing drafts with the goal to improve students' writing quality and in the process model the kind of thinking needed to improve the students' writing.

F. Scaffolding and Intellectual Imitation

Scaffolding and intellectual imitation are fundamental concepts of the ZPD theory which is closely related to social interaction. Vygotsky himself never used the term 'scaffolding' in his works. It was introduced by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) to explain the social and participatory nature of teaching and learning which occurs in the ZPD. Since then, the concept of scaffolding has been as a metaphor to describe the role of MKO in guiding children's learning and development.

Donato (1994) defined scaffolding in L2 teaching and learning context as "social interaction [in which] a knowledgeable participant can create, by means of speech, supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in, an extend current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence" (p.40). Similar to this, Rassaei, (2014) said that scaffolding is "a collaborative process through which a teacher or a more proficient learner provides support or guidance to assist a less proficient learner" (p. 420). From the two definitions, it can be concluded that scaffolding in L2 teaching and learning emphasizes more on the social interactions which can take place either in learner-teacher or learner-learner interactions.

For Vygotsky, the key in these interactions is the intellectual imitation that occurs. Furthermore, he emphasizes that this process is also different from merely helping the learner in an undirectional way, which is typical in the traditional teaching (Nassaji & Swain, 2000). As the learner begins to take on more responsibility for the task, the teacher or the more proficient peer takes on the intellectual process of the more expert indicating that the learner has benefited from the assisted performance and internalized the problem-solving processes provided by the previous scaffolded episode.

From this explanation, it can be concluded that there are three key concepts in intellectual imitation and scaffolding; collaborative work through which the learner can participate in and extend current skills and knowledge to a high level of competence through the imitation of the thinking process of the more advanced teacher or peer; directional assistance which is determined by the learner's need; and extraction of assistance when it is no longer needed. When these three concepts of intellectual imitation and scaffolding are applied in feedback activities in the writing classroom, the focus of feedback provided by the teacher or peers is only on the aspects of writing, which need developing or revising. By doing so, the learner is provided the structure necessary to complete the task. When the learner

shows that she can revise the draft as suggested in the feedback and use the main ideas behind the feedback to further develop her writing, she becomes consciously aware of the thinking processes inherent in the feedback and is able to accomplish the task on her own and thus is regulating her writing.

G. Mediation

Mediation is another key concept in learning in the ZPD. Vygotsky explains that a child's development within a ZPD involves social interaction, dialogue, mediated activity, and intellectual imitation between learners and with their teachers. Mediation in a teaching and learning process can be defined as "the process through which humans deploy culturally constructed artifacts, concepts, and activities to regulate (i.e. gain voluntary control over and transform) the material world or their own and each other's social and mental activity" (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006, p. 79).

In his writings, Vygotsky emphasizes that language/speech as a psychological tool played a critical role in the child's learning in the ZPD. However, Vygotsky (as cited in John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996) also lists many other modes of semiotic mediation that play a role in both interpersonal and intrapersonal thinking and problem solving which include "various systems for counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes, diagrams, maps and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs; and so on" (p. 193). When the concept of semiotic mediation is applied in feedback activities, the most common tools to use are either language/speech or written text. When the feedback is delivered orally (oral feedback), language is used to mediate the psychical processes. However, when written feedback is given, written comments on the written drafts become the mediated tool in social interactions between the learner and the teacher or peers.

H. Internalization

The concept of 'internalization' might be considered as the end phase in learning and development within the ZPD. When this phase is reached, the social interaction in the inter psychological processes has finally been conceived as the means to regulate individual performance through intra psychological processes. In other words, the mediational means have been

internalized to enable the learner to operate independently at the level of higher psychical processes (Villamil & De Guerrero, 2006).

Higher psychological processes unique to humans can be acquired only through interaction with others, that is, through inter psychological processes that only later will begin to be carried out independently by the individual. When this happens, some of these processes lose their initial, external form and are converted into intra psychological processes (Leont'ev, 1981, p. 56).

Based on the citation above, the term internalization can be simply defined as "external activities (which) are transformed into mental ones" (Nassaji & Swain, 2000, p. 103) or "the movement of language from environment to brain" (Ohta, 2001: p.11).

One way of characterizing internalization is a progression from object or otherregulation to self-regulation (Ellis & Shintani, 2014). When this character of internalization is applied in feedback activities, it means that the learner who has undergone the process of feedback through collaboration with a peer and/or a teacher has finally comprehended the points of comments/revision provided on her drafts and been able to use them to guide her in future writing. The comprehension of the feedback points and the ability to apply them in the learner's own writing are the proof of internalization of social interaction with a more skillful person through scaffolded learning in feedback activities that reflect the imitation of the thinking processes of that person.

I. Conclusion

Learning in the ZPD involves the process of social interaction through scaffolded activities using the semiotic mediation that involves intellectual imitation with the final goal that the child can internalize the interaction and use it to guide or regulate her own performance. This process of learning in ZPD is also reflected in feedback activities in writing classroom.

During feedback activities, a learner needs to interact or collaborate with a more able peer who provides assistance, models the thinking processes, and scaffolds through comments on the drafts the learner writes and/or oral communication. In this case, the comments provided are the semioticmediation or the mediating tool. When the learner can

finally work independently inproducing her writing, the scaffolding provided previously is no longer necessary. At this stage, the learner can be said to have stretched her ZPD and transformed her potential level to actual level of development, and in the process creating a new ZPD.

Regarding the similarity of the process of feedback process in the writing classroom with that of learning in the ZPD as proposed by Vygotsky (1978), it can be concluded that Vygotsky's theory of ZPD can be used as the theoretical framework in studying feedback in any writing classrooms, including the second language ones.

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