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Chapter 1 — A Pedagogy of Promise (pages 6–12)

from Scaffolding the Academic Success of Adolescent English Language Learners: A Pedagogy of Promise

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describes a pedagogy of promise, a way of teaching that anticipates student learning that is just on the horizon.

The QTEL Application of Sociocultural Learning Theory

How do tenets of sociocultural learning theory apply to the co-construction of understanding demonstrated above by the two students' reading of "The Road Not Taken"?

Lev Vygotsky developed the basis of sociocultural theory in the 1920s and 1930s. Although he died in 1932 at the early age of 37, much of his work was translated and published posthumously. Vygotsky's ideas influenced many researchers, who have built on his legacy to propose ways of better understanding how human beings learn and, thus, how they can be taught (see, for example, Cazden 1981; Cole, 1985; Lantolf and Thorne, 2006; Rogoff, 1995; van Lier, 2004). QTEL incorporates the following tenets of sociocultural learning theory in understanding how to affect teaching and learning:

- Development follows learning (therefore, teaching precedes development).

- Participation in activity is central in the development of knowledge.

- Participation in activity progresses from apprenticeship to appropriation, or from the social to the individual plane.

- Learning can be observed as changes in participation over time.

Development Follows Learning (Therefore, Teaching Precedes Development)

Many times we hear teachers say they can't teach a specific unit or lesson to their English language learners because "their English is not there yet."

The assumption seems to be that before students can learn concepts and skills, they need to know the related language — that language and content are two separate entities. This idea derives from traditional developmental psychology, which posits that learning can only be successful after the learner's relevant mental functions have already matured.

Instead, and in line with thinking first proposed by Vygotsky, we believe that learning truly happens only if it is ahead of development. In response to teachers' worries, we would say that development occurs precisely because teachers plan lessons beyond the students' ability to carry them out independently. The catch, of course, is that the lessons be deliberately designed to present high support along with high challenge. This support comes by way of teacher invitations that engage students' intrinsic motivation, that involve students in using new concepts and new language in meaningful contexts, and that provide students with the opportunity to develop their understanding in interactions with others, at least initially. In this view, deliberate, well-constructed teaching drives development.

Participation in Activity Is Central in the Development of Knowledge
Students develop higher-order functions as they engage in activity that requires them to use language. Vygotsky emphasized the primacy of linguistic mediation in the development of higher mental processes; he contended that language is the main vehicle of thought and that all language use is dialogical, that is, based on social interaction.

Even when social speech is internalized as inner speech, it remains essentially dialogical and social and continues to have the function of supporting thinking. When we are faced with a difficult task that requires much thought and concentration, we will often make our inner speech overt, turning it into private speech that is audible, but not directed at anyone but ourselves. For example, we might overhear a learner struggling with

algebraic functions engage in private speech: "Oops, that can't be right… Maybe I should start by making a function table…Ah, good! I see why that relationship is off." In this instance we see language and thought intimately interconnected as the learner attempts to marshal resources and control the task. Language, then, is an abstract tool that mediates all learning, in the way that physical tools mediate the conduct of physical tasks.

If social interaction is the basis for language and learning, as described above, the notion of consciousness (awareness of self and one's surroundings), the development of identity, and physical and mental skills and abilities all emerge from and in interaction. As Vygotsky puts it, "[H]uman learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life of those around them" (1978, p. 88). "[E]very function in the child's development appears twice, on two levels. First, on the social, and later on the psychologicial level; first between people as an interpsychological category, and then inside the child as an intra-psychological category" (1978, p. 128). Children internalize what they learn in social interactions not by "copying and pasting," but through a process of transformation involving appropriation and reconstruction. In Vygotsky's view of pedagogy, all knowledge arises in social activity, and all learning is co-constructed, with the learner transforming the social learning into psychological, or individual, learning over time. Such learning, Vygotsky suggests, takes place in a learner's *zone of proximal development.*

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is the most recognized — almost emblematic — construct in Vygotsky's theory of learning. The most often quoted definition of ZPD describes learning that results from interaction with someone more accomplished than the learner:

> It 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)

Vygotsky also recognized, however, that interactions between peers with essentially equal knowledge could also result in learning. Many researchers (e.g., Donato, 1994; Gibbons, 2002; Mercer, 1995; Rogoff, 1995) have further developed this idea of joint construction of knowledge among peers (for further discussion, see chapter 2).

For Vygotsky and other sociocultural theorists, "problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with…peers" does not refer to just any and all kinds of "assistance" or "helping." First, learning presupposes, quite precisely, initiative and agency on the part of the learners. While the teacher must set up tasks that invite learner agency (i.e., active involvement and the development of autonomy), it is the collaborative work of the learners that will show their ZPD, or level of development to come, and the kind of support that will result in learning. Most of this book consists of the fundamentals of working within such proximal contexts and in supporting learners' proximal abilities, or abilities that are just on the horizon.

Participation in Activity Progresses from Apprenticeship to Appropriation, or from the Social to the Individual Plane

As learners engage in collaborative activity beyond their individual ability to perform, they apprentice the ways of "doing it right," in accordance with the patterns of behavior valued by their community. If the task is a history discussion of multiple points of view, for example, students will learn how to make a statement or claim from a given perspective and how to use documentary evidence to articulate the assumptions or warrants that support the claim. English language learners, since they will be carrying out the activity in a language they do not fully understand, initially

may imitate, uncomfortably, the models the teacher has provided. As they move from claim to claim in a scaffolded activity and work together with peers, their understanding increases. Over time, students appropriate the ability to make claims from a historical character's perspective. Support is there as needed, and it is adjusted as the learners' needs change. What the support enables is a gradual owning of processes, ideas, and language. To paraphrase Vygotsky, what students can do with support today, they will be able to do alone tomorrow.

The fostering of autonomy is what all good teaching is about. The process starts with carefully designed and supported pedagogical activity that provides, over time, the continuity for learners to make proximal ideas, relationships, and higher-order activities their own, along with the language required to express them.

Learning Can Be Observed As Changes in Participation Over Time

If we want to see whether English language learners have appropriated knowledge, then, ideally, we should observe how they engage in similar activity over time. In the example of the history discussion above, students would tentatively repeat phrases they heard the teacher model, perhaps even use a list of formulaic expressions the teacher may have given them (see figure 1).

Two weeks later, a similar interaction on a different historical topic should show the same students now more comfortably using ideas and language they had encountered before. Now, no supports are needed, and there is more fluency in students' expressions, although their participation is still hesitant. A month or two later, we should observe students who are comfortably making claims and are now apprenticing how to express other activities central to the discipline.

Figure 1. Formulaic Expressions for Analyzing Historical Consequences

From the perspective of X, what were some of the consequences of Y?

Some of the benefits that resulted from Y for X include…

Do you claim any other advantages?

On the other hand, there were also disadvantages for X, for example…

Do you claim any other disadvantages?

Can you justify with evidence that Z was a positive consequence (a benefit for X)?

Can you justify with evidence that W had a negative impact on X?

Taken together, these tenets of sociocultural learning theory enable us to propose a pedagogy of promise, one that looks at students' academic futures as the deliberate development of potential built on what they bring to the class. Rather than just focusing on students' past performance and achievements (what they have or have not learned so far), a teacher's role shifts to creating enticing opportunities for students to interact around key disciplinary topics, through the mediation of emergent language skills (Ellis, 2006). Given the linguistic and academic diversity of a class, the teacher determines what learning experiences will allow all students in the class to operate in their zone of proximal development and provides the needed supports. Urie Bronfenbrenner, an ecological psychologist, recounts an anecdote in which Vygotsky's colleague A. N. Leont'ev compares in a similar vein the difference between Soviet and American psychologists' approaches to child development: "American researchers are constantly seeking to discover how the child came to be what he is; we in the USSR are striving to discover not how the child came to be what he is,

but how he can become what he is not yet" (from a conversation between Leont'ev and Bronfenbrenner in 1977, reported in Bronfenbrenner 1979, p. 40). Instead, then, of testing students at a given point in time to see what they learned in the past, it is more revealing to observe students' participation in academic activity over time, to see how their potential is gradually realized.

Conclusion

The future for the increasing number of our students who are English language learners depends on an education that sees, appreciates, and engages their promise. The learning theory developed by Lev Vygotsky and others points us toward educational practices that can meet the promise of English language learners precisely because these practices are organized around promise — the zone of proximal development and the supports that enable learners to move toward abilities that are just on the horizon.

In the next chapter, we will begin to see how the kinds of supports, or "scaffolding," that teachers provide enable students to make optimal learning gains. Because notions of "scaffolding" have at times drifted from their theoretical (and meaningful) base, we will focus on the critical differences between, on the one hand, simply helping students complete tasks they cannot do independently and, on the other hand, the theoretical intent of scaffolding — to create the contexts and supports that allow students to interact in their zone of proximal development.