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Teaching Mixed-Level Classes with A Vygotskian Perspective

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Abstract

One of the biggest challenges that teachers face is the mixed-level classes, where students have different abilities, backgrounds and interests. All classes can be defined as 'mixed' since no student is the same as the other and this makes it difficult for teachers to meet each student's needs. The purpose of this study is to identify this problem by using Lev Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' (ZPD) theory as a background and suggest solutions for teachers by making use of Vygotsky's ideas such as peer tutoring and scaffolding. While the starting point of the problem is English language classes at universities in Turkey, suggestions offered for effective teaching are in a more global context.

*Keywords:*mixed-level classes; language teaching; Vygotsky; Zone of Proximal Development; scaffolding

1. Introduction

In an ideal, student-centered language classroom, the class is made up of up to 12 people (Jones, 2007, p.4) and the students belong to approximately the same level. However, not all the classes can offer this and English teachers often face with classrooms filled with a higher number of students and whose competencies in English are quite different from each other. Teachers may prefer teaching in accordance with the level of upper-middle section, however more advanced students can feel that they do not learn much while students with lowest levels can have difficulty in understanding what is going on in the class. In Turkey, this is a problem especially for university-level students. In order to be placed in a university, Turkish students have to take a university entrance exam and according to the exam results they are either placed at one of the universities they have chosen or they cannot go to any university at all. The test consists of subjects like Turkish, Mathematics, Geography, Science and History and only those who would like to study in foreign language departments take a separate test in English. As a result of

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this situation, students and sometimes teachers in high schools usually focus on test subjects so that students can get higher scores and English is usually ignored. When students get into the university, there is usually a chaos in the English classes which all of the students have to take. While there is a one-year preparatory class in some departments and some universities where students are divided into groups according to their language abilities, not all departments or universities have this option, so students with various levels of English usually take an English class in their first year together. Considering the large number of students as well, teachers may find it difficult to have control over the situation and there is usually complaint among the students. Students with higher levels may feel that they do not learn anything and they are wasting their time, on the other hand there may be students who think that they cannot understand anything at all. It is not always possible for teachers to meet each student's needs in these multi-level and crowded classes on their own. In order to overcome this situation, it would be helpful for teachers to get inspiration from Vygotsky's ideas.

2. Lev Vygotsky and the 'Zone of Proximal Development'

Throughout the years education has been affected directly from the research in psychology. Soviet psychologist Lev Vygotsky is one of the most prominent figures in this relationship and his works are mainly on developmental psychology. In terms of children's development, Vygotsky believed that social interaction was crucial:

'Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people and as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts, and the development of volition. We may consider this position as a law in the full sense of the word….Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships ((1960) 1981, p.163 as cited in Berk and Winsler, 1995, p.12).'

In order for learning to occur, the child should be in the 'Zone of Proximal Development' (often abbreviated ZPD). Vygotsky defines the term as ' 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). Here, "more capable peer" (MCP) may be an adult (the teacher) or a peer. With the help of MCP, the child can move through the ZPD and can carry out the tasks that he cannot do by himself and his peer assists him in this process (see Fig.1). As stated in Utah Education Network (2005, p.11, as cited in Blake and Pope, 2008, p.63), it is 'a waste of time to teach kids what they already know and what they cannot do without assistance', so it can be said that it is the ZPD where children actually start learning things. Instead of focusing on tasks that they are capable of, the children solve problems that they cannot do individually; and through collaboration with their peers or adults like teachers and parents, they develop their mental and cognitive skills. This view also resembles to Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis in language learning which is also known as 'i+1' theory, in which *i* represents current competence and *i+1* shows the structure that is a bit beyond the learner's current level (Krashen, 1982, p.20-21). Vygotsky also defines the functions in the ZPD as 'buds' or 'flowers' of development, rather than the 'fruits' (1978, p.86), and in order for these functions to be mature, cooperation is essential. The teacher's role here is to keep the tasks within children's ZPD, or in other words in a level that is slightly above theirs. For teachers to be successful in this task, "scaffolding" gains importance at this point.
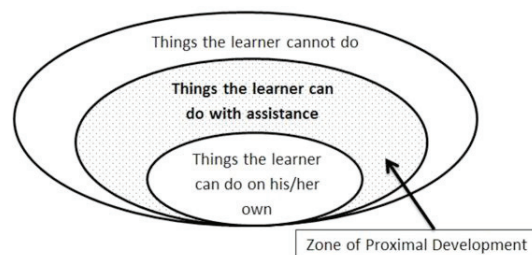

Fig. 1:Zone of Proximal Development

3. Scaffolding in the classroom

Oxford Learner's Dictionary defines the word scaffolding as 'poles and boards that are joined together to make a structure for workers to stand on when they are working high up on the outside wall of a building'. While the workers are constructing a building, they stand on this platform, moving up and down while making the necessary changes. In educational terms, the term is used metaphorically. The child is seen like a building here, it is constantly being constructed and scaffold is the support system around him/her to help the child to construct new abilities. Scaffolding is a term that is usually associated with Vygotsky but actually Vygotsky himself did not originate the term. It has been introduced by Jerome Bruner, a cognitive psychologist, who defines scaffolding as 'a process of "setting up" the situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handling the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage it' (Bruner, 1983, p.60 as cited in Walqui, 2006, p.163). Since then it has been widely used in psychology and education (Berk and Winsler, 1995, p.27).

Scaffolding involves teacher's behavior shaping according to learner's needs, but this simplification is not for the task itself, but rather it is more related with the simplification of learner's role in the task. The simplification process can be carried out by the adult or more capable peer, where the adult or the peer assists the child gradually. As stated previously, Vygotsky claimed that children can learn in the ZPD and they need assistance in this zone. It is not always possible for the teacher to instruct within each student's ZPD and this is especially difficult in classes where there is a wide gap between the upper and lower section of the class. In this case, it is the more capable peer who helps the learner. In the light of Vygotsky's views, teachers should encourage the learners to give assistance to each other during the tasks. In mixed-level classrooms, teachers sometimes tend to give more work to upper-level students and less to lower-level learners but this is not usually motivating for the advanced students as they can feel that they have more work to do and the rest of the students may feel that they are inferior. So adjusting the quantity of the assignment is generally less effective than adjusting the nature of the assignment to meet students' needs (Tomlinson, 2001, p.4). That is why scaffolding gains importance in mixed-level classes. As students work in their ZPD where they need assistance, their peers help them to overcome problems and students have different roles in the same task.

There are some essential features of scaffolding that underlie the principles of it. Beed, Hawkins and Roller (1991, p.649) list these features as *collaborative context, operating in the zone of development and gradual withdrawal of support*. Briefly, collaborative context refers to the support given by the adult or the peer and it involves constant checking of the level of the learner's competence. In order for scaffolding to be effective, it should happen in the learner's zone of development as this is where learning occurs. Lastly, as the learner is trying to move from his ZPD where he needs assistance towards the zone where he can work independently, the support is withdrawn gradually after the learner starts to internalize knowledge and work on his own. Accordingly, it is important to form individual working settings for the learners in the classroom as well since the learners should also have time to work independently, 'with students coming together as a whole group to begin a study, moving out to pursue learning in small groups or individually, coming back together to share and make plans for additional investigation, moving out again for more work, coming together again to share and review, and so on' (Tomlinson, 2001, p.5)

During the process of scaffolding it should be kept in mind that while 'more capable peer' helps his classmate, the situation of the former should not be ignored. Advanced students also need to learn, and if they are always in the position of being assistance provider, they may face regression. In order to avoid this situation, the teacher should take into account the needs of the more advanced learners and should develop lesson plans and tasks that are also challenging for them. As stated earlier, scaffolding is not about adjusting the difficulty of the task, but about adjusting the learner's role. Different students may have different responsibilities in the same task according to their competencies. Besides, students may have both strengths and weaknesses in different areas and teachers should form the groups of students accordingly. For instance, in a language classroom, a learner can be good at grammar but may have weaknesses in vocabulary. Pairing this student with a student who feels strong in vocabulary but weak in grammar would be fruitful for both parties.

Although Vygotsky's works mostly focus on children development, ZPD and scaffolding can be applied to classrooms with higher age groups as well and there has been some research on this matter. For instance, Bayer

(1996), Dalton (1989) and Tirrell (1985) showed how Vygotskian principle can be applied to adult learning (as cited in Higa, 2005). In terms of a language classroom context, Kim (2010) used the ZPD to show that 'having more capable English speakers available instills confidence, which could affect the students' information behaviours' (Brannon, 2013, p.8).

In order to differentiate the learner's role in a language classroom, teachers may offer some complementary tasks. For instance, after putting the students in mixed pairs, the teacher can give two tasks, one of which is more challenging, and ask the students to choose the task they prefer. For a reading passage, for example, the more challenging task may be to answer the questions for the text (task A) or to write the questions to the answers (task B). After the learners finish their tasks, they compare their answers (Prodromou and Clandfield, 2007, p.60). One other example of scaffolding is plays and it is usually used for scaffolding activities and some theorists claim that play 'provides support at the highest levels of ZPD' (Bodrova and Leong, 1998, p.278 as cited in Cole, 2013, p.6). Role playing has been used in language teaching widely since the communicative language teaching got popular and teachers began to focus on communicative activities with which learners can develop their language abilities in meaningful contexts. In order to differentiate the tasks for the learners, teachers may ask the more capable group members to write the play and the less capable ones to act it. For less crowded classrooms, the teacher may have a small role in the dialogues as well and prompt the students and give support where necessary.

There are lots of other possibilities for scaffolding in the classroom. Tomlinson adds learning logs, journals, graphic organizers, creative problem solving, cubing, learning centers, interest centers or interest groups, learning contracts, literature circles, jigsaw, mind-mapping and labs to this continuing list (1995, p.80). To make the learning environment better, teachers should be careful about grouping the students according to their abilities, not dividing the class into higher-lower levels, but rather in a mixed way where every student can learn from each other. Teaching a class with mixed-levels is not a drawback for teachers who would like to adapt Vygotsky's ideas; instead it is a positive aspect since more possibilities occur as the diversity of the class's members increases.

4. Some concluding remarks

Although many teachers prefer teaching to small classes where all the students are approximately at the same level, this is not always possible. In order to make the best of this situation, a good way is to start with adapting Vygotsky's ideas in the curriculum and create settings where collaborative work is fundamental. This is especially crucial for language classrooms where interaction and communication are of great importance for developing language skills. Through collaborative work and with assistance from their peers and teachers, the learners move through their zone of proximal development and become more independent learners. Just like a person who learns swimming, the learners need a little push at the beginning in order to be able to become more independent. In large and multi-level classrooms this is possible with some scaffolding where learners help each other. However, teachers should keep it in their minds that they should not depend on collaborative work only. Vygotsky stated that learners first study in their zone of proximal development, getting assistance from their peers or an adult, and later the guidance is withdrawn gradually. So, it would be more effective to assign tasks to learners with which they can both work as a group and individually.

Lastly; although the starting point was language classrooms, it is possible to adapt these ideas to any classroom as Vygotsky developed these thoughts as a psychologist, not as a teacher in a specialized area, and for all children alike. All teachers need is to be aware of the needs of learners and instead of differentiating the quantity of the tasks according to levels, giving different roles in the same task so that each student can learn according to his level and no one will feel inferior.

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