

What is ZPD and what are the implications of ZPD for teaching?

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Abstract

Sociocultural theory was established by Vygotsky, and it analyzes the social and cultural attributes of the development mechanism of human psychological function based on the view of development and history (Xi, 2020). Vygotsky divided human psychological function into low-level psychological function as the result of biological evolution and high-level psychological function formed by the development of social culture and history. Focusing on the development of high-level psychological function of individuals, Vygotsky put forward three core concepts: internalization, mediation and zone of proximal development (ZPD). In this article, one of the core concepts, ZPD, will be discussed.

Keywords— ZPD, teaching, social culture and history.

I. WHAT IS ZPD?

In 1930s, Vygotsky first put forward the concept of ZPD (The Zone of Proximal Development, ZPD) in the field of child psychology, which refers to “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). He believes that there are two levels of students’ development: one is the existing level of students, which refers to the level of problem-solving that can be achieved when acting independently; the other is the possible development level of students, that is, the potential obtained through teaching. The difference between the two levels is called ZPD.

II. IS IT SAME AS THE “I+1” THEORY?

Gifford & Mullaney analogized the “ZPD” to “I + 1” theory, and described an educational example of interaction between learners (Wen, 2019). However, these two concepts have been proved to be different by more examples (Schinke-Llano, 1993; de Guerrero, 1996; Dunn & Lantolf, 1998; Thorne, 2000; quoted from Wen, 2019). From the

perspective of conceptualization, “i+1” refers to passive input while ZPD emphasizes on collaborative activities. Besides, there are fundamental differences between ZPD and “i+1” on the basis of philosophy. ZPD holds that the development of human advanced psychological function originates from the interaction between individuals and others and tools in social communication activities; “I + 1” belongs to metaphysics, which holds that development itself is spontaneously produced by learners. Furthermore, in terms of process, “i+1” emphasizes the process of language acquisition, but ZPD refers to collaboration to accomplish a specific task. “I+1” focuses on language and hypothesizes that every language learner has the same language acquisition device. The “I” and “1” in “I+1” theory are abstract and cannot be predicted (Xi, 2020). As for ZPD, since it is based on the collaborative activities between the learners and the experts, the learners’ ability can be expected individually.

III. IS IT SAME AS THE “SCAFFOLDING”?

In the past, I used to classify the concept of “scaffolding” under the sociocultural theory, because scaffolding and the ZPD more or less reflect the same

process. Scaffolding is derived from an architectural metaphor. The ZPD is grounded in an agricultural metaphor in which the buds and flowers of fruit-bearing trees mature as they are tended by growers. The two concepts are very different metaphors. Xi & Lantolf (2020) pointed out that scaffolding was limited to face-to-face interaction, failed to take full account of context, and features task fluency and independent performance as its goal, while the ZPD encompassed face-to-face interaction but also extended to domains such as play and even interaction with texts, was clearly focused on development over task fluency, and saw context as a crucial factor in shaping development.

IV. IMPLICATIONS FOR LANGUAGE TEACHING

The “development” in the concept of ZPD means changes in psychological structure rather than the progress in knowledge and skills (Chen, 2015). It is essential for educators to understand that the progress in knowledge and skills is surface development. Learning knowledge and skills is the way to change psychological structure. Only with the change of psychological structure can individuals achieve real development (Zhong, 2018). So, the language teachers are expected to figure out ways to trigger students’ motivation so that they can internalized knowledge to change the psychological structure.

4.1 Transformation of teaching paradigm

The traditional teaching paradigm has always been teacher-centered, one-way “transmitting” the intensive knowledge of textbooks to students, while students “acquire” knowledge by remembering the knowledge. However, the new teaching paradigm is that the work of teachers is to design the scaffolding for group activities. In this class, students construct knowledge in interaction (Zhong, 2018). Teachers do not completely control the classroom. It can be said that teachers actively participate in learners’ learning activities and encourage students to form learning by themselves. The role of teachers in the new teaching paradigm should be regarded as facilitators.

4.2 Learning is a process of meaningful social negotiation

“Society” and “construction” are the ideological core of the zone of proximal development theory. Vygotsky believes that the psychological process is not a purely

natural phenomenon, it comes from the individual’s adaptation to social culture (Quoted from Chen, 2015). Therefore, construction is difficult to become a pure individual behavior. The process of learning can be regarded as a meaningful social negotiation between mature and immature individuals using cultural tools. ZPD is a framework for integrating individuals and society, and it is also a social psychological space for learners to connect with others, which is an appropriate place for education.

4.3 Dynamic Assessment

In ZPD, children’s ability is divided into actual ability and potential ability, and the latter more determines the achievements that individuals can achieve in future learning. Nevertheless, potential ability cannot be displayed independently. Therefore, the measurement of potential ability should pay attention to the process and provide necessary help so that the potential ability can be reflected. A completed assessment should include actual ability and potential ability evaluation. As language teachers, we should shift from focusing only on the actual ability of individuals to paying attention to both actual ability and potential ability, and from focusing only on the results of learning to paying attention to the results and process of learning at the same time, which is helpful to improve the comprehensiveness of evaluation.

4.4 The relation between teaching and learning

Teaching should proceed development, but where is the boundary between teaching and development? What level of teaching is appropriate in ZPD? Although we’ve discussed that scaffolding should not be included in sociocultural theory, I believe that it may be a useful method for language teachers to find out the dividing line. Aljaafreh & Lantolf put forward the “regulatory scale”, that is, at the beginning, teachers give the most implicit feedback, but if learners do not respond, gradually provide learners with more explicit feedback until they correct their mistakes (Quoted from Wen, 2019).

In general, it is important for language teachers to pay more attention to students’ development. As we know that, teachers should individualize the teaching approach to each person’s aptitude, personality and interest. Meanwhile, teachers should also realize that the process is dynamic. Students’ aptitude is constantly changing, and ZPD will change accordingly. Teaching takes precedence over

students' development, which is an effective teaching method.

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