Lecture 4: Lev Vygotsky's Social Cognitive Development Theory

Lev Vygotsky was born in 1896 in what is now known as Belarus. He became a contemporary to other leaders in the field of psychology, including Piaget and Freud.

A key component of Vygotsky's theory of cognitive development put emphasis on the importance of social interactions as the key ingredient for how humans understand the world. At the same time, he thought that how people share information shapes their culture and shapes how they learn new things. Vygotsky's theory focuses on the relationship of the learner with their teacher, as well as the sharing of information through language.

1. Principles of the Theory

Vygotsky's theory of child development can be imagined as a cycle, not as stages which a child can go through. Vygotsky maintained that there are three themes that interrelate and affect each other as a person learns: Vygotsky observed that culture is essential to learning, language is essential to culture, and learners learn how to think by the influence of their community. Vygotsky recognized how languages link communities together, and that the culture of the adults in the community influences what the children learn. Culture puts pressure on how parents raise their children, which affects how children behave in certain situations. When learners go to school or in other ways engage with people in their community, they pick up on the attitudes and opinions of the people around them. The biases, attitudes, and behaviors of the culture play out in how children learn and develop.

Vygotsky placed importance on the culture framing how families interreact and teach their children.

2. Speech and Language Development

Vygotsky researched the connection between how people learn and how they acquire language. He noticed that as a person develops, he or she uses language in different ways and that the use of speech grows from the external cues as a baby to the private, inner thoughts of an adult. As this occurs, the individual is shaped by culture. Vygotsky created three stages of speech and language development: external, egocentric, and inner speech.

- **External speech** begins at birth to age 3, when babies learn through interactions from their caregivers. Babies learn how to share what they need and also learn that they can earn approval and disapproval from their caregivers. A baby might learn that saying "please" makes his parents more likely to give him what he wants.
- **Egocentric speech** occurs from ages 3 to 7. It focuses on an egocentric child using the social aspect of thinking out loud to solve problems and then remember them for next time. When preschoolers all have different ideas for a game, but they work together to find something they can all play together, they are demonstrating egocentric speech.
- **Inner speech** occurs when older children up to adult age can essentially have two modes for speech: an inner conversation where they talk to themselves and a verbal conversation. An adult who has the reached inner speech does not need to think out loud as they make decisions; they basically talk to themselves and process ideas before they need to speak. For example, a student might use inner speech to remind herself to study for her math test, but use verbal speech to ask the teacher to define a mathematical term.

3. Zone of Proximal Development

For Vygotsky, there were essentially two avenues of learning: things that a person can teach and master themselves, and things that are out of reach for the learner by themselves (and must be taught by someone else). The second avenue for learning was explained with the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)**. The goal is that the student begins with a specific skill or task just out of reach, but with the support of a **More Knowledgeable Other (MKO)** they will master the skill. The More Knowledgeable Other can be anyone who can lead the learner in the new skill, from a parent to an older sibling or even a neighbor. In this case, the word "proximal" refers to what is close, but just out of reach, of the learner without help. In the ZPD, the learner has the potential to master a skill or something new but needs some outside help.

4. Vygotsky's Theory in the Classroom

Vygotsky's theories continue to shape modern teaching practices. **Scaffolding** refers to how the MKO tailors their supports to meet the needs of the learner. A learner might need very little help with a new task or idea, or need more concrete guidance compared to another classmate. A concept related to scaffolding is **fading**, where the MKO reduces the level of support needed as the learner demonstrates they are mastering the skill.

For example, a second-grade teacher introduces butterflies (the new science unit) to the class. She asks the class to list as a group what they already know about butterflies, as well as what they might want to learn. As the class shares what they know about butterflies, the teacher writes it down on the board. Departing from those ideas, the teachers starts the lessons by explain the characteristics of insects.

Put differently, in order to use ZPD and scaffolding techniques successfully, it's critical to know your students' current level of knowledge. Without this information, you won't be able to teach them in their ZPD or provide effective scaffolding support.

Before you begin a lesson with ZPD or Vygotsky scaffolding, find their baseline knowledge by giving a short quiz or having an introductory discussion on the topic where you ask students questions to figure out what they already know.

It is to be noted that each student will have a different ZPD for each topic. If a class has widely varying ZPDs for a specific topic, it can be more effective to have them work in groups or individually while the teacher walks around the classroom and provides guidance so that they can tailor your techniques to each student's ZPD.

Group work can be a very effective way of using scaffolding principles in the classroom because students can learn from each other while working together on a project. More advanced students can help others learn while improving their own skills by explaining their thought process. It is advisable that teachers try to create groups that contain students with different skill sets and learning levels to maximize the amount students learn from each other. They should also make sure that each student in the group is actively participating.

A potential drawback of Vygotsky scaffolding is the possibility of providing too much help. This causes the student to be passive, instead of active.

If you're using scaffolding techniques, don't jump in right away and start offering advice. Let each student work on their own first. When they begin to struggle, first start by asking them questions about what they've done and what they think they should do next. As much as possible, ask open-ended

questions that encourage them to find a solution on their own, as opposed to just telling them the next step.

Having students discuss their thought process is one of the best ways to figure out where their current skills are (and thus determine their ZPD) and make sure they're actively learning.

5. Piaget vs Vygotsky

Piaget maintains that cognitive development stems largely from independent explorations in which children construct knowledge of their own. Whereas Vygotsky argues that children learn through social interactions, building knowledge by learning from more knowledgeable others such as peers and adults. In other words, Vygotsky believed that culture affects cognitive development.

These factors lead to differences in the education style they recommend: Piaget would argue for the teacher to provide opportunities which challenge the children's existing schemas and for children to be encouraged to discover for themselves. Alternatively, Vygotsky would recommend that teacher's assist the child to progress through the zone of proximal development by using scaffolding.

However, both theories view children as actively constructing their own knowledge of the world; they are not seen as just passively absorbing knowledge. They also agree that cognitive development involves qualitative changes in thinking, not only a matter of learning more things.

	Piaget	**Vygotsky**
Sociocultural	Little emphasis	Strong emphasis
Constructivism	Cognitive constructivist	Social constructivist
Stages	Cognitive development follows universal stages	Cognitive development is dependent on social context (no stages)
Learning & Development	The child is a 'lone scientist', develops knowledge through own exploration	Learning through social interactions. Child builds knowledge by working with others
Role of Language	Thought drives language development	Language drives cognitive development
Role of the Teacher	Provide opportunities for children to learn about the world for themselves (discovery learning)	Assist the child to progress through the ZPD by using scaffolding

Sources
Vygotsky's Theory of Cognitive Development Stages & Examples - Video & Lesson Transcript | Study.com
Vygotsky Scaffolding: What It Is and How to Use It (prepscholar.com)
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