Second Language Teachers' Roles in the Scaffolding Instruction in Autonomous Learning—from the Perspectives of the Zone of Proximal Development

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Abstract

Learners' automous learning may not be implemented smoothly without teachers' guide. Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) offers a framework for studying educational intervention in autonomous learning. This paper first considers the applicability of the ZPD to the second language (L2) teaching, and secondly discusses the scaffolding instruction deriving from the ZPD, then summarizes the seven roles L2 teachers should play in the scaffolding instruction in autonomous learning.

Keywords

ZPD; The Scaffolding Instruction; Autonomous Learning; L2 Teachers' Roles.

1. Introduction

In the 1930s, the Soviet Union psychologist Vygotsky put forward the concept of the ZPD, which illustrated the relationships among the instruction, learning and development creatively. Vygotsky's concept of the ZPD offers a framework for studying relationships between development and educational intervention. The implication of his thoughts initiated the concern of the western psychology circle along with the translation of his work *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1962) published in the U.S., and affected the related subjects including education. In the development of constructivism theory, since 1990s, the ZPD inspired numerous researchers with a series of studies in the field of SLA. From the perspectives of the ZPD, constructivists borrowed the construction term "scaffolding" to describe one model of instruction vividly, which means *assistance* in the ZPD and the accomplishments made with assistance may be termed *assisted performance* (Tharp and Gallimore, 1991). In an educational context, scaffolding is an instructional structure whereby the teacher models the desired learning strategy or task then gradually shifts responsibility to the students.

The purpose of this paper is to consider further the applicability of the ZPD to L2 teaching in autonomous learning, and discusses the scaffolding instruction deriving from the ZPD. This paper begins by considering the definition of the ZPD. Second, the implications of the scaffolding and some research on the scaffolding instruction are introduced. Third, the paper summarizes the seven roles should be played by L2 teachers in the scaffolding instruction in autonomous learning. The paper concludes with the questions facing the challenges of the ZPD and scaffolding instruction in autonomous learning.

2. ZPD Theory of Vygotsky

2.1 Historical Perspective on the ZPD

Vygotsky (1896-1934) is one of the Russian psychologists whose ideas have influenced the field of educational psychology and the field of education as whole. He began to work in psychology shortly after the Russian revolution, where the Marxism replaced the rule of the czar. The new philosophy of the Marxist emphasized socialism and collectivism. Individuals were expected to sacrifice their personal goals and achievements for the improvement of the larger society. Sharing and co-operation

was encouraged, and the success of any individual was seen as reflecting the success of the culture (Tayebeh Fani, Farid Ghaemi, 2011). Vygotsky incorporates these elements in his model of human development that has been termed as a sociocultural approach. For him, the individual's development is a result of his or her culture. Development, in Vygotsky´s theory, applies mainly to mental development, such as thought, language and reasoning process. These abilities were understood to develop through social interactions with others (especially parents) and therefore represented the shared knowledge of the culture.

2.2 Defining the ZPD

Vygotsky's introduction of the notion of the ZPD was due to his dissatisfaction with two practical issues in educational psychology (Lantolf, 2002; Wertsch, 1985; Shayer, 2002): the first is the assessment of a child's intellectual abilities and the second is the evaluation of the instructional practices. With respect to the first issue, Vygotsky believes that the established techniques of testing only determine the actual level of development, but do not measure the potential ability of the child. In his view, psychology should address the issue of predicting a child's future growth, "what he/she not yet is" (Tayebeh Fani, Farid Ghaemi, 2011). Because of the value Vygotsky attached to the importance of predicting a child's future capabilities, he formulated the concept of ZPD which he defines as "the distance between a child's actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the higher level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (Wertsch, 1985: 60).

Vygotsky's definition of the ZPD was designed as a way to consider the developmental potential of children. However, in L2 learning context, many learners are adults. Prompted by this fact as well as the finding that adult peers need not necessarily be more capable in order to provide assistance in the ZPD, Vygotsky's definition has been adapted to better suit the adult L2 developmental context (Ohta, 2005). The adapted definition states that the ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual linguistic production, and the level of potential development as determined through language produced with a teacher or peer.

Further, Vygotsky advocates that good instruction should proceed ahead of development and should awaken and rouse to life an entire set of functions, which are in the stage of maturation and lie in the ZPD.

3. ZPD and the Scaffolding Instruction in Autonomous Learning

3.1 Incompletion of ZPD in L2 Instruction

As Vygotsky died at his middle age, he himself did not offer much practical advice as to how ZPD might be successfully applied in classrooms. Shayer (2002) claims that despite the attractiveness of the concept of ZPD in its simplicity, its application in practice is more problematic. Shayer says that Vygotsky left it to others to find effective ways of doing so. It is also important to note that the concept of ZPD does not imply that these levels of learning are hierarchically ordered or neatly sequenced.

To improve the theory and the practice of the ZPD, an issue arose in school contexts including L2 instruction: what are the means that can help learners progress from one level to the next and what is the teacher's role in facilitating this progress. Two important concepts are discussed, one is the concept of mediation, which is central to sociocultural theory, and the second is the concept of scaffolding that was engendered by cognitive psychologists. In the following part, this paper will focus on the second concept "scaffolding" under the notion of the ZPD.

3.2 Scaffolding Instruction

The scaffolding instruction is one of the popular instruction concepts since 1990s under the influence of the ZPD, the essential goal of which is to realize students' potential skills, the basic approach of which is the equal interaction between teachers and students and the distinct characteristic of which is the teachers' accurate holding of the development of students.

The scaffolding instruction indicates that a teacher guides the process of the instruction during which the teacher makes students grasp, construct and internalize the knowledge and the skills, then promote the students to the higher cognitive activities. In a word, through "scaffolding" the teacher gradually transfers the task of learning management to the students, and finally withdraws the "scaffolding" at a proper time and to actualize the real autonomous learning. In the scaffolding instruction, teachers representing the culture guide students to master and internalize the skills which can lead them to engage in the higher cognitive activities. This kind of master and internalization is balancing with the students' ages and cognitive levels and gradually they can self-monitor their studies once they acquire these skills when the "scaffold" is withdrawn.

The scaffolding instruction includes the following several segments (Brown et al., 1984): (1) constructing the "scaffolding"— teachers construct the concept framework according to the ZPD centering on the current learning subject; (2) entering into the context—teachers guide students into some problematic context; (3) exploring independently—teachers leave students to explore and solve the problems independently; (4) studying coordinately—students coordinate and discuss problems in groups; (5) effect assessment—teachers assess the learning effect of the students , the students in one group assess each other and one student assess himself or herself.

According to Donato (1994) scaffolding is a concept that derives from cognitive psychology and the first language (L1) research. It states that in a social interaction, a knowledgeable participant can create by means of speech and supportive conditions in which the student (novice) can participate in and extend current skills and knowledge to a high level of competence. In an educational context, however, scaffolding is an instructional structure whereby the teacher models the desired learning strategy or task then gradually shifts responsibility to the students. According to McKenzie (1999), scaffolding provides the following advantages:

a) It provides clear directions for students

b) It clarifies purpose of the task

c) It keeps students on task

d) It offers assessment to clarify expectations

e) It points students to worthy sources

f) It reduces uncertainty, surprise and disappointment

g) It delivers efficiency

h) It creates momentum

According to Rogoff (1990 in Donato, 1994), scaffolding implies the expert's active stance towards continual revisions of the scaffolding in response to the emerging capabilities of the learner, and a learner's error or limited capabilities can be a signal for the adult to upgrade the scaffolding. As the learner begins to take on more responsibility for the task, the adult dismantles the scaffold indicating that the child has benefited from the assisted performance and internalised the problem-solving processes provided by the previous scaffolded episode. Wertsch (1979a) claims that scaffolded performance is a dialogically constituted interpsychological mechanism that promotes the learner's internalisation of knowledge co-constructed in shared activity. Donato (1994) advocates that in an L2 classroom, collaborative work among language learners provides the same opportunity for scaffolded help as in expert-novice relationships in the everyday setting. Van Lier (1988) states that L2 teaching methodology can benefit from a study of L1 scaffolding to understand how classroom activities already tacitly employ such tactics. The study of scaffolding in L2 research according to Donato has focused exclusively on how language teachers provide guided assistance to learners.

4. L2 Teachers' Roles in the Scaffolding Instruction in Autonomous Learning

In autonomous learning, in the framework of the scaffolding instruction, the L2 teachers should regard their students as the participants of the language practices, the major parts of the cognition and the actively constructors of the speech acts, which make the teachers' roles change a lot compared

with the conventional instructions especially in China (Yan, 2009). According to researchers and scholars' studies, there are seven roles should be played by teachers especially L2 teachers in the scaffolding instruction in autonomous learning.

4.1 The Guide

As a guide in the students' L2 learning, teachers should work out a practical and viable learning scheme which point out the correct direction of L2 learning and offer advice and opinions timely during different processes of learning. In the process of teaching, teachers should assist and guide students gradually to attain the desired learning goal and fulfill the teaching tasks step by step. Although in the traditional teaching mode teachers also played the role as a guide, the implication of it is immensely disparate with the guide in the scaffolding instruction. In the mode of scaffolding instruction, the guiding function of teachers is mainly reflected in the guide of every link and method. On the premise of student-centered classroom instruction, adequate guidance should be given to students to access the teaching objectives and achieve better learning effect under the teachers' inspiration and guidance.

4.2 The Promoter

As we saw earlier, Wertsch (1979a) also claims that scaffolded performance promotes the learner's internalization of knowledge co-constructed in shared activity. From this point of view, teachers should transfer from their roles in the conventional classroom imparting knowledge forwardly to be a prompter in the classroom. The prompter is the most explicit and direct role for the teacher in the process of the scaffolding instruction. The so-called "promotion" refers to advance to the progress of a behavior or a procedure to complete. On the scaffolding learning teaching model, teachers are not only responsible for students' language input, but pay more attention to students' creative skills of language output. As mediators, teachers first must have patience, tolerance and other personal qualities and, secondly also the ability to stimulate students' initiative to help students to make progress, gain the knowledge, skills and strategies in handling problems, adapting to a variety of cultural context and social change, and coping with the challenges.

4.3 The Psychological Counselor

Yan (2009) claims that one of the goals of constructing the scaffolding is to enhance the students' confidence and promote the interest of L2 learning, at the meantime prevent students from finding himself in a tight corner and feeling anxiety. Under this circumstance, during the construction of the scaffold, L2 teachers should insight into the students' emotional changes, place themselves in others' position from the students' point of view, reflect on what they want, be good at finding their progress, and continue to encourage them, enable them to study with interest, maintain an optimistic attitude (Yan, 2009).

Successful teachers all understand in the class how to pass the enthusiasm through their own enthusiasm, how to pass their passion for teaching and flexible teaching methods, strategies to arise the students' positive emotions, which can infect students and motivate them to participate in language practice activities. Teachers' design of the scaffold should depend on the degree of students in order to encourage them to experience success, to enhance student achievement sense and the sense of competence (Yan, 2009). When students encounter difficulties and put up negative emotions and psychological problems such as anxiety, boredom, stress, the teacher, as a psychological counselor, has the ability to listen to the voice of students with patience putting off the superior authority attitude, to analyze the reasons and provide advice of elimination which can help the students get rid of the negative emotional impact and burn up confidence and fighting spirit in L2 learning.

4.4 The Coordinator

As we indicated earlier, teachers leave students to explore and solve the problems independently in the third period of the scaffolding instruction. In this phase, it is significant for the teacher to play the role as a coordinator.

Teachers in the scaffolding teaching might organize the student to carry on various kinds of communications and interactive activities. Where there are communicative activities, there are different opinions and even the occurrence of contradictions. At this time the teacher need to make judgment impartially, and give reasonable and effective evaluation, strive to coordinate all aspects of conflicts to reduce friction, if we want to maximize the benefit of the teaching goal.

4.5 The Cooperator

In terms of the scaffolding instruction, methods which are sensitive to classroom and interactional processes are needed. In the scaffolding instruction, L2 teachers are not only responsible for the arrangement of the teaching task and issued to students learning instruction; in this isolated environment lacking of interaction students cannot achieve good learning results. Teachers should take the role of students' cooperator participating in classroom teaching, as well as regarding themselves as a member of the students, to participate in their activities and answer or solve teachers' previous topics or subjects in equal status with students (Yan, 2009).

4.6 The Resource Provider

Foreign language learners need numerous learning resources of that language to assistant their learning, so are the L2 learners in the scaffolding instruction. Learning resources are not only the learning materials, but also include a variety of learning methods and conditions, such as multimedia and the Internet, radio, television, video, etc (Yan, 2009). The L2 teachers need to act as the role of the resource providers, actively develop and make use of English teaching materials and the other curriculum resources. Providing students with rich, practical materials and resources, teachers can strengthen the positivity and flexibility of L2 teaching (Yan, 2009). Teachers also need to know the students' needed resources situation in the learning process so as to give the students help and guidance timely.

4.7 The Assessor

Assessment of teachers and students' self-assessment are the last part of the scaffolding instruction. Teaching assessment is an indispensible part of the teaching activity, no matter in the traditional teaching mode or in the scaffolding instruction environment. Timely feedback is needed for L2 teachers in the classroom communicative activities after paying attention of students' emotions and reactions. In addition to the student assessment, however, it is more important for L2 teachers to encourage and help students learn self-assessment. Students' self-assessment includes the level evaluation at the beginning of the semester, progress monitoring, and classmates' evaluation. Through self-assessment students can understand their own level and ability better, and then adjust learning objectives and plans timely. In terms of the self-assessment, teachers can organize students study groups to group them as a unit processing text preview, task scheduling, task completion, autonomous learning ability cultivation and mutual supervision. It is also helpful to introduce some self monitoring and assessment method for students to use and refer to (Yan, 2009).

5. Conclusion

According to the ZPD, Laura R. Roehle of the theory of teaching ideas (2008) claims that the scaffolding instruction has a brand-new understanding towards the process and purpose of teaching and learning, and the status and relationship between teachers and students compared that of traditional teaching. Therefore the scaffolding instruction represents a new teaching concept, Laura r. Roehle (2008) also considers that the essence of scaffolding instruction is a process of communication. Teachers give respect and acceptance to students' any ideas, comments or problems, and then fully discuss with them so as to help students understand construction and development to across the ZPD.

Scaffolding instruction, therefore, is the main content of the design according to the teaching strategy, in the recent development of the students in the design an appropriate "scaffold". The main role of the "scaffold" is to help them surpass their previous ability levels through some work in advance. With

the passage of time, expected to internalize the content provided beforehand, students can finish these tasks autonomously. According to researchers and scholars' studies, this paper summarizes seven roles which should be played by teachers especially L2 teachers in the scaffolding instruction. The seven roles for the L2 teachers are respectively the guide, the promoter, the psychological counselor, the coordinator, the cooperator, the resource provider and the assessor.

The most important goals of L2 teaching are the cultivation of autonomous learning ability, so are the scaffolding instruction. The mode of the scaffolding assistance doesn't mean to weaken the role of teachers; on the contrary, the higher and updated requirements are set forth for the teachers in the classroom. Assistance in the ZPD functions most effectively when it is tailored to the learner, adapted and eventually withdrawn in response to learner development (Lantolf and Aljaafreh, 1996). Therefore, teachers firstly are practitioners of the teaching mode who constantly reflect on the advantages and disadvantages of their behaviors in the teaching process and then gradually improve their knowledge and teaching level; secondly, teachers should apply the concept of autonomous learning in the teaching with building a "scaffold", fully mobilize students' learning initiative and enthusiasm, strive to explore the proper time for the construction and the withdrawing of the scaffold for each individual.

Only do L2 teachers fully realize the significance of their roles in this mode, playing appropriately the seven roles in the scaffolding teaching, they can adapt to the development of new teaching mode.

Finally, there are still numerous questions should be researched about the ZPD and the scaffolding instruction: What support is needed to help students move toward independent functioning? How can support be provided and withdrawn so as to provide a developmentally appropriate challenge? How do students make use of textual and interactional resources as scaffolds as they begin to make use of the new forms or strategies? How do learners assist one another, and how can student–student support be guided so that it is maximally useful? Only teachers fully realize the importance of their role, play their role in the scaffolding teaching, to adapt to the development of new teaching mode (Ohta, 2005). They are all the interesting problems needed investigation and exploration.

Acknowledgements

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