

Applicability of Vygotsky's contributions to the Teaching-Learning of English as a Foreign Language

La aplicabilidad de los aportes de Vygotsky a la Enseñanza-Aprendizaje del Inglés como Lengua Extranjera

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ABSTRACT

Teaching a foreign language is a difficult task to accomplish. Its level of complexity raises according to the context it occurs and the students' ages. That's why, it is a concern to the context of the School of Foreign Language Education from the University of Pedagogical Sciences Enrique José Varona; specifically, to the research project "The improvement of the teaching of English in Primary, High School and Higher Education". Its objective is to communicate how to apply Vygotsky's contributions to the teaching-learning process of English. To accomplish the objective, some principles and activities that can be used under the grounds of his theory are shown. Methods, such as analysis-synthesis, induction-deduction, document study, and non-structured interview have been used, allowing to systematize the theory in question and take a pedagogical stance in this respect. The theoretical findings let the authors reveal how useful the historical-cultural theory is to the teaching-learning process of English as a foreign language.

Key words: Theory, historical-cultural, principles, activities, pedagogical stance

RESUMEN

Enseñar una lengua extranjera siempre ha sido una tarea difícil de realizar. Su nivel de complejidad aumenta en función del contexto en el que se produce y de la edad de los alumnos. Por ello, constituye preocupación en el contexto de la Facultad de Educación en Lenguas Extranjeras de la Universidad de Ciencias Pedagógicas Enrique José Varona; específicamente, al proyecto de investigación "El perfeccionamiento de la enseñanza del Inglés en las Educaciones Primaria, Media y Superior". Su objetivo es comunicar cómo aplicar los aportes de Vygotsky al proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés. Para cumplir el objetivo, se muestran algunos principios y actividades que pueden ser utilizadas bajo los cimientos de esta teoría. Métodos, como el análisis-síntesis, la inducción-deducción, el estudio documental y la entrevista no estructurada, se han empleado, permitiendo sistematizar la teoría en cuestión y tomar una posición pedagógica al respecto. Los hallazgos teóricos permitieron a los autores revelar cuán útil es la teoría histórico-cultural para el proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje del inglés como lengua extranjera.

Palabras clave: Teoría, histórico-cultural, principios, actividad, posición pedagógica

Introduction

Teaching a foreign language has always been a difficult task to accomplish. Its level of complexity rises depending on the context it occurs and how old trainees are. In this regard, many researchers have devoted time to its study, showing different learning paradigms, approaches, methodologies and even procedures that can be adapted to those approaches or methodologies, which are part of a particular paradigm.

Some psychological or learning paradigms have been created through centuries; such as, Behaviorism, Cognitive Scientist, Interactive, Constructivism, Social Constructivism, and The Historical-Cultural one, among others. In this sense, the latter is the one that has been implemented in the Cuban pedagogical context during the last three decades.

However, some of its contributions are still unknown by many English teachers. That is why, one of the tasks of the research project is directed to systematize some of the main contributions to language teaching resulting from the historical-cultural theory created by the Russian Psychologist Lev Semionovich Vygotsky (1986-1934). The findings of this study can be considered important to the language teaching community since a brief scientific outcome like this, may let them understand what best pedagogical practices may be implemented.

Several researchers have devoted time to the study of this theory; for example, Umaña (2019) studied its contribution to dialectical modeling of statistics, using the genetic law as starting point. Ortiz (2021) expressed the way educational research may be increased by the use of this theory. This author emphasized the epistemological problem that affect the scientific accuracy as well as their practical and educational values.

On the other hand, García y Bustos (2021), although did not focus their work on the study of historical-cultural approach, they mentioned some of its features in the self-regulation of learning in pandemic times.

In this current year, other authors, such Alberteris, Rodríguez, Cañizares (2023); Chumaña & Arcia (2023); Fernández (2023); Küster, Gómez, Morón (2023); Liu & Cuba (2023); Martín & Mora (2023); Oñate, Urtubia, Pairicán, Nocett (2023), and Vásquez (2023), among others, studied different approaches from foreign language teaching; nevertheless, they did not embrace Vygotsky's theory.

Focusing on Cuban English teachers, it can be stated that although many have researched Vygotsky's studies, they just intentionally used the Zone of Proximal Development and the Mediation Theory. Other contributions, such as the internalization process, the game theory and the interrelation between the development of thought and language are not taken into consideration. Thus, it shows the necessity to go into this topic.

Based on the previous statement, the research problem to solve is the lack of knowledge English teachers show of certain contents implied in the historical-cultural theory, which could have been put into practice to enhance foreign language teaching. Considering this problem, the object of research of this study is Vygotsky's historical-cultural theory.

To solve the previous problem, the following hypothesis is declared: a conscious study, based on scientific methods that allow a deep theoretical systematization of Vygotsky's historical-cultural theory, can enrich English teachers' knowledge of its contributions so as to be implemented in the pedagogical professional practice.

Thus, the objective of this paper is to communicate how to apply Vygotsky's contributions to the teaching-learning process of English.

Material and methods

This study had a qualitative approach since it focused on a theoretical systematization. It also had a descriptive reach because the findings show the main features of the historical-cultural theory, its contributions to language teaching without trying to understand the causes of its origin. It means, then, that this was a non-experimental study since the authors neither manipulated variables nor set control groups.

To accomplish the objective declared, first of all, 20 scientific papers from the Master's degree program Didactics of Foreign Languages were studied with the purpose of knowing the stance taken in relation to Vygotsky's theory and the way this author's contributions were implemented in the teaching-learning process by means of their scientific proposals. This permitted the authors confirm the need to continue with this study.

Likewise, a non-structure interview to 15 English teachers, with more than 10 years' experience as teacher trainer, was applied in order to know to what extent Vygotsky's theory was adopted to teach students from different levels of education. As a result, 100% of teachers just know how to apply the Zone of Proximal Development and the Mediation theory. Likewise, in the 50% of the total, they were implemented unconsciously.

Then, the scientific method analysis-synthesis was applied to interpret the information and reach theoretical conclusions with regard to Vygotsky's contributions. Besides, induction-deduction allowed the authors to determine essential contents within the theory in question, going from the particular to the general aspects of it and vice versa.

Outcomes

One of the findings in relation to Vygotsky's contributions, that can be put into practice to language teaching, is the principles (1978a) that may be applied, those are as follows:

- The active construction of meaning: It is based on the idea that experiences or concepts that are encountered for the first time undergo one of two processes: assimilation, subsuming a new idea into an existing schema, or accommodation, creating new schema to contain novel information. This organization and reorganization take place constantly within the human mind, thus learning and development build on themselves to create more complex cognitive structures.
- Social influences on construction. It emphasizes that learning and development are socially situated activities that are enhanced in meaningful contexts.
- Importance of self-regulatory practices: This principle highlights the role of self-regulation in learning and development, providing the capability of individuals to control their thoughts, feelings, motivations and actions.
- The role of mental operations: It declares that individuals are capable of formalize operations and abstract thought, and to solve complex problems. People must first determine what skills or information are relevant to find the solution.

Other contributions are listed below:

- The internalization process (1979)

It is a process of cultural, scientific, technological and valuation internalization, which revolutionize and reorganize constantly the psychological activity. It is shown through a progressive control, regulation and mastery of oneself; behavior that is evidenced in a sociocultural context.

It is understood as the process that involves the transformation of social phenomena into psychological ones by means of tools and signs. It means that a social experience (colloquial language) is gradually transformed into intellectual language use (thoughts), and it has as intermediate stage the egocentric language. In the meantime, autonomy and independence are developed; which are then mentally declared in an abstract aspect.

- The game theory (1978a)

Abstract meaning can be elaborated through games, separated from objects; which presupposes a critical feature in the development of higher mental functions. By means of games, social rules, self-regulation and self-control are acquired.

Several types of games can be implemented in the teaching learning process of English according to the age and level of assimilation of the students. For example:

- Roles with arguments; which constitute a reflex of reality.
- Dramatization game; which are conditioned by an argument and may represent a play.
- Didactic games; in which some tasks are ordered and its solution demands attention, mental effort, skills, sequence of actions, and assimilation of rules with an instructive character.
- Table games; which allow students to find solutions in puzzles.
- Linguistic games; which embrace a variety of games. For instance, observation game allows the students to analyze the context of interaction. Conversation game is a good alternative to develop oral skills. Invention game is a proper to develop creativity while solving non-real situations by means of imaginary questions. Narrative games are based on tales, and let the students be creative. Vocabulary game; which focuses on enriching lexical area.

- The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

It has been defined as “the distance between the current 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). So, it is related to the current skills and the potential to develop. The former (first level) consist of working and solving tasks or problems without any help (current development). The forerunner of this theory used the term *scaffolding* to make reference to the temporary support provided by others; may be the teacher, another student, the group, a friend, or a family member. It means that collaborative learning, discourse, modelling, and scaffolding are strategies for supporting the intellectual knowledge and skills of learners and facilitating intentional learning.

Considering the previous information, the authors of this paper agree with the statements of Kozulin, Gindis, Agueyev, and Miller (2003, p.17), in relation to the important insights to the issue of dynamic testing the notion of ZPD gives; They are:

- It focuses the attention on those psychological functions of the learner that are emerging at a given moment but that have not yet been fully developed;
- it introduces assisted performance as a legitimate parameter of assessment procedure;
- it helps to conceptualize the difference between the level of actual performance and the learning potential.

- Mediated Learning (1986)

It stipulates that the development of the learner's higher mental processes depends on the presence of mediating agents in the learner's interaction with the environment. Agents of mediation may be human or symbolic. In the former, three aspects may be considered: apprenticeship, guided participation, and appropriation. The first one provides a model of community activities that mediates sociocultural patterns, the second one covers the interpersonal aspect, while the third one relates to changes occurring in the learning due to the interaction in mediated activities.

The second agent (symbolic) refers to different signs, symbols, writing, formulae, and graphic organizers; however, its acquisition requires guided experience because it does not appear spontaneously, and these symbolic tools derive their meaning only from the cultural conventions that engendered them. Both agents of mediation focus mostly on culture-specific interactions.

In the teaching learning process of English as a foreign language, mediation is applied by means of communicative interaction among: teacher-student; student-student; student-group; student-communicative tasks that allow the interaction with oral and written texts; student-didactic aids that encourage partial search of information and research, as well as the appropriation of linguo-communicative knowledge, as a way to develop communicative competence through systemic, systematic and distinguished practice of communicative functions. Hence, a creative, conscious and developmental process may be applied as they reach higher levels of cognitive independence.

- Interrelation between the development of thought and language (1978b, 1986)

This conception embraces the explicit and profound interconnection between oral speech and the development of mental concepts. Thus, it asserts the intervention of language in the cognitive, metacognitive process, and the development of personality, creating certain dependence on the context the interaction occurs. It means that the language enhances social communication and intellect development as well through practical activity and mediation.

Based on the previous statement, it is incorrect to assume thinking and speech as two isolated elements, they are linked. Although they have different genetic roots, in certain moments of development both lines are intertwined to form a new way of behavior; let's state, verbal thinking and rational language.

Discussion

Based on the principles stated and the conception of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, learning a foreign language from this perspective requires self-regulation and building conceptual structures through reflection and abstraction. Problems are not solved by the

retrieval of rote-learned “right” answers, it must be considered as an obstacle that obstructs one’s progress towards a goal. So, some positive aspects can be expressed:

- The importance conferred upon the active character of human beings in the construction of knowledge
- The role of previous knowledge in the construction of new one.
- The internalization process as a way of development.
- The study of thought method and the experimental tasks used to study it.

As limitations can be mentioned the following:

- The spontaneity of intellectual and psychic development in the construction of knowledge.
- The intellectualism when understanding the psychological factors in human beings.

Vygotsky’s contributions are closely linked to foreign language learning and teaching because he proposes that learning takes place in the interaction between people and the environment, without denying the cognitive role. The author further explains that cultural and social heritages are assimilated by acquiring knowledge through contacts and interactions with people as the first step – referred as interpsychological plane, and then later assimilates and internalizes this knowledge adding own personal value to it – referred as intrapsychological plane. In addition, he also claims that students are not copying the teachers’ capabilities, but transforming what the teacher offers them during the processes of appropriation. Learners should learn to discover principles, concepts and facts by themselves; hence, they encourage and promote the guesswork and intuitive thinking in learners.

Moreover, Vygotsky (1978) believes that learning is a continual movement from the current intellectual level to a higher level which more closely approximates the learner’s potential. This movement occurs in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) as a result of social interaction.

As can be understood, learning a foreign language results from an involvement in the act, that is to say, learning rarely occurs if the one who learns is not engaged in the process. In this sense, learning English implies communication with others and involves cognitive, cultural and language processes. A classroom with diverse learners can be a great challenge because cultural, social and learning differences may influence the students’ ability to be successful communicatively.

To cope with this; for instance, Vygotsky emphasized on reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, cognitive learning, problem-based instruction, web quests, problem-solving teaching, anchored instruction, and other methods that involve learning with others. That is why his theory is considered one of the psychological fundamentals of communicative language teaching. Thus, every activity compatible with a communicative approach which enables learners to attain the communicative objectives of the curriculum, engages learners in communication, and requires the use of such communicative processes as information sharing, negotiation of meaning, and interaction.

In this sense, two major activity types are applied: functional communicative activities and social interaction activities. Both types match the historical-cultural theory since the former

includes such tasks as learners comparing sets of pictures and noting similarities and differences; working likely out sequence of events in a set of pictures; discovering missing features in a map or a picture; giving instructions on how to draw a picture or how to complete a map; following directions; and solving problems from shared clues.

Social interaction activities include conversations and discussion sessions, dialogues and role plays, simulations, skits, improvisations, and debates. In this sense, it is true that there is a vast list of different types of activities that foster learners' communicative competence, but the suitable ones are focused on a functional and an interactional view; which defines the language as a vehicle for the realization of interpersonal relations and for the performance of social transactions between individuals. In this case, the target of the language teaching is interaction analysis, conversations and ethnomethodology as well as semantic and communicative dimension. It means the methodological conceptions used are communicative approach, task-based Language teaching, cooperative learning, problem-solving, and content-based learning.

Under the grounds of the previous conceptions, some didactic methods are used; such those of the problem-solving teaching, independent work and practical-conscious method. The former allows to apply problem exposition; which is based on declaring a problem, show the way to be solved through thinking models, revealing its logic from the contradictions it implies, pointing out the source of the problem and arguing each step in the search of information. This way, the students internalize knowledge, the problem it contains and the best way to be solved. In the context of this study, the problems to solve are basically communicative. In language teaching, this method is applied through dialogued and monologued problem exposition.

Another method is partial search. In this case, the teacher evidences all the elements of the communicative problem without its completely solution in order to encourage the students to search independently.

Heuristic conversation is a method based on dialogue. It is caused by declaring a problem and letting the students participate actively, productively and creatively. This method can be applied as a previous step with that of partial search in documents or different sources to favor the exchange or critical analysis of information.

Research method is related to the experience acquisition of creative activity and the proper approach to science methods. Its objective is to teach how knowledge can be acquired and communicative problems can be solved independently. This is the moment to ask the students to work on their own finding lexical and grammatical rules as a way to master the system of the English language, reading books, paper, essays, listening to materials or even watching films consciously to infer how to be coherent and cohesive in speech.

On the other hand, independent work, as teaching method, play an important role to guarantee developmental learning. It requires two principles; systematic increasing of tasks complexity as well as increasing activity and independence.

In language teaching, those principles are evidenced in the accomplishment of the teaching-learning cycle, since the recognition stage to the spontaneous creation, process that allows students to do tasks that promote search of information and development of communicative skills along with research. It is a process in which students may apply different strategies; such as, cognitive, metacognitive, communicative, as a way to learn how to learn and reach

higher levels of independence as they are able to work at their own pace to accomplish all tasks assigned.

In relation to practical-conscious method, which principles constitutes theoretical bases of communicative approach, and which is held in the dialectical-material conception based on Vygotsky's theory, it is essential since it considers a foreign language an instrumental mediator to develop a comprehensive general culture.

It declares language as a way to convey ideas, feelings, emotions in sociocultural contexts. Its premise is the conscious approach in language learning and its comprehension by means of practical activity. Based on this, this is an approach that assumes:

- Oral meanings as main means and starting point of teaching, no matter what the objective is.
- The use of productive procedures with a great support on didactic aids.
- Specific determination of the sequence to consider in order to develop communicative skills: provide the students with information about the linguistic contents to study; practice the contents systematically to keep information in the memory and develop linguistic habits; do significant tasks related to the four verbal activity areas, that make the students produce and create in the process of conveying meaning.

In order to implement all previous methodological conceptions under the ground of Vygotsky's historical-cultural theory, some exercises, activities and tasks must be used. In this sense, the authors of this paper assume that former deals with habits training, the second one with skill development, and the latter with problem-solving.

Examples of exercises are as follows:

- Open dialogues, in which the student must finish it part by part.
- Ordering sentences within a text.
- Crossing elements that do not belong to a list.
- Grouping lexical areas together.
- Solving puzzles.
- Repeating to practice articulation, stress, intonation and fluency.
- Transposing dialogues.
- Narrating, step by step, a dialogue previously studied.
- Imitating communicative situations.
- Changing text construction by means of synonyms and antonyms.
- Translating simple dialogues or texts.
- Examples of activities are the following:
 - Transferring information in dialogues and monologues.
 - Describing sequence of actions.
 - Narrating events that have not been studied.
 - Expressing likes and dislikes, feelings or attitudes in response to a given situation.

- Completing stories.
- Arguing to justify an opinion.
- Summing up stories or events.
- Translating academic texts.
- Games.

Examples of tasks are listed below:

- Sharing personal experiences in a way that allows free interaction.
- Making decisions in problem-solving situations by means of negotiation and discussion.
- Exchanging information, in which each viewpoint is expressed and there is no need to get into an agreement.
- Doing jigsaw, combining different parts of the information to form a new one.
- Creating events that have not occurred.
- Describing complex processes by using linking words, connectors and transitions.
- Hypothesizing and comparing solutions to problems under the grounds of logical basis of their judgement.

As a conclusion, it can be stated that Vygotsky's contributions with regards to the historical-cultural approach are closely connected to foreign language learning and teaching. Its conscious systematization and implementation in the pedagogical professional practice take communication as a means and as a goal, using methodological conceptions; such as, task-based learning, communicative approach, or problem-solving, among others.

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