

FORUM

Pursuing Vygotsky's Dialectical Approach to Pedagogy and Development: A Response to Kellogg

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a widely recognized construct articulated by L. S. Vygotsky, whose scholarship inspires the approach to L2 research known as Sociocultural Theory (SCT). In a synthesis of North American L2 ZPD work, Kinginger (2002) outlined how the construct had been appropriated, focusing on three interpretations then permeating the field: skill mastery, scaffolding, and metalinguistic knowledge. Kellogg (2017) has argued that L2 research in general consistently misuses the ZPD construct and distorts its original meaning. Citing *The Problem of Age* (Vygotsky 1998), Kellogg claims that the ZPD was intended to model ontogenetic development from birth to around age 17. Consequently, for Kellogg, L2 research commits three fundamental errors: (i) recruiting adult learners (often undergraduate university students) rather than children; (ii) focusing on microgenesis (in some cases within a single interaction) rather than ontogenesis; and (iii) scrutinizing pedagogical 'scaffolding' which yields learning rather than development. To move 'beyond pedagogical interpretations', Kellogg contends that the ZPD should be invoked only in discussions of transitions across age-period 'crises' during childhood; this would seemingly align with Vygotsky's *The Problem of Age* and would avoid confusing development with learning. Curiously, Kellogg regards acquisition of an L2 as decidedly non-developmental in adults, but suggests that this might not hold for children. However, he fails to explain precisely how the age of the learner formally studying an L2 is important with regard to acquisition versus development.

We appreciate the value of engagement with multiple interpretations of groundbreaking intellectual work. New readings of Vygotsky are inevitable given the increasing availability and improved translation of his writings. However, studying a theory as influential as Vygotsky's also carries a modicum

of risk, including 'doctrinal' readings that proscribe further development of the theory or privileging a given text or passage as sacred rather than understanding it in context. One need not follow to the letter Vygotsky's particular comments concerning general psychology to engage in the research and educational activism he championed, especially when adapting his ideas to contemporary circumstances (Holzman 2009; Stetsenko 2016).

Our research extends Vygotsky's ideas into L2 studies to understand developmental processes as individuals appropriate new semiotic systems and to design educational environments accordingly. We appreciate Vygotsky's ambition to create a unified, scientific psychology, as outlined explicitly in *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology* (Vygotsky 1997b). For Vygotsky, general psychology required theoretical principles to account for human consciousness and its development. In our view, and we see no reason why Vygotsky would disagree, this includes language and the development of language abilities (first and additional). Moreover, Vygotsky's commitment to formal schooling as a privileged context for development and his conviction that special forms of development are possible through appropriately organized academic pursuits are evident in numerous works, including the textbook prepared from his lectures for teachers, *Educational Psychology* (Vygotsky 1997a), and his masterwork, *Thinking and Speech* (Vygotsky 1987). L2 SCT researchers, ourselves among them, continue Vygotsky's efforts to establish a scientific psychology on dialectical principles by applying the theory to problems that Vygotsky himself did not directly address. These principles include the significance assigned to the ZPD in all educational contexts.

2. VYGOTSKY AS EMPIRICAL RESEARCHER AND *METHODOLOGIST*

Davydov and Radzikhovskii (1985) noted that while one may admire Vygotsky's empirical research, particularly with young children and learners with special needs, his efforts to elaborate a general psychology underscore his importance as a *methodologist* who sought to establish principles to guide the study of consciousness. Vygotsky found his general methodology in dialectical materialism (Lantolf and Poehner 2014). Just as dialectics guided Marx's theory of political economy, Vygotsky adopted a dialectical orientation in building a psychology to account for human consciousness. This required examining consciousness not in its fully developed state but through the processes of its formation. Thus, much of Vygotsky's empirical work explored children's developing control, through semiotic means, over psychological functions such as attention and memory and their unification in the higher psychological system of consciousness (van der Veer and Valsiner 1991). According to John-Steiner and Souberman (1978, p. 128):

to view this great Russian psychologist as primarily a student of child development would be an error; he emphasized the study of

development because he believed it to be the primary theoretical and methodological means necessary to unravel complex human processes, a view of human psychology that distinguishes him from his and our contemporaries. There was, for him, no real distinction between developmental psychology and basic psychological inquiry.

Vygotsky (1990) was also intrigued by cases in which ‘normal’ development had not occurred; his groundbreaking work with special needs individuals led to differentiating biological from ‘secondary’ problems arising from social environments. A. R. Luria (1973) extended this line of research to diagnosing and rehabilitating loss of psychological functions among adults who had suffered severe cerebral trauma. Indeed, it was Luria (1961) who first introduced the ZPD to Western psychologists, with no mention of age periods; instead, he discussed the value of the ZPD in differentiating learners whose difficulties stemmed from, for example, their home environment versus biological causes.

Vygotsky’s scientific research was linked with efforts to improve lives, particularly, as he insisted, through education. Vygotsky (1997b, p. 88) understood education as proposing a unique form of ‘artificial’ development organized around specific sets of systematic academic knowledge. Indeed, Vygotsky (1997a, p. 1) characterizes education as ‘deliberate, organized, and prolonged effort to influence the development of an individual’. His interest in life-long development is clearly illustrated through the cross-cultural investigation of the effects of education on thinking carried out by Luria (1976) in Uzbekistan. This well-known study was further elaborated by Scribner and Cole (1981) among the Vai people of Liberia, by Saxe (1982) among the Oksapmin of Papua New Guinea, and by Tulviste (1991) among the rural population of Kirghizia. This research demonstrates that psychological functioning does indeed develop in adults as they internalize new and/or more sophisticated psychological tools (e.g. scientific concepts) through education.

3. SCT AND L2 PEDAGOGY AND DEVELOPMENT

Kellogg’s (2017) concern with L2 research invoking the ZPD derives from his view that SCT is rooted in ontogenesis, understood strictly in terms of child development. However, to build general psychology, Vygotsky’s theory accounted for development across all timescales, including ontogenesis, sociogenesis, and phylogenesis. Moreover, Vygotsky clearly recognized the importance of microgenesis for a theory of development. To our knowledge, the term does not appear in Vygotsky’s writings but was introduced by Wertsch (1985). Nonetheless, Vygotsky (1978, p. 61) notes the following in his discussion of development:

The development in question can be limited to only a few seconds, or even fractions of seconds (as in the case of normal perception). It

can also (as in the case of complex mental processes) last many days and even weeks.

Elsewhere, in describing imitation as a key developmental mechanism, Vygotsky (1987, p. 210) explained that something can be ‘learned suddenly—once and forever’. Thus, while Vygotsky (1987) distinguished development from the learning of, say, a discrete skill (e.g. riding a bicycle), as Kellogg (2017) observes, there is no reason to suggest that learning and development are processes operating on different timescales. When Kellogg chides L2 researchers for taking literally Vygotsky’s (1978) statement that what an individual can do through cooperation today she can do independently tomorrow, he apparently dismisses this possibility. Like Vygotsky, we neither limit development to processes that occur over a 24-hour period nor do we exclude the possibility that development might occur much more quickly. More importantly, Vygotsky viewed learning and development as intertwined, irrespective of the focal timescale: ‘learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological functions’ (Vygotsky 1978, p. 90). Therefore, Kellogg’s dismissal of L2 *learning* research as irrelevant to *developmental* research is misguided.

Our work follows Vygotsky’s emphasis on *obuchenie*, or teaching-learning activity that leads development. While Kellogg (2017) charges that Kinginger et al. (2016) and van Compernelle and Williams (2012) confuse development with learning, he obscures the dialectic relation between teaching-learning and development that is central to Vygotsky’s thinking. Rather than simple scaffolding leading to correct responses, the study abroad home-stay interactions analyzed by Kinginger et al. demonstrate how host families organize speech events and offer mediation that pushes even novice L2 learners to make creative, often idiosyncratic, use of communicative resources in their new cultural settings. Kellogg (2017, p. 3) regards this as ‘almost the reverse’ of van Compernelle and Williams’ (2012) study of classroom L2 French learners attempting to understand the variable use of the negative particle *ne*. This teaching-learning activity began with learners imitating the linguistic behavior of dropping the particle; only after engagement with appropriate conceptual explanations and materials did they develop the socio-pragmatic understanding necessary to interpret and control their use or omission of *ne*. These and other studies (see Lantolf & Poehner 2014) do indeed consider L2 development in relation to pedagogy, a process that entails appropriation of conceptual knowledge and ways of thinking employed to regulate L2 comprehension and production.

Furthermore, Kellogg claims, without evidence, that learning a foreign language is different from learning scientific concepts in a lecture hall. Without question, for Vygotsky (1987) educational development must be grounded in scientific understanding of the object of study, and second languages are no exception. The argument that we have made for more than 10 years, however,

is that in the case of language instruction the challenge is to link conceptual understanding with communicative performance to enhance that performance and to enable learners to use the new language in creative ways rather than simply adhering to native speaker norms. This, in our view, clearly entails development rather than learning. Systematic, concept-based conscious awareness of meaningful patterns is precisely what allows speakers to use any semiotic system thoughtfully and deliberately. This is also precisely what high-quality, properly organized pedagogy inspired by Vygotsky's ZPD concept can encourage.

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