



## VYGOTSKY'S SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT AND INTERACTION THEORY: IMPLICATIONS TO THE TEACHING OF THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE CURRICULUM IN KENYA

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### Abstract:

Language is very important in our lives. Through language, we convey our feelings, desires, and thoughts. Of importance is English language in Kenya which is the medium of instruction from upper primary school and beyond. English is taught as a Second Language in schools in Kenya and has implications to the school curriculum and education in general. This paper is a discussion of the Social Development and Interaction theory advanced by Vygotsky (1978) and its implications for English language teaching in Kenya. This theory formed the theoretical framework for a study that looked at the teaching of English oral communication skills in upper primary school in a particular district in Kenya in the year 2009. This paper is drawn from part of the literature review that guided the study and the recommendations that the study arrived at. The study utilized a qualitative research approach with a heuristic methodology. The research population consisted of primary school teachers teaching English in upper primary classes and standard six pupils. Data was collected using structured and focused group interview schedules, observation checklists, and document analysis. In the light of the findings, the study concluded that the kind of new language items, learning activities and methods of conveying the meaning of new language items that the teachers selected were inadequate and ineffective in enhancing interaction. So were the practice activities adopted by the teachers and the strategies used in motivating learners in the teaching and learning of oral communication skills.

The argument advanced in this paper is that effective teaching of English language in Kenya demands an interactive approach. In other words, English teachers should use interactive strategies in their teaching because as Vygotsky (1978) argues, children learn language best through interaction.

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**Keywords:** English language, interaction, teaching, Kenya

## 1. Introduction

English is taught in schools in Kenya as a Second Language and it's very significant in education in the country as it's the medium of instruction from upper primary school and beyond (Syomwene, 2010). This paper is a discussion of the Social Development and Interaction theory advanced by Vygotsky (1978) and its implications for English language teaching in Kenya. This theory formed the theoretical framework for a study that looked at the teaching of English oral communication skills in upper primary school in a particular district in Kenya in the year 2009. This paper is drawn from part of the literature review that guided the study and the recommendations that the study arrived at. The study utilized a qualitative research approach with a heuristic methodology. The research population consisted of primary school teachers teaching English in upper primary classes and standard six pupils. Data was collected using structured and focused group interview schedules, observation checklists, and document analysis. In the light of the findings, the study concluded that the kind of new language items, learning activities and methods of conveying the meaning of new language items that the teachers selected were inadequate and ineffective in enhancing interaction. So were the practice activities adopted by the teachers and the strategies used in motivating learners in the teaching and learning of oral communication skills.

Based on the Social Development and Interaction theory, this paper proposes the need for English language teachers in Kenya to maximize the interaction between the teacher, learners, and the learning tasks during English language lessons for effective teaching of the subject.

## 2. An Overview of Vygotsky's Social Development and Interaction Theory

Vygotsky (1978) social development and interaction theory asserts that interactions with the surrounding culture and social agents such as parents, teachers, and peers that are more competent contribute significantly to a child's intellectual development.

Accordingly, to Vygotsky (1978) cognitive development is as a result of interaction. Vygotsky (1978) argues that cognitive development results from a dialectical process whereby a child learns through problem-solving experiences shared with someone else, usually, a parent, a peer or a sibling. Initially, the person interacting with the child assumes most of the responsibility for guiding the problem solving but gradually the responsibility transfers to the child.

Based on this theory, Vygotsky (1978) advanced the concept of Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). This is the difference between what a child can do on his/her own and what the child can do with help. In other words, it is the difference between the child's capacity to solve problems on his/her own and his/her capacity to solve them with assistance. It is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. The actual development level refers to all the functions and activities that a child can perform on his or her own, independently and without the help of anyone else. According to Vygotsky (1978), the full development of ZPD depends on upon full social interaction.

Scaffolding is an important concept in Vygotsky's theory too. This involves the instructor or advanced peer working to support the development of the learner. According to Vygotsky (1978), the instructor should guide the learner in such a way that the gap is bridged between the learner's current skill levels and the desired skill levels. As learners become more proficient and able to complete tasks on their own, they certainly do without assistance and the guidance can be withdrawn. Scaffolding requires that the teacher provides the students with the opportunity to extend their current skills and knowledge. The teacher must engage students' interest, simplify tasks so that they are manageable and motivate students to pursue the instructional goals.

Scaffolding and effective teaching are effective strategies to access the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). The teacher must look for discrepancies between students' efforts and the solution, control for frustration and risk and model an idealized version of the act (Vygotsky, 1978). One way to scaffold instruction for English language learners is to provide learning tasks, materials and a variety of verbal and academic supports, both from the teacher and more proficient peers so that students are able to meaningfully engage in content and acquire the necessary language and academic skills necessary for independent learning.

To Vygotsky, a clear understanding of the interrelations between thought and language is necessary for the understanding of intellectual development. Language is not merely an expression of the knowledge the child has acquired. There is a fundamental correspondence between thought and speech in terms of one providing the resource to the other; language becoming essential in forming thought and determining personality features. Language is a crucial tool for determining how the child will learn how to think because advanced modes of thought are transmitted to the child by means of words.

For Vygotsky, language has a particular role in learning and development. By acquiring a language, a child is provided the means to think in new ways and gains a new cognitive tool for making sense of the world. The implication of Vygotsky's theory to the teaching and learning process is that since children learn through interaction, the curriculum should be designed to allow interaction between learners and the learning situation. Vygotsky's theory requires that students and teachers play untraditional roles and collaborate with each other. Instead of a teacher dictating his/her meaning to students for future recitation, a teacher should collaborate with his/her students to create meaning in ways through which students can understand on their own.

Learning should be a reciprocal experience for the students and the teacher. On the other hand, instruction should be designed to reach a developmental level that is just above the students' current development level.

### **3. Implications of the Social Development and Interaction Theory to English Language teaching in Kenya**

A language is a primary form of interaction through which adults transmit to the children the rich body of knowledge that exists in a culture (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), children learn language best through interaction. Language acquisition is strongly facilitated by the use of the target language in interaction. This section presents a discussion of how English language teachers can effect interaction in their teaching as proposed in the theory.

Teachers of English need to create a friendly atmosphere in the classrooms. This way, the learners will feel free to participate in the teaching/ learning process. A free and light-hearted atmosphere promotes communication while a nervous and stiff atmosphere builds invisible obstacles in communication. Vygotsky (1978) argues that in language learning, the authenticity of the environment and the affinity between its participants are essential elements to make the learner feel part of his environment.

In favor of this, Krashen and Terrel (1988) postulates that teachers must create a favorable environment to language acquisition by lowering the anxiety level of students, establishing a good rapport with the teacher and a good relationship with other students. Otherwise, learners will feel uncomfortable and insecure which will further induce a psychological barrier to communication and learn (Hussin et al, 2001). Anxiety is often related to a sense of threat to the learner's self-concept in the learning situation, for example, if a learner fears being ridiculed for a mistake.

The new language items selected by the teachers for English lessons should be simple, familiar to the pupils and frequent in their everyday lives. The language items that are familiar to the pupils should be selected because they are applicable in pupils' everyday lives (Syomwene, 2010). Schwartz (1998) argues that teachers should model listening strategies and provide listening practice in authentic situations: those that learners are likely to encounter when they use the language outside the classroom. Baker and Westrup (2000) concur with this and observe that communicative methods work best if the teacher uses realistic activities based on situations which students experience in their lives.

Lile (2002) advocates that teachers should select material that is relevant to the students. They should use vocabulary that the students can relate to and material they would find interesting. The familiarity of the language items by pupils and frequency in pupils' everyday life are important factors considering the objectives of teaching English in schools in Kenya that learners should be able to communicate fluently, independently and accurately in everyday life (KIE, 2006).

In addition, teachers should not restrict themselves to the new language items available in the course books (Syomwene, 2010). Baker and Westrup (2000) concur with this and observe that course books contain exercises and activities that reflect different views of language and teaching methods. However, in order for teachers to consider and respond to the needs of the students, they need to select, adapt, reject and supplement the materials in the course books (Belchamber, 2007). The teacher should make additions on the activities that are not in the approved course books. This is because the course books may not contain all the learning experiences that the pupils need (Shiundu & Omulando, 1992). As Gredler (1997) proposes, teachers should know that although a curriculum may be set down for them, it inevitably becomes shaped by them into something personal which reflects their own belief systems, their thoughts, and feelings about both the content and their learners.

For English lessons to be fully interactive, teachers should provide opportunities for the learners to hear and read English. Teachers should provide plenty of reading materials to their pupils to expose them to good English. Of importance too is the need for teachers to sensitize their pupils to communicate in English always when in the school premises or even when out. All teachers should communicate the pupils in English always. During English lessons, the language of instruction should be purely English. In other words, teachers should teach English through English. Using another language in an English lesson reduces pupils' exposure to English language (Baker & Westrup, 2000; Kisilu & Lelei, 2008).

Teachers of English should be perfect role models in their classrooms. The teacher should provide the correct language output for pupils to imitate (Krashen & Terrel, 1988). This calls for the teacher to polish his/her pronunciation and to use tone and intonation patterns appropriately. According to Belchamber (2007), the teacher has a very important role in setting up activities so that communication actually happens. He has to equip students with vocabulary, structures and functions, as well as strategies to enable them to interact successfully.

The teachers should provide the learners with tasks that are both interesting and challenging. Vygotsky's "Zone of Proximal Development" demands that learners be challenged within close proximity to get slightly above their current level of development. By experiencing the successful completion of challenging tasks, learners gain confidence and motivation to embark on more complex challenges. The materials should also be interesting, relevant and adequate (Quist, 2000).

Teachers of English should create self-confidence in their learners. According to Ebata (2008), self-confidence is the most significant in language learning. It provides learners with the motivation and energy to become positive about their own learning. It also creates the drive in them to acquire the targeted language, enjoy the learning process, and experience real communication. It is understood that teacher's personality and behavior towards students have a strong influence (Ebata, 2008). Consequently, this paper recommends that teachers of English should avoid ridiculing the learners or comparing them with their peers and siblings. The teacher should strive to have the learners feel that they have the potential in language learning and can be the best.

Teachers of English should strive to use learner-centered methods of teaching as opposed to teacher-centered methods. Teachers should abandon teacher centered frontally controlled classrooms in favor of learner-centeredness (Belchamber, 2007; Syomwene, 2010). Baker and Westrup (2000) assert that each lesson in English should include a good variety of learning activities to help keep the students interested and motivated to learn better. Teachers should provide a variety of learning activities in order to capture the interest of the learners throughout the lesson.

Hussin et al (2001) believe that teachers can drive students to learn the Second Language and to sustain their interest in language learning if they can provide activities that are interrelated between in-class and out-of-class, communicative and integrative, pleasant, safe and non-threatening, enthusiastic, group-based, meaningful or relevant and challenging. These activities help promote self-confidence, experiences of success, learning satisfaction and good relationships among learners and between teacher and students.

Teachers of English should incorporate a variety of practice activities in the lessons in order to have the learners practice using the language. Practice incorporates Vygotsky's (1978) idea of scaffolding. Scaffolding requires that the teacher provides the students with the opportunity to extend their current skills and knowledge. The significance of practice in the learning process can best be understood by considering the words of Gabler et al (2003). These authors argue that the constructivist learning perspective is best conveyed through an ancient Chinese proverb that *"I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand"*. According to Baker and Westrup (2000), all students of English need to have a lot of practice in using English freely in the classroom to practice using the language they have learnt.

During oral work lessons, this paper proposes the use of such practice activities like dialogues, drama, role play, pair and group work, saying tongue twisters, debates, language games, interviews, discussions among others. Teachers should plan for a practice phase in the lessons during which students can be given time to use the language in communicating with one another (Syomwene, 2010). In reading and writing lessons, this phase should be used to having students engage in reading and writing tasks. Reading tasks are like reading sentences, passages, stories and narratives. Writing tasks include written exercises like rewriting sentences according to instructions, gap filling exercises, using substitution tables to construct sentences, note making, and composition writing.

To achieve a fully interactive classroom, this paper proposes that teachers of English exploit questioning technique in their teaching. Questioning is an influential teaching act in that in the realm of teaching and learning. Afolayan et al (1980), contends that teachers of English should ask questions to encourage pupils to speak and to find out how well they have understood what they have just heard or read. Similarly, learners should be encouraged to ask questions and to answer questions asked by others. Teachers of English can initiate the interaction between themselves, the learners and the learning tasks by asking and answering questions. This is because thoughtful questions can serve to encourage students of any age to think beyond the level of knowledge and comprehension (Gabler et al, 2003).

Asking and answering questions, a form of active learning, is an excellent teaching tool. This is because posing questions to students breaks the monotony of lecturing and increases active participation, understanding, and retention. Teachers should ask questions to encourage learners to speak and to find out how well they have understood what they have heard or read.

Afolayan, et al, (1980) caution that the questions asked should be at the right level. They should neither be too easy nor too difficult. According to Peacock (1990), the

teacher should listen carefully to pupils replies, encourage the pupils who have responded and make use of what has been said to develop the lesson further. In case of a prolonged silence after asking a question, the teacher can prompt and probe pupils. Prompting involves helping pupils to recall relevant information in order to make the question comprehensible in some way.

On the other hand, probing entails encouraging a pupil who has responded to a question with an answer that is abrupt or limited in depth or scope to be explicit and to develop the answer in greater detail. According to Gabler, et al, (2003) probing questions challenge students to think in more depth and to add detail or otherwise build on what they have said.

Another way through which teachers can effect interaction in English language lessons is by conveying the meaning of new language items through explanations, giving examples of sentences, demonstrations and by using a variety of teaching aids like pictures and real objects. Chernoff (1994) provides the advantages of demonstrations in the teaching and learning the process in that they utilize several senses, they stimulate interest, they present ideas and concepts more clearly, they provide direct experiences and that they reinforce learning. On the other hand, pictures and real things help pupils to conceptualize teachers' explanations of abstract ideas (Syomwene, 2010). A class in which learners can see for themselves what things look like and how they work is more interesting than a class in which the teacher only talks about things (Afolayan et al, 1980). Making translations into mother tongue as a way of conveying the meaning of new language items reduces pupils' exposure to English language, it makes pupils over dependent on the teacher and that confusions may arise when the sentence structures of the two languages are different (Baker & Westrup, 2000; KIE, 2006; Kisilu & Lelei, 2008).

#### **4. Conclusion**

Vygotsky's theory of Social Development and Interaction (1978) asserts that full development of Zone of Proximal development (ZPD) depends upon full social interaction. Meaningful human learning takes place in interactive social settings. Consequently, this paper recommends that the English curriculum in schools in Kenya be organized in such a way that it permits the use of purposeful interaction and the use of knowledge in real situations. Students can best learn the Second Language by interacting. The resources used by the teachers like the approved course books should also have this factor married in their approach. The courses offered to teacher trainees at the teacher training colleges should incorporate this factor as well. This way, the



instruction can pave the way for students to reach a developmental level that is just above the students' current developmental levels. The teachers should not only lead the students in knowing but also discovering, inventing and imagining. In addition, by enhancing and improving classroom interactions, the teachers can allow more students to reach their highest educational potential.

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