DEVELOPING SECOND LANGUAGE LITERACY: A VYGOTSKYAN PERSPECTIVE

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Today the theory and insights of the Soviet psycholinguist Vygotsky and of his colleagues, students, and followers increasingly influence our understanding about how people learn (Bruner; Wertsch, *Vygotsky* and *Culture*). Vygotsky's work explored the dialectal relationship between society and language and the relationship of that totality—that is, society-and-language—with the development of the human mind (Bruner, 137). That intricate relationship becomes even more problematical when we consider the development of students' writing competence in their second or other language, English. Vygotsky gives us a new way to apprehend the relationships between speaking and writing, speaking and thinking, and writing and thinking. Understanding language and cognition through a Vygotskyan perspective will aid us as we seek to facilitate the development of literacy in a second language in college as well as other levels of writing. To begin with, let us consider some of the main principles or concepts of Vygotsky's work on the relationship of language and cognition. We will need first to look at speaking as it leads to writing.

LANGUAGE AS MEDIATION

One main Vygotskyan concept is *mediation* (Wertsch, *Vygotsky*). For Vygotsky and the later Soviet psycholinguists, language serves to put things into categories. Our language provides us with the categories of our culture. This sense of language creating the way we can interpret our world is not unlike the Whorf hypothesis—in its strong form, that hypothesis says that language determines culture. The child is presented with the categories of her culture through the language used by the people she interacts with. However, the strong Whorf hypothesis does not account for the dialectical interrelation of language and culture, as does Vygotsky.

Consider then what happens to the second language learner. She has to apprehend a new culture, but does not have the language with which to do it. And she has to acquire a new language to mediate her wants and needs in society but does not have the access to social interaction by which to develop that mediational tool. It's complicated. We need to be competent in the second language to use it to interpret (mediate) the world; we need to use the second language for mediation in order to become competent in it.

We know that there is a period of direct translation in the process of learning a second language. Vera John-Steiner reports her subjects' recall of early stages in their competence in English, translating directly, and only later and through much struggle, moving into direct use of the second language. This struggle is echoed in a series of interviews I recorded with non-native English speakers about their reading and writing histories, both in their first language and in English (Roy, in preparation). Throughout the tapes of these conversations, interspersed with information about the relationship between reading and writing, there is a powerful, overriding sense of trauma, the trauma that attends changing one's language and thus one's mediational resource.

LANGUAGE AND HIGHER MENTAL FUNCTIONS

It is through language that we are able to move into what Vygotsky called "higher mental functions." Higher mental functions in one culture may not necessarily be those valued by another (Scribner and Cole, *Psychology*). However, the role of language in discriminating between elementary and higher mental functioning

is undisputed. In a Vygotskyan perspective, one of the main characteristics of higher mental functioning is *voluntary control*, compared with its opposite, control by the natural environment (Wertsch, *Culture* 25-27).

Most people agree that learning another language makes us feel like a child. When we are in a strange country, we feel at the mercy of the environment; we have no mediating tools to make our wants known, to satisfy our needs, except so far as gestures will suffice; we feel isolated. We do not have access to social interaction, and we feel that we cannot use our own good mental processes to regulate our lives or our world. Similarly, teachers observe in adult education classes often a childish or immature behavior on the part of otherwise normal competent adults. Part of that is due to our tendency as teachers to see and treat as childlike those who are incompetent in our language, but part as well has to do with the psychological condition of the learner: because she in truth lacks the mediational tools to regulate the environment, that person is in a dependent, unrealized state.

LANGUAGE AND INTERACTION

The primary difference between Western and Soviet views of human mental development is an emphasis on the interaction between psychological and social forces (Wertsch, *Vygotsky*, xiv). Vygotsky saw language as originating in the infant's pointing finger. The infant begins by reaching for something, trying to grasp it. Through a combination of the child's behavior and the adult's response, the reach becomes a social gesture; later the pointing leads to an articulation. This reflects the essence of the rhetorical situation: a "speaker," a "hearer," and a subject about which something is to be accomplished, surrounded by shared context. Crucially, there is somebody out there, responding. Vygotsky saw this, in the inception of a child's development of language.

If we say that acquisition of language depends on social interaction, it sounds as though we could be talking about Stephen Krashen's concept of "comprehensive input" as the necessary data that must be available to the emerging language-user. Krashen's work, along with that of Tracy Terrell and others, has been important in expanding our understanding of the relationship between natural acquisition and formal learning of a second language. This work, with its focus on the learner, has paralleled the movement

in composition research to focus on the writer and the writing process. However, Krashen's view is a psychological view, in the sense of remaining focused on the individual as "taking in" the available "input," almost like a sponge. The input must be accessible, or, in Krashen's terms, "comprehensible." However, Krashen has said that he does not believe interactive response is necessary, only the availability of comprehensive input (*Principles*; personal communication). It is essentially an asocial theory, or concept—not antisocial, but independent of the way Vygotsky saw social interaction as a shaping influence for both language and cognition. Language does not develop in the individual for the purpose of cognitive process but rather to facilitate social interaction, in Vygotsky's framework. Cognition then is closely tied to linguistic activity in social contexts.

INTERNALIZATION OF SPOKEN LANGUAGE

Language, and culture with it, is internalized through dialogic action. The social influence outside the individual is thus brought in, transferred to a social influence within the individual. In a Vygotskyan perspective, thought begins as outer speech and is later internalized as inner speech, through constant dialoguing with, first, adults and, later, peers and adults. As we mature, our inner speech retains a dialogic structure, voices interacting even when we feel that we are "monologuing" with ourselves.

If social, external speech is internalized to produce thought, then writing is internalized speech, externalized Workers in the Vygotskyan school are careful to point out that these stages or operations are never merely additive, or incremental—they are incorporations, each of the previous stage: transformations of what was before. Writing then is not simply transcribing, or even translating, inner speech onto paper with a few adjustments to make it more accessible to readers (Zebroski, 138). This view contrasts with earlier structuralist views of writing as merely encoding speech in a set of graphic symbols and filling in the signals that otherwise would be taken care of with paralinguistic features such as intonation, facial expression and conversational context.[1]

ZONE OF PROXIMAL DEVELOPMENT

We will need to consider one other key concept of Vygotsky's, the *zone of proximal development*. Vygotsky's definition of the

zone of proximal development is the difference 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" (*Mind in Society*, 86). Some translators render "the zone of proximal development" as "the zone of nearest development," a phrase which perhaps clarifies the more conventional translation of "proximal" (Markova, translator).

The zone of proximal development has rather a "faddy" status right now, and indeed it is easy to trivialize this concept: isn't it true that we can all do more with help? Thus we might be led to see guided and controlled writing, for example, as the kind of help that makes use of the zone of proximal development. Although current researchers in writing as a second language have been careful to take into account developments in research on composing processes, many writing textbooks provide a rigid, formulaic model for writing in a second language, and many English language teachers who have long since joined in the move to teach spoken language in functional, naturalistic ways may feel more comfortable with controls built into writing instruction, in order to protect against rampant error. Similarly, many teachers of composition who know about writing process and processes, who would never teach native speakers in a product-traditional way, when faced with non-native speakers of English may become overwhelmed by their own assumptions about the needs or the capability of the audience for their teaching and reach for the false security of models, formulas, and drills.

PROBLEM-SOLVING

A crucial term in Vygotsky's definition of the zone of proximal development is "problem solving." Of course, most of Vygotsky's work was with infants and children, while students at the college level are young adults, and sometimes not-so-young adults. So the "zone of proximal development" may be different, but there is no reason to assume it will be absent. In fact, Vygotsky saw human development long into adulthood as the occurrence of increasingly complex zones of proximal development (Wertsch *Culture* 74). While writing is certainly not just problem-solving in any narrow sense, the development of competence in thinking both through and in writing in a way that most constructively stimu-

lates a reader's thinking is an activity that requires the engagement of the writer's creative attention. Thus, we do second-language students a disservice if we overcontrol their writing, removing the sources of error by which solutions to problems can be found, under the misapprehension that we are helping them to grow.

If language and cognition are aspects of the same activity (Cole xi), then it is unlikely that a second language learner, even as an adult, proceeds through the development of competence in another language without implicating cognitive development. In recent years we have seen in the literature of research in writing and rhetoric a strong sense of the role of writing in learning, the use of writing to develop thinking. If we value this view of the power of writing, we need to resist very strongly the tendency toward a reductionist view of teaching writing to nonnative speakers of English. For example, the view that "They," meaning ESL students in composition programs, don't need free writing, invention, interviewing, and group feedback for revising and editing, but instead need only a format to follow, such as that of a business memo or technical report, is not uncommon. The view often carries over onto upper division competence testing, where faculty may rely on teaching the five-paragraph essay in order to help students pass a graduation writing requirement; this approach, in a Vygotskyan perspective, is similarly reductive.[2]

A. K. Markova, a researcher in the institute where Vygotsky did most of his work, has studied the development of literacy through stages of learning activity, from infancy to old age. Of particular interest for college writing instructors are the stages from 18 forward. In the ages from 18 to 27 or 30, young adults enter the sphere of chosen work activity and learn the method of analysis and communication needed there (Markova, *Teaching*). This is the age of most college second-language speakers. But second-language students have still to acquire English to an extent where it will work for them as a mediational tool, where they can use it to affect their environment. These students still need to experience group work and collaborative learning in order to internalize this language through dialogic action. They, like native speakers of English, still can continue to develop higher mental processes through writing in English. Although they, as adults, have these higher mental processes to draw on in their first language, the transfer is not simple; it may have to be reconstructed in ways which we do not yet understand. And as Janice Hays points out,

the process is not complete at 19, 22, or perhaps at any given age ("Models"). So for second-language students, although their reasons for studying English may be quite understandably instrumental, this age and stage must not be spend merely doing the kind of writing that is expected to ensure them a better job.

The next stage, according to Markova, is from 30 to 55 or 60, the stage of real creativity, when the individual enriches, perhaps even reorders, social-historical experience. Let us remember that it is our world they will be enriching, because by the time they get there, we will be in the last stage, 60 plus, in which the "individual puts his [or her] own experience in ordered and generalized form" (68). But there has to be a world for us to do it in, and we will be dependent upon our students, both native and nonnative speakers of English, to construct it. The Vygotskyan school of speech activity is "profoundly human and pedagogically optimistic" (Markova 6). We can learn from it as we work to empower the development of literacy for writers in a second- or first-language.

NOTES

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[1]Judith Rodby describes more fully the structuralists' view of writing in an unpublished paper "Community and Communitas: Social Interaction in ESL Writing Development," presented at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, 1986.

[2]Mike Rose makes a similar point about basic writers in "The Language of Exclusion" in *College English* 1985, and see Joseph Trimmer, "Basic Skills, Basic Writing, Basic Research" in *Journal of Basic Writing* 1987.

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