

Exploring the Impact of Zone of Proximal Development and Scaffolding in Second Language Acquisition: A Comparative Study of Vygotskian and Freirean Approaches

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Abstract

This paper critically examines Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT). The focus of the study is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding, and their roles in second language (L2) acquisition. SCT suggests that human cognitive development is a mediated process shaped by cultural artifacts, activities, and social interactions and language serves as the focal for mediation, enabling the development of higher-order cognitive functions through social and material engagement. The research questions highlight 15 learners' perceptions. The study also has 3 variables of teachers' role in practicing scaffolding from the private college in Hyderabad. The qualitative comparative analysis provides more competent interlocutors, and facilitates L2 learning. It underscores the importance of teaching within the learner's ZPD to enhance progression and development. Additionally, the research integrates Paulo Freire's dialogic method to highlight the interplay between dialogic learning, conscientization, praxis, and critical consciousness. Both Vygotsky and Freire assert that language learning is inherently dialogic, emphasizing the transformative power of interaction between learners and educators. The study results of positive and negative feedback, group studies, and collaborative learning are the median of scaffolding practices.

Introduction

This paper seeks to critically look into the theory of sociocultural theory as proposed by Lev Vygotsky (1986). In the research, it mainly focuses on second language learning and Zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding for second language learning. The theory of sociocultural is among the most important theory about second language acquisition of Vygotsky. The assets of the theory are the principles of approach to learning and mental development. Ratner (2002) argued that human functions were a mediated process mediated by the cultural artifact, activity, and concepts. The main means of mediation are language use, organization and structure. Interactions in these social and material environments are the most important ways through which human cognitive activity become the most important forms.

This study attempts to analyse socio-cultural theory (SCT) and two important constructs of socio-cultural theory in L2 development i.e., zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding in second language learning. According to Vygotsky learning as mediatory means the interaction of a learner with the more capable person (interlocutor) is essential. However, he says a learner must be taught within his ZPD and a more mature or competent person should scaffold him to reach a step ahead in his ZPD. While discussing SCT Paulo Friere's concept of dialogic method is also needed to discuss the importance of learning and development of dialogic method, conscientization, praxis, and critical consciousness in Frierean concepts. Vygotsky and Freire both emphasize that language learning is always dialogic. That lively interaction is the basis for the mental transformation states of both (learner and educator) about the real and theoretical contexts.

Overview of Sociocultural theory

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of human learning describes learning as a social process of organizing human intelligence in society or culture. In terms of the main thematic framework of Vygotsky's theory, 'social interaction is the core factor in the development of cognition'. To him, everything was learned on two levels. First psychologically between people, and then intra psychologically in the individual, second the relationship of inanimate reality, starting from the relationship between people and one with the inanimate object, and then in the individual. This is true of voluntary attention, logical memory, and concept formation. Such actual relationships are the source of all higher functions. This theory states that an individual learning his environment; Culture and society is of greater importance. As we see a child at an early age is not capable of standing, walking, jumping, and speaking but he becomes capable of performing such actions slowly and gradually under the influence of his environment besides he is provided with strong support from his mother. He learns to perform such actions by himself slowly mother's support is taken off him similarly a learner in a class can learn more when interaction starts with the teacher and his fellows. The sociocultural theory is propounded by Vygotsky in which he discussed some important points. He states that learning is mediated. It is the interaction of an individual with a peer, a teacher, or an adult who is more capable than (the interlocutor) who provides child i.e., learner support or frame to learn (scaffolding) there is a learner becomes (self-regulated) through other regulation and object regulation within his ZPD. In socio cultural, there is a belief that knowing of society and culture has more role to play. The socio-cultural approach puts emphasis on the interdependence of the social and individual processes in the knowledge co-construction. The three ways of cultural tools that is passed from one individual to another its called imitative learning, instructed learning and self regulated learning.

Defining Zone of Proximal Development

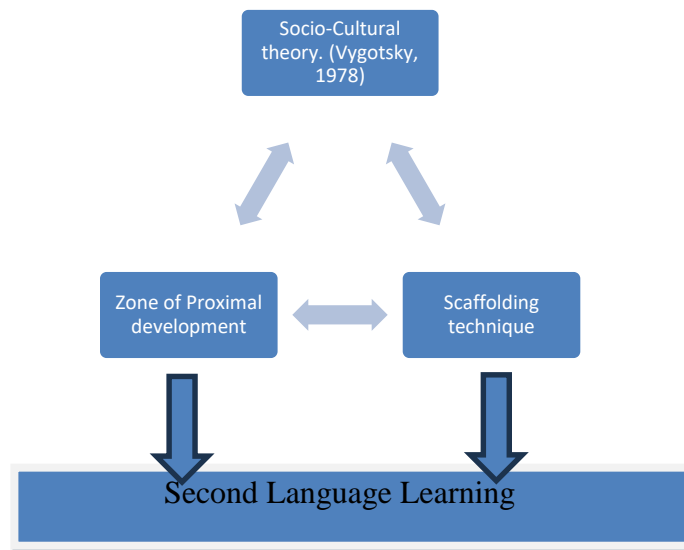
A foundational concept in sociocultural theory and it has thoughtful suggestions for second language learning, there is Vygotsky (1978). ZPD derives from variation in tasks learners can perform with a more knowledgeable other's (i.e., a teacher, peer, and mentor) help, but cannot perform an independent way. The power of learning and development through individual efforts and social collaboration makes this concept. Thus, ZPD places emphasis on provided learning in the context of ESL. Collaborative learning enables progress to second language learners. It frees their developmental level (neither too simple nor too complex). Scaffolding is a fundamental part of the zone of proximal development, and it involves offering temporary guidance that makes learning easier for learners to achieve that which they are not capable of doing right now. As

learners become more proficient and independent (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976), they are supported gradually until it is withdrawn.

Theoretical Model of the Study

Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT), suggestively, has an impact on the second language (L2) learning. It focuses on the place of social interaction, mediation, or collaborative learning. Its one of its strength is based on its concern with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) It highlights the role of guided learning as a lever that aids the learners in making it past what they without guided knowledge could accomplish.

Figure 1. Theoretical Model of the study



Research by scholars such as Swain (2000) and Lantolf and Thorne (2006) demonstrates that collaborative activities, such as group discussions and peer feedback, enhance linguistic competence and meaning-making in communicative learning environments. Furthermore, SCT's emphasis on mediation—whether through language, cultural tools, or digital technologies—has enriched L2 learning experiences, as shown in studies by Lantolf and Poehner (2014). Additionally, the theory's focus on dialogic interaction promotes cognitive and linguistic development, with structured dialogues proving particularly effective in accelerating proficiency (Donato, 1994; Otha, 2001). Dynamic assessment, another concept derived from SCT, allows for individualized instruction that aligns with learners' developmental stages, offering real-time feedback and scaffolding (Poehner, 2008). However, despite its strengths, SCT faces prominent criticisms. One common critique is its insufficient attention to individual differences, such as learners' cognitive styles, motivations, and aptitudes. While SCT prioritizes collective learning through social interaction, it may not effectively address the needs of learners who do not prosper in collaborative settings (Ellis, 2010). Moreover, the practical application of SCT concepts, such as ZPD and scaffolding, can be challenging for educators, particularly in large or diverse classrooms (Van Lier, 2004). Critics also argue that SCT places superfluous emphasis on social

and cultural contexts, potentially undervaluing the role of internal cognitive processes in language acquisition. From a cognitive perspective, scholars like Mitchell, Myles, and Marsden (2019) contend that SCT overlooks how learners independently internalize linguistic input. Additionally, while dynamic assessment attempts to operationalize ZPD, its reliance on qualitative data often makes it resource-intensive and subjective (Poehner, 2008). Lastly, empirical evidence has hindered the theoretical appeal of SCT. Particularly, regarding its applicability across diverse cultural and educational settings (Lourenço, 2012).

Literature Review

The theoretical perspective from which knowledge is described as the existing interdependence between society's members and the artifacts the society creates is the one that is in accordance with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory. In a sense, then, the child learns as he/or she participates in his /or her social life. Activities are practiced continuously, which involves the child in the membership of society. Effective learning is a socially, historically, and culturally integrated concept (Vygotsky, 1986, 1986, 1993) (Phan, 2009). Key to learning is social interaction through the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Accordingly, Vygotsky (1978) propose the ZPD to be: The distance of the definite developmental level is defined as independent problem-solving and the level I of the potential problem-solving stipulated in problem solving in collaboration with the adult, or in collaboration with the more capable peers. The ZPD is equated with functions of the recent maturity (functions which have not matured but are maturing) and functions which have not matured today but will mature tomorrow (functions in embryonic state). With these functions being called the "buds" or "flowers" of development rather than the fruits of the development. Beyond generalities, the mental development is characterized prospectively in terms of its actual development level (p. 86).

ZPD becomes a point of paradigm shift because what the child could have done with help of more knowledgeable people could indicate more on the child's mental development than what the child alone could do (Cook, 2010). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory of education focuses mainly on the need for the children's interaction with more knowledgeable people and peers in his environment. He or she interacts with the child, socially and culturally co constructs knowledge in the community and internalizes it (Turuk, 2008). Language generated within the environment mediates learning (Lantolf, 2000; le, 2003). With regard to pedagogy, the use of social teaching behaviors by the teacher is to form the social behavior of assisted performance in class. This basically means that interaction, the teacher and the students as well as the students in relation to one another makes social teaching contexts effective teaching and learning. Some educators and Vygotskian are of the opinion that education's role is to experience. These are in their zone of proximal development. This in turn provides much encouragement to their learning.

Propounded by Vygotsky to argue against the use of academic, knowledge based tests to measure students' intelligence, the concept of ZPD advocates the interventions with an individual student that will support his capability to achieve to his highest potential. He suggests that instead of looking at what a student knows to determine intelligence. The best is to look at whether he can solve problems with the help of an adult.

The idea of ZPD is widely used to understand the notions of the mental development of children in education. Essentially, the ZPD concept is that of a scaffolding a structure comprising of "support points" by which to act. The term scaffolding was not mentioned by Vygotsky himself yet, but it was developed by other sociocultural theorists who applied Vygotsky's ZPD to educational settings. A scaffold is a process in which a teacher (or surrogate teacher) or more

competent peer helps the student in his or her ZPD as is needed and then takes it away, as the scaffold is removed from a building being built. Adult guiding of child learning by focused questions and positive interactions is called scaffolding.

Social Development and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Cognitive development includes social interaction. Some skills are the individual can do alone; other skills require the assistance of the individual. Within an individual's ZPD exist skills which can be performed with some assistance. Scaffolding is based on the theory of the ZPD. Zone of proximal development is the distance between the developmental level as solvable by child independently and level at which child can be solved with help from mature individuals or other children (Vygotsky 1978 p.86). He says that no pedagogy produces the learning processes directed to development, that their sequence is in zone of proximal growth. The actual concept is that a child does something that he cannot do on his own with the aid of a more experienced person. As we teach them behind home, we often notice that. He learns easily if the same task he performs with other kids with elders to guide them, he does not learn easily. ZPD, for Vygotsky, is the difference between the actual development level as evidenced by problem solving and the development that would occur through problem solving with the assistance of, or in collaboration with, more knowledgeable others. This leads to the result that children become more socialized in the dominant culture, and also it induces cognitive development. He states that children learn from their interactions with society and their culture and that, with the help, they can even learn more. With the massive support of peers, caregivers, and teachers, learners may help them to achieve more tasks. It is encountered in many real-life situations in class, learners learn more in group activity. At the initial stage, they experience certain problems but with the interaction, they may remove their hesitation and gradually learn from their problems how to solve them. Vygotsky's theories have had something of a renaissance since introducing these theories and the publication of *Mind: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* in 1978. Since then, He has been regarded as one of the great contributors of education theorists of the twentieth century, most prominently to social learning. He considered all thought to have a social and external origin. Language functions are seen as how individual cognition could be developed. This is possible in mediation. "There is persuasive evidence that cooperative teams achieve higher levels of thought and retain information longer than students who work quietly as individuals. The shared learning allows students to engage in discussion, take responsibility for their learning, and thus become critical thinkers." (Johnson and Johnson, 1996)

"Students achieve more in cooperative interaction than in an individualistic one. Students are also more positive about school, subject areas, their peers and teachers or professors when they are structured to work cooperatively" (Johnson, 1997)

The zone of proximal development and collaborative learning

Vygotsky unveils the fundamental difference between their actual and the possible level of development. Taking into consideration the mental growth of children. Definite level is children's ability to perform certain activities without help from another person at a given time point in development and while the potential levels of development are those instances of functions that are not sufficiently stabilized yet for the children to perform autonomously, therefore, other person intervention is needed. It is the area in which children transition from potential to actual development that children take up those forms of mental functioning considered to be valued in a culture (Newman 1989). According to Vygotsky, any mental function related to instrumental

activity such as voluntary attention, logical memory, concept formation and volition is initially distributed between a novice and an expert. It is later appropriated by the novice in the zone of proximal development (ZPD) and becomes an intermental activity (Vygotsky 1987). The presence of expertise is not required for the construction of a zone of proximal development. It often happens that in this collaborative posture, individuals who are none of whom to be considered as experts can gather together and jointly construct a ZPD where each person gives something to and takes something from this interaction. L2 learners can co construct solutions to novel situations, as stated by Donato (1988–1994). The monitor can be constructed in cooperative activity in the ZPD (Donato & Lantolf, 1990). Villmail and De Guerrero (1998) investigate how L2 writers facilitate mutual strategic assistance in the course of collaborative peer revision. In particular, they concluded that this collaboration is a potentially powerful mechanism for learning because “ it allows for interchangeability of rules and continuous access to strategic forms of control by task demands”.

Freire’s Dialogic Method

The theory of education on the dialogical method was created by Paulo Freire in his work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. The basis of his theory is on dialogic interaction with those people the wealthy deemed hopelessly ignorant or incapable of learning because of their economic deprivation and failure to access the educational system of the rich. Freire proposed a dialogic method in education which transformed the scenario of educational practice as a unidirectional receiving of information from more knowledgeable and dominant teachers to a passive student. He states that students are regarded as empty vessels whom teachers and more knowledgeable people fill according to their wishes and purposes. There is interaction between the more knowledgeable person and novice but the role of knowledgeable person is authoritative. Freire recognizes the condition of men/ women and points out that since humanization is a ‘dialogical’ process, to spare one another’s humanization is to liquidate one’s own. The other one, also dehumanizing oneself, but not in the same ways as elsewhere, for Freire, who works on the problem of his material condition, those who are oppressed can get to a self-consciousness or the critical consciousness that can turn, as he says, (conscientization), his condition called. Working on the subject of the oppression is by its very nature an act of self-reflection of the subject which compels the subject in the dialectical relation with the subject itself. The idea to which he refers is Praxis in which he argues that people gathering together and dialoguing does not mean gaining knowledge of the social reality. To undertake critical reflection must be done together about their reality and so to transform not only by further action but also through further critical reflection. In an elaboration of this, Freire writes that entering into dialog presupposes equality among participants. Each must trust the others, have mutual respect, and must love (and care and commitment for the other). In both cases, each one must question what he knows and comes to understand that through a dialogue existing thoughts will change and new knowledge will be created. Moreover, it criticizes the concept of education thus imparted. Freire (1970), “calls this the digestive concept of education where students are considered as having empty minds that are to be filled with the words”. Vygotsky and Freire both emphasize that learning is always dialogic. That a lively interaction is the basis for the transformation of mental states of both (learner and educator) in relation to the real and theoretical contexts.

Scaffolding

Therefore, the meaning and nature of the term scaffolding seem to be of crucial importance when it comes to analyzing the concept of sociocultural theory. Scaffolding students within the ZPD is an attempt by teacher and more knowledgeable others (MKO) to activate and enact the potential in students. ZPD and scaffolding are the two cardinal concepts in human sociocultural theory. Oddly enough, these concepts have been repeatedly scrutinized and defined from different sociocultural lenses by many scholars. This virtually unanimous definition of ZPD comes from Lantolf (2000) as the difference between a learner's performance on a task by him or herself and the same learner's performance on the same task with an expert. Unlike the clear definition of ZPD, there has been a wide acceptance of the meaning of scaffolding. Scaffolding is defined by Donato (1994) as a "situation in which a knowledgeable participant can create supportive situational conditions in which the novice can participate and extend his or her current skills and understanding to higher levels of competence". According to Schumm (2006), scaffolding is a term used to "provide students with support in their language and as skills are developed, the support is reduced smoothly". According to Verity (2011), it is "the cognitive support to a novice learner to lessen the cognitive burden of the task". One must remember that scaffolding in sociocultural theory is an idea taken from support along newly built structures. These are the supports used to erect, shape, and construct a building and as soon as the building is erected these supports are removed. Similarly, scaffolding in education means some support or guidance provided to the learners by the teacher. Xi, J., & Lantolf (2021) pointed out that Vygotsky never used the word scaffolding in his work as this word would not have made any sense to a Russian-speaking person but it was used by neo-Vygotskyan, according to them the word scaffolding refers to any support, structure, or guidance of more experienced persons or of one who is more competent in performing that particular action.

Role of scaffolding in second language learning

Many educationists and scholars practice different types of scaffolding yet do not take into account degrees of guidance or help. It might bring different aspects to second language learning. They have been applying the term for teaching several subjects in the world over the last two decades. Since learning a language is a complex phenomenon. It seems to be quite practical and significant. H. Douglas Brown defines language learning in his book *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching*, as "showing or helping someone to learn how to do something, providing with knowledge causing to know or understand". Evidence from different studies conducted by educationists shows that scaffolding has been and is being applied in several different ways for teaching language.

Research Design

The research proposes qualitative research. It explores the constructs of Sociocultural Theory (SCT), specifically the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and scaffolding, in second language (L2) learning. A qualitative approach is chosen to gain in-depth insights into the interactional dynamics between learners and instructors within a sociocultural framework.

Research Approach

This study is based on a case study. It allows for an in-depth exploration of specific instances of ZPD and scaffolding in second language acquisition. The study focuses on the lived experiences and interactional patterns in a real-world educational context.

Participants

The participants of the study are 15 learners of a second language at a private college in Hyderabad. They may have age levels 15-17. The interviews were also conducted with 3 Instructors in the same College. All three had experience teaching ESL for more than three years.

Data Collection Methods

The study follows the Semi-structured interviews. Learners were interviewed for their experience with scaffolding and its significant participation in their learning. Teachers were interviewed to learn their strategies for identifying and utilizing learners' ZPD.

Research Setting

The study will be conducted in a second-language classroom setting, such as a private college.

Data Analysis

Comparative Analysis

The study compares the data from students' and instructors' perspectives. It creates the base for the role of ZPD and Scaffolding. The analysis also highlights the similarities and differences in students' perceptions and instructors' practices.

Model Integration

The analysis will also explore the presence and impact of Freirean principles, such as dialogic learning and critical thinking, in the interviews.

Comparative Analysis of the Role of Zone of Proximal Development, Scaffolding & Dialogic Learning

Students Perception Analysis

90% of the students highlighted they could not accomplish the tasks without teachers' guidance. The students (70%) stated using task-based activities like role play, peer participation, or group-making activities and video/audio clips for language learning daily or 2-3 times a week. However, 25% of students indicated "rarely" or "never," suggesting uneven access or preference.

Collaboration and Dialogic Learning:

60% of students described engaging in peer discussions weekly, but 20% noted "rarely" or "never." The students' comments suggested that students value collaboration, but they often lack opportunities or structured forums for meaningful interaction.

**Instructors’ Practices
Practicing Scaffolding**

All three instructors have emphasized assignment-based practices. They give worksheets, projects, and home tasks regularly and sometimes weekly as scaffolding practice. The students are often made to sit in the groups. One of the teachers said that group discussion makes the class environment interactive. All students get involved in it. Another teacher emphasizes on feedback method as good practice for scaffolding.

Dialogic Learning

Instructors have shown moderate likeness to the dialogic method in the class. One of the instructors has said that it is used or preferred when there is any comprehension based on character dialogues. The other said to practice it in any story based on the characters’ dialogues. The comments showed that while instructors valued Freirean dialogic principles, their practical application was inconsistent.

Results

Following are the results based on students’ and teachers’ perception and practice feedback.

Aspect	Student's Perspective	Instructors’ Perspective	Key Insights
Feedback practice	Daily or 2-3 times a week (70%)	Daily or 2-3 times a week (80%)	High alignment in tool usage frequency.
Group Discussions	4.2 (High perceived effectiveness)	Perceived supplementary scaffolding as to	Students seek more structured guidance.
Collaborative learning	60% engage weekly; 20% "rarely/never"	Promote group work, but cite barriers	Collaboration opportunities need expansion.
Dialogic Practices	Mixed perceptions	High confidence in strategies	A perception gap exists in scaffolding impact.

Conclusion

The scholars research revealed that students are more effective working in group settings. Those students mainly did more, learned more and had a more positive attitude about class work. In addition, it demonstrated that group work is simple to be implemented in the classroom by the teachers. ZPD has been constructed such that academic, knowledge based tests should not be used to determine students’ intelligence. Instead of asking what a student knows to see intelligence, he argues. It is about investigating the capacity of a second language learner to solve a problem with an adult help.

According to Vygotsky socio-cultural theory, in the learning process, it is the interaction of an individual with his social and cultural elements that are of importance. Scaffolding clearly plays an important role in teaching a second language, especially as in this theory. Several scholars define and interoperate the term scaffolding. Others believe that the term can simply be a mere support to the learners from the teachers; and others think they can include any strategy, a technique or a design that a teacher uses to teach students. Scaffolding has been applied to English by educationists in many concerns of the world with the aim of bringing improvement in English. This study also discusses the dialogic method of Freire in which he criticizes the concept of education thus imparted. Freire (1970), "calls this the digestive concept of education where students are considered as having empty minds that are to be filled with the words". There should be an active role of learners and teachers. Applying scaffolding mechanisms to classes of EFL teachers may provide them with a great deal of insights. Low structured scaffolding can also be useful for teachers since they do not have to supply too much hints and guides to the students in writing activities. In this case, they are supposed to let students do a writing activity on their own, after giving an example of a writing activity so that they will be able to use self-exploration.

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