Vygotsky's zone of proximal development

Lev Vygotsky views collaboration with peers as an effective way of development. He suggests that more cooperative learning activities should be used in the classroom in which less capable students develop with assistance and support from more knowledgeable peers, within their zone of proximal development. In other words, according to Vygotsky, the task becomes " internalised through actual relations between" the students (Vygotsky, 1978: 57) and successfully performed.

In one of my English Literature lessons, I taught a group of Y11 second language learners how to answer and analyse a question using PEER (Point – Evidence –Explain – Reflect) technique. The students were revising exam-type questions and had to be ready for analysis. I started with a demonstration activity from the novel – I am the King of the Castle. With some leading questions, I started analysing the point, involving the students in finding evidence, linkers, explanation, etc.

As soon as the students were assigned with an individual task, the majority of them (7 out of 10) were able to perform with no challenges due to their prior knowledge and vocabulary. On the other hand, the ' ripe' students were not able to follow the critical task unaided. Therefore, they were paired with more able students to practise analysis, finding evidence, explaining and evaluating. The less able students were doing it correctly till the point when more criticality needed. With a little aid from a more competent peer, they developed conceptual learning.

In future lessons, given a similar task, students will be able to perform with more confidence; and once it is internalised, scaffolding might be removed. I

think as a conceptual tool for teachers the ZPD is very helpful in developing a curriculum which will challenge students' learning and enable them to enquire; it also helps teachers in effective grouping of students where less able students can achieve with some guidance and support from more competent students. Finally, the ZPD might be helpful in assessing students' abilities in order to decide their year group distribution.

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In this specific lesson, I managed scaffolding the group of Y11 second language students to write effectively. My main objective was how to write interesting, imaginative and thoughtful texts, using appropriate and effective vocabulary. (The lesson objectives were taken from the Writing Assessment Foci (AF1/AF7) of the National Curriculum.) Due to the different ability level of students, I demonstrated all the instructional options summarised by Wood, (1988).

In the video clip, David Wood explained evidently the difference between contingent teaching and scaffolding, highlighting that scaffolding is " a functional analysis of the kinds of activities that a teacher might undertake to simplify the students' learning; whereas contingency is about interaction, process, it's how teachers go about of supporting a particular individual when they are setting out to learn." Therefore, I involved all the five instructional options as aspects of scaffolding.

I introduced the lesson objectives and outcomes of writing effectively, and assigned the students to write a one line description of a man who is smiling

coldly. My verbal instruction was to look at their partner's work and compare their responses, ensuring that the sentences matched the assessment foci. The more competent students performed very well because of their pre-existing knowledge of literary devices, sentence structure, effective vocabulary, and the ability to look at the context, whilst the less capable students used very simple and uncomplicated sentences. At this point, I provided some prompt by asking them to write a one line description of a man who is smiling coldly, using the word ARCTIC. This time, the students also worked individually and upon their task completion, I asked them to compare their responses with the model sentence on the board: " Mr. Fisher had a smile of arctic brightness." While working as a class and comparing their sentences, the students then had to consider how the description worked there, what literary devices were used to make the sentence more effective.

Obviously, a few of the students with less competence could construct a sentence with the word ' arctic' because they did not know what it meant. I then provided a thesaurus support, asking them to first look up the word and then, using some other techniques of personification or imagery and careful sentence structure to construct a sentence, which meets the objectives of the lesson. The students still struggled with the use of a simile, metaphor, etc.; therefore, a group of more knowledgeable students was swapped to provide support to those less competent peers by sharing their examples, reinforcing the use of literary devices, using effective vocabulary and correct structure. With the additional support, the students came up with a variety of sentences. They were also provided with a checklist of expected skills they

needed to accomplish the task. This was done as a class work, thoroughly read and explained. In Wood's terminology, this was a stage where I demonstrated contingent teaching with the features of interactive instruction. I indicated the material and prepared them for the assembly.

The rest of the lesson was spent in focus on exploring the necessary skills in writing; and the students were assigned with a final task of writing a character description using one of their carefully crafted sentences as a starting point.

To sum up, I should put together Wood's theory of scaffolding:

1. General Verbal Prompt (GVP) was given throughout the lesson to give instruction and introduce the topic, etc.
2. Special Verbal Instruction (SVI) was given as well when the students had to construct their own sentences and compare them either with their partners or with the model. Even though this work was done individually, the students still could do this unaided, due to their pre-existing knowledge.
3. Indicating Material (IM) was the next step when I suggested the use of a dictionary, constantly reminded the students of the AFs, objectives of the lesson, and provided the assistance of more competent students to help to successfully accomplish the task.
4. To prepare for the assembly of the final writing piece using literary devices, appropriate and effective vocabulary, and an effectively written text, the students were distributed a checklist and framework of expected skills explored during the lesson.

5. A demonstration (DEM) of how to write imaginary and thoughtful sentences using an effective word choice was also used throughout the lesson by sharing model sentences with all the students to facilitate their work and understanding.

Throughout the lesson, there was a varied level of teacher interaction supporting the students to ' internalise' the knowledge and complete the task successfully, at which point, the teacher should have not intervene. The following lesson aimed at peer marking and spotting mistakes and the discussion of the skills acquired during the previous lesson.

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Child-centred learning has been advocated by several educationalists and psychologists for many years. Its basic emphasis is children's individual interests and needs in education, which may vary in terms of development rates and the nature of the teacher's control. The term ' child-centeredness' is related to children's individual needs and decisions about the curriculum and the teacher's role in the classroom. However, since child development theories vary, child-centred learning also varies in a classroom.

Pioneers in child development theory, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygostsky, observe considerable differences between cognitive and social constructivist theories assigned to each individual child and the social context of play in their development. They both support the idea of knowledge construction by individuals. However, Piaget believes that knowledge is a product of the individual and the environment. Vygostky, on the other hand, advocates the

idea that knowledge is constructed due to social interaction and then internalised by guidance.

Piaget and Vygostky differently promote the relationship between learning and development: Piaget believes that development follows learning, whilst Vygotsky shows that learning leads to development and plays a vital role in it. He states that "…the only ' good learning' is that which is in advance of development" (Vygotsky, *Mind in Society and the ZPD,* 2002: 113). Both theorists emphasise, though, that peer interaction and cooperation promote children's learning. Since Piaget's and Vygostky's child-centred approaches vary greatly, their implication in a classroom varies as well. Piaget's approach relies on the liberty of children and appropriate environment for learning, where children learn by exploring things by themselves. Those with Vygotsky's approach, provide a balance between teacher-directed and child-initiated classroom, where teachers provide assistance to ensure that the children are able to attain a higher level within their ZPD.

Other theorists, John Dewey and Maria Montessori, have also played a significant role in child-centred learning theory development. Despite the similarities in their belief that some guidance is important for children to help them develop their intelligence, they both have different perspectives about the role of children's freedom in education and the teacher's role in the classroom. Dewey believes that democratic schooling is based on child-centeredness where learning means experiencing. Being a progressivist, he believes in the development of the ability in children to function well in the larger democratic society and attain personal fulfilment. Dewey emphasises that the construction of children's freedom of intelligence via observation is

more important than their freedom of will. Therefore, he summons up the teachers to act as a representative of the children's interests as a whole. They should create self-control in children, which will assist the teacher to understand the aim of education.

Montessori, by contrast, sees teachers' authority in the support they give to the children rather than in their " dignity". She believes that orderly environment and appropriate materials will promote children's development. Teachers, therefore, should prepare motives and inspire children to develop without any direct instruction.

I think the combination of all four theories is beneficial for my understanding of child-centeredness in education and in conceptualised classroom situations. Piaget's cognitive constructivist theory helps me understand when children have freedom to explore and construct knowledge, they make choice and experience. Vygotsky's social constructivist theory can help me understand children's ability to develop with adult guidance to attain their ZPD. Dewey's understanding of children's freedom of intelligence to promote learning will assist me how to nurture this with guidance for each individual's constant growth. Finally, Montessori's support of each child's potential to have inner drive to learn, will help me remove all the obstacles that impede learning.

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Nowadays, Early Years Education (EYE) has a mixture of their foundation in the work of Montessori and her critics W. Kilpatrick and J. Dewey. A confident

Early Year practitioner should be aware of the ways how children learn and develop; support them in solving problems and making decisions; and provide them with practice and roles to enhance learning.

The Montessori method has been partially embraced by the International Community School in Amman, Jordan, where I am currently working. Some of the pedagogic principles, however, have not been accepted by the school administration due to their understanding of the method as " purely academic, mechanistic and rigid". Below, I will demonstrate the aspects which are currently practised in the school, and which I, a Secondary Teacher, have observed as part of my EC in Lower Primary.

One aspect of " good practice" in Foundation Stage of the school is that the teachers utilise activities in " sensory rich" environment. The students are guided and supported to learn to interact and thus develop independent learning. In this environment, the children choose their activities and learn by doing. Montessori believes that training senses is fundamental and that it will promote the basis for the development of imagination. According to her, intellect should be developed early, through stimulation of senses, as a basis for the development of imagination and social relationships (Montessori, 1964). The FS teachers do apply this aspect of learning because they find it fruitful: students become prepared for KS1 as " self-directed", independent students, who are able to perform and master inter-connected and challenging tasks.

On the other hand, W. Kilpatrick argues in his book *The Montessori Method Examined* (1914), that imagination and social relations should be developed

before the intellect because the premature development of the intellect can stifle creativity. Kilpatrick believes in the opposite that providing children with " socially conditioned environment" will create a spontaneous unity of groups to work out their tasks. This suggests that children will develop their imagination and social relationship by " cooperating" with each other. The FS teachers apply this aspect of learning in their classroom as well, believing that only through their [teachers'] " consideration" and " suggestion" (p. 20) can the students cooperate socially and learn effectively.

Another aspect of " good practice" utilised by the FS teachers is the child's liberty. Montessori believes that students' free choice and freedom on the " educational playground" can be advantageous and can promote their free self-expression. This is practised in my school with caution, however. The teachers as well as Kilpatrick believe that too much liberty will not lead to " right conduct" (p. 23). He emphasises that "…in the effort to suppress… impulses, a certain amount of positive pain association (" punishment") will prove necessary…" (p. 24). Thus, having acquired a positive self-expression with the guidance and support of the teacher, the child develops self-discipline and " proper conduct" (p. 24).

Finally, one more aspect of " good practice" applied in FS of my school is that the students exercise " practical life" in their classroom. Activities like cooking, cleaning, serving, setting tables, washing hands, constructing, etc. become so intrinsically meaningful that the students develop their potential to perform these tasks with interest and concentration. Utilising this approach, teachers create the Montessori model which is " the school should fit the needs of the students." This means that the Montessori curriculum is

based on the students spending a lot of time taking part in different sessions of uninterrupted activities, which last several hours. These activities contain a variety of independent and group-solving tasks related to different subjects: maths, science, music, geography, etc. Here, Kilpatrick agrees with Montessori that " schools should function more definitely as a social institution, adapting itself to its own environment, utilising more fully actual-life situation" (p. 41).

In contrast to a Montessori classroom, the FS classrooms are NOT mixed age, but are counterparts. This is why the teachers mix the children according their abilities when less-able students are supported by more capable students.

To conclude, our students are a combination of the Montessori Method and a modern democratic school, where the child's day is a mixture of activities, starting from unstructured approach – where the students play and learn independently – and ending with highly structured approach – where the tasks are teacher-directed and there is little play. Other activities are focused learning, when students are guided by the teacher and play and learn via experiential activities; and finally, the activities are child-initiated, when students interact sensibly and sensitively in a supportive and enabling environment. All these approaches are used by Early Year Foundation Stages (EYFS) in international schools in Amman.

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Freire's views explicitly recognise the relationship between education and knowledge. He emphasises that liberal education would build on the knowledge resources and agency of learners: " Liberation education consists in acts of cognition, not transferals of information" (Freire, 2002: 366).

In Jordanian education system, however, " the raison d'etre of liberation education" lies in its didactic approach of teaching – the ' banking' concept of education – where teachers are ' depositors' and students are ' depositories'. The system heavily relies on memorisation techniques, which is done for the academic performance. Students are required to learn from seven to ten subjects within the period of two years. At the end of the two-year, they sit for the end-of-year external examinations. The students' learning styles involve a lot of writing and memorising; the classes are teacher-centred and in " transferals of information"; the content is massive and should be covered in a two-year period; and time constraints are obstacles to interactive lessons.

Within this short time framework, students and teachers work hard to cover the content of learning, which is overwhelming. They display their " absolute ignorance" towards the " oppressed" situation and fail to respond to the " essence of consciousness". They also fail to recognise cognition and thus, do not " establish an authentic form of thought and action." (p. 366)

Problem-posing education would liberate Jordanian state school students if they were taught facts of the reasons and means of humans' existence; if teachers regarded dialogue as a precondition to cognition; if students were taught how to think critically; if they built their understanding on creativity,

etc. I believe the Jordanian education system would be one of the best if they accepted individuals as " historical beings" to clearly acknowledge their present, past and their willingness to " wisely build the future" (p. 367).