

Integrating Vygotsky and Imaginative Education in Curriculum Design

A theory to practice approach

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English is recognized as an international language, a language of commerce, communication, diplomacy, technology, and science (Pitsuwan, 2014). Accordingly, the number of English language learners is on the rise. Learners of English as a second language (ESL) exceed 1 billion people globally (British Council, 2014); this number is expected to exceed 1.9 billion by 2020. From November 2015 to November 2016, over 34,000 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada (<http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/refugees/welcome/milestones.asp>). The Canadian government has recognized language learning as key to successful settlement and offers language learning to all newcomers, including refugees. To facilitate the optimal success of this staggering number of learners worldwide, including the critical need of refugees, fundamental ESL learning methods must be considered from a closer perspective. Specifically, the essential learning challenges faced by ESL students need to be identified, with an eye to gaining a fundamental understanding of best practices in the ESL classroom.

Typically, students in an ESL classroom come from different nationalities and backgrounds, but share the same goal—learning English as their second language. What all learners have in common is their aim to understand English, to communicate with it, and to be able to use it in different contexts. Despite their common goal, these learners may have basic differences. That is, they may not all be equipped with the same tools to achieve their goal in learning language.

Adult learners coming from different cultural backgrounds have acquired different learning styles and cognitive tools throughout years of education in their mother tongues. The cultural tools used in the learning process differ amongst these learners. Successful attempts to

educate these learners in ESL must take these differences into consideration. This paper will adopt a Vygotskian perspective in arguing that learners from different cultural backgrounds are challenged when expected to use unfamiliar cognitive tools to learn language. Suggestions for a possible solution to these challenges from an Imaginative Education perspective will also be made.

Learning styles

Taking the learning styles of students in consideration is an important factor in successful classroom outcomes. As Tulbure (2011) concluded in her research, when teaching strategies in a classroom considers the learning styles of the students, learners are better able to perform academically. A main key to building a strong, successful curriculum is to make it engaging enough for the learners to relate with it and hence master the subject. As Egan (1998) mentioned, any curriculum can become engaging and interesting for the learners as long as it contains the proper material in relation to their cognitive understanding. Findings of a study done by Castro and Peck (2005) in a foreign language learning classroom highlight the importance of cognitive understanding and learning style as well. Their research found planning classroom activities based on an awareness of students' learning styles to be a main factor of success.

Learning Style, Cognition, and Culture

To discuss learning styles in a careful way, the term itself must be defined. Commonly, learning styles are often defined in terms of individual modes of learning, such as visual, spatial, or motor (Learning Styles, n.d.). In this paper, however, learning styles are referred to as the tools a learner is equipped with to make sense of the world when encountered with something not previously known to him. These sets of tools originate in the culture of each human being

and relate to what the individual has been exposed to, within the daily and educational life of that person's culture. Thus, learning styles by their very nature are culturally sensitive. Research supports the influence of culture on learning styles. Joy and Kolb found:

Individuals tend to have a more abstract learning style in countries that are high in in-group collectivism, institutional collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, future orientation and gender egalitarianism. Individuals may have a more reflective learning style in countries that are high in in-group collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and assertiveness. (2006, p.69).

In addition, the results of research in adult multicultural business classes have pinpointed the direct effect of different culture-based educational experiences on learning styles of the students. (De Vita, 2001). Despite much research pointing to the relationship between learning style and cultural background, this issue has not yet received sufficient attention to be implemented in schools and classrooms.

Oxford and Anderson (1996) pointed out that teachers in culturally diverse classrooms face many challenges, yet are unaware that student learning difficulties are often rooted in the lack of cross-cultural and learning-style understanding within the classroom. Recent research shows that the importance of learning style and culture has yet to be discovered and incorporated into teaching methods and systems. ESL learner may be taught by teachers who are not familiar with their culture or background (Eun & Lim, 2009). In some cases, teachers may be aware of the student's culture, and the importance of that culture to learning, but may lack the institutional support to implement awareness in their teaching in a practical, consistent way (Ajayi, 2008). Thus, there is need for a consideration of the culture of the student and the relation of that culture

to student learning style. To be able to address this issue, a closer look at concepts such as culture and learning is required. This closer look will be informed by the perspective of the foremost expert on culture and learning, the pioneer Russian theorist Lev Vygotsky.

Vygotsky, Language, and Culture

Culture is a term with many meanings and connotations. A common understanding of culture includes sets of traditions and habits rooted in the history of a nation which effects beliefs and behaviors of the people (Culture, n.d.). House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta (2004) conceptualized the term culture to refer to “shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations of meaning of significant events that result from common experience of members of collectives that are transmitted among generations” (p.15). Vygotsky, however, has a more specific application for the term culture. For him culture is closely related to language.

Vygotsky’s use of the term culture referred to the sense of concept and word, a sort of cognitive tool which is more commonly considered as cultural practices (Van de Veer, 1996). For Vygotsky, culture is a means of mediating behavior. This mediation results in learning

In the process of growing up, every child acquires a set of tools from his environment. This environment consists of cultural mediators which shape the human being’s behavior over time. Vygotsky’s emphasis on culture as a cognitive tool is evident when he wrote, “In the process of development the child not only masters the items of cultural experience but the habits and forms of cultural behavior, *the cultural methods of reasoning* [emphasis added].” (Vygotsky, 1929, p.415). He further explained that the cultural development of human beings related to any specific psychological operation is related to mastering methods of behavior based on the use of

signs. These signs differ from one culture to another; thus, psychological operations, specifically language learning styles as our main concern here, would obviously differ among members of different cultures.

The Learning Process

The term learning can also have different connotations. As Egan (2002) explained, some progressive scholars such as Spencer, Dewey, and Piaget referred to a natural process of learning in children. According to this perspective, all human beings go through similar stages of mental growth and development, regardless of their cultural environment. Years of study on different learning styles in multicultural classrooms, however, do not support this perspective.

Vygotsky offers a very different view towards learning. While Vygotsky is more commonly known in educational circles for his Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), he actually has conceived more fundamental and far-reaching ideas than this often misunderstood concept. In particular, Vygotsky has deeply analyzed the essential relation between culture and education. For Vygotsky, educational development and cultural tools come hand in hand. He explained two different developmental lines in human growth. One line is the natural development which is biologically set and functioned. And the next is the cultural development line which is affected by mediators from the culture (N. Gajdamaschko, personal communication, course lecture, July, 2016).

In terms of natural development, children spontaneously relate to their environment, grasping what they feel, see and experience around them. Through cultural development, children learn through mediators, such as adults, peers, signs and objects; these mediators differ

from one culture to another. In the internalization process of any behavior, including the learning process, the cultural mediators determine and shape the signs in human thoughts. In fact, Vygotsky (1978) considered the culturally mediated internalization process of a behavior so important that he felt this was one of the distinguishing characteristics of the human being as a species. “The internalization of socially rooted and historically developed activities is the distinguishing feature of human psychology, the basis of the qualitative leap from animal to human psychology” (p.57).

From a Vygotskian perspective, a learning style can be considered as a cognitive/cultural tool, and thus follows the culturally mediated internalization process just described. For example, rules and structures can be considered educational mediators in a classroom. In some cultures, classroom structures are typically based on a lecture monologue of the teacher; not many Student-Student (S-S) interactions are allowed in such educational settings. On the contrary, there are cultures in which S-S interactions, brainstorming ideas, and peer and group works are highly valued in the classroom. Each of these classroom structures mediate the learning in its own fashion, creating a culturally based learning style.

Similarly, in some cultures perfectionism is highly appreciated in a classroom, while as in other cultures students are free and comfortable to make errors without receiving negative feedback. Students will develop the cognitive learning style mediated in their classroom, developing cognitive tools that fit that style. Research previously cited in this paper show this wide diversity of educational behavior and preferences in cross-cultural classrooms, in support of Vygotsky’s cultural theory.

Language, Thinking, and Learning

Vygotsky devoted profound texts and examination to the topic of speech and learning. A full discussion of his theory is obviously beyond the scope of this paper. Since, however, this paper focuses on the challenge of learning a language, a summary of Vygotsky's extensive ideas on this topic will be attempted. Special attention will be given to key terms such as tool, sign, and mediator, and especially the role of the teacher as a mediator of culture.

As Vygotsky has explained many times in his work, language is not only a set of arbitrary symbols used to communicate. Language is a tool for thinking. Vygotsky (1934) explained the unity of word and thought, showing how word meaning is the basis of thought formation in human beings. Language here represents the cognitive structure of members of a culture. Vygotsky reflects the idea that each language is tightly related to a system of thinking, a system intricately related to the culture.

Vygotsky's discussion about *tool* and *sign* can be applied to the relation between thought and word in language learning. For Vygotsky (1978) tool refers to an external phenomenon, which with the help of mediation can become a sign, an internal phenomenon. An example for tool and sign is a person tying a knot on someone's finger to help him to remember something. The knot is an external phenomenon. The person tying the knot, as mediator, assigns the connotation of memory prompt to the knot, provoking the internal activity of remembering (sign). Once a tool is mediated and has gone through the process of internalization, the sign no longer needs the tool to function (remembering without the tying a knot). Vygotsky(1978) used the phrase *higher psychological function* for the combination of tool and sign in psychological

activities. “Development, as often happens, proceeds here not in a circle but in a spiral, passing through the same point at each new revolution while advancing to a higher level” (p.56).

This process can be understood on an everyday basis when considering how a mother teaches a child language. The mother acts as cultural mediator, and teaches a “sign” a word to the child. For example, she teaches the sign or word “ball” to the child, representing a spherical object that can be rolled. The child learns the sign/word, and now uses this as a tool. He calls out ball whenever he sees one, and may use this tool as a way to engage others in ball play with him.

Kozulin (2003) emphasized the importance of teachers as mediators of learning. Kozulin identified two agents of mediation, human and symbolic. In a classroom setting, the teacher carries the weight of both. Through interpersonal interactions, the teacher is the main human mediator. The teacher is a symbolic mediator in developing, selecting, and implementing the material, structure, rules, and activities in the classroom. In fact, Vygotsky (1997) referred to the primary role of the teacher as “director of the social environment” (p. 339).

With teaching language and literacy, the ESL teacher is not only conveying words and symbolic and grammatical systems to the students. The teacher mediates new cognitive tools relating to the second language, and thus mediates a new system of thinking. Students not only are learning the language but also they are learning how to think in a new system.

Through the personal and material mediation of the teacher, students become familiar with new kinds of understandings and cognitive tools. Egan and Gajdamaschko(2003) explicitly explained this matter as the following;

“Approaching literacy from the Vygotskian perspective as a much more complex cultural phenomenon, we need to recognize that literacy will give a new set of cognitive tools to

the child. It is not only the mechanics of writing to which a child is being introduced in school but the whole new system of cognitive psychological tools that literature has historically stored within itself.” (p.87)

Second Language Learning

Vygotsky gave special attention to the process of language learning and to the difference between learning a native or first language (L1) and learning a second language (L2). In *Thinking and Speaking* (1934), Vygotsky explained that when the student is about to learn a second language (L2) he already has a set of fully formed and developed word meanings (L1). The second language word meaning is built based on this existing knowledge. He clearly explains this matter as “the learning of a foreign language is unique in that it relies on the semantic aspects of the native language” (p. 16). After a close look through a Vygotskian lens at ESL learners Eun and Lim (2005) suggest teachers learn as much as possible about the dominant mediational patterns of their students’ culture. For optimal learning, teachers also need to find a way to connect students from their native culture of their L1 to the new culture of the L2.

Following Vygotsky’s discussion, the importance of having a uniform cognitive learning style in the classroom, one which is aligned to the culture of the student, is essential. Learning a foreign language, however, may inherently demand the need for a cultural shift, for students to be able to develop new cognitive tools through the gradual introduction of teacher and material based mediation related to the new language and its demands.

Thus, there is a need to discover methods in the ESL classroom which could accomplish two important goals. The first is to recognize the specific learning style, culture, and cognitive tools of the students and strive to create a culturally leveled classroom. For teachers to be able to

use the existing cognitive tools of students for the learning process, they first need to acquire a general understanding and knowledge about these specific tools. The second goal would be to mediate in such a way in this culturally leveled classroom, to enable students to develop new tools to deal with the demands of the second language, a language which involves cognitive tools and learning styles foreign to the student's culture.

Vygotsky, Imaginative Education, and ESL

Imaginative Education (IE) provides a lens through which teachers can view student cognitive learning style and culture. In IE, Egan conceived education as occurring through different kinds of understanding the world and related cognitive tools. Along with explaining different kinds of understanding, Egan (1998) explicitly pointed out that these kinds of understanding and the related cognitive tools are essentially culturally sensitive and will be different in different socio-cultural backgrounds.

Egan (1998) introduced five kinds of understanding the world among human beings and includes some related cognitive tools for each. He explained that through social cognitive interactions individuals may acquire Somatic, Mythic, Romantic, Philosophic and Ironic kinds of understanding. He noted that the individual's development of these kinds of understanding depends on the socio-cultural background. Moving from one kind of understanding to the other requires the acquisition of appropriate cognitive tools. For example, in some socio-cultural contexts children never have access to the cognitive tools relating to the later kinds of understanding, Philosophic and Ironic. Thus, they are not able to develop those kinds of understandings.

Here I would like to propose a new possible solution to ESL multicultural classrooms, one which merges Vygotskian insights with IE ways of understanding the world. That is, IE can be used to carry out both essential steps in ESL learning— first, identifying (and in best circumstances leveling) the culture and thus conceptual tools of the classroom, and second, gradually introducing new cognitive tools to bring about cultural change necessary to learn a new language.

To return to Vygotsky's viewpoint, initially language is an objective, to be learned by the mediation of various tools, especially the family and social environment. A learned language becomes a tool by which other signs can be learned. For Egan, an individual's learned language will reflect the level of his understanding of the world. As such, it becomes a socio-culturally relative cognitive tool that will impact overall learning.

When learning a second language, language is both a cognitive tool L1 and a desired outcome L2. Applying the IE perspective to ESL learning, the challenge of the teacher is to identify the type of understanding reflected in the L1 language, and connect with the learner at that level. The identified cognitive tools become a starting point for the teacher to mediate in a culturally appropriate way, according to the student's learning style. Integrating Egan and Vygotsky, one can say that once the connection is established on the L1 cognitive tool level, the development spiral can begin, allowing the student to grasp new cognitive tools, ones that help build new language.

From the IE perspective, teachers will first need to become familiar with the kind of understanding their students currently have from the world around them. This first step is crucially important as teachers are the primary mediators in the learning process. To be effective

mediators, they will initially need to identify their students' existing tools and cognitive systems. In ideal institutional circumstances, the teacher can create a culturally leveled classroom to accommodate the shared cognitive tools of the students in the class. Where this is not possible, understanding and accommodation of individual cognitive tools must be undertaken, a far more challenging and time consuming process.

In either case, the second step is to progressively build on the cultural understanding through mediation so that the student can grasp the new language. The IE concept of different ways of seeing the world can represent cultural understandings through which students can transition as they go from the culture of their original language (L1) to the culture of their new language (L2).

IE and ESL: A case Study

The following is a brief case study, showing how Imaginative Education principles can be used to revise ESL curriculum and thus increase learner engagement with the language, and as an extension, with the culture of the second language. While this particular example was not taken from work with the Syrian refugees, inferences can be made from this example to curriculum revisions in other such settings.

Original curriculum. The original curriculum chosen for change through application of an IE perspective was one weekly ESL unit, consisting of both productive and receptive language skills—reading, writing, grammar, and speaking. Students use the text *American Headway*; teachers have access to the *American Headway Teacher's Book* as well as an extra practice book.

Typically, teachers go through each unit, constructing their lesson plan through the use of the Teacher's Book. Teachers tend to make only minor changes to the detailed instructions available for each unit. Teachers do, however, have the freedom to make more extensive changes to align with the needs of their classroom, as long as they cover the main material and target language of the week, and meet the aim of each lesson

Examination and critique of the material. When I went through the material of the unit, what initially grabbed my attention were some existing IE cognitive tools in the lesson. *Humanizing of meaning*, a cognitive tool of romantic understanding, was present through the use of real stories in the readings. I spotted *binary opposites*, a mythic cognitive tool, used in grammar material related to countable and non-countable nouns. Also, there was a good use of *extremes and limits of reality*, an effective tool of romantic kind of understanding, in the activity on “unusual and fascinating markets around the world”. These tools, however, were not used in a coherent, consistently engaging way and were unlikely to shape a meaningful, unified understanding of the lesson. Furthermore, additional cognitive tools could add to engagement while achieving lesson aims.

Changes made to the instructional unit Based on my examination of the material and a critique from an IE perspective, I made the following changes to the unit:

1) The lessons lacked coherency. While various techniques and topics were introduced and a variety of learning goals were targeted, the lesson itself lacked coherency. According to research by Emerling and Groff-Emerling (2016), described teaching is a cultural activity. These cultural goals can best be met when the lesson has a coherent storyline or context. Their research showed that even the most engaging activities may lose their effectiveness in a lesson full of variety but

lacking a coherent context. They suggest that a coherent story line can organize the progression of the lesson toward its learning goals.

--Suggested solution: This lesson began with word recognition and definitions and progressed to a reading selection somewhere near the middle. Words introduced early, even with various “engaging” methods can seem disjointed and out of context. Instead, I introduced a reading activity early, one which would engage students and draw them in to learning the target words in context. This reading formed the base for the entire lesson.

2). Lessons lacked cultural relevancy for the student. The students were presented with various content and exercises, ones which did not relate to them or which would not be likely to engage their sense of wonder. For example, as a writing activity they were asked to write a postcard home. This is not only repetitive for students at this level (thus lacking a sense of wonder or interest), but also does not align with the context of the activity.

--Suggested solution: All sections of the lesson, such as reading, writing, and word recognition were keyed to have cultural relevancy for the student and to align with the overall context. The overall theme for this lesson, according to the assigned text, was shopping. Knowing that newcomers often use Craigslist to search for affordable household items, I presented “Dirty Little Secrets of Craigslist” as the base reading. Use of a familiar concept such as Craigslist humanized the lesson, offering current cultural relevancy.

I also added a *real activity* to assist students in practicing countable and non-countable nouns. Students were asked to set up a market in the classroom and role play shopping. This gave them a fictional context in which to practice their real learning skills.

3. Lessons lacked a sense of amazement and wonder. The required text offered some degree of amazement and wonder, by presenting different types of markets, such as a floating market or Marakech souk. The amazement and wonder embedded in this unit, however, was blunted by being followed up with an everyday shopping vocabulary exercise. In the follow up activity students were to memorize and repeat sets of sentences which are used in shopping.

--Solution: I kept the first part of this activity, the reading, and changed the second part to a much more engaging plan using an IE eye. For this part I divided the class in three groups and each group had the task of coming up with a new plan of an extraordinary market.

Results in the classroom:

Even considering all the extra time and energy spent to shape up this unit from an IE perspective, the delivery in the classroom was quite rewarding. Students were very engaged with the narrative and it sprang off into some good discussions on the topic of craigslist (Any kind of discussions that flows in ESL class is valuable for fluency purposes). Also, the rearrangement of unit components, starting with the reading and building the lesson on that, was much more meaningful for the students in comparison with the standard layout of the units. In the standard way students first study sets of words and grammatical rules and then see the application of the vocabulary and grammar in a text or listening. New words are often vague when presented to students, and having them at the beginning of the lesson can lessen engagement and enthusiasm. An interesting narrative, on the other hand, can engage the student's sense of wonder and motivate them to seek out the meaning of any unfamiliar words.

Perhaps the greatest classroom success in this IE revision of ESL curriculum, however, was achieved in the group activity of designing extraordinary markets. Frankly, I was amazed at how engaged students were with their groups, at their sense of agency and at how closely they worked together. Even the quietest students in the class spoke up, offering and exchanging ideas. Academic goals were met as everyone was now using the target language of the lesson to come up with the best extraordinary market for their group. As these were adult students, their ideas were very realistic and at the same time professional and innovative. They enjoyed using their imagination and personal experiences in designing something extraordinary. We also picked up on the original unit goal of using the shopping sentences, by going through the target language with the aim of using these sentences in the new extraordinary markets. Each group had to present their market to the class. The best market was voted for and in the next block students role-played going to this market and shopping for items.

Conclusions. Generally, I felt although the lesson delivery and success in the classroom was very positive after making IE changes, teachers could experience frustration and possibly even burnout by trying to implement change on this level. In my case, I had to spend double the amount of time my colleagues spent on lesson planning and assessment, for which, obviously, I received no compensation. Also, I had to negotiate complex dealing with colleagues and the director on many levels for a lesson which took lasted one week. I could relate closely with Fullen's (1993) idea that if a real change is supposed to happen it must go beyond the classroom walls.

Just as in Butler's (2004) framework for the Pro-D Activities, any new approach to learning like IE requires different layers of and continuity of Support, I reached the conclusion

that real change must take place on a larger scale, on a higher level than the classroom. I began to imagine at least one layer, ESL content material and a teacher's book, filled with IE tools that are comprehensive and aligned, engaging students' sense of wonder and imagination. This would help teachers and administrators be geared towards using a much more productive method of teaching in their classrooms from the very beginning!

Summary and Conclusions

The demand for learning English as a Second Language is on the rise, projected to reach nearly 2 billion ESL students by 2020. English is used in diplomacy, science, communication, technology, and many other globally shared enterprises. ESL learners typically learn in a culturally foreign environment and face many challenges.

Vygotsky's understanding of the nature of the learning process shows an inextricable relation between learning and culture. This relation may be even more intense in the case of foreign language learning, when the foreign language itself may introduce new signs and cultural markers. Drawing on Vygotsky's theory, a logical approach to ESL would be one which takes the culture of the learner into consideration, making all possible attempts to create a culturally uniform classroom to make learning more comprehensible to students.

At the same time, it must be recognized that learning a new language, perhaps more than any other type of learning, involves engaging with a new set of cultural signs and tools. Teachers need the insight and means to take the cultural background of students into consideration and to

use meaningful cultural cognitive tools as the proper mediator in the ESL classroom. This can only be a starting point for the learners to be able to use existing tools for building internal signs in the new language. Furthermore, the whole new sign system which they have internalized will become new tools helping them in the spiral developmental pattern of their new language and thought system.

Imaginative Education can be a viable method to facilitate this engagement. IE suggests that teachers become familiar with the culture of their students, through its model of five kinds of understanding the world. Teachers can then identify the styles of their learners and develop appropriate tools to lead their learners through the different facets of learning and thus become deeply engaged in the learning the new cognitive tools that form the structure of the new language.

A full discussion of the promise that the use of Imaginative Education in the ESL classroom holds in carrying out Vygotsky's vision of education is beyond the scope of the current paper. Arguments presented here, however, strongly call for a consideration and application of IE as a Vygotskian solution to ESL learning. Further research on actual application of IE in the ESL classroom on students of various ages and cultures will be needed to substantiate the applicability of IE as a valuable method in ESL learning.

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