

# Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and Its Implications for Secondary School English Teaching

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## Abstract:

As one of the major themes in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, the Zone of Proximal Development(ZPD) exerts a far-reaching influence on the field of education and has been widely applied in the second language teaching. Recent years many Chinese scholars have explored the application of ZPD theory in second language acquisition and made many achievements. But little attention has been paid to the application of ZPD theory at the primary education stage. Thus this paper aims to discuss implications of the ZPD theory to secondary school English teaching combining the Curriculum Standard of English (2017).

## Keywords:

Zone of Proximal Development, Research Review of ZPD, Secondary School English Teaching, the Curriculum Standard of English (2017), Implications

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## 1. Introduction

Vygotsky (1896-1934), an outstanding psychologist in the Soviet Union, mainly explored child development and educational psychology, focused on the relationship between thinking, language, and children's learning and development. His sociocultural theory, which stressed the social and cultural nature of development, had a profound impact not only on the Soviet Union, but also on Western psychology. As the essence of Vygotsky's thought, the Zone of Proximal Development(ZPD) theory creatively shed light on the dialectical relationship between teaching, learning and development. Unfortunately, Vygotsky died young, neither proposed any specific methodology for the use of ZPD in education nor made his thought spread widely. But later until 1960, his work was translated into English and spread to the West. Since then, his classic idea was expanded by many scholars (such as Jerome Bruner, James Wertsch and so on) from different perspectives and aspects in combination with different fields and inspired a series of in-depth research. Some new educational concepts and models under the influence of ZPD theory, such as Scaffolding teaching model, interactive teaching and dynamic assessment of learning capabilities, have been put forward one after another. In recent years, many Chinese scholars have

explored the application of ZPD theory in second language teaching and made many achievements. This article aims to review and summarize the main research achievements of the ZPD theory in the field of second language acquisition in China from 2011 to 2021, and discuss implications of the ZPD theory to secondary school English teaching based on the Curriculum Standard of English (2017).

## 2. Zone of proximal development (ZPD)

As one of the major themes in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, ZPD was initially proposed for psychological testing at school. Vygotsky maintained that testing should be based not only on the current level of a child's achievements but also (and mainly) on the child's potential development. He claimed that the actual level of development does not sufficiently describe development. Rather, it indicates what is already developed or achieved, it is a "yesterday of development". The level of assisted performance indicates what a person can achieve in the near future, what is developing (potential level, "tomorrow of development"). Thus, the ZPD refers to the distance between the current development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or collaboration of more capable peers. "The current or actual level of development of the learner" is what a child can do without any help or instruction. "The potential development" is defined as that which a child can achieve if given the benefit of support during the task. It means the ability to solve problems under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers [1].

## 3. Research review of ZPD

Although the ZPD as the core of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory entered China a little late, once introduced it gained lot of popularity. In recent years, many Chinese scholars have explored the application of ZPD theory in second language acquisition and made many achievements. In order to gain a thorough understanding of the research status and existing problems of ZPD theory in second language acquisition research, this paper analyzes 17 research papers published from 2011 to 2021 on Chinese core periodicals.

Some scholars have made theoretical reflections on the interpretation of ZPD theory in the field of second language acquisition. Chen [2] thoroughly analyzed the educational value of ZPD combining Vygotsky's theoretical system, social constructivism and the research results of developmental psychology. Wu and Gan [3] sorted out the research achievements of second language acquisition at home and abroad from the perspective of society and culture, and pointed out that the future should combine sociocultural theory with the principles of ecolinguistics to guide the study of second language acquisition comprehensively and dynamically. Zhang and Liu [4] argued that the ZPD theory still faced many challenges in the theoretical level such as the misunderstanding of theory and application.

Some scholars have applied ZPD theory to the practice of second language acquisition, focused on the influence and enlightenment of ZPD on second language teaching, and proposed new models of English translation, speaking, reading, writing and activity teaching [5,6,7,8,9,10]. These researchers attached great importance to the role of scaffolding teaching based on ZPD in second language teaching, stressed the timely construction and withdrawal of scaffolding. Peng and Zhou [5] conducted an empirical study on students in higher vocational schools and proved scaffolding

teaching was superior to the traditional teaching mode. With the support of teachers, students could transcend ZPD and proceed to the next development zone. Besides, with the further development of information technology and online teaching, some researchers turned to explore the network-based foreign language teaching under the guidance of the Zone of Proximal Development theory. Based on the ZPD, Guo [11] put forward the dynamic hierarchical teaching model of university English and verified the application effect of this model through experiments and interviews.

In addition, many researchers have studied teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction in the second language classroom including classroom discourse interaction, teacher questioning, classroom feedback, teacher role, etc. [12,13,14,15]. Li [16] adopted experiment and interview method to investigate and analyze interactive discourse between an English teacher of Hong Kong University and her students. The research results show that timely and clear scaffolding can promote learning, but the over-regulation of teacher discourse has a negative effect on language learning. Zhao [13] discussed the types and strategies of teachers' questioning in the second language class and pointed out classroom questioning based on ZPD was beneficial to the development of students' communicative and critical skills.

Recent years more and more researchers paid attention to dynamic ability assessment [17,18,19]. Different from the traditional evaluation method, dynamic ability assessment involves the interaction between the evaluator and the testee and requires the acquisition of a large amount of learners' data as support. The evaluator discovers their potential learning cognitive ability by observing the learners' performance in participating in various complex activities. Due to the lack of data collection and analysis tools in learning process in traditional teaching, it is difficult to effectively evaluate the ZPD of learners, thus it is difficult to optimize teaching. Liu & Yu [19] first used big data technology to effectively collect and analyze learners' online learning data and then proposed a presentation model of the ZPD of learners, finally summarized the main steps of precision teaching based on the ZPD.

Based on the above analysis of the 17 core articles, the author found that there are some limitations in research methods, research content and research objects, especially in research objects.

Among the 17 core articles, very few researchers focused on students' second language acquisition status at the primary education stage and the influence of the ZPD theory on learners of different school ages and stages. Next this paper will try to discuss implications of the ZPD theory to secondary school English teaching based on the new curriculum standards.

#### **4. Implications of ZPD to secondary school English teaching**

General Senior High School Curriculum Standards (2017 edition) clearly puts forward the concept of developing students' English subject core competencies based on students' development, that is, English courses in ordinary senior secondary schools aim to develop students' core literacy of English subjects, such as language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability, so as to implement the fundamental task of fostering virtue through education [20]. Vygotsky's idea coincides with the new curriculum standards in some respects such as teaching concept, teaching approach, evaluation concept. To begin with, Vygotsky argues that

teaching should focus on the child's ZPD and go ahead of children's development. The essence of teaching is to stimulate students' potential and teaching is the process of transforming the "zone of proximal development" into the existing level. The new curriculum standards stresses that teaching should be based on students' development and students are the masters of learning with the teacher as a guide. Additionally, the new curriculum standards advocates adopting an activity-based approach to English learning and some other ways of learning such as cooperative learning, and inquiry-based learning. The teaching process is an interactive process in which teachers and students communicate and develop together. And Vygotsky's ZPD theory is exactly in line with it. the ZPD theory affirms the influence of external factors on students' development, such as teachers' guide, peer interaction, classroom environment and so on. Vygotsky regards teachers as promoters of students' development, students as active participants, and interpersonal interaction as an important mechanism of knowledge generation. Learning and development are socially cooperative activities that can never be "taught" to an individual. It is suitable for students to construct their own understanding in their own mind. Finally, Vygotsky believes that the traditional static assessment method (also known as "standardized assessment") focuses on learning results, ignores the potential of students as individuals, ignores the dynamic changes of students' intellectual development, and fails to effectively reflect students' intellectual level. Thus the dynamic ability assessment is advocated to optimize teaching. The new curriculum standards advocates the philosophy of evaluation for learning, and pay due attention to the elements such as students' emotions, attitudes, and values demonstrated in the process of English learning.

The basic idea of the new curriculum standards is in line with Vygotsky's idea in many respects such as teaching concept, teaching approach, evaluation concept. Therefore, it has brought much enlightenment for how to promote students' English subject core competencies. Based on the ZPD, teachers can provide slightly more difficult content, stimulate children's learning enthusiasm and develop their potential, so that they can surpass their zone of proximal development and reach the next stage of development, and then proceed to the next development zone. When teachers set teaching objectives, select teaching materials and methods, implement teaching activities and evaluations, students' ZPD should be taken into consideration.

#### ***4.1. Analysis of the students***

The learning situation analysis is the basis of the formulation of teaching objectives and teaching content analysis, as well as the foothold of teaching strategies selection and teaching activities design. Thus, the first step of English teaching is to find the students' actual level of development and predict the potential level of development. With the further development of information technology, teachers can adopt a variety of methods such as questionnaire, interview and on-line testing to collect students' data. Then based on available data, students' learning situation including their level of knowledge, characteristics, learning style, thinking style and so on can be traced and analyzed. What's more, teachers can teach students in different levels according to their actual English development level and their potential to accept knowledge. Stratified teaching is helpful for teachers to manage their classes and improve teaching efficiency by teaching students according to their aptitude. Taking the high school English writing class as an example, the first step of teaching under the "Zone of Proximal development" theory is the initial assessment of the English writing level of the students. First of all, teachers can develop a writing ability rating

scale for senior high school students from the dimensions of language, content and structure in the light of the requirements of the syllabus. In addition, Student writing data can be collected through a variety of methods such as writing test, questionnaire, interview. Last but not least, it is necessary to analyze and classify the data according to English writing evaluation criteria. Therefore, teachers can determine students' English cognitive level and development potential based on the above assessment content, so as to achieve hierarchical writing task setting and improve students' interest and effect in English learning.

#### ***4.2. Design of teaching objectives***

According to Vygotsky's idea "Good teaching should focus on the child's ZPD and go ahead of children's development." Thus, the rationality of design of teaching objectives directly affects the final teaching effect. In the selection of teaching materials, teachers should control the difficulty and depth of teaching materials according to students' ZPD. The formulation of teaching objectives and teaching important and difficult points should be based on students' ZPD (the existing and potential levels of students), with a view to factors such as age, gender, needs, motivation, educational background and so on because of the differences of students' ZPD. Teachers can develop feasible teaching objectives for students of different levels by means of stratification and grouping. No matter teaching objectives lower than the students' existing level or higher than the students' potential level, the teaching will be inefficient.

#### ***4.3. Construct of learning scaffolding***

Scaffolding instruction is a kind of constructivism teaching mode proposed by Bruner, a famous American educational psychologist, based on ZPD theory. Scaffolding teaching advocates student-centered, aims to use situational, collaborative, conversational and other learning environment elements to stimulate students' initiative and enthusiasm, and finally effectively realize the construction of the current knowledge. In the teaching process, teachers can construct appropriate learning scaffolding on the basis of students' ZPD to maximize the development potential of students. Taking "Writing after reading" in China as an example, effective writing scaffolding can be constructed from the four dimensions of language, content, thinking and emotion. First of all, teachers can guide students to analyze the language of reading materials from the viewpoints of the rhetoric, the theme vocabulary and the functional sentence patterns perspective, so as to build scaffolding for writing in language. On the content side, teacher can stimulate students' imagination and broaden their writing thought through brainstorming and resource expansion. In addition, teachers can apply multi-level questions as scaffolding in students' reading process to encourage students to express critically. Eventually writing scaffolding in emotion is the most critical step for writing teaching. Teachers can create a variety of situations to guide students to form their own real emotional attitudes when reading texts and integrate their emotion into writing after reading. In brief, teachers' writing scaffolding must be based on the students' ZPD, especially their existing language ability, thinking level and emotional attitude.

#### ***4.4. Integration of teaching, learning and evaluation***

English Curriculum Standards points out that "teaching evaluation is an important part of English curriculum" [20]. The teaching evaluation is both the beginning and

the end of teaching and runs through the whole process, aiming to find the students' actual level of development and predict the potential level of development. The purpose of evaluation is to fully know the students' characteristics, learning effect, diagnose learning difficulties and predicting learning potential. It can help teachers to make teaching plans for the next step so as to guide students surpass their ZPD and reach the next stage of development. However, it was generally believed that it was hard to assess the ZPD, analyse the dynamic process of students' potential cognitive development in traditional teaching. With the further development of information technology, there are more and more evaluation tools at hand. The integration of teaching, learning and evaluation is a kind of new teaching methods to break through the traditional isolation between teaching and assessment, and make evaluation no longer free from the teaching but embedded in the teaching [21]. It is a dynamic circulating system which involves such elements as educational conditions, resource allocation, school orientation, individual differences, learning needs and classroom situation [22]. Teachers should realize the importance of evaluation and achieve the integration of teaching, learning and evaluation in teaching design.

## 5. Conclusions

Vygotsky's ZPD theory has a profound influence on English elementary education reform in China. Especially after General Senior High School Curriculum Standards (2017 edition) were issued, it has brought much enlightenment for how to promote students' language ability, cultural awareness, thinking quality and learning ability. When teachers set teaching objectives, select teaching materials and methods, implement teaching activities and evaluations, students' ZPD should be taken into consideration. In the selection of teaching materials, teachers should control the difficulty and depth of teaching materials according to students' ZPD. In order to develop students' core literacy, the design of teaching objectives need to be based on students' ZPD (the existing and potential levels of students), with a view to factors such as age, gender, needs, motivation, educational background and so on. And appropriate learning scaffolding should be used in teaching to maximize the development potential of students. Activity-based approach to English learning and some other ways of learning such as cooperative learning, and inquiry-based learning should be advocated to help students to construct their own understanding in their own mind. Moreover, teachers should pay more attention to students' potential development level than their actual development level. Finally, To comprehensively know the students' characteristics, learning effect, learning difficulties, the dynamic ability assessment also becomes increasingly important. the integration of teaching and evaluation in teaching design is the key factor to improve teaching quality. The future research should pay more attention to the implementation of the integration of teaching, learning and evaluation in English classes, and the dynamic assessment of students' ZPD.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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