Using Vygotsky's Inner Speech/External Speech to Enhance International Students' Writing Skills

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Abstract

According to Vygotsy, speech and language have two forms: "inner speech" and "external speech." Inner speech is pure meaning—shifting, unstable, and fluttering between word and thought. If an ESL learner himself/herself unconsciously uses "internal discourse" to talk to himself/herself out loud in English, we may say that this person is taking his/her first step towards becoming a fluent writer. Further, let's examine the aspect of external speech. Here, thought is embodied in words. Our thought is shaped by our external speech which serves as a tool to explore ideas and nourish thought.

Our external speech has two forms too: private speech and social speech. When we talk or write to ourselves, we use "private speech" and we are our own audiences. When we talk or write to others, we create social dialogues with others. It is imperative that ESL educators use the social-cultural context around their ESL learners to encourage shifting their private speech/social speech from the mother tongue to English. Vygotsky's scaffolding technique offers a way to achieve this goal.

The starting point is to decide the ESL learners' zone of proximal development and to promote their potential with the help of knowledgeable others. Secondly, the educator's modeling technique should be used carefully to lead students in achieving conscious awareness of various writing styles. Finally, it is important to focus on students' reflection on how they use their strategies and how they build their conscious awareness of their thinking. As long as international students follow these three stages when using Vygotsky's inner speech/external speech concept, they may assume responsibility for their own learning and monitor their own progress when writing the American way required in U.S. graduate institutions.

Keywords: Vygotsky, Inner Speech, External Speech

Introduction

Among Vygotsky's theories, the most salient features for educators are his concepts of the zone of proximal development and the role of more knowledgeable others. According to Vygotsky (Kozulin, 1990), children do not naturally learn by themselves and they need knowledgeable others (peers or especially adults) to guide their learning. How a teacher can move from the children's actual developmental level to the higher level of their potential development is really a challenge. In terms of language learning, McMahon (1996) points out that if a child refuses to read and write, his/her teacher cannot provide "instruction on concepts associated with literacy" (p. 61). McMahon further suggests that a teacher must "provide a scaffold that narrows the task sufficiently for the learner" (p. 61). The task must not be too easy nor too difficult: (1) a teacher mediate his/her students' learning through social interaction; (2) a teacher's role should be flexible; (3) a teacher's support should be based on his/her students' needs (McMahon, 1996).

McMahon focuses on children' language learning by using Vygotskian perspectives. I assume that these perspectives also apply to adults' and adolescents' learning and international students' English language learning. This assumption also rests on several scholarly articles (Kronk, 1994; Mahn, 1997; Tarule, 1992; Wood, D. & Wood, H., 1996). For example, Kronk (1994) investigates the occurrence of private speech in adolescents, and she concludes that "private speech can help children study or adults focus on their work" (p. 791). Mahn (1997) shed light on how his ESL students' expressive writings in their dialogue journals help him understand his students' inner speech and needs. Tarule (1992) suggests that "the roles of inner speech as providing orientation to ideas, of external speech as stabilizing thought by linking it with language, and of dialogue as a socially constructed relation that undergirds knowledge, inquiry, and learning, can potentially provide a new theoretical basis for creating and assessing learning environments (p. 19). Wood, D. & Wood, H. (1996) examine research into individualized tutoring for children and adults by using Vygotskian scaffolding and the zone of proximal development. Therefore, these scholars' research increased my confidence and interest in investigating how Vygotsky's theories can be applied to help international students' academic writings.

As an international student, writing the American way is like a pilgrimage filled with trials and frustrations. I wonder if I were an American professor or ESL teacher, what could I do for international students who want to improve their academic writing in order to succeed in American universities? Then, I shaped a question for myself: How can I use the concepts of inner speech/external speech to help international ESL students acquire the writing skills expected in US graduate institutions? To answer this question, the following points will be addressed: (1) the role of speech in the learning process; (2) the application of the concepts of inner speech/external speech in an ESL classroom based on Vygotsky's scaffolding techniques.

The Role of Speech in the Learning Process

According to Vygotsky (Tarule, 1992; Vygotsky, 1981), the meaning of words changes when a person grows and develops, and the relationship between words and thought is unstable and shifting all the time. Speech and language have two forms in thought: "inner speech" and "external speech."

According to Tarule's interpretation of Vygotsky's concept of speech, Vygotsky would think that inner speech is a function in itself, which still remains speech and which is not the interior aspect of external speech. To some extent, inner speech is pure meaning, shifting, unstable, and fluttering between word and thought. The inner speech could be images, movements as well as words, which could be very personal, rooted in one's own specific cultural-historical context. Even when the inner speech is done in our own mother tongue, it is hard for us to expand it into the written and communication forms, let alone for an ESL learner to write down his/her inner speech in English.

Therefore, there is a way to judge an ESL learner's writing competence, that is, to ask if he/she uses translation in the second language composing process. If so, this ESL learner will take a long time to become a fluent writer. Therefore, how to transfer a person's inner speech in his/her mother tongue to English is a challenge for both international students and their ESL teachers.

When they write in their mother tongues, most non-native English speakers don't have to worry about grammar. It sounds as if they are writing (painting) a picture on a piece of paper or watching the scenery through the window of a train. They use their inner eye to "watch" (write) scenery. To international students writing in English sounds like using others' eyes to watch the scenery. They could not see the whole forest but only focus on leaves, branches, and individual trees. The powerful role of one's cultural and linguistic context in writing is really similar to using one's inner eyes to view the world.

In other words, one's inner speech (a condensed form, movements, or images shaped by the specific and cultural inner eyes) functions as a kind of pre-narrative and pre-dialogue. When we expect an ESL learner to employ external speech to stabilize his/her babbling inner speech, we have to make his/her own thought link with English words or with American culture. If an ESL learner unconsciously uses "internal discourse" to talk to himself/herself out loud in English, we may say that this person is taking his/her first step to become a fluent writer. Thinking in English is the first step for an ESL learner to go through and become a fluent writer.

Further, let's examine the aspect of external speech. Although in external speech, thought is embodied in words, we cannot deny that our thought is often shaped by our external speech which serves as a tool to explore ideas and nourish our thought.

Our external speech has two forms too: private speech and social speech. The two forms have their audiences. When we speak to ourselves, we are our own audience. This process is also confined in social-historical context. The idea is quite similar to a novel writer's interplay between writers, texts, and other texts. A writer's text could be a dialogue with his/her previous writers. Therefore, a person's private speech is related to one's dialogic imagination (Bakhtin, 1981) influenced by his/her environment, other people, and the social-cultural interaction with

the two. One's private speech could take place consciously or unconsciously. It is imperative for ESL educators to make good use of the social-cultural context around ESL learners to shift their private speech from their mother tongue to English.

In addition, one's social speech also can be a tool to help one's second language learning. An individual's social speeches create different dialogues which also create different meanings. We create diverse speech communities in different social contexts which often shape our thought and facilitate our learning and produce different forms of learning. Encouraging international students to use different forms of external speech opportunities (oral and written "dialogues" with others in different situations) is also a good way to help them socially construct knowledge with their knowledgeable others (native English speakers).

The Application of the Concepts of
Inner Speech/External Speech in an ESL Classroom
Based on Vygotsky's Scaffolding Technique

A student's constructing knowledge with knowledgeable others is similar to a reader's encountering different texts. In other words, an international student's position is like a reader who "creates a new text with each reading" (Mahn, 1997, p. 269). Each reading could be his/her encountering with the environment which includes "artifacts, the setting, social, cultural, historical, and political factors, as well as the influence of other individuals, such as teachers or classmates" (Mahn, 1997, p. 270). According to Vygotsky, human beings play an important role in creating and shaping their environment and Mahn (1997) and Rosenblatt (1995) argue for the difference between transactive and interactive experiences. The former means that the reader (the international student) and the text (the environment) are altered through the transaction while the latter (the elements in interaction) does not cause chemical and fundamental change.

A question could be raised here whether transactive experience could achieve the goal of making international students aware of their processes of writing and transcend them into a fundamental change in their writing habits. The transcendental experience seems to be ignored by Mahn and Rosenblott because a person's conscious awareness of his/her writing process is only a starting point for his/her transcendental experience which means that a student is able to transcend his/her own cultural background and the new experiences learned in the USA into an independent and detached position in his/her English writing. Based on the assumption that an international student has to go through the three stages (interactive, transactive, and transcendental), I will use Vygotsky's scaffolding technique to discuss what writing activities an ESL teacher may use to help international students make good use of their inner speech/external speech in achieving metacognition of their writing processes and in leading them to their taking an independent writing position between their own and the American cultural paradigms.

Interactive Experience

At this stage, an ESL teacher would expect that the rudiments in interaction between

him/her and students remain the same because it is a starting point to decide ESL learners' zone of proximal development. International students come from different cultural backgrounds, bring diverse educational experiences and own their unique social discourses which would play an important role in deciding their writing paradigms in their academic writings. In other words, these international ESL learners' social activities in their own countries have already molded the structure and organization of their consciousness. According to Vygotsky's theory, the internalized social relationships initiate all higher human mental thought (Ashton, 1996; Vygotsky, 1981). The task for an ESL teacher is to identify how different concepts and functions and writing knowledge in international students' consciousness were developed from their specific social activities and how an ESL teacher helps them reconstruct their thoughts "based upon a dialectic between instruction and development "(Axel, as cited in Ashton, 1996).

In other words, the purpose at this stage depends on an ESL teacher's analysis of the characteristics of the readers (international students) and the text (the teaching materials and the classroom discourses). After this analysis, the ESL teacher can evaluate his or her students' original abilities and consider proper teaching materials a little bit higher than their prior knowledge. He or she can create a suitable and friendly classroom atmosphere to promote their potential to write the American way with the help of their peers and the teacher.

The writing activities could be implemented in the use of freewriting in the classroom and a dialogue journal at home. Freewriting means that students could write anything coming to their minds without stopping in the classroom. The time limit is usually within 15 minutes, so students won't have enough time to worry about grammar. The purpose of free writing does not require students to write correct English. Instead, it makes students' ideas flow faster than they expect because in order to turn in assignments in a short time, students have to give up the idea of writing correct English. For native or non-native English speakers, the thinking process is always faster than the writing speed. Staying with the flow of ideas and telegrammatic jottings of thought will increase the students' confidence and this type of training will prepare them to improve their writing ability. If a person does not worry about grammar, his/her writing will become easier and faster. If one can be satisfied with one's communicative intent, one has more desire to learn how to write and the interest of learning can last for a long time.

Freewriting helps students' speed in writing and generating ideas and later it will help their spoken English. This type of external speech in a written form also gives feedback to international students' thoughts and English oral speech. The key point lies in the speed of generating ideas in English because when they write, they have no time to think in their mother tongues. Thinking in English will lead international students to write fluently, which also helps their oral English in public and private situations. Language, here, has become a tool for international students to express their thoughts. On the other hand, at the beginning of their knowledge in the USA is the English language which determines what is true and rules over their senses, their tastes, and their individuality, and their beliefs. Their thinking processes and their access to truth is done through the mediation of the English language on which international students rely to explore their sociocultural knowledge about writing. Thus, they could not write without bending to the laws of the English language which is not anyone's personal invention but is rather universal and essentially rational, controlling their thinking processes. In terms of

using language as a tool, an ESL teacher would ask his/her students to share their thoughts in the freewriting with their peers. By doing so, their English language will be gradually shaped by their environment. Therefore, based on the characteristics between "the reader and the text," an ESL teacher is able to monitor the ongoing development of students' thoughts and their mastery of English writing.

Dialogue journals serve the same function which is different from one's private speech in the diary because talking to oneself is more lonely and one has to depend on "dialogic imagination" to create an audience. When the international students' teacher is the audience, students have to externalize their verbal thinking into a written form to satisfy their audience (the teacher). At this point, their verbal thinking concentrates on the purpose of communicating instead of on the structure and form of the language.

To finalize the above interactive experiences of freewriting and dialogue journals, we can find that through interaction, the unchanged elements in interaction among the students, their peers, and their teacher are gradually undergoing chemical change, which is similar to the "state of play and interplay in intertextuality" (Durey, 1991). The interplay among the writers (the students and their teacher), texts (their writings) and other texts (the classroom discourses) constitutes a starting point for transactive experiences.

Transactive Experience

At this level, an ESL teacher would expect that the interplay among writers, texts and other texts will produce a fundamental change—which means that international students have achieved conscious awareness of the difference in writing paradigms between their countries and the USA and which also means that their teacher benefits from their diverse discourses brought from their home countries and form his/her transactive experiences. For the teacher, it is the right time to form his/her strategies based on each other's transactive experiences. Among all the strategies, modeling technique forms a bridge between students' expressive writings and academic writings.

Ashton (1996) provides us with the modeling interpretation of the zone of proximal development. According to her interpretation, a teacher or an expert peer has to assume a regulative role in a learning activity that international students gradually internalize through active participation in dialogue, which is a transition from other-regulation to self-regulation.

Freewriting and dialogue journals prepare a seedbed where students develop their ideas and write them down spontaneously and clearly. A question has to be raised whether this training is useful for their future academic writing. One possible assumption is that if an ESL teacher always gives international students "level appropriate" works to read and write which reflect their interests as international students and can be read without constant recourse to a dictionary, or written assignments of "the personal expression" kind, based on first-person narratives that describe what they have seen, felt or experienced, possibly the training in logical analysis, in constructing a rational argument to defend one's opinion, and the training of the mind, will be ignored if a teacher only pays attention to the spontaneity of their verbal thinking.

In order to bridge the gap, modeling technique needs to be carefully used in leading

students to achieve conscious awareness of the difference between expressive and academic writings. For example, American academic conventions emphasize the final product while expressive writings in an ESL classroom stress the writing process. Using proper strategies in leading students to achieve conscious awareness of the conventions that academics value is especially imperative at the transactive stage. Modeling from an ESL teacher or an expert peer would be crucial for students to achieve American academic literacy: "to examine and identify, to question and clarify, to make comparisons, to see relationships between concrete and abstract, specific and general, to define, classify, and differentiate" (Ray, as cited in Mahn, 1997).

For example, an ESL teacher can give students explicit guidelines to help in editing their partners' essays. Students have to be prepared to tell the writer of the essay their answers to the following questions (C. Malarcher, personal communication, Oct. 9, 2000).

1. Is this an informative or persuasive essay? Why do you think it is one or the other?
2. What is the thesis statement of the essay? Is this a direct or indirect thesis statement? Should the thesis statement be changed to make it stronger?
3. Do the topics of the body paragraphs support the thesis statement? How could any of the topic sentences be changed to make them fit the thesis better?
4. Are the body paragraphs unified and coherent? Mark any sentences within the body paragraphs that you think should be changed in some way.
5. Does the conclusion of the essay make sense? Is the conclusion suitable for an informative essay or a persuasive essay?
6. Does the essay have sentence variety? Mark any sentences that you think should be changed to another type of sentence (simple, compound, or complex).
7. Check the grammar and punctuation of the essay. Mark any corrections that you think should be made.
8. How many citations does the writer use in the essay? Are the author, year, and page included for each citation?
9. How many references does the author have? Do the references follow the correct format (APA or MLA)?
10. Is there a reference for every citation? Is there a citation for every reference?

The more specific the modeling guidelines are, the more students tend to internalize these rules into their own writings. Thus, these ESL students can develop an awareness of writing for particular audiences in the fields fitting their interests. Therefore, the transactive experience stage is really a turning point to cause a fundamental change of a person's awareness of different writing paradigms. However, the danger is that it can result in excessive use of guided learning, with teachers and peers and learners taking passive responsibilities for their learning. In order to assume responsibility for their learning, students need to achieve the level of transcendental experience by using the new gained knowledge they have internalized through social interactions (Ashton, 1996; Brown & Reeve, 1987).

Transcendental Experience

If students achieve at this level, they are able to write independently and sometimes can keep a detached position to see the strength and weakness of writing paradigms between their countries and the USA. Possibly they may make a good combination of the two and create incredible contribution to the knowledge in their fields. At this level, students are capable of using the word sense from their own native languages and make rich the English word meanings in their writings.

Therefore, what an ESL teacher can do here is to focus on students' reflection on how they use the strategies and figure out the meaning to build their conscious awareness of their thinking, asking the students to assume the responsibilities to independently conduct research related to the field fitting their interests.. At this level, an ESL teacher's monitoring task should not cease. Instead, when students monitor their learning process and progress, an ESL teacher has to keep monitoring his/her students to see if the students need any support while the teacher himself/herself has to monitor his/her teaching process too. An ESL teacher also goes through the interactive, transactive, and transcendental experiences with his/her students. He/she also constructs his/her teaching knowledge through social interaction.

Conclusion

Leading international students to write the American way is a challenge for an ESL teacher in the classroom. It is also a learning process for the teacher to be aware of the complex relationships among one's external and inner speeches constrained by the sociocultural context. Although time and space is limited in the classroom, an ESL teacher can model how to write the American way and monitor his/her students' progress and further may encourage them to make good use of their external and inner speeches outside of the classroom context. Most importantly, students have to assume responsibility for their own learning and monitor their own progress and finally achieve transcendental understanding of how to write the American way required in US graduate institutions and simultaneously keep the strength of the writing conventions.

The mediation model for writing instruction in this paper reflects Vygotsky's ideas about how to use one's inner speech/external speech in "reconciling one's developing word sense and word meaning in English with the word sense from one's native language" (Mahn, 1997) while the scaffolding technique helps international students to develop their potential step by step with the support of knowledgeable others (the teacher and the expert peers). In short, the Vygotskian classroom is similar to a classroom which recognizes the productivity of teacher, students, and knowledge in the classroom as active, changing, and changeable agencies.

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