

Language and literacy development: A sociocultural perspective

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With the recent Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS), ((DfE), 2021) reforms, language and literacy learning in early years settings has been pushed up the agenda with practitioners expected to provide quality play-based and adult-guided learning opportunities. This article seeks to explore how socio-cultural theories can be used in practice today to support practitioners in meeting the challenge of improving young children's outcomes, and balancing child and adult-led practice, through examining two excerpts of a childminder's practice which had been initially recorded for the purposes of reflecting on practice through observation. The first excerpt considers language, definable as symbols, contained within systems of organisation with underlying mental representation, the meanings of which have been individually and societally agreed upon (Hayes, 2016) and the second investigates literacy, the skills in speaking, listening, reading and writing which allow us to communicate and understand our world (National Literacy Trust, 2017). The roles of professionalism and values are highlighted throughout and suggestions are made as to how practice could be improved.

The socio-cultural perspective developed from Vygotsky's seminal ideas that knowledge acquisition is socially facilitated through interaction between a more knowledgeable person and a less advanced one (Vygotsky, 1978) and human experience is mediated through cultural tools (Daniels, 2017), thereby providing an alternative view to Piaget's cognitivism. Therefore, whilst Piaget may consider E's 'egocentric speech', in the observation below, results from her not yet being able to recognise that her own perspective differs from others (Kohlberg, Yaeger and Hjertholm, 1968), this observation better supports Vygotsky's alternate view that, far from serving no particular purpose, 'private speech' is "intimately and usefully connected with the child's thinking" (Vygotsky, 2012, p. 242) and would help E to think, understand and solve problems.

Two children, E (2 years 6 months) and M (2 years 8 months) were playing with playdough and various loose parts. M passed E a pipe cleaner.

E: "M gived it to me."

Practitioner: "M gave it to you."

E: "She gave it to me."

Practitioner: "What are you going to do with it now?"

E: "I don know."

Practitioner: "Hmm, I wonder what it could be".

E: Quietly, to self. "What be? What be? Has eyes.... No nose... Is mouth?" Holding the pipe cleaner to the dough "is big" ... "Be?" Looking at M's dough "[inaudible] feet... need legs". Looking at practitioner, speaking louder "Need legs."

Practitioner: "He needs legs, how many?"

E: Looks at own legs "Two!"

Practitioner: "Two, okay. Could we use the pipe cleaner to make them?"

E: Puts the pipe cleaner into the dough "need 'nother one."

Practitioner: "Do we, or could you bend this one to make two?" Demonstrating with the pipe cleaner.

E: Reinserting the pipe cleaner, picks up the dough and "roars" at the practitioner.

Practitioner: "Eek... aah" pretending to hide from the monster.

E: Giggling, puts the monster down and leaves the activity.

For Vygotsky, speech developed as a tool, in the same way any physical tool was developed, to increase social interactions (Sawyer and Stetsenko, 2018). Here, E is using her private speech as a tool to articulate and work through the problem of what to do with the pipe cleaner. Accepting this interpretation, there is vindication for the value placed on allowing children time and space to think and staying attuned to, but not interfering with, E's speech during this time was probably appropriate. Allowing E to verbalise her experience benefits her in two main ways, developing understanding and aiding communication by allowing E to 'try out' externally representing language before speaking to another (Nelson, 2015). However, Vygotsky (1978) also suggests speech is linked to internal motivation and forming intentions and in failing to use the insight gained from observing E's private speech by imposing a solution somewhat different to E's own thinking, the two-part process suggested by Vygotsky of using speech to plan and actions to carry out, may have been interrupted which could have impacted on E's motivation to continue playing and further benefit from the language-building exchanges being offered.

Another of Vygotsky's assertions supported by the observation is that children adopt language which has been modelled by an adult into their private speech so it becomes part of their thoughts and cognition (Stanley, 2011). The implication is interactions with practitioners have a significant impact on language acquisition (McDonald et al., 2015) and practitioners have a responsibility to ensure children experience high-quality language interactions. E's speech is consistently modelled back with correct grammar and open questions and 'wonder statements' (Parlakian, 2020) are used to facilitate turn-taking dialogue and provide extra information. These facilitative strategies are indicative of good practice and suggestive of sound knowledge and a high value placed on supporting language development. Despite this, there is evidence of missed opportunities to further support E's language skills around emotions when reacting to the monster's roar. Many human emotions have developed through the cultural tool of language (Jablonka and Ginsburg, 2012) and identifying and discussing them in play could help develop E's ability to identify emotions in herself and others (Bruce, 2010), the first step towards emotional literacy. Therefore, more could be made of opportunities for discussing emotions when they arise in play to support emotional development and self-regulation as required by the EYFS (DfE, 2021).

Evaluating Bruner's scaffolding theory provides additional validation for the suggestion that the development of E's language skills are being supported. Influenced by Vygotsky's notion of the zone of proximal development, Bruner would suggest E is being assisted with her use of language through specific language support within the interaction in a way which will allow her to ultimately become independent in the task (Riley, 2006; Smidt, 2011). Bruner made the point that whatever language E knows, she will "still have to learn how to use language" (Bruner, 1983, p. 119) and whilst there may be limited examples of new vocabulary being introduced here, modelling correct grammar back to E is scaffolding her use of words already acquired. The interaction between child and caregiver is an important aspect for Bruner and something he felt was missing from Chomsky's nativist proposal that children have an innate 'language acquisition device' enabling them to learn language (Smidt, 2011). Certainly, the pedagogy being demonstrated reflects that interactions are valued, and it is seen as part of the adult's role to model appropriate, mature speech (Bruner, 1983) specifically intended to help children acquire language skills. However, the observation shows a pretend play situation such as Bruner (1983) would consider ought to provide a valuable opportunity for using language and arguably E's learning could have been further enhanced by introducing new vocabulary which is known to support language growth and have positive impacts on later academic success (Weisleder and Fernald, 2013).

Turning to consider how using the lens of socio-cultural theory can support practitioners in improving literacy outcomes for children, there are two main elements of Vygotsky's theory which relate to the acquisition of literacy skills, the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and mediation

which are considered in relation to the second observation below, alongside Rogoff's theory of guided participation and Bruner's 'modes of representation'.

Following a morning planting seeds, child O (23 months) selected a book from the choreographed planting display and handed it to the practitioner. Practitioner: "Should we read this together?" E (2 years 6 months): "ye, ye". O and E sat on the practitioner's lap. The practitioner read the title, pointing to the words in turn. The practitioner then read the book, following the words with her finger, turning each page, sometimes helped by E and speaking about the illustrations.

Practitioner: "Ten seeds, one ant. Look (pointing) there are the seeds, what are they planted in?"

E: "soil"

Practitioner: "yes, the seeds are planted in soil, and who's this (pointing)?"

E: "Is worm, me find worm too."

Practitioner: "That's right, you found a worm when you were digging earlier didn't you. Do you remember what he felt like?"

E: "And ant (pointing at the picture)."

Practitioner: "Yes, and there is an ant too. Can you see the ant, O?"

E: turning the page over.

Practitioner: "Nine seeds, one..."

E: Is pigeon!

O: Giggles.

Practitioner: "Yes nine seeds, one pigeon. What's the pigeon doing?"

E: "Huh, Is eating seed!"

Practitioner: "I think he is eating the seed, yes. Nom, nom" (using hands to 'peck' on O's leg).

O: "Nom"

Practitioner: turning page, "eight seeds, one mouse"....

Later, E spotted a pigeon outside. "Naughty pigeon, go way, no eat me seed".

Looking first at the ZPD, Vygotsky would suggest the book and language (questioning) have been used as cultural tools to bridge the gap between the children's current level of knowledge and the higher-level understanding of the adult (Smidt, 2009). Knowledge of the children's cultural capital and current developmental level is being used to intentionally ask questions which extend thinking but remain accessible and E's understanding, demonstrated through her speech is carefully attended to (DaSilva Iddings, Risko and Rampulla, 2009). Nonetheless, in being so heavily led by E, O's ZPD may have been overlooked leading to missed opportunities to support his literacy development. Although it will later be suggested O is learning literacy skills through merely being involved in the activity, the needs of all children involved should be considered. This assertion alludes to the tension between providing adult-led and child-led learning opportunities. Statutory guidance may have evolved from explicitly requiring professional judgement to achieve a balanced approach, but the succeeding acknowledgement that children learn through both (DfE,

2021) is unlikely to materially affect the debate and it is suggested practitioners will need to remain mindful of children's developmental stage when deciding when to lead.

Rogoff (2003) argues Vygotsky's ZPD concentrates on academic situations and so overlooks much of the learning which takes place in everyday interactions which she proposes can be captured through her concept of guided participation. Not only does the questioning provide another example of scaffolding to support E's speech development, further suggesting this forms a consistent part of the pedagogy, but Rogoff would submit it also supports literacy development through creating "structuring through direct interaction" (Rogoff, 2003, p. 290) and allows for the reciprocal building on of E's spoken words to facilitate the 'mutual bridging of meanings'. This back-and-forth exchange of information, where both parties contribute to the other's understanding, links to the concept of 'Sustained Shared Thinking' (SST). As an apprentice (Smidt, 2009), E is playing an active role in reading the book and SST has extended her thought to embed her knowledge and later allow it to be applied in different situations (Brodie, 2014). This all suggests literacy, as well as language, can be supported by reading books together and discussing the words and pictures, asking appropriate questions and enabling children to make links with their experiences. The ease with which questions are asked during the reading, and the confidence with which children respond, suggests this is typical of the pedagogy and facilitating such interactions is highly valued.

Another aspect of Rogoff's (2003) guided participation is 'mutual structuring of participation'. In showcasing the book so O could select it, and then being responsive to his choice, a situation where literacy can be developed has been mutually created. This idea is supported by Bernstein's concept of invisible pedagogy as the context has been deliberately arranged and O has been allowed agency over his choices (Bernstein, 1975). Furthermore, understanding of how Bernstein's idea of the hidden curriculum supports early literacy development is demonstrated through modelling how to hold the book and following words with a finger, thereby implicitly transferring knowledge around literacy standards (Riley, 2006). Appropriate responses ensure the children's capabilities are pushed but not exceeded (Rose, 2004) allowing them to experience success, contributing to their identity as readers. The importance of such early opportunities for involvement with literature is explored by Whitehead (2010) who suggests they are enjoyable and help emotional development whilst building foundations for reading which is an activity highly valued in our society. This suggestion resonates with the demonstrated belief in introducing books from a very young age and supports the practice of ensuring books relating to the activities within the setting are prominently displayed, accessible, and frequently read.

The idea of linking books to the experiential opportunities the children have supports the second Vygotskian idea, mediation. Vygotsky (1978) ventured that development is mediated through social interactions and cultural tools, principally including language. Applied to this observation, unlike Piaget's constructivism, Vygotsky suggests E has not self-constructed her own knowledge by actively experimenting with seeds and soil, but rather her knowledge has come about through adult participation and intervention (Halpenny and Pettersen, 2014). This is significant when considering the development of literacy skills as there are clear implications for the role of adults within literacy activities. In this instance, it is suggested the children's experience of the book has been mediated, and E has inferred meaning and applied that knowledge to other situations. Yet, this process of making meaning from texts could have been better supported had the cognitivist view that children require an active element to their learning been considered (Moore, 2012), and the children given opportunities to show the knowledge gained through responsive play (Flint, 2020).

Further support for the perceived role of the adult and methodology in mediating literacy events comes from evaluation of Bruner's (2006) modes of representation. All three proposed modes can be identified within the activity. Allowing children to turn pages supports their motor memory for enactive representation, the illustrations accompanying the speech will support iconic

representation and linking the written words to those pictures will support symbolic representation, when the children are ready. Had the typical position of reading to the whole group, with the children seated on the carpet been adopted, these processes would not have been so well supported and potential learning lost (Torr, 2020).

In conclusion, it is suggested socio-cultural theory can provide a useful lens through which practice can be considered and potential improvements identified to support early years providers in improving language and literacy outcomes for children. Analysis of the first excerpt demonstrates how understanding the role private speech plays for children, and supporting that process, gives insight into children's thinking and cognition, how modelling the correct use of language and frequent exchanges between practitioner and child facilitates communication and why opportunities to introduce new vocabulary should be maximised. The second excerpt shows frequent opportunities for literacy events, particularly one-to-one, create opportunities for tailored, appropriate discussion surrounding texts and encourage of multi-modal engagement linked to children's cultural capital and interests. The literature discussed demonstrates how these elements all support and maximise the opportunities for literacy development. However, it is suggested opportunities available for children to make meaning through responsive play should be contemplated and the needs and interests of all children present should be balanced to ensure they are equally supported. Maximising opportunities for supporting language and literacy development and being sensitive to each child's individual needs and circumstances will ensure they have the best environment in which to achieve their full potential.

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