

The Context of Children’s Learning and Development: Sociocultural Perspectives

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Abstract

Sociocultural theories have been discussed in this research in the context of children’s learning and development among young English language learners in early childhood settings. A range of sociocultural perspectives drawn for the research includes (i) meaning and object in the context of contextualisation and (ii) roles and rules in the appropriation of sociocultural practice.

Introduction

Sociocultural theories describe learning and development as being embedded within social events and occurring as a learner interacts with other people, objects, and events in the collaborative environment (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning and development are two different processes that are related to each other in a complex manner (Bodrova & Leong, 2002). Vygotsky (1978) argued that “learning is not development; however, properly organized learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning (p. 9)”. Vygotsky addressed one of the most fundamental concerns, the relationship between learning and teaching within a learner’s cognitive development. From Vygotsky’s perspective, cognitive, social, and affective development take place through teaching and learning processes.

Vygotsky (1978) argued that social contexts influence the way a person thinks. Sociocultural theories illuminate the point that learning and environment cannot be separated from their social context as the context influences how and what children think (Vygotsky, 1978). The child’s attempts to learn and society’s attempt to teach through parents, teachers and peers all contribute to the way a child mind’s work (Bodrova & Leong, 2007). Bodrova and Leong (2007) illustrated this by suggesting that the meanings of concepts change as they are linked with their social contexts. For example, ‘kindergarten’ is not simply a physical structure but also a place where children learn while they play with their friends and interact with their teachers. Thus, social context moulds the learning process and is part of the developmental process.

Within sociocultural theories, Vygotsky (1967, 1978) identified play as the leading activity, with particularly fundamental implications for understanding learning and development in early childhood education. Vygotsky (1967) argued that during the early childhood period, “the child moves forward essentially through play activity” (p. 16). Play is regarded as “the leading source of development” (p. 6) in early childhood education. According to Vygotsky, play leads to

learning and development in two main ways. First, play with a substitute object constitutes a significant step in the development of semiotic mediation, although play is not itself a fully-developed symbolic activity. Second, sociodramatic play involves the active appropriation of sociocultural rules of activity, having a profound influence on cognitive and personality development (Duncan & Taruli, 2003).

Vygotsky (1967) claimed that play becomes the leading form of activity around the age of three years, when the child begins to experience new kinds of desire that cannot be addressed directly. Before this age, “immediately unrealisable desires” of this kind are of limited importance and “the child tends to gratify his desires immediately” (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 7). The child’s inability to perform real adult activities and carry out adult roles, as he or she wishes, results in a dialectical tension which is resolved through play activity (Vygotsky, 1967, 1978). According to Vygotsky (1978), play seems to be invented “at the point when the child begins to experience unrealisable tendencies” (p. 93) leading to the creation of “an imaginary, illusory world in which the unrealisable desires cannot be realised” (p. 93). In Vygotsky’s view, development of new desires of this kind is the driving force behind the emergence of play for children (Duncan & Taruli, 2003).

Meaning and object: Decontextualisation

Vygotsky (1967, 1978) claimed that play with objects in imaginary situations constituted a significant step in the development of symbolism, although this particular play is not itself true symbolic activity because it does not involve full decontextualisation of meaning. In playing with a substitute object, the child separates meaning from its actual object and establishes it in the substitute object, which functions as a concrete mediator (Duncan & Taruli, 2003). In play involving an imaginary situation, “the child begins to act independently of what he sees” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 97), and “operates its meaning detached from their usual objects or actions” (p. 98). The child performs specific representational actions with the substitute play object that are consistent with its meaning in the play context, despite the fact that the object is not the real thing (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, when the child uses a stick to represent a sword or a gun, he/she pretends to be a warrior or a policeman.

As a result of this significance of meaning, objects “lose their determining force” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 96) in the context of play activity. The “child learns to act in cognitive, rather than externally visible realm, relying on internal tendencies and motives, and not on incentives supplied by external things” (Vygotsky, 1967, p. 11). In this way, the child’s motivational and cognitive processes slowly progress in the direction of decontextualisation (Duncan & Taruli, 2003). Finally, the child’s thinking “is separated from objects and action arises from ideas rather than from things” (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 97). Through play with substitute objects children, to some extent, free themselves from situational constraints of the real physical context, enabling the indirect satisfaction of unrealisable desires through pretense (Duncan & Taruli, 2003).

Play is an important step in the development of semiotic mediation and abstraction of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978). However, decontextualisation of meaning becomes a challenging problem for children around the age of three years (Vygotsky, 1967). Meaning is only partially

decontextualised in children's play, and objects cannot freely substitute for one another in an interchangeable way. It is this "lack of free substitution" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 98) which shapes the basis for Vygotsky's position that the use of a substitute object is not true symbolism. Although meaning is partially decontextualised in play and thus the children's use of substitute objects does not constitute true symbolism, play has an enormous role in the appropriative development of semiotic mediation.

Roles and rules: Appropriation of sociocultural practice

Vygotsky's analysis of play and its developmental changes emphasises the importance of rules in the imaginary situation (Duncan & Taruli, 2003). Early sociodramatic play is a foundation for the development of games with rules. These rules become explicit and the children must follow the rules in order for the play to be satisfying. Thus, the child playing the role of a teacher must follow the rules of teaching behaviour.

Vygotsky (1978) discussed the example of two sisters who were asked to play sisters. In so doing, the pair acted in ways that emphasise the rules governing relationships between sisters. Vygotsky (1978) argued that "as a result of playing, the child comes to understand that sisters possess a different relationship to each other than to other people" (p. 95). Performing the role in the context of play activity "induces them to both acquire rules of behaviour" (p. 95) in order to display the specific characteristics of the role. In this way, "what passes unnoticed by the child in real life becomes a rule of behaviour in play" (p. 95). Subordinating his or her behaviour to specific role-related rules increases the child's explicit, conscious awareness of these rules (Duncan & Taruli, 2003).

Vygotsky (1978) claimed that a child first becomes able to subordinate her behaviour to rules in group play and only later does voluntary self-regulation of behaviour arise as an internal function. Vygotsky (1978) argued there are rules in play but the rules are not formulated in advance and change during the course of a game. According to Vygotsky (1978) "every game with rules contains an imaginary situation in a concealed form" (p. 95), in a subordinate, implicit form.

It is interesting to note paradoxes of play highlighted by sociocultural theories. Vygotsky (1978) noted that a child adopts the line of least resistance because she does what she feels like doing because play is connected with pleasure. At the same time, she learns to follow the line of greatest resistance by subordinating herself to rules and thereby renouncing what she wants. Vygotsky (1978) claimed that subjection to rules and renunciation of spontaneous action lead to maximum pleasure of play. However, play continually creates demands on the child to act against immediate impulse (Vygotsky, 1978). The child is always faced with a conflict between the rules of the game and what she would do if she could act spontaneously (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky (1978) emphasised that the child's greatest self-control occurs in play. Hence, the essential characteristic of play is a rule that has become a desire (Vygotsky, 1978).

Conclusion

Vygotsky (1967, 1978) emphasised play as the context of children's learning and development. Therefore, it is important for the teachers and parents to carefully plan the learning and development context for young children to ensure the optimisation of the children's potential.

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