

Language as a Pedagogical Tool

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One difficulty faced by teachers is that within a classroom there is a range of students' zones of proximal development (ZPD). Blank's (2002) Levels of Dialogue provides a cognitively structured approach to questioning that provides teachers with a tool to target the level of a student's subject knowledge to support knowledge development. Developed for use in early childhood years, this approach has been successfully applied to vocational education and has potential for teachers at all levels of education. Learning to use levels of questioning within a subject knowledge base helps to develop teachers' pedagogical content knowledge.

Question:

What is language?

Task:

Discuss the question with another person.

Language is often considered as a means of communicating between a transmitter of an utterance and the receiver of the utterance (Chomsky, 1986; Pinker, 2001). This process suggests that there must be some means by which the receiver of the utterance decodes it and provides a response to the utterance. For Vygotsky (1978) there are three fundamental tenants that are considered critical to human cognitive development and each is influenced by language as a culture tool.

1. The development of mental activity cannot be seen as an individual activity, but is one in which cultural mediation is implicit (Hatano & Wertsch, 2001).
2. Language is a cultural tool that starts in externalised interaction between a care giver and child, but later becomes internalised as inner- speech. Inner- speech is critical in the development of an internalised mediation process of self-regulation (Bräten, 1991).
3. Individuals embrace new information at different rates and this difference in learning Vygotsky (1978) named the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD is the difference between what we know and our individual potential to learn something new supported by a mediation process.

The zone of proximal development (ZPD) works on two levels,

1. A knowledgeable other, such as a teacher of a language class for adult student could mediate the learning of a new language at different levels depending on the processing speed and working memory potential of the individual students (Vygotsky, 1978; Hatano & Wertsch, 2002).
2. There exists in the classroom the individual's zone of proximal development and also the zone of proximal development related to the distance between the teachers' potential to act as a transmitter of knowledge and the potential of each individual in the class to decode the teacher's transmission (Blank & White, 1999; Efklides, 2014).

Ehrich (2006) has supported the call for inner- speech activity to be described as working memory (WM) as described by Baddeley (2004). It is speculated that there are two levels of inner- speech, one in which speech planning takes place, and secondly, a structure in which problem-solving takes place (Ehrich, 2006). Pivotal in the theory is the mediation role of inner- speech, where it is suggested that at the working memory (WM) level metacognitive activity is related to conscious processing of procedural knowledge matters, and declarative knowledge which are linked to long- term memory (LTM). Inner-speech contributes to mediating between these memory systems. Blank (2002) has operationalized Vygotsky’s (1978) ideas related to language as a cognitive tool. The following is a discussion of her ideas.

Blank’s Levels of Dialogue

The suggestion is that Blanks (2002) levels of dialogue can be used in any classroom activity and provide a means of supporting thinking and investigating potential areas in which students might be struggling. The following is an example of the four levels of dialogue as suggested by Blank. The questions listed below could be used in any context.

Table 2.1
Example of dialogue questions based on Blank’s hierarchy

	Level of questioning	Examples of types of questions
Level 1	Characteristics of the topic	What do you see?
Level 2	Comparison and contrast	How is this different from that?
Level 3	Re-organisation-personal reflection and applying new knowledge	What experiences have you had?
Level 4	Higher order reasoning	What made it happen?

(Hay, Fielding-Barnsley & Taylor, 2010).

Question:

Is knowledge different from memory?

Task:

With one other person discuss what impact the word “birthday” has on each of you.

From Vygotsky’s (1978) perspective, the three elements that Blank is organizing into a hierarchy are: (i) language proficiency; (ii) social skills proficiency; and (iii) reasoning proficiency, which are considered to be related because they stem from a common underlying cognitive source that manifests all three proficiencies. It is speculated that the core cognitive proficiency of language and reasoning is working memory (Baddeley, 2007) along with processing speed and capacity (Goswami & Bryant, 2007). From this perspective, people’s reasoning, language, and social development cannot be easily separated from their ongoing and developing cognitive skills to store, organize, and retrieve information into long-term memory (Baddeley, 2004; Enfield & Levinson, 2006; Hattie, 2009).

Question:

Can theory supported dialogue assist teachers in developing a dynamic means of understanding the individual and class ZPD?

Task:

Discuss with another person your opinion of the question.

Blank's (2002) levels of dialogue provide a way in which teachers can generate questions for a classroom that is linked to a theoretical context. Sociocultural theory (SCT) as it is proposed by Vygotsky (1976) provides teachers with a context in which to assess learning, as well as supports a student's potential to put into a context what is being taught. A teacher is able to move backward and forward through the levels of dialogue depending on how the teacher assesses the requirements of the class at that time. It is also suggested that the dialogue process provides the opportunity for the teacher to be able to assess a student's ZPD based on Blank's level dialogue used, while also being able to engage the class ZPD in that dialogue.

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