

A critique on the role of the teacher through Vygotskian perspective

¹Dr. Amruth G Kumar, ²Ali Mubarak BB

¹ Associate Professor, Department of Education, Central University of Kerala, India

² Research Scholar, Department of Education, Central University of Kerala, India

Abstract

Various changes taking place regarding the teaching-learning process in the classrooms. Methods and approaches also have been changed. Changing the paradigms necessitates changing the role of a teacher. An inevitable change in the role of a teacher in a changing teaching-learning environment is a mere fallacy. This paper is an attempt to analyse the role of teacher in the present teaching-learning environment and to reinterpret it through Vygotskian perspective. This paper also aims to unveil the contradictions of constructivist notions on the role of a teacher through sociocultural perspective.

Keywords: sociocultural, vygotsky, more knowledgeable others

Introduction

Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and More Knowledgeable Others (MKO) are the two innovative principles of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory. ZPD is the difference between what a learner can do without the help and what he/she can do with help (Vygotsky, 1978) ^[17]. MKO refers to anyone/anything has higher ability level than the learner with respect to particular task, process or concept (Vygotsky, 1978) ^[17].

Vygotsky stressed the role of teachers as MKOs in (1) demonstrating ideas, (2) values, (3) strategies, (3) speech patterns and so on that a child internalizes. In classroom, this is likely to be a teacher, textbook, peers and technology. Vygotsky claimed that a child has limits to what he/she is able to learn alone, however these limits are extended under the guidance and support of a MKO. For learning to occur, the learner must work with a challenge that is within his ability when provided with assistance, and gradually, as the assistance is reduced, learning and cognitive development occur.

There has been a paradigm shift in the pedagogy of classroom, which can be described as a shift from behaviorism to cognitivism and then from cognitivism to constructivism (Cooper, 1993) ^[2]. The role of a teacher also has been undergone many changes along with the paradigm shift. The transformation of role of teacher confined the role of teaching and instructional processes in the classroom. Deep analyses on social constructivist view unveil that the role of teacher proposed by Vygotsky contradicts with key assumptions of the constructivism. Vygotskian social constructivist theory proposes new dimensions to the concept of teacher and the role of teacher juxtaposing the constructivist view of very minimal interference of teacher in the learning process.

Piaget Gruber and Voneche (1977) ^[14] state that the term constructivism most probably is derived from Piaget's "constructivist" views. As this theory is mostly based on the ideas of Jean Piaget and its implications in education are rather student centered than teacher centered. Piaget gave too much attention on individual aspects and he didn't consider the external aspects such as society, culture and people (Amineh & Davatgari, 2015) ^[1]. His theory stresses the individualism of

the child, encountering the material world and engaging in a solitary quest for knowledge.

Piaget and Inhelder (1969) ^[11] suggest that individual discovery is the most important and fundamental basis of learning. Piaget (1977) ^[7] asserts that learning does not occur passively; rather it occurs by active construction of meaning. He explains that when we, as learners, encounter an experience or a situation that challenges the way we think, a state of disequilibrium or imbalance is created. We must then alter our thinking to restore equilibrium or balance. For this purpose, we make sense of the new information by associating it with what we already know, that is, by attempting to assimilate it into our existing knowledge. When we are unable to do this, we use accommodation by restructuring our present knowledge to a higher level of thinking. As his notion of constructivism focuses too much on internal process of the individual such as 'assimilation', 'accommodation', the learning process has also been transformed into student centeredness.

Although Constructivism has become popular only recently, the origins of constructivism are believed to date back to the time of Socrates, who claimed that teachers and learners should talk with each other and interpret and construct the hidden knowledge by asking questions (Hilav, 1990, cited in Erdem, 2001). Balakrishnan & Claiborne (Tappan, 1997) cited "The collaboration between teacher and students, and students and students, enables a vision of the fundamentally dialogic nature of all teaching and learning". Learning and knowledge construction do not take place in isolation, the learner has to interact with the community and the culture to learn and to imbibe new concepts. As against the notion that the learning is an internal process, Vygotsky (1978) claimed that learning process primarily as a function of external factors such as culture, history and social interaction. "Learning does not take place only within an individual, nor is it a passively developed by external forces" (McMahon, 1997) ^[10]. Learning is of course an active process in which experience has an important role, it takes place when the individual interact and collaborate to the external world.

Interaction is essential for child's language development and cognitive development. Internalization of new concept is only

possible through this interaction.

An in-depth analysis unveils that both Piagetian and Vygotskian theories contradict each other in many ways regarding the learning process of the individual. An important part of Vygotsky's work (1986) is critical upon Piaget's contribution to constructivism, while Piaget believes that development precedes learning, Vygotsky believes the opposite. On the topic of the development of speech, Piaget said that the children's egocentric speech goes away with maturity and is transformed into social speech. On the contrary, Vygotsky stated that the child's mind is inherently social in nature and so speech moves from communicative social to inner egocentric. Therefore, since the development of thought follows the development of speech, Vygotsky claims that thought develops from society to the individual and not the other way. It is clear in some studies that, Piagetian constructivist ideas have a personal background and Vygotskian constructivism has a social background (Amineh & Davatgari, 2015) ^[1]. Piaget's theory stresses the solitary quest of the individual whereas, Vygotskian theory strongly contempt the individual learning in solitude and he proposes the learning through collaboration and interaction (Amineh & Davatgari, 2015) ^[1]. Kukla (2000) ^[8] argues that members of a society or group together (and not individual) invent the properties of the world.

Roth (2000) ^[15] also states that the roots of individuals' knowledge are found in their interactions with their surroundings and other people before their knowledge is internalized. To internalize the new concepts and knowledge from external world there should be a link between the learner and the learning environment. Here, the teacher's role can be a link between learner and the environment. This linking role makes the teacher a perfect mediator of learning process and this linkage fulfils Vygotskian idea of ZPD. As Vygotsky (1978) ^[17] suggests that the teacher should be a mediator, collaborator, scaffolder and a social agent in the process of teaching learning process. According to Shunk (2000), "social constructivist teaching approaches emphasize reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, cognitive apprenticeships, problem-based instruction, web quests, anchored instruction, and other methods that involve learning with others. "Instructional models based on the social constructivist perspective highlight the need for collaboration among learners and with practitioners in the society" (Lave & Wenger, 1991; McMahan, 1997) ^[10]. Lave and Wenger (1991) ^[9] assert that the relations among practitioners, their practice, and the social organization and political economy of communities of practice are all important and effective in a society's practical knowledge. For this reason, learning should involve such knowledge and practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Gredler, 1997) ^[9-6].

The proactive role of teacher as proposed by Vygotsky in his theory has been under severe threat in the modern practice of constructivist learning environment. One of the major threats is the text book. This paper argues that the text books designed for constructivist classroom have been done without understanding the spirit of Social Constructivist theory and its implication about the roles of a teacher in the class room. There are plenty of things can be carried out by a Vygotskian teacher in the present classroom environment. A close look to the learning process of students in a different perspective reveals that the present constructivist textbook itself is

becoming a barrier in the teaching learning process. Construction of the textbook is based on the curriculum which is already framed and the role of textbook itself is important as it canalizes the objectives of curriculum or it manifests particular curriculum in the learning environment. As the textbook in constructivist curriculum ensures the notion of student centeredness, in a student centered classroom the role of teacher become a mere facilitator. Facilitation of learning process is quite a passive task and it is entirely different from collaboration and interaction in the class room, through which a teacher can perform an active role in students learning process. How a textbook can be constrain in the teaching learning process? A close analyze on discourses in a textbook will reveal that the essential instructions for students are being embedded along with the content to be taught and with the activities to be done. These incorporated instructions are intended to accomplish the activities and tasks by students without the dependence from the teacher. Students can easily follow the instructions and can do the activities without the help from the teacher. Activities and tasks are given in way that the student can reach the solution without making any collaborative attempt with peers and without interaction to the teacher. Though, the answers are given in a not obvious manner, students can answer the questions from the paragraph or stanza. Though, these activities in the chapters are intended to enhance the abilities of learners to accomplish tasks by their own, the chances for collaboration and interaction in the classroom are being confined and neglected.

To substantiate the above arguments, a chapter from the text book published by State Council Educational Research and Training (SCERT) text of Plus One is given in the appendix. The said chapter is a poem titled 'IF', written by Rudyard Kipling. In the beginning of the chapter a general idea about the poem is given in the form of instruction to the students. By reading these instruction students can easily get the theme of the poem and poets' intention. Students can get the central idea about the poem without interacting with their teacher and without the dialogic engagement from the part of the teacher. In the glossary, five words are given along with their meaning such a way that students can reach the meaning without any effort from their part as well as from their teacher (see Glossary). Analysis of the Activity I in the chapter shows that the answers are easy to get by the students. The Question No.1 & 4 in this activity itself is framed in a way to indicate the answer to the students. None of the questions in this activity encourage the collaboration among students. Questions in Activity II (read and reflect) also minimize the chance to collaborate between the students. The Question No.1 in this activity asks the central theme of the poem and Question No.4 asks what the poem is about. In the beginning of this chapter a concise idea on the poem is already given in the form of an instruction, i.e., this poem suggests the idea of conditional fulfillment and also mentioned that the poet describes in this poem about the traits of a perfect man. These kinds of discourses constrict the teacher's dialogic engagement and face to face interaction with students. Promotion of the dialogue as chains of questions in the class room also gets lessened. Interaction and collaboration are the social traits which should be the learning approaches in the text book discourses and activities.

Vygotskian teacher as collaborator, mediator and of course a MKO have a significant role in the teaching learning process

of present scenario. In the past, the role of teacher was an omniscient MKO, who had the dominance over the teaching learning process. Then the teacher becomes a facilitator within the learning environment. Now, we can say that, the role of a teacher is again confined as a facilitator to a mere spectator of learning process, who can only peep into students' activities as a static MKO. The new dimensions on the role of teacher as proposed by Vygotsky, have a significant role in students learning as well as encouraging them to explore knowledge. It is the time to get rid the passivity of so called 'Teacher' and to instill new dimensions as seen by Vygotsky. Our classroom needs a teacher who can lead and support the students behind them by incorporating social and cultural traits rather than standing and lecturing in front them. This is the high time to emerge Vygotskian teacher to the entire teaching learning process of our classroom.

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