
Teaching Literature through the Construction of an English Children's Drama: A Vygotskian Perspective

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Abstract

Traditional literature teaching is usually a passive process as students normally perform the role of listeners. This research proposes to alter the students' role to active learners by assisting them to produce and stage an English children's drama. This study is student-centered and attempts to adopt workshop and drama practice to enhance students' participation in the classroom. Different from traditional teaching methods, constructivist pedagogy enables learners to recognize and strengthen their self-learning abilities. Often discussed in constructivist pedagogy, Lev Vygotsky's works are especially related to this research. Even though the application of Vygotsky's theory to teaching is beneficial to students, relevant studies are scarce in higher education. This paper then proposes to apply Vygotsky's idea of zone of proximal development and scaffolding approach to cultivate students' ability to produce an English children's drama. Through the support of capable others, the learners achieve a deeper understanding of drama/literature and through the scaffold approach, students steadily leave the need of assistance behind, are able to work independently and autonomously, and become more capable than their previous selves.

Keywords: Constructivism, Vygotsky, Zone of Proximal Development, Scaffolding Approach, Drama

Introduction

As an instructor who teaches English literature in a Taiwanese university specializing in educating future teachers, I have observed that most students at the graduate institute that I work at have aimed at fulfilling the requirements of their career choice of becoming English teachers, and their interest in literature is much lower than that in language teaching. Moreover, most of the students hardly possess general knowledge of English literature, which is then regarded as a difficult subject. Therefore, to elicit students' interest in literature and motivate their learning in the literature area, a course mainly focusing on literary reading and textual analysis will be impossible to achieve this goal.

It should be understood by the students, however, that literature can be applied to language teaching; English education in Taiwan have long emphasized on the teaching of language itself and ignores the possibility of integrating children's and adolescent literature with the curriculum. This neglect disables students from recognizing the richness of English literature. It is then urgent for the future English teachers to savor the pleasure which English literature can bring to them that students in Taiwan will likely be introduced to this field. Therefore, in my course "Children's Literature in English," besides the exposure of various literary genres of children's literature, theatrical production is introduced to help students recognize that literature may not be castles in the air, being illusionary and far away; literature can be concrete and visual through theatrical performance. Furthermore, students will act out in front of a hundred of kindergarteners, whose direct and usually positive response will help the actor-students to understand that the application of literature is meaningful and fruitful.

At the college level, traditional literature teaching is usually a passive process as students normally perform the role of listeners; if they are asked to present oral reports, the speakers take the active role while the others still present passivity. This research proposes to alter the students' role to active learners by assisting them to produce and stage an English children's drama. The theory of constructivism appears most relevant to this study; different from traditional teaching methods, constructivist pedagogy enables learners to recognize and strengthen their own self-learning abilities (Zhang, 2014). Gould (2005) argued that in constructivist teaching, teachers were prompted to offer "innovative environments in which they and their students are encouraged to think and explore" and "learners must play an active role in selecting and defining the activities, which must be both challenging and motivating" (p. 99). In this course, the students are set in a workshop environment, which is very different from traditional

literature classroom where the teacher lectures and students listen. Students are highly encouraged to present their thoughts and asked to participate in discussions and activities. The theatrical activities are often challenging to the learners as they face a task to work with their bodies, which they hardly encounter in their lives.

Fosnot (1996) developed a model to signify how constructivist learning functions and demonstrate that the learning process is never “linear” but an “interplay” of different factors; the self thus developed under the impetus of different symbols, media and other people (p. 28). Applying Fosnot’s work to drama teaching, a similar model can be retrieved as presented in Figure 1. The “symbol” is substituted by “drama,” which is composed by many symbols. Students are “selves” who perform the learning roles; in the process of constructing a drama, the learners are stimulated by the texts and relevant media while negotiating with the other students and re-evaluating their concepts under the instruction of the lecturers. Through constant struggles and re-constructions, students are subject to develop learning abilities through the interplay with other factors. Constructivism indeed appears helpful in drama-based education.

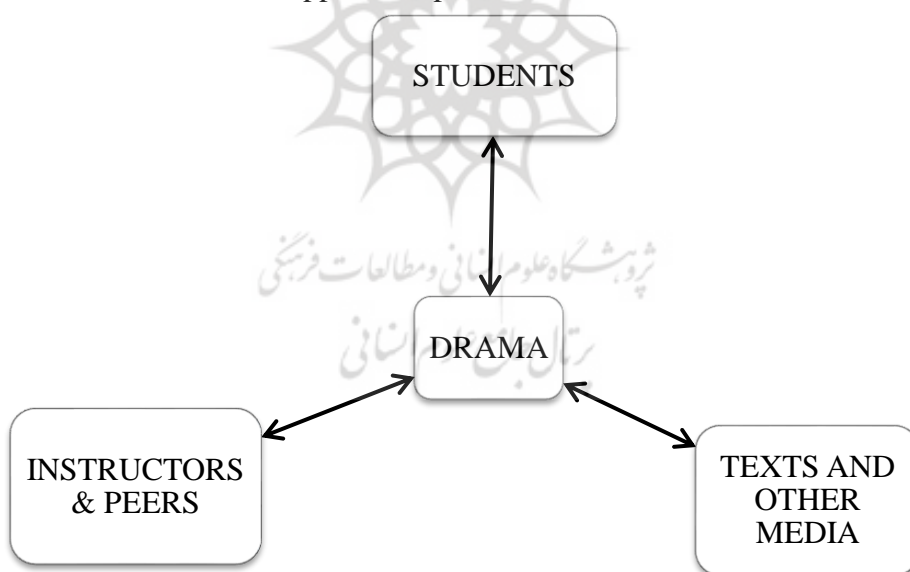


Figure 1. Drama Learning Model

Vygotsky and Pedagogy

Howe and Berv (2000) pointed out that constructivism is “very prominent” in the area of education, and constructivist learning theory bases on Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky’s discourses (p. 30). According to John-Steiner (2015), it was ideal to understand Vygotsky’s theory through drama, since

Vygotsky himself used a chapter to analyze Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* in his first work *The Psychology of Art* (1971). Vygotsky had been interested in discussing arts, which includes the main topic of this paper, the drama. However, Connery, John-Steiner & Marjanovic-Shane (2010) argued that cultural historical scholars working on Vygotsky's theories had failed to consider the notions of "play, meaning making, and creativity" (p. 4); thus, they called for the application of Vygotskian concepts in creativity and arts. In the reading of Vygotsky, Holzman (2009) suggested that "play" is significant in "lifelong developmental learning" (p. 50). For Holzman (2009), the term "play" involved different stages of a person:

... *free play*, such as the pretend and fantasy activities of early childhood; *game play*, the more structured and explicitly rule-governed activities that become common in the school years and then dominant in adulthood; or *theatrical play or performance*, common in early childhood and, in adulthood, primarily in formalized and professional versions. (p. 50, original emphasis)

Following the definition of "play" in different ages, Holzman (2009) disputed against Vygotsky's argument that play "lost its significance to formalized learning" after early childhood; instead, she claimed that "in order for learning past early childhood to be developmental, it needs to be done playfully" (p. 53). The term "play" not only signifies activities which children engage in but also refers to theatrical performance, which is the focus of the course "Children's Literature in English"; hence, expanding Vygotsky's concept of "play" from the perspective of children's learning to adults' education, this study will adopt his perspectives to help understand students' leaning process.

Wass and Golding (2014) argued that Vygotsky formed a useful tool, the zone of proximal development or ZPD, for it was "simple to use, and powerful for understanding teaching" (p. 671). However, despite its wide influence in primary and secondary schools, the ZPD had limited power over higher education (Wass & Golding, 2014, p. 671; Chen, Feng & Chiou, 2009, p. 141). The application of Vygotsky's theory to teaching is beneficial to students; however, relevant studies rarely involve higher education. This paper then proposes to adopt Vygotsky's idea of zone of proximal development and scaffold approach to cultivate students' ability to produce English children's drama and even lifelong-learning capability. The ZPD was explained by Vygotsky (1978) as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem-solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance, or in collaboration with more capable peer" (p. 86). Even though the learning subject of his discussion in the child-learner, Vygotsky's theory can be expanded to learners of all ages. For

Vygotsky (1978), in the ZPD, “learning awakens a variety of internal developmental processes” when the learner interacts and cooperates with others; the learner internalizes the processes, which then becomes his/her independent developmental achievement” (p. 90). Vygotsky proposed that the ZPD is an area where one is able to develop an ability with others’ assistance; an individual accepts help to gradually leave the stage of dependence to become capable of completing the task independently.

Wood, Bruner & Ross (1978) proposed a term “scaffolding” to signify how a learner receives capable others’ assistance while accomplishing a task or solving a problem. When the learner steadily develops the competence, the assistance from others decreases, and at the end, the task will be independently fulfilled by the learner. The learning process is implied by the scaffolding approach of building: at the beginning stage a scaffold is needed for supporting the structure; when the building is approaching the finishing stage, the scaffold will be removed. Doolittle (1997) suggested that the scaffolding approach was a “three-component process” for it involves

(a) presenting a task for student completion that lies at the upper end of the student’s zone of proximal development, (b) providing students with the assistance necessary to be successful, (c) withdrawing the assistance as the student develops in the completion of the task. (p. 97)

Doolittle (1996) illustrated the process of how a learner moved forwards in the zone of proximal development: A learner who required much assistance at the early stage proceeded to the state of less assistance and even of no assistance (p. 35). Within the ZPD, thus declared Doolittle (1996), “A student is provided with a learning opportunity that is beyond her level of current development, but is not beyond her level of potential development” (p. 35). After being assisted by others, the potentiality becomes the learner’s actual development. Similarly, Wass & Golding (2014) adopted the Vygotskian concept to present how a learner enlarged the area of competence after a course applying the ZPD concept and scaffold approach and claimed that “if students work on tasks within their ZPD, with assistance from more able peers or their teachers, then they will eventually learn to do these tasks on their own” (p. 675). Students develop in the ZPD and then acquire the ability after teaching; their capability is thus expanded. In Vygotsky’s words, “What is the zone of proximal development today will be the actual developmental level tomorrow” (1978, p. 87).

Moreover, as for the development, Daniels (2016) pointed out that “Multiple and possibly conflicting discourses with different sociocultural historical origins may be in play within the ZPD” (p. 67). As presented in

Figure 1, the forces that stimulate and shape the learning subjects are complicated and multi-layered: “The view of the ZPD as the nexus of social, cultural, historical influences takes us far beyond the image of the lone learner with the directive and determining tutor. It provides a much expanded view of the ‘social’ and the possibility of a dialectical conception of interaction within the ZPD” (Daniels, 2016, p. 67). Adopting the ZPD in pedagogy enables the researcher to observe how learners explore themselves in the multi-faceted learning environment and how they develop and expand their ability under the stimuli of diverse forces.

Procedure

This study aims to help students obtain the ability of producing an English children’s drama, and the procedure is explained as follows. In the initiating phase, the teacher informs the students that they will be performing an English children’s drama in front of actual child audience, who are from a kindergarten nearby. Students are asked to bring potential texts for discussion. After the students present the ideal texts in their minds, they proceed with discussion on each individual text; the selection is finalized following the discussion and vote. Meanwhile, the teacher coordinates with the kindergarten headmaster to confirm the time and place of the performance and identify the English proficiency level of the audience.

In the subsequent phase, students start to write the script and the teacher helps modify the text and writing mechanics. With the script, the characters are allocated and students begin to practice reciting their own lines; the teacher assists each actor with the script reading. At the same time, the students are asked to take an administrative position in the drama production process, such as director, stage manager or accountant. Afterwards, each role performs the duty corresponding to the position taken.

In the succeeding phase, students start to brainstorm for their stage performance, including how they act out, the movements on the stage, and dance and accompanying music/songs. Moreover, students are reminded of the fact that the audience are kindergarten children; therefore, interactive activities are highly encouraged. While the stage performance is under way, the executive duties also demand students to operate their work like designing posters and invitation cards, and shopping for costumes, prop-making materials and relevant essentials.

When a basic structure of the drama is produced, the teacher invites a professional actor whose expertise is in children’s drama to instruct

students acting techniques and provides students with different ideas of arranging their drama. In this phase, students independently design their stage, manage to complete their prop-making and the slides to display as stage background. The rehearsal takes place in the authentic environment with costumes on, props ready, and lights and music provided. The teacher acts as audience and provides no assistance during the rehearsal. Students prepare for their formal performance on stage and final check their separate duties. On the designated date of stage performance, students arrive earlier for preparation and then stage the drama. After the performance, students exchange their reflections about the drama and leave their feedbacks on the course.

Results

In students' overall evaluation of this course from the academic affairs system of the university, the result is 4.95 out of Likert five-point rating scale; the score indicates that students are satisfied with the design of this course. One student leaves the comment that the course is rich and diverse in content.

In the questionnaires distributed to them, the students express how the implantation of an authentic drama performance helps them learn to stage an English children's drama, cooperate with others, and acquire deeper understanding of the literary texts, children's theater and acting skills. Students agree that different from a traditional literature course, this one offers them an opportunity to practice what they have learned in a real scenario. There are six questions in the questionnaire, also based on the Likert five-point rating scale; question one asks if students are satisfied with the method of this course, namely, the implementation of drama performance. The result is 4.4, signifying students' satisfaction with the design of this course. The second question inquires students' motivation after integrating drama performance into this course; the score is 4.6, showing that students are motivated to learn. Question three requests the students to answer whether their learning results are enhanced with the introduction of drama performance, and the score is 4.6, presenting that students recognize the positive learning effects. The fourth question demands the students to reckon if the method of this course helps them pose questions and actively participate in discussions with their classmates or teacher, and the result is 4.6; the score suggests that constructing a drama stimulates the learners to think and prompts them to work with others. Question five asks the students to evaluate if this course enables them to produce a children's drama, and the result is 4.4, demonstrating that the students' knowledge of children's drama is enlarged and they are

more or less capable of producing a children's drama. The last question implores if this course helps students put what they have learned into practice; with the score 4.6, students agree that this course is practical and useful to them.

In the written comments, students leave positive responses. One student claims that through drama, the emotions are conveyed, which is something that traditional teachings cannot offer. In addition, the real practice of abstract knowledge helps the learning effects. Another student expresses gratitude to the teacher of inviting an actor to instruct them from a professional angle of theatrical performance. A student acknowledges the acquired skills of theatrical performance and deeper understanding of children's drama and theatre, while another one is pleased that a whole process of building up a children's drama is witnessed and relevant skills are taught. Furthermore, one student remarks on attaining the spirit of teamwork and the sense of achievement from staging a drama. In the questionnaires, all the results demonstrate that constructing an English children's drama is beneficial in many ways to students' learning in this course.

Conclusion

In this course, students have to produce an English children's drama from the very beginning. At an early stage, students are informed of their task of undertaking a future authentic stage performance with real audience and thus motivated by the knowledge of this goal. Under the teacher's guidance, students undergo the process of text selection, composition and modification. Later on, students select their roles and then start to recite the script and memorize their lines; the teacher helps correct the student's pronunciation, intonation, and emotional expressions. Next, students add acting elements and design the stage. With the assistance of a professional actor, students' acting part is stimulated and becomes more refined. In the finishing period, students complete the prop-making and background slides, rehearse on stage with their make-ups and costumes, and perform with real audience, of them mostly kindergarten children. It is important to note that students, in order to make their drama as ideal as possible, even voluntarily devote their time to prepare for the drama performance after class. This behavior proves that students are strongly motivated to complete their learning tasks.

According to Vygotsky's ZPD structure, a learner enlarges his/her ability through assistance of more capable others in the zone of proximal development; in this course, the teacher helps the students with the process of organizing an English children's drama; as time proceeds, the teacher

reduces the assistance and intervention and the supporting scaffold is gradually removed. At the end, the students are able to work on their own and present their drama on stage. In addition, according to Holzman (2009), if applying “play” in the ZPD, the learners developed through a “collective process” where

They come face to face with the limitations of trying to learn and grow as individuals as they participate in the process of collective learning and growing. Their new learning and development (a unity of cognition and affect) is both tool and result of the activity of creating the group/ensemble/social unit. (pp. 112-3)

Inspired by Vygotsky’s theory, Holzman (2009) continued with the discussion of “being” and “becoming,” arguing that “it is as performers that people are able to engage, in a developmental way, the paradox of experiencing what is a social existence as a separate and individuated one” (p. 113). It is the act of performance that the learners collectively learn and become newer selves. Discussing Vygotsky’s influence on her research, John-Steiner (2000) asserted that “An individual learns, creates, and achieves mastery in and through his or her relationships with other individuals. Ideas, tools, and processes that emerge from joint activities are appropriated, and internalized, by the individual and become the basis of the individual’s subsequent development” (p. 5). A stage performance demands the learners to work together and this collaboration prompts them to interact with one another, internalize what they have learned and progress with self-development.

The limitation of this study lies in the quantity of the sample since the course is designated for graduate students and there are only seven students in this class. Future studies may include more students as their research subjects to examine the effectiveness of Vygotsky’s concept of the ZPD and the scaffold approach. Moreover, it should be noted that the researched subjects are graduate students, who are more capable of coping with the tasks resulting from producing a drama on their own; future researchers are suggested to consider the maturity of learners. In addition, as proposed by Mahn and John-Steiner (2002), the Vygotskian concept of *perezhivanie*, often translated as lived experience and being emotionally and socially related, was worthy of discussion while analyzing the ZPD. Future studies may include Vygotsky’s notions of emotions to examine the interplay between the learning subject and the others. In Mahn and John-Steiner’s words, “Innovative works of literature, drama and science are nourished by sustained support – as are teaching and learning across the lifespan” (2002, p. 52). Vygotsky’s zone of proximal development has offered teachers a useful tool to expand learners’ capacity; through the support of others, the learners of the course “Children’s Literature in English” achieve

a deeper understanding of drama/literature and through the scaffold approach, students steadily leave the need of assistance behind, are able to work independently and autonomously, and become more capable than their previous selves.

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