

Social interactionism in the EFL writing class

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Abstract

Social interactionism is a Vygotskian approach to educational psychology which emphasizes the essential role of learners in constructing their own knowledge and understanding while learning foreign languages by means of the interaction and negotiation of meanings in communicative situations. The aims of this paper are to reflect upon our role as teachers to scaffold our students' learning and to show how such scaffolding may be applied in EFL writing classes of different genres and how it is altered during exams.

Keywords: social interactionism; foreign language learning; collaborative writing; genre.

Resumen

El interaccionismo social es un enfoque de la psicología educativa de raíz vygotskiana que enfatiza el papel decisivo de los aprendientes en la construcción de su propio conocimiento y en el aprendizaje de lenguas extranjeras mediante la interacción colaborativa y la negociación de significados en situaciones comunicativas. El objetivo de este trabajo es reflexionar sobre nuestro rol como docentes de andamiar el aprendizaje de nuestros alumnos, mostrar cómo es posible aplicar dicho andamiaje durante las clases de escritura de diferentes géneros en la enseñanza de inglés como lengua extranjera y cómo se altera en instancias de exámenes.

Palabras clave: interaccionismo social; enseñanza de lenguas extranjeras; escritura colaborativa; género.

THE PROCESS OF education is ‘one of the most important and complex of all human endeavours’ (Williams & Burden, 2007, p. 5). Traditionally, education was something carried out by one person, a teacher, standing in front of a class and transmitting information to a group of learners who were expected to absorb it. Nevertheless, a successful educator could attempt to go beyond teaching-learning processes and teach issues which may have relevance for the students’ future life.

Education is a “contextualized social practice, a process which involves not only governments and educational institutions” (Rodriguez Ascurra, 2010) but all of us as well, especially if we are teachers.

As teachers, we should reflect upon our mission and the way we work to achieve it: one such reflection is the reason for writing this paper. It aims to present a brief introduction to Social Interactionism as an approach to education, focusing on Vygotsky’s concepts of mediation and zone of proximal development (Hyland, 2007; Williams & Burden, 2007) as theoretical background. Next, the way Vygotsky’s ideas influenced genre-based pedagogy will be explained. Finally, the paper presents the steps for Developing the Context – Modelling – Joint Construction and Independent Construction; and shows how this methodology changes when students sit for term tests. This study was successfully carried out with students of English Language IV, Profesorado and Licenciatura en Inglés, Facultad de Filosofía y Letras, Universidad Nacional de Tucumán. But teachers and students from different teaching-learning levels and dealing with different genres may also benefit from these ideas.

Theoretical background

Social Interactionism

“For social interactionists, children are born into a social world, and learning occurs through interaction with other people. From the time we are born we interact with others in our day-to-day lives, and through these interactions we make our own sense of the world” (Williams & Burden, 2007, p. 39). “Social interactionism emphasizes the dynamic nature of the interplay between teachers, learners and tasks, and provides a view of learning as arising from interactions with others” (op.cit: 43).

An important representative of this approach is Lev Vygotsky. Central to his psychology is the concept of mediation. This is a term used to refer to the part played by other significant people in the learners’ lives. The secret of effective learning lies in the nature of social interaction between two or more people with different levels of skill and knowledge. The role of the one with greater knowledge (a teacher, a parent or a peer) is to find ways of helping the other to learn (Williams & Burner, 2007). Donato (1994 in Cotterall & Cohen 2003, p. 158) describes the concept of scaffolding as follows:

in social interaction a knowledgeable participant can create, by means of speech, supportive conditions in which the novice can participate in, and extend, current skills and knowledge to higher levels of competence.

The notion of scaffolding “emphasizes the role of interaction with peers and with experienced others in learning, moving learners from their existing level of performance (what they can do now) to a level of “potential performance” (what they will be able to do without assistance)” (Hyland, 2007, p. 122).

Vygotsky’s most widely known concept is that of the zone of proximal development (ZPD), which is used to refer to the layer of skill or knowledge which is just beyond that which the learner is currently capable of achieving. Working together with another person, either an adult or a more competent peer at a level that is just above a learner’s present capabilities is the best way for the learner to move into the next layer (Williams & Burner, 2007). The majority of teachers now recognize that if students, young and old, are given tasks to accomplish that are just beyond their actual competence, but are able to secure the support of others, it is likely that they will be able to manage the task better than if they are left to struggle with it on their own. The teacher’s skill is to observe carefully and monitor a student’s progress in order to provide a task within the proximal reach of that learner and to suggest who their learning partner might be to provide a scaffold, or support, to achieve this goal.

Therefore, “the teacher and learners begin by working together, with the teacher initially doing most of the work, but gradually passing on more and more responsibility to the learners as their skills increase so that they are eventually able to work independently” (Hyland, 2007, p. 157).

Genre-Based Pedagogy

Writing was neglected in the early years of second language studies possibly because of the dominance of the audiolingual approach in the mid twentieth century. Priority was given to spoken language as writing was only considered as an orthographic representation of speech (Matsuda, 1999 in Kroll, 2003). In the 1970s and 1980s, psycholinguistic and cognitive theories dominated language teaching and writing teachers were encouraged to focus on principles of thinking and composing. Writing was seen as a skill that was learned rather than taught and the teacher’s role was to be non-directive, facilitating writing through a cooperative environment with minimal interference (Hyland, 2007). In the 1980s, EFL/ESL writing started emerging as a distinctive area of scholarship. Since then, a number of theories trying to understand L2 writing and learning have developed, each having a different focus: language structure, text functions, creative expression, composing processes, content and genre and contexts of writing (Hyland,

2003a).

Until quite recently research on composition focused on the written product, trying to show that an approach that gave importance to usage, structure or correct forms would improve writing. More recent approaches to teaching L2 writing have accepted the importance of helping students to be aware of genre, which is defined as abstract, socially recognised ways of using language. It is based on the assumptions that the features of a similar group depend on the social context of their creation and use, and that those features can be described in a way that relates a text to others like it and to the choices and constraints acting on text producers (Hyland, 2003b, p. 21).

Bakhtin (1986 in Egging & Martin, 1998, p. 236) defines genre as ‘relatively stable types of interactive utterances’, while Lo Cascio (1991) claims that whenever a message is transmitted, the linguistic code offers us a variety of choices. Such choices are closely connected to communicative circumstances and to the existing habits within a group of speakers. Cultures seem to possess a wide range of genres that are recognizable to all members of any given culture. All texts have a global defining purpose and it is this global purpose that predicts the stages the text will go through to achieve this goal. In our culture, the main function of the argumentative genres is to explain why things are as they are, in a rational way, to uncover the reality out there and to present it to readers (Martin, 1989).

Genre-based pedagogy believes that learning should be based on explicit and systematic awareness of language. Language develops with the passing of time, but this development, mostly in the case of written language, is the result of explicit teaching that starts at primary school level, moves on in secondary schools and, in most occasions, is strengthened at university (Parra, 1991). Teaching within a framework that draws explicit attention to genres offers students ‘a concrete opportunity to acquire knowledge that they can use in undertaking writing tasks beyond the course in which such teaching occurs’ (Johns, 2003, p. 197).

Students are provided with models which are ‘analysed, compared and manipulated’ (Hyland, 2007, p. 132), so as to become aware of the particular structures and language features of the different genres and the way purposes are realized (Larreamendy Joerns, 1991). Through models, students become aware of the way writing differs across genres and of the way particular structures and language features are drawn on to achieve students’ writing goals. A careful, active, reflexive and critical reading of models will allow students to analyze the structure of the chosen text, its vocabulary and the strategies employed to achieve coherence and cohesion, among other elements which will help them produce an appropriate written text (Pico, 2007).

Social Interactionism in EFL Writing Classes

Genre-based pedagogy involves explicit teaching of the corresponding genre, critical analysis of models and interactionism. Genre orientation is drawn upon in Vygotsky's (1978 in Hyland, 2003a) work. Vygotsky emphasized the importance of language in interacting with people (Williams & Burner, 2007). As has already been established, for Vygotsky, learning is more effective when learners engage in tasks that are within the area between what they can do independently and what they can do with assistance, the teacher having a central role in scaffolding this learning as learners move toward their potential level of performance and the confidence to independently create texts.

The notion of scaffolding is achieved through a process which involves different steps: contextualizing, modelling, negotiating and constructing. Progress from one level to the other is not achieved only through input but rather through social interaction and the assistance of more skilled and experienced others. Teaching involves a dialogue between teacher and student, rather like an expert training an apprentice (Hyland, 2007).

The first step of this process, developing the context, involves assisting students in understanding the legitimate and meaningful context for writing. Students are made aware of the institutional and social purposes of the genre, the settings in which it is commonly used and the potential audience their production may have.

In the second step of the cycle, modelling, students make use of textual models of the corresponding genre. Modelling is an important scaffolding activity that involves teachers and learners discussing and exploring the stages of the genre and its key grammatical and rhetorical features. With the help of the teacher, these models are read and analysed. Key issues at this stage are:

- a) the stages of the text and the function served by each stage,
- b) how each stage contributes to the overall social purpose of the text,
- c) the language features that help to express these functions,
- d) how social relationships between the reader and the writer are encoded

(Hyland, 2007, p. 132).

The next step is the *joint construction* of texts. 'Teachers need to provide support to students in the early stages of learning a new genre' (Hyland, 2007, p. 124). At this stage, teachers and students work together to produce their texts, using data from the previous steps. The teacher focuses less on input and modelling and begins to act as a facilitator for shared writing activities and as a responder to student writing. 'Teachers need to provide opportunities for group interaction and discussion' (Hyland, 2007, p. 124). Students brainstorm ideas in groups and then these ideas are boarded, shared and discussed. Next they are asked to write the thesis sentence and/or topic sentences

that will guide their written texts. Although the final production will be an individual activity, they work in groups and exchange ideas.

The purpose of the *independent construction* stage is for students to apply what they have learned and write a text independently while the teacher monitors and gives advice. In our case we work with the Introduction to the essay, whereby students are asked to write it at home and then in class some of the texts are written up on the board and students, together with the teacher, make suggestions to improve them. At this point different activities are provided by the teacher to develop strategies for planning, drafting, editing and polishing. This support is gradually reduced until the learner has the knowledge and skills to write texts independently, without any kind of collaborative work. It is only then that they are asked to write the complete essay.

The final step, *comparing texts*, provides opportunities for students to investigate how the genre they have been studying is related to other texts that occur in similar contexts.

What are the advantages we find in genre-based teaching instruction?

- It is explicit: It offers writers an explicit understanding of how target texts are structured and why they are written the way they are.
- It systematically addresses texts and contexts: To create an effective text, students need to know various issues such as the way texts are organized, the lexico-grammatical patterns that are typically used in a certain genre, the social purposes of the text, the probable audience that will read it or the roles and relationships of text users.
- It is supportive: Genre-based pedagogies emphasize the collaboration between teacher and student. The teacher scaffolds or supports learners as they move towards confidence to create texts independently. This scaffolding is more evident when students start learning a genre and is gradually reduced until they can perform it by themselves (Hyland, 2007).

Nevertheless, when the time for term tests and final exams comes, the teaching-learning cycle changes. The five stages of the complete teaching-learning cycle, *developing the context, modelling and deconstructing the text, joint construction of the text, independent construction of the text* and *linking related texts* are reduced to three: *developing the context, modelling and deconstructing the text* and *independent construction*.

For assessment purposes, students are usually required to write a text belonging to the genre studied, independently and in a specific period of time. They are supposed

to follow the steps previously described but this time without any scaffolding on the part of the teacher or peers. They should follow the stages of the genre; for example, for narratives, Introduction [‘setting the scene: who, where, when, what’] ^ Main body [‘event 1’, ‘event 2’, ‘event 3... usually in the order they happened’] ^ Conclusion [‘end of story’ (including feelings, comments or reactions)]; for descriptions of people, Introduction [‘name of the person’] ^ Main body [‘when, where and how you first met him/her’ ^ ‘physical appearance: facial features and clothes’ ^ ‘personal qualities with justification(s) /examples ‘ ^ ‘hobbies / interests’ ^ ‘comments and feelings about the person’] ^ Conclusion (Evans, 2000); for argumentative essays, *Issue* ^ *Sides* ^ *Resolution* (Martin & Rose, 2008). They should also think about the text purposes and the potential audience and choose the appropriate vocabulary, etc. Next, they should recall the models analyzed in class, their format, organization of ideas, ways of achieving cohesion and coherence, introduction of logical and convincing arguments, correct use of transitions, etc. Finally, they are expected to write the text combining ‘knowledge of content, process, language, context and genre’ (Hyland, 2007, p. 136).

The following figures show the complete cycle of teaching and learning (Figure 1 taken from Feez 1998 in Hyland, 2007, p. 129) and the reduced version that is usually followed for term tests and final tests (Figure 2) (Pico, 2010).

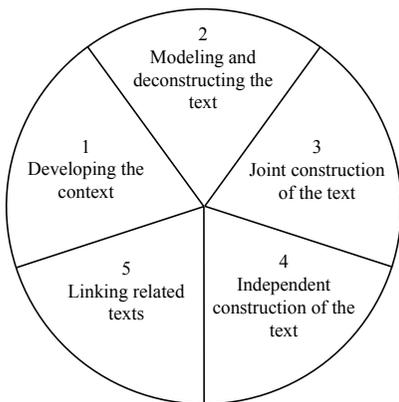


Figure 1.

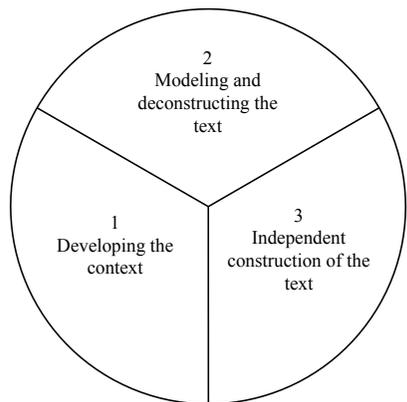


Figure 2.

Figure 1. Complete cycle of teaching and learning followed in writing classes.

Figure 2. Reduced version of the cycle followed for term tests and final exams.

Conclusion

Learning based on an interactionist approach, therefore, presupposes a collaborative relationship between teacher and learner, rather than a relation of learner’s dependency and is likely to involve built-in opportunities for learners to discuss, collaborate,

negotiate and become actively involved with the learning process.

The concepts of mediation and zone of proximal development provide a positive message about how to help learners when they are “stuck” at any stage in their learning. They suggest that the teacher should set tasks that are at a level just beyond that which the learners are currently capable of functioning, and teach principles that will enable them to make the next step unassisted (Williams & Burner, 2007, p. 66).

In the 21st century, it is essential to achieve a good control of writing skills in order to communicate ideas and opinions effectively. However, this ability is not naturally acquired but rather culturally transmitted by means of instruction, training and practice. For this reason teachers should help their students become aware of their need to write coherent and effective texts. Social interactionism offers students and teachers the possibility of discussing ideas, helping each other, negotiating and becoming actively involved in the teaching and the learning processes.

For assessment purposes, the learning cycle is usually modified. In Argentina, at least at university level and for writing skills, what is generally evaluated is the text belonging to the genre studied, written independently by each student, in class and in a specific period of time. In class, students will have already identified the characteristics of the corresponding genre, exchanged ideas about different topics to write about, read and analyzed models, written as many versions as necessary to achieve a final draft and corrected their own productions and that of their classmate’s. Therefore teachers consider that the time devoted to previous training, scaffolding and practice may provide students with the necessary tools to face the written task by themselves and in the context of tests.

Our role as teachers should be to guide our students from simple steps to more complex ones so that they can learn new topics and make use of them beyond the classroom situation, in everyday life. The ideas developed here have been carried out at university level and, while a detailed description of this experience is not within the scope of this paper, I consider that EFL teachers and students belonging to different teaching-learning levels and dealing with different genres may also benefit from these reflections.

Note

1. ^ followed by, [] phases within stages. Stages are labelled with capital letters and phases within each stage, with quotation marks (Martin & Rose, 2007).

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