Vygotsky and the Teaching of Writing

For the past twenty years or so, writing research has been offering classroom teachers some pretty exciting information about writing instruction — information that “real writers” use everyday, that discourse theorists heartily advocate, but that unfortunately seems to be a long time reaching the schoolhouse door. James Moffett (1981), for example, talks about the effects of inner speech on composing, and he maintains that formal, essay-type writing grows most naturally out of a beginning writing instruction in personal narrative such as memoir. Peter Elbow (1981) shows us how to listen to the internal dialogue of our writer’s mind in order to realize the full potential of our writing abilities. Donald Graves (1983) explains that it’s best not to grade every draft of a new composition; rather, we should afford young authors the luxury of time in order that they may rethink and revise their pieces. Frank Smith (1988) promises us that language learning is a natural phenomena and a social one, that students learn more when they work in a nurtured environment of communal sharing and collaboration with peers and mentors. And Vera John-Steiner (1985) maintains that writing is the product of a creative, dynamic learning process that spirals naturally upward and outward toward limitless possibilities, but only when it is fostered by examples over time. All of these insights translate into a complex methodology of writing instruction that is deeply rooted in the strong ground of language development theory.

Even more important, though, is the fact that anyone who has experienced first hand what real writing and real writing instruction is, knows that all of these insights are true. What most don’t realize, however, is that these concepts of inner speech, internal dialogue, composing over time, and the social, dynamic aspects of learning originated much earlier than the past twenty-or-so-year history of written discourse theory and research. In fact, they were developed just after the turn of the century by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky.

L. S. Vygotsky (1896-1934) lived and worked during the time of the Russian Revolution of 1917 — a time ripe for both intellectual and cultural upheaval. And though he was never trained as a professional psychologist, Vygotsky’s work greatly affected the social sciences as well as modern language theory. Because of Vygotsky’s work, we know now that most language skills are alive and well long before our students come into our English classrooms.

Talking It Over

Vygotsky (1989) started his work by attempting to narrow the rift that existed between the psychological camps of his day, and he ended up by altering and expanding upon Piaget’s accounts of children’s learning, especially in the areas of speech functions. Vygotsky agreed with Piaget’s findings in many areas, but he saw a different link between external (social) and inner speech than Piaget postulated. Vygotsky watched and listened to children working through given tasks, and he found that language development follows three distinct stages: from external or social speech to egocentric speech, and then to inner speech. Piaget saw no real purpose served in the child’s first speech sounds, except as a stepping stone to the next stages of language development. According to Vygotsky, however (and contrary to Piaget’s observations), external speech from its inception plays an important, specific role in the learning development of the child. Small children, he found, speak to be heard, to get a response, to make meaning in their world. Their first attempts at speech are not mere trial and error utterances; they are purposeful attempts at communication and social interaction. Vygotsky underscored the importance of language as a social tool when he said, “The primary function of speech, both for the adult and for the child, is the function of communication, social contact, influencing surrounding individuals” (1934a, p. 45). Vera John-Steiner (1985) agrees with Vygotsky. She says, “The infant is surrounded by language, which he or she acquires through the daily exchanges of play and mutually articulated need” (p. 116). What we have come to find with writing instruction is that this “mutual
need” for verbal “social” contact also plays an integral part in the earliest prewriting stages. Our students write fuller narratives, more detailed descriptions, and clearer exposition when they are given the opportunity to talk over their ideas before they begin to write.

Vygotsky also saw importance in social interaction as providing a “motivating force” for the transition to higher mental functioning. Social interaction of language response presupposes generalizing or thinking in concepts, a sophisticated, higher order thinking skill. When students generalize, they order and sort information in order to produce the most effective response. This sorting process helps to conceptualize ideas in written discourse that similarly elicit responses from the audience. Vygotsky realized the advantages of children working together in small, interacting groups, but was careful at the same time to distinguish between inter- and intrapsychological processes:

Any function in the child’s natural development appears twice, or on two planes. First, it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then as an intrapsychological category. Social relations or relations among people genetically underlie all higher functions and their relationships. (1981b, p. 163).

This design of inter- versus intrapsychological process would first appear to be developmentally backwards, but what Vygotsky found among his young subjects was that they naturally moved from exchanged verbal activity to isolated verbal activity when completing a task that was set before them. So again we see how and why cooperative learning strategies such as peer response groups fit nicely into the beginning stages of the composing process.

Thinking It Through

Vygotsky saw a significance in the function of egocentric speech that eluded Piaget. Egocentric speech involves a certain amount of unconscious language behavior. It is speech for oneself, without concern for influencing others. According to Piaget, egocentric speech plays no part in the communication process. He describes it as a “by-product of the child’s activity,” and therefore “useless” (Vygotsky, 1989, pp. 28, 29). Vygotsky, on the other hand, views egocentric speech as serving a significant function in the verbal activity of the child:

In order to determine what causes egocentric talk, what circumstances provoke it, we organized the children’s activities in much the same way Piaget did, but we added a series of frustrations and difficulties. For instance, when a child was getting ready to draw, he would suddenly find that there was no paper, or no pencils of the color he needed. In other words, by obstructing his free activity we made him face problems. We found that in these difficult situations the coefficient of egocentric speech almost doubled, in comparison with Piaget’s normal figure for the same age and also in comparison with our figure for children not facing these problems (1989, pp. 29-30).

Vygotsky calls these “phenomena” of egocentric speech “inner speech in its psychological function and external speech physiologically” (Wertsch, 1985, p. 111). Egocentric speech, according to Vygotsky, is the first means by which the child adapts to reality. John-Steiner explains that “talking to oneself is helpful to preschool children, for it allows them to privately rehearse difficult words and complex grammatical structures” (1985, p. 119). It follows that allowing a student writer (of any age) personal rehearsal time to work out the difficult beginning stages of composition serves in the same way to facilitate the art as well as the craft of writing.

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Both Piaget and Vygotsky agree that egocentric speech eventually disappears and turns into inner speech, where it becomes the basic structure of human logic. John-Steiner explains it this way: “Under pressure of school, these overt rehearsals and commentaries are internalized; they form the subvocal speech of thought and become the basis of the much condensed inner speech” (1985, p. 119). The transfer of external speech to egocentric speech, and the sublimation of egocentric speech into inner speech is usually completed by the age of seven, so that our middle and high school students come to the English classroom with two basic modes of language: social and inner speech.

According to Vygotsky, “inner speech enables humans to plan and regulate their activity and derives from previous participation in verbal social interaction” (Wertsch, 1985, pp. 110-111). So then, inner speech is our students’ first true perception of reality, and because of its interactive nature it serves our students best when it’s had a chance to develop socially. Translated into classroom terms, a student’s language develops socially first, individually second. As a result, our young
writers will be better able to make meaning if they are able to work in an atmosphere where they may interact with their teacher and classmates before going to their writing alone. John-Steiner calls these settings "communitas," and says, "When creative young people form a community — however temporary it may be — they become more aware of themselves, they profit from the criticism of their peers and they learn new ways to claim their experience" (1985, p. 208). If this sounds like process writing advocates who recognize that writers need the time, space, and prewriting and conferencing skills to work through their ideas, it is because we now know that these writing practices have a sound theoretical base in language development.

**Solving The Problem**

When considered in light of writing instruction, however, inner speech has a strong potential to affect written discourse negatively as well as positively. Inner speech is not a replica of external speech. Because it is speech for oneself, it is abbreviated, and it moves from part to whole conceptually. Speech for oneself is familiar, personal, and most importantly, best understood by the speaker. Writing, however, is meant for others; it is elaborate, and it requires detailed, abstract thought. Vygotsky says:

(a) the essential difference between written and oral speech reflects the difference between two types of activity, one of which is spontaneous, involuntary, and nonconscious, while the other is abstract, voluntary, and conscious;

(b) the psychological functions on which written speech is based have not even begun to develop in the proper sense when instruction in writing starts. It must build on barely emerging immature processes (1989, p. 183).

These "barely emerging immature processes" are what we teachers see when we read our students' writing and find fragmented sentences, omitted words, unrelated detail, and confused story structure. Thoughts come in pure meanings, where the polish of standard expression is not always necessary, and early writing often reflects the intimate nature of these thoughts. In other words, writing a story is a quantum leap from thinking a story, or even telling a story.

Because inner speech is abbreviated, it sometimes leaves gaps when it is written down — gaps that demand the details of meaning be added on a grand scale. Vygotsky says of inner speech, "A single word is so saturated with sense that many words would be required to explain it in written speech" (John-Steiner, 1985, p. 113). Also, inner speech works semantically, not phonetically; student writers have the whole picture in the full view of their mind as they write. They "see" what they want to say, but sometimes during the process of writing it down, the fragments of language — syntax, mechanics, usage — get in the way.

So, because inner speech is the immediate precursor to writing, all of its characteristics, both those that create possibilities and those that limit them are reflected in the composing process. This poses a double-sided challenge for writing teachers. We must somehow maintain the spontaneity and integrity of our young writers' ideas, while at the same time foster editing skills that ultimately enhance the finished product.

**Writing It Down**

It follows, then, that our student writers need language instructional designs that not only take into account to what extent their abbreviated inner speech is interfering with their writing, but also how that internalized structure can be channeled so that it enhances their writing instead of crippling it. In other words, classroom writing instruction should provide for an environment where students are able to externalize their thoughts gradually, freely, and completely. Small group discussions before the writing ever begins and subsequent sharing of drafts aloud with peers (or the teacher) help to develop self-editing techniques in student writers. By externally voicing the writing (instead of reading it silently) the writer is able to step away from that personal, abbreviated inner speech to the external, social speech. This affords a more objective view of the writing, it makes trouble spots more apparent, and corrections easier to complete.

Another writing activity that moves fragmented thought along the way of good writing is the classroom diary, journal, or learning log. According to John-Steiner, "Since part of verbal fluency consists of the skill of translating inner, telegraphic speech into effective written text, this activity may well be made easier for those who have started to organize their thinking through written language at an early age through the keeping of a diary ... " (1985, p. 116). Language is a complex entity. It has two sides: on one, it serves to realize a fuller view of reality; on the other, it can fragment that reality into confusing perceptions that translate into disorganized prose. Journals and diaries
can help to link perceptions with realities while establishing verbal fluency for even the most reluctant writer.

The "Zone"
No discussion of L.S. Vygotsky would be complete without mentioning his notion of a "zone of proximal development." Vygotsky was the first to see learners as having two levels of intellectual development — an actual level and a potential one. When left alone to solve a problem, for example, a student demonstrates what Vygotsky calls "actual development" (1989, p. 187). Vygotsky reasons, however, that this actual development level is not a true or useful (or fair) measure of ability. Instead, he proposes a concept of a "zone" or parameter of "proximal development," the area within which the learner is able to complete a task with assistance (1989, p. 188). Learning in collaboration with others — with what Vygotsky calls "more capable peers," or with a mentor — is a more natural way to determine learning potential, and Vygotsky believes this developmental potential to be much more telling than actual development levels. Vygotsky says, "What the child can do in cooperation today he can do alone tomorrow" (1989, p. 189). Frank Smith calls it the "social and collaborative basis of learning" (1988, p. 8). And John-Steiner calls this collaboration "apprenticeship":

Learning by being with a knowledgeable partner is a more effective method of developing a particular language of thought than learning from books, classes, or science shows. The crucial aspect of these informal or formal apprenticeships is that they provide the beginner with insights into both the overt activities of human productivity and into the more hidden inner processes of thought (1985, p. 200).

Unfortunately, the current penchant for standardized testing and high scoring considers only the actual development of our students. As a result, and once again, the burden falls on a classroom design that includes the time and structure for the risk-free cooperative learning and mentoring that is necessary to boost these mental processes and establish and maintain the greatest range of learning possibilities. John-Steiner says, "The structuring of time and space according to one's needs is part of the invisible tools of creativity" (1985, p. 74).

Teachers as mentors become an important part of this classroom design, because, according to John-Steiner, "The influence of a live mentor frequently serves to validate a young person's own discoveries" (1985, p. 61). Also, developmental processes (even at the secondary level) lag behind learning processes, and students of all ages need this partnership. (As Frank Smith says, "So much of learning is hanging around people who do it well.") Mentoring also helps to overcome much of the artificiality of classroom writing instruction where topics are remote and irrelevant, and writing quickly becomes a lonely burden.

Although Vygotsky was more interested in thought processes than language acquisition, most of what he found as a result of his research in language development speaks directly to some aspect of writing instruction. His work is represented throughout modern discourse theory, and his observations are reflected in solid instructional practices. Peter Elbow warns us that "writing well is a complex, difficult, and time-consuming process" (1981, p. 3). Writing is a synthesis or pulling together of ideas, images, disarrayed facts, and fragments of experiences. It should be taught naturally. It should be necessary for something. And it should allow the time and space and cooperation necessary for the composition to develop into a worthwhile product. Writing teachers must recognize this interplay of inner voices and social contexts that are ever combining to form written discourse. Only then will our student writers be free to experiment and mature as much as possible along the way.

References


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