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Working in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in the English classroom: A case study on the teaching of literature

Abstract

This paper details an innovative approach to the teaching of literature (fiction) in a Grade 10 convent classroom. This was embedded within a module on English teaching which took six months of the school year. It, however, took the teaching in a deeper way than envisaged in the curriculum, using as it does a theory of school learning within "The Cultural Historical Activity Theory". The concepts used include "mediation",

"the zone of proximal development," "the double move", and "the social situation of development". The outcome of this teaching experiment was a high level of learner competence in working with South African fiction.

Key words: Vygotsky, Hedegaard, Cultural Historical Activity Theory, fiction, mediation, zone of proximal development, group work.

1. The general aim of this research

This case study research aimed to test out the central concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and some of the important concepts in Activity Theory; the former due to Vygotsky, and the latter, Leont'ev (1978), Luria (1979) and recently, Blunden (2010, 2014). In other words, we are looking both at Cultural Historical (Psychology) and Activity Theory, often referred to by the acronym CHAT. Cultural Psychology is very clearly laid out in Cole (1995). The classroom-based research combined the social and the individual, an aspect developed from Vygotsky (1978 *et passim*) and developed more recently by in the work of Hedegaard, (1996, 2002), Chaiklin, (2003) Hedegaard and Jensen (2003), Hedegaard and Chaiklin (2005), Hedegaard, Edwards and Fler (2012) and the idea of a “double move” (see also Hedegaard 1998, Davydov 1982, 1988).

The set of studies carried out in the English classroom involved the second author as teacher in a convent classroom with twenty grade 10 girls. The learners were allocated to six mixed ability groups. The aim was to enhance affect and performance in different aspects of the English curriculum. The focus of the total piece of research was on the acquisition of the following skills, as specified by the curriculum: Parts of Speech within the Language component of the syllabus; Summary Writing within the Writing / Language component, and the writing of a *Literature Essay* within the Literature component. The literature component is described here.

Vygotsky's (1977, 1978, 1998 *et passim*) most famous concept is that of *the zone of proximal development* (ZPD). The concept has been developed in different ways over the past three decades, and as such, is the organising concept of the research. It involves the key concepts of *mediation* and the *tools* and *signs* which mediate learning (for example, in Wertsch, 1985).

There is a temptation for teachers to regard their learners as individuals, as it is these who ultimately receive marks. However, just because it is the base for assessment does not mean that this is the appropriate unit of teaching and learning. The unit of learning is the social, “cognition is a social product that is achieved through interaction” (Rosa and Montero, 1990:83). Our psychological functioning is species-unique, insofar as it is culturally mediated, historically developing, and arises from practical activity (Cole, 1990: 91). Explaining the practical activity is the core of this paper.

Teaching and learning always take place in context, but it is a context that is situated in unique ways. Vygotsky (1998: 198) is interested in the *social situation of development*:

... at the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single, and unique relation, specific to the given age, between the child and reality, mainly the social reality, that surrounds him.

The social situation here is adolescent learners learning in a formal situation. They relate to each other rather differently than children, their orientation is to each other and increasingly to their world, and they are preoccupied with their growing, albeit not yet adult, identity.

So, how are we to understand the social interactions of the literature classroom? On the one hand, we have the immediate context of the classroom interactions, of the teacher and learners, the learners and fellow learners, and the learners and the text. On the other, we have the relationship between the learners and the world of the text, not often examined. But it is precisely within this relationship that meaning is constructed. The learners need to engage with it when writing *about* the world of the novel.

The discourse that happens within most classrooms may be seen as decontextualized (Wertsch, 1990: 121). This generally refers to the fact that the reference is to knowledge outside the immediate context of the classroom. However, the new context is the engagement with the world of the text, the world of the novel in this case.

It is up to the teacher to enable to make meaning of the discourse and to make learning meaningful; our perception is that learners will not achieve self-regulation if the discourse of the classroom is not made meaningful. So instead of writing notes about the themes of novel, we need to engage learners with the text themselves, in developing an orientation towards it.

In this research learners are also asked to reflect on the different teaching and learning modalities they have encountered and to highlight aspects of those they feel have been more successful.

2. Key ideas from cultural historical activity theory

2.1. The General Idea of the Zone of Proximal Development

One of the most famous - and misused - concepts in the psychology of education is the ZPD. The term recently recorded a hit of more than a million on Google, and even on Google Scholar, more than 130 000 hits. In referring to this apparent fecundity, Chaiklin (2003: 40), always helpful, tells us that the term is now included in most development and educational psychology textbooks, as well as some general psychology books.

Within educational research, the concept is now used widely (or referred to) in studies about teaching and learning in many subject-matter areas, including reading, writing, mathematics, science, second-language learning, moral education and violin teaching; with diverse kinds of learners; with information technologies and computer-mediated communication; with children's use of libraries; with discussions about teacher training, and about nursing education. The concept has also been used in other academic

disciplines and professional areas, including nursing, psychoanalysis, psychotherapy and occupational therapy. Faced with this array, we are compelled to ask whether all this research has helped us to understand the concept of the ZPD in new and compelling ways. Or, has using this term simply become fashionable?

The earliest reference to this term in English is in Vygotsky's (1962) famous book "Thinking and Speech" but interest really picked up after the concept was referred to in Chapter 6 "Mind in Society" (1978) in a general introduction to key Vygotskian ideas in English. In the latter (1978: 86), the most well-known definition occurs: "*the distance between the actual developmental 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 peers*" (emphasis in the original). Elsewhere it is referred to as "*what the child is able to do in collaboration today he will be able to do independently tomorrow*" (Vygotsky, 1987: 211).

One of the reasons that people see the ZPD as involving one-to-one mediation is that in one much referred to 'thought' experiment in which Vygotsky talked about two individual children with the same mental age. In fact, Vygotsky spent his life in state education, and was always focused on classroom instruction (Guk and Kellogg, 2007). In helping to support this reading of Vygotsky, reference must also be made to distinctive metaphors he used (1997: 159-60), contrasting the teacher as *rickshaw driver*, pulling the individual learner along in a one-to-one fashion, with the teacher as tram-driver, organizing the social aspects of learning.

In the last decade, there have been a small set of a few dozen highly critical articles and chapters on this concept (e.g. Chaiklin, 2003; Zuckerman, 2007; Levykh, 2008; Hakkarainen & Korepanova, 2009; Roth & Radford, 2010), questioning the way it has been understood, and helping us to reconceptualise it. Some of the queries that have been raised are that: there is a vagueness regarding the process; there is a failure to consider developmental aspects; there is a disregard of children's individuality, and that there is a vagueness concerning the precise meaning whereby learning is produced. While Roth and Radford would like to move beyond the orthodox paradigm by reconceptualising the nature of communication, Levykh (2008) believes that apart from considering emotion separately, we can safely stay within the orthodox Vygotskian paradigm as it covers cognitive, social, cultural and historical factors. Levykh goes on to say (2008: 83): "culturally developed emotions must mediate successful establishment and maintenance of the ZPD to be successful".

Chaiklin (2003) also points us back to Vygotsky's notions of the subjective versus objective ZPD. The objective one applies to the social-historical ZPD of the learners' situation. Let us say that the ZPD for learners in 2005 would be somewhat different from the ZPD for the cohort of learners in 1965, reflecting the changing history and changed conceptions of adolescent South African learners, for example. The subjective ZPD would refer to those of each respective learner (remembering that this shifts with different asks).

In this study, each individual learner will move through a generic, set activity and achieve her *own* level of competence for that particular task. An added extremely important facet when considering the construct of the ZPD is that each individual *task* has its own unique zone of proximal development. In a series of lessons, the teacher has to formulate a new ZPD for each task. Each task achieved constitutes the starting point for the next.

The teacher has to be aware of the capabilities of her learners and set activities that allow each learner to achieve her maximum potential by the completion of the set activity. This is an extremely complex and time-consuming exercise for the teacher, and she has to be highly competent on the content knowledge and exceptionally conversant with the range and ability of her students: she must have subject knowledge and pedagogic knowledge. The series of lessons designed for this research paper aimed to meet this criteria operating within the ZPD. Each series of lessons was different and used various means in order to move learners through the stages of the ZPD for that specific task.

Moll (1990: 13) explains that the focus of such lessons or activities would not concern the “transferring” of skills from learners who “know more” to those who “know less”, “... but on the collaborative use of mediational means to create, obtain and negotiate meaning.” The role of the adult (in this case the teacher) is to: “[A]ssist learners in appropriating or taking control of their own learning.” The lessons designed for this research demanded this *agency*—taking control—on the part of the learners. The collaboration with peers and the teacher and the mediation of the texts and materials also demanded active participation from the learners. It is highly structured activity, quite different from naïve views of teaching by way of groups.

It is possible to use and adopt different approaches when applying the theoretical construct of the ZPD within different contexts. Hedegaard (1996, 2002 *et passim*) maintains that it is possible to establish the ZPD of an entire class and modify instruction accordingly. Her 1996 research article (developed further in her 2002 book) seems to support this claim, as does the research outlined here. It is possible to set a generic question and for students to engage with and answer that *question* at completely different levels. The level at which learners will engage with the *material* is also different, according to their level of maturity.

2.2. The Place of Scientific and Everyday (Spontaneous) Concepts in the ZPD

One lesser known aspects of Vygotsky’ (1978) theory is his theory of concepts. Although these concepts are not much discussed these days (but cf. Blunden, 2012) they are actually at the centre of his theory, helping us in our current challenge of understanding the ZPD. *Spontaneous* (everyday) concepts are those we learn from everyday life, starting from early communication. They are therefore not a product of conscious instruction, although naturally, early language and communication are a product of mediation. Crucially, they

are not generally accessible to conscious awareness without formal instruction, such as school learning, and formal language instruction. By and large, they are developed without conscious awareness and are involuntary. For example, it is very difficult for young children to give you a definition of “son” and “father”, although a boy can point to his father.

On the other hand there are *scientific* (schooled) concepts, better translated into English as “systematic concepts”, which are discipline concepts such as those which occur in history and geography. They arise from school learning, developed from the voluntary control of knowledge and conscious awareness (Kozulin, 1990).

Vygotsky (1962: 108-9) called this, his ‘General Law of Cultural Development’ where:

[I]n working its slow way upwards, an everyday concept clears the path for a scientific concept in its downward development. It creates a series of structures necessary for the evolution of a concept’s more primitive, elementary aspects, which give it body and vitality. Scientific concepts in turn, supply structures for the upward development of the child’s spontaneous concepts towards consciousness and deliberate use.

Note that the direction here is the reverse of our present-day understanding, but the point remains. Scientific concepts work downwards, the abstract becomes more grounded. The teacher works from the scientific to the everyday in the ZPD. When the scientific has been grounded as development, in other words, an actual level, the next new scientific concept is taught. The important point here is that we need to work with scientific concepts thoroughly enough for scientific concepts to work downwards, so that the parallel, everyday concepts become accessible to consciousness and transform and make sense to us. We need to access our spontaneous concepts; in other words, we start to make sense of the scientific concepts in our own way. Learning then becomes more personal, we can use our own words. The child will then be capable of achieving “self-regulation” according to Vygotsky (1978), the conscious monitoring and control of learning, the endpoint of worthwhile learning experiences. In this study, everyday concepts of love, hate and revenge would interact with the conceptions of these in the novel. The scientific concept of a literature essay is attained and then manifested in each learner’s essay.

Vygotsky (1956: 278 as cited in Wertsch, 1985: 251) has this to say about learning and development:

Instruction is good only when it proceeds ahead of development. It then awakens and rouses to life those functions which are in a stage of maturing, which lie in the zone of proximal development. [...] It is in this way that instruction plays an extremely important role in development.

The teacher constructs a ZPD for the operation and function for the new scientific concept. This ZPD may then be constantly re-constructed for the class for a series of lessons, a lesson and task at a time. The longer term module planning is crucial, with the added proviso that it is continuously open to negotiation. As Wells (1999) and Blunden (2014) point out, the end-point of the learning process is in *essence unknown*, because each learner will achieve competence at her own level. Often, the end-point shifts as the activity progresses and new directions and opportunities are created that were not initially envisaged. Such vigorous teaching requires a great deal of teacher confidence.

Hedegaard (1996) maintains there should be a number of external 'stimuli' used in order for students to be able to link 'scientific' knowledge to 'everyday' concepts: school outings, different forms of texts such as charts, schemas and so on. The learners in this study, as part of their focus on South African Literature and Poetry, visited the Apartheid Museum, the Hector Peterson Memorial, Constitution Hill and a number of informal settlements. Furthermore, the author of the novel they were to study – Jane Fox – was invited to hold a workshop on her 'The Killing Bottle' (1999). During this she discussed themes, issues and ideas surrounding the novel and its conception.

2.3. The Double Move

It is not only confidence that is required in such teaching, it is also competence. The teacher's understanding of the subject is paramount. For Hedegaard (1996) the teacher, when she is planning her lessons, must have a deep and thorough understanding of the general laws and concepts of the subject. The lessons must be planned in such a way that they advance from (Hedegaard, 1996: 190):

[T]he general laws to the surrounding reality in all its complexity. In order to explain these laws the teacher must choose concrete examples that demonstrate the general laws in its most transparent form.

Hedegaard goes on to explain that the teachers will proceed from the 'general' to the 'concrete', while the students will move from their 'pre-conceived actions' to a 'concrete' application of the knowledge acquired. The last step in the process is to articulate and evaluate their understanding of their new 'concept'. This is the process followed in this study.

Pulling together the ideas about scientific and spontaneous concepts and the double move, the following is apposite (Hedegaard, 1996: 181):

[C]hildren acquire concepts as active concepts [...] when they are able to relate themselves to their own learning activity as well as to the sphere of application to the concepts they have worked with. The scientific will become everyday concepts, enabling the children to orient themselves theoretically to the surrounding world.

The double move is at first glance nothing more than a teacher planning learning activities. However, it is a weightier concept, involving as it does, two moves. The basis of the first move is the teacher's conception of the issues in their full, developed form, constituting a mature concept of themes, relationships and characters. The second move is the teacher's concept of the "germ-cell" of the concepts she is mediating (Davydov's 1988 term). What would count as valid ideas, manifested in a variety of learning experiences, including very practical, concrete experiences, moving through a range of carefully developed steps towards the final concepts?

The double move here suggests that learners would be able to apply the scientific concepts necessary to understand the aspect related to literature in the curriculum, and furthermore apply these to their everyday conceptions/ideas. This process would be embodied in the notion of a 'guided investigation'. The outcome would be changes in acting, thinking and feeling and the transformation of identity. Thus it consonant with "literary theory" as such - a view of the way humans interpret meaning.

3. PUTTING THE IDEAS INTO PRACTICE

3.1. Research Design

This study ran for eight weeks. The girls in one class were put into six groups of mixed ability but having the brightest learners assigned to each as group leader. The girls were explicitly informed about the nature and extent of the larger "teaching experiment" which was to run over six months of the school year, for their teacher's M Ed degree. They expressed a positive attitude to being involved, although, in one way, they were a captive audience - learners following the Grade 10 national curriculum. Naturally the whole research design was presented to and accepted by school management. The classroom artefacts are always labelled - learners hand in their work - but in reporting on the research, everybody's identity is protected.

The research was conceptualised as a *case study*. There is a tradition of case studies over more than 40 years, and the concept is generally used across the social sciences (George and Bennett, 2007). An educational case study is a special kind of case study, involving a specific aspect of curriculum innovation bounded in space and time, where the innovation is of interest to academics and practitioners alike (Hamilton, 2011). There should be sufficient data collected to explore the significant features of the case, as well as the possibility of replicating it. In Stake's (1995) view, the current research is an instrumental - rather than holistic - case study, involving a structured approach to the specific teaching aspect, rather than to the classroom teaching-learning situation as whole.

The case study refers internally to its own validity, rather than outwardly to other studies, although this study is explicitly related to Hedegaard's (1996, 2002) "teaching

experiment". If it is successful, then it does reflect the explanatory power of CHAT. Finally, it should succeed in its own terms, which here is elucidating the effective teaching of writing literature essays.

3.2 Lesson Series on Literature "The Killing Bottle": Tasks and Outcomes

The teacher-researcher had done a great deal to prepare the class both earlier in the year, and also for this module.

Part 1: The collage

The girls had read and discussed the book before the process began. The first lessons involved the completion of collages in groups. Each group was assigned a theme or a relationship embedded in the novel and were asked to design a collage embodying that. They had two lessons to design the collage, and used pictures and words found in newspapers and collages, or generated their own on computer; they had three weeks prior to this been given the task of collecting words and images. The collage was on an A3 size paper and show a balance between words and pictures. There was a checklist for assessment on this task, allowing the girls to know what was important, including organisational and social criteria such as equal social contribution in the group. There was to be no take advantage of the brightest learner in the group. After this the groups had a lesson to write a motivation of one page for what was included in the collage, and why it had relevance, including references to the actual text.

This part worked very well, with groups being well-prepared and working together effectively and quickly, as per the instructions. An extract from one of the motivations is seen below, with the words which were on the collage included in **bold**.

This side shows how different their relationship became after Puni's accident. The word **why** shows us Matt's view about what happened on Rooikop. Puni always looked for **the truth** trying to understand what happened. **Lies** poured out from young Matt who was scared and also didn't know how to come to terms with everything.

Part 2: Collage motivation with reference to the text

The groups were to reform, then a member of each group was to go and spend 10 minutes at each of the other groups clarifying and discussing their collage and motivation, and taking notes about extra points which came up. The original groups were to reform after the five turns, and write a long paragraph, 350 – 400 words, about the topic, this time not making reference to the collage, but rather, to the text. This activity served the twin purpose of revisiting the text, as well as preparing the learners for the next step in the process.

Part 3: Analysing good writing

The same groups were then to examine sample introduction and concluding paragraphs for the “essay” they had just written. From this scrutiny they were to write a list of “do’s and don’ts” for constructing their own literature paragraphs essays. Here is an example given by the teacher/researcher:

Introduction: (What you SHOULD aim for)

In the novel The Killing Bottle by Jane Fox, there are many relationships between characters that are explored and contrasted, such as that between William and his father, Magnus Henry Mott. This relationship provides the teacher with insight into the central themes of entrapment, guilt and responsibility that pervade the novel, as well as broaden and deepen the understanding of the potential control a parent can exert over a young, impressionable child. ...

Introduction: (What you SHOULD NOT aim for)

I think, that in this book about the killing bottle, that William’s father is very unfair to him. Henry doesn’t allow Mott to have his own life. All Henry cares about is a bunch of dead moths and he makes William into one of his moths as well when he makes him take over the collection. William never finds a wife and he never has a life and he grows old with only Puni for company. ...

The learners’ checklist was very close to the teacher’s, with aspects related to the style both including no clichés and abbreviations, make a point clearly and not repeating it. Other aspects include the use of quotations, planning and conclusions. The latter should have a sense of finality, refer back to the topic, restate the argument and offer a final comment on it. These lists help self-regulation, helping planning, constituting a constant check while writing, and a reflection on what is written. They were learning other-regulation and then self-regulation.

Here is an extract from a group paragraph:

Mapunye is very angry with Mott, and cannot express his anger in words. He uses actions to express his feelings. “Mapunye thrust past him and ripped off the bedcover, scrunching it in his arms and throwing it down. ... back and forth until they hung askew.” By making a mess of the room, Mat had tidied and prepared, he portrays his feelings of anger, which sets him on his path to redemption.

Part 4: The essay plan and group essay

Six literature essay topics such as the one below, were then issued.

Topic 2:

‘There are things you can do,’ she said, ‘to bring babies on too soon, so they don’t live.’

To what extent does Jane Fox persuade us as to this decision Meggie should make regarding her pregnancy? Discuss Meggie’s choices and how they are highlighted throughout the novel.

The groups then reformed, and each given a topic. Flipchart paper was used to develop a group essay plan. Some of the lesson plan for the Topic 2 on Meggie and Ash includes:

“If she was going to have to choose between Ash and the baby, the valley was desolate indeed.” Here Meggie feels, or at least realises, that having this child would bring in the feeling of “choosing”. Much of that time she would have spent with Ash would go towards looking after the baby.

[...]

Meggie has reached the idea that she is not the same person that she used to be before the baby as conceived.

Meggie is awaking the emotional side when she says “I feel different”. She is becoming attached and used to the idea of the baby.

The essay plans were then put up around the classroom and learners given the opportunity to walk around and compile their own notes for each topic.

One member of each group typed the group essays and each learner received a pack with five essays to use as a reference. The level of sophistication (register) of the language was remarkable. They were instructed to write in a formal register but not given any explicit guidelines. Here is a paragraph from one of the group essays, about Ash and Meggie’s relationship:

Meggie is extremely nervous to tell Ash about her pregnancy. Her feelings about this issue are illustrated when she thinks, “it was more of a question of having to tell herself that she was not going to be sick” This also provides us with the feeling that Meggie herself, does not think that Ash is ready for a baby. When she eventually releases the news to Ash, he takes it in quite a negative way. “Christ, Meggie I trusted you. We had an agreement.” This is not a fair statement to make as Ash blames Meggie for having the baby and in fact it is both their responsibility to prevent this sort of incident.

Part 5: Individual essays

After that each girl was expected to write her own essay for homework. The lesson plans which the groups had drawn up remained up for the week that they were preparing their individual essays.

Here is an extract from one of the final individual essays on Mott and Mapunye's relationship:

...William is also in denial of the injustice that took place. It becomes obvious when he asks, "There's a hole in your boot, Puni ... how did it get there?" After all William knows perfectly that it is because of the disaster at Rooikop, Mapunye walks with his foot turned in, and this wears away the boot. [...] Their friendship is like Mapunya's boot. After the rockslide, a hole is punched through it, and then it is plugged up with a flimsy piece of cardboard. Their relationship is fragile and unstable. William ruins it by refusing to be reconciled with his friend. ...

The essays were extremely promising to assess. It was clear that the learners had grasped the concept and that with practice, they would have no trouble writing essays for examinations and in their future studies. Figure 1 shows the marks achieved out of X. The class average was 78.5% which means that most girls achieved a high B symbol.

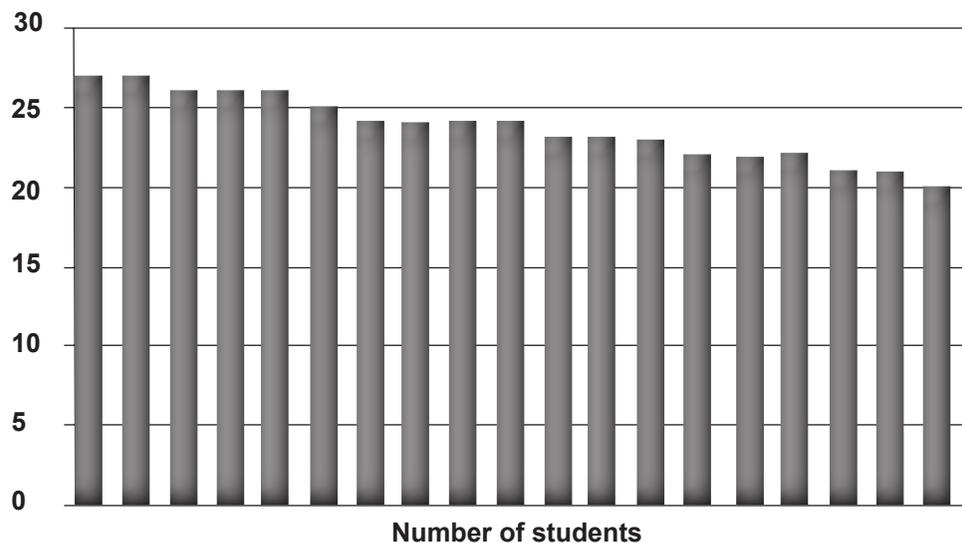


Figure 1: Literature essay results (marks achieved out of 30)

3.3. Reflections on the Activity

The researchers were impressed by the level of dedication in the group work. There was a constant quiet hum of work, with girls seeming to be fully engaged with the tasks. Furthermore the groups seemed to be very open to being observed by us. Engagement remained high throughout the lesson series.

The girls were given a post-experience questionnaire to complete before they received their essay marks. The five questions on the questionnaire included, *“Do you feel confident that you have grasped the basic of how to write a literature essay after this unit of lessons?”* Eighteen girls agreed that they were and raised some interesting points:

“Yes, because we did it so thoroughly. Also, when you have to think about something yourself (like writing rules for the writing of the essays) you learn more because you’re paying attention to all the important things, whereas you tend to not listen when teachers just explain.”

Another interesting response was:

“Yes we went slowly through the steps and we started to learn to write an essay before we even realised what we were doing. It also helped to do the collage and write the motivation as this forced us to look at the novel and read between the lines to order to grasp a greater understanding of the novel.”

The second question was *“Was there any part of the process that did not make any sense to you?”* All the girls responded positively about the process. Interesting responses included: “I had lots of fun doing it in a group as well, because if there was something I didn’t understand my group members would help explain it to me.” And, “No, it all made sense. At first I couldn’t understand the point of the collage and thought it was pointless, but as it all came together it helped me more than I thought.”

Two other responses to a question about the group process include: “It helped because we could explain to each other and learn from teaching and listening to each other.” And, “I really feel comfortable with my classmates so I didn’t feel embarrassed asking question or sharing ideas. We all helped each other to learn.” Asked about whether they enjoyed the lessons, the answer was unequivocally, “Yes”.

We asked the students to add a general comment about the effectiveness of their learning throughout the term. (This included three separate aspects, grammar, literature essay and summary.) They were most affirming about their teacher: “You have really ‘taught’ me.” And, “You actually taught me”. Very telling here was “[t]he confidence that you have in each and every one of us really encourages us to work hard. Your different approach to teaching is really effective” and also, “You don’t just stand in front and ‘teach’ us. You give us the opportunity to teach ourselves which is what has made you such

a good teacher and has made me understand English one hundred times more.” The concept of scaffolding is typically regarded as a cognitive one. Here there is more - the girls never felt they were taking large risks; rather small risks, at the same time owning their own learning. Their affect and their motivation was positively engaged.

In a class discussion about the process, one theme that emerged was that they respected the confidence their teacher had in them; that she never doubted their competence. “The thing I like the most is that you treat us like adults. [...] We never feel ignorant. You listen to all of us and give us credit for our ideas. We feel so comfortable in your class.” They also mentioned the fact that they felt they were in control of their own learning: “You make it feel like we are doing it ourselves.” And, “[t]he ‘baby steps’ helped us to feel we were in charge of what we are doing.”

The double move in the teaching experiment is clearer here even more than in the grammar intervention (Macdonald and Pinheiro, 2012). The technique or skill underlying this teaching is sophisticated. The affective aspect was in place here, the teacher trusted the girls to take responsibility for their own learning, partly from her respect and trust for them to do the right thing. The cognitive scaffolding is multi-faceted. It is not simply coming in and out when needed, but on the teacher varying the tasks as new skills became required, for example when linking in the motivation to the collage, and then on to linking the motivation to the novel, and starting to pull out relevant quotes from there.

Writing a paragraph, and then being asked to scrutinise good and bad writing, and infer principles for writing. In the very last step the girls are still not totally autonomous, as they can use the essay plans other groups have developed to their own ends. The learners worked in a range of ways: from reading the book and discussing it, to making collages and mind-maps and plans. They analysed each other’s arguments, came to agreement from time to time in a group collaborative effort; from evaluating each other, to evaluating themselves.

4. The Status of the Theoretical Concepts

In CHAT, analysing the task demands are vital, but the importance of motivation is so central that it is seen as intrinsically part of the process. The setting of the activity includes the two aspects mentioned above, but with the additional proviso that the teacher will approach the task not only able to unpack the process into steps. Their pedagogic relationship and personal learning history are understood and created before the process begins. The process is negotiated at every moment, with respect, concern and trust. Such work is crucial in developing a robust identity. The girls see themselves as having more powerful identities as learners than they did before. In both the grammar and the literature studies, this is very clear from their feedback, which was solicited and not coerced in any way. This development points to the power of the teacher’s method.

What counts as learning in this idea of the “teaching experiment”? The analysis of group interaction, although we cannot say at any point which the external ideas, discussed verbally and manifested in concrete artefacts at each stage of the unit, become internalised. Working with six groups would generate an enormous bank of data. Nobody to date has produced an exact explanation of the dynamics of interaction in the ZPD. Rather, in such a study, the production of polished, sophisticated essays is what constitutes the endpoint of the class’s ZPD of writing literature essays. At each step of the unit learners are producing ever more abstract written artefacts. Learning starts out as social but has an individual endpoint.

From what we have seen in this discussion, the concept of mediation calls for deeper and deeper development. Effective mediation is almost always located in the flux of individual, group and class ZPDs. Teacher and learners are involved in its co-construction at every point. Language learning is always embedded in the psychology of learning more generally. This has been admirably evidenced here.

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