



# Vygotsky and Socio-cultural Theory

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Lev Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of development is based on four principles:

- Children construct knowledge
- Development cannot be separated from its social context or culture
- Learning usually leads development
- Language plays a central role in early human development

Early in the twentieth century, the Russian psychologist, Lev Vygotsky (1896 - 1934) recognized that children's cognitive and language development do not happen in isolation. The central idea is that thinking and learning are social activities for the human species – social interaction of some sort is involved in most learning. Culture (including values, beliefs, customs, tools and skills) is transmitted to the next generation through social interaction. Children learn the skills and acquire the tools that are important for their social context.

Vygotsky's ideas and theories did not gain much prominence in North America until towards the end of the twentieth century. Vygotsky's short life (he died when he was 38-years-old) and his isolation within the young Communist world in Russia contributed to the passage of time before his theories became of interest to North American researchers and practitioners. The more recent attention to the central influence of social context on development has brought Vygotsky's theories and ideas to the fore.

According to Vygotsky, cognitive processes and skills are socially transferred from knowledgeable members of society to children. He believed that social interactions, particularly cooperative dialogues between and among children and adults, were necessary to acquire ways of thinking and behaving. As adults and more-expert peers help children master activities that are meaningful to that culture, the communication becomes part of children's thinking. When children internalize the basic features of these dialogues, or conversations, they are able to use the language themselves to guide their activities and to acquire skills on their own.

Thus, Vygotsky viewed cognitive development as a socially-mediated process that is dependent on support from adults and more-competent peers. Once children are able to use language, they can try to communicate with others and their social interactions result in continuous changes to cognitive abilities. The specific cognitive abilities vary considerably from culture to culture and are not bound by a universal sequence or stages of cognitive development. Vygotsky emphasized that the development of higher cognitive abilities, such as memory, attention, and reasoning, involve learning to use the inventions of society, such as language, mathematical systems, and memory devices.

Vygotsky pointed to both the institutional and the interpersonal aspects of social context. At the institutional level, tools and organizations are determined by the collective cultural history, experiences, and abilities of a particular society. At the interpersonal level, children acquire these cultural tools from the guidance of individuals who already have the skills to use these tools.

### **Zone of proximal development**

Vygotsky noticed that there were some tasks that were too difficult for children to master alone but that could be mastered with the guidance and assistance of an adult or more-skilled child. He labeled the distance between these two points as the “zone of proximal development”. The lower limit of the zone of proximal development is the level of problem solving reached by a child working independently. The upper limit is the level of additional skill the child can master with the assistance of a more skilled individual.

Vygotsky described three levels of learning:

- Level 1: unable to do the task without an adult or mature learner
- Level 2: able to do the task but needs assistance from an adult or mature learner
- Level 3: able to complete the task independently

Scaffolding is a feature of the assistance given in level 2 – the support is adjusted to meet where the child’s current ability.

### **Development of language**

According to Vygotsky, language is made possible because of our culture (tools and symbols). The learning of language (or signs) is brought about by social processes, and language or signs ultimately make thought possible.

Vygotsky noted that a young child’s rapid growth in language leads to changes in thinking. Preschoolers are able to use language to have conversations with knowledgeable peers and adults who encourage their mastery of culturally important tasks.

Private speech (children’s self-directed speech) is common among children three- to five-years-old. It guides their thinking and behaviour. When a task is more difficult, it is typical for children’s private speech to increase. Gradually, private speech becomes whispers, followed by silent lip movements. In middle childhood, private speech typically is completely internalized.

## References

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