Adapting Activities into a Task:
A Vygotksyian Principle

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Abstract—*A language classroom, ideally, is a place where ample opportunities are created for young learners to acquire language with ease and interest. Instructional materials play a major role in promoting language learning. Young learners approach the activities with their own experiences and expectations which may not match with those of the demands of the activity. English language teachers need to be able to analyse activities in a textbook for the demands that the activities make and the support they provide. An understanding of the cognitive demands an activity places on the young learners and the support it provides to execute the activity helps the language teachers respond to a given activity. In case the demands of the activity and the support it provides do not match with the language abilities and exposure of the learners, teachers have to adapt the activities to create meaningful opportunities for the learners for language learning.*

The aim of this paper is to analyse an activity from a prescribed textbook and provide a framework for adaptation of the activity into a task using Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Cameron's framework of analysis of activities. Based on the analysis the activity is adapted to a task to facilitate language learning among the young learners.

Keywords*: ZPD, textbook, adaptation of instructional materials, activity, task, task demands, task supportdemands that a task makes on the young learners and the support the activity provides.*

Introduction

Jean Piaget (1976) looks at children as the ones who continually interact with the world around them and through this interaction try to solve problems, i.e. acts. This action is central to a young learner's cognitive development. According to Cameron (2010), Piagetian psychology differentiates two ways in which development can take place as a result of activity: assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation happens when action takes place without any changes to the child's behaviour; accommodation involves the child adjusting to features of the environment in some way (p. 3). These two adaptive behavioral traits later on become a part of the thinking processes. Accommodation is an important idea that has been taken into second language learning under the label 'restructuring', used to refer to the re-organization of mental representations of a language (McLaughin, 1992 cited in Cameron, 2010). Thus, for Piaget, environment creates opportunities for the child to act and through these actions a setting for development is provided. Transferring this idea to language teaching and learning, a classroom and activities in the classroom create opportunities for a child to learn.

On the other hand, Lev Vygotsky (1978) places the child in the interactional pattern with people in the child's world. Language provides the child with a new tool, opens up opportunities for doing things and for organizing information through the use of words as symbols (Cameron, 2010). Vygotsky's principle of development is that a child learns actively by interacting with people around him/her.

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)

Vygotsky used the concept of ZPD to measure a child's performance by examining what it can do with help from others (teachers, parent, and others). This he calls the child's zone of Proximal development. Just as parents and caretakers know what a child needs and when, in a class of forty, a teacher knows when a child needs assistance.

Vygotskyan theory of learning has several implications for language learning amongst children. The first one is the importance of words as units and their meanings. According to Cameron (2010), '…words do have a special significance for children learning a new language…from the earliest lessons, children are encouraged to think of the new language as a set of words …' (p.7).

It is imperative to understand the links between classroom interaction, the aspect of language that is taught, and how it is taught. The richer and broader the language exposure and experience provided to the learners through various engaging activities, the better young learners are likely to learn languages. Thus, language tasks play a major role in creating opportunities for learners for language learning. Cameron developed a framework for analyzing tasks in textbooks that incorporated the concept of ZPD.

Tasks in a language classroom

In the literature of Task-based Language Teaching there are varied definitions of a task. According to Skehan (1995), a task is an activity in which meaning is primary; there is some sort of relationship to the outside world; task completion has some priority; and the assessment of task performance is in terms of task outcome. Though Long and Crooks (1991) and Breen (1987) and others add other dimensions to a task, those are not included in this paper. Tasks need to be examined with one objective: learner participation.

The aim of the paper is to analyse activities in a prescribed textbook of English for young learners and suggest a framework for adapting the activities into tasks so as to help the teacher understand the rationale and objectives of the task s/he is using, and to implement them effectively.

Framework for analyzing tasks: learning perspective

Syllabus designers and materials producers, through the activities that aim at developing language abilities of the learners, take into consideration social and cognitive development of young learners. A classroom is an environment where opportunities for young learners are provided for the development of language. According to Cameron (2010), young learners work hard to make sense of what teachers ask them to do, and come to tasks with their own understandings of the purposes and expectations of adults. Tizard and Hughes (1984), cited in Cameron (2010), observe that children starting school have shown how much difference there often is between language use and activities at home and at school, but also how quickly children work out what is expected of them and how to fit themselves into the new patterns of interaction. However, the activity-type and new language demanded by the activity can create confusion even for the most motivated child and they may fail to understand the purpose of the activity. Cameron emphasizes the fact that teachers should be equipped with tools to check learner's understanding of the task and encourage them to go beyond 'a superficial evaluation of a classroom activity'(p.11).

It is imperative, therefore, to understand the environment created by an activity. In order to do so, teachers need to analyse the activity in terms of the demands it makes on learners and the support required for learning. If the demands are too high, then learners get de-motivated to work on it; on the other hand, if the support provided takes away the demand from an activity, it does not challenge the learner enough to think about the language. An activity can be successful only when there is a balance between the demands of an activity and support for learning. Cameron (2010) proposes a framework of analysis task demands which is presented in the next section.

Framework for analysing task demands

An activity can place different types of demands on learners, chief among them being cognition and language. Cognitive demands are related to concepts, and to an understanding of the world and other people. Language demands are related to using the foreign language, and to uses of the mother tongue in the context of learning the foreign language. Other types of demands are interactional, metalingusitc, involvement, and physical (Cameron, 2010).

The table given below explains the types of demands an activity may place on young learners.

Table 1: Types of task demand

- Cognitive demands vary with the degree of contextualization of language; difficulty of concepts that are needed to do the task (e.g. use of graphics, colours, telling the time).

- Language demands vary with function: whether the language is spoken or written, for understanding or production; for extended talk or conversation; with the vocabulary and the grammar needed; with the genre; with the amount of L1 and L2

- Interactional demands vary with the type of interaction required, e.g. pair work; with the participants in talk—adult/peers; with the nature of the interaction, (e.g. question and answer)

- Metalinguistic demands may include the use of technical terms about language in production or comprehension (eg. in instructions, in feedback).

- Involvement demands may vary with the ease or difficulty the learner experiences in engaging with the task, (eg. length of task stages; links to child's interests and concerns; their novelty, humour, suspense).

- Physical demands vary with how long the child must sit still; with actions needed; with fine motor skills needed (eg. to write or draw).

- *Source*: Cameron (2010, p.25)

Task support

Types of support can be categorized in the same way as types of demand as shown in Table 2 below.

- Cognitive support can come from the contextualization of language; from the use of concepts already developed; from familiar formats of graphics or activity; from familiar topics and content.

- Language support can come from re-use of language already mastered; from moving from easier domain to more difficult, e.g. spoken to written; from using known vocabulary and grammar to help with the new; from use of L1 to support L2 development.

- Interactional support can come from the type of interaction, e.g. pair work; from helpful co-participants; from the use of familiar routines.

- Metalinguistic support can come from familiar technical terms to talk about new language; clear explanations.

- Involvement support can come from content and activity that is easy for the learner to engage with, eg. links to child's interest and concerns; from mixing physical movement and clam, seated activities.

- Physical variation in sitting and moving; use of familiar actions; matching to the levels of fine motor skills development, eg. to write or draw.

    Source: Cameron (2010, p.27)

The Goldilocks Principle

What the learners can do with a task and whether they learn any language items in the process depend neither on the task demands alone nor on task support alone. It is 'the dynamic relationship between demands and support', (Cameron, 2010) that helps learners acquire language. Based on Vygotsky's ZPD, it can be argued that if the demands of a task are too high, learners will be de-motivated as they find it difficult to work on. They may either not work on the task at all or might work on it the way they have understood it. On the contrary, a task loses its purpose if the task or the materials provide support that is more than necessary. A teacher reading the text and explaining its meaning in the learners' mother tongue is an example of providing excessive support to learning. Hence 'the difference between demands and support creates the space for growth and produces opportunities for learning…Language learning for an individual can be seen as a repeated process of stretching resources slightly beyond the current limit into the ZPD or space for growth consolidating new skills, and then moving on to the next challenge' (Cameron, 2010, p.28). Therefore, it is important for a teacher to scaffold a task for learners by breaking it down into manageable steps with clearly specified goals at each step. The next section provides an example of balancing task demands and task support.

Analysing the environment created by an activity

The activity given below is taken from a coursebook prescribed for students of Class II in Government schools of Telangana, South India. The learners, mostly six-year olds, are introduced to English in Class I. The set of materials from which this activity claims that 'the new textbooks in English have been developed basing (sic) on National Curriculum Framework (NCF) 2005 and A. P. State Curriculum Framework (SCF) AP 2011 and are in tune with the Right to Education (RTE) Act, 2009. They envisage a shift in the teaching paradigm in the sense that the focus is on knowledge and language construction rather than the reproduction of a given set of information.' The textbook 'contains seven units

each unit dealing with a specific theme but all the units together making a story. Most of the questions/activities given on the pages are meant for eliciting the perception and divergent thinking of the learners…the vocabulary activity ends up with evolving a concept map on themes such as family, vehicles, places, animals, birds, things I like, etc.'

In its context of use, the activity is intended to be a part of 'Story time' which is a part of the first Unit of the textbook on animals titled *At the Zoo*. After having introduced the learners to the animals in a zoo and birds found in the zoo and outside, learners are to work on the activity given below and narrate the story based on the picture prompts.

One has been reproduced below for analysis:
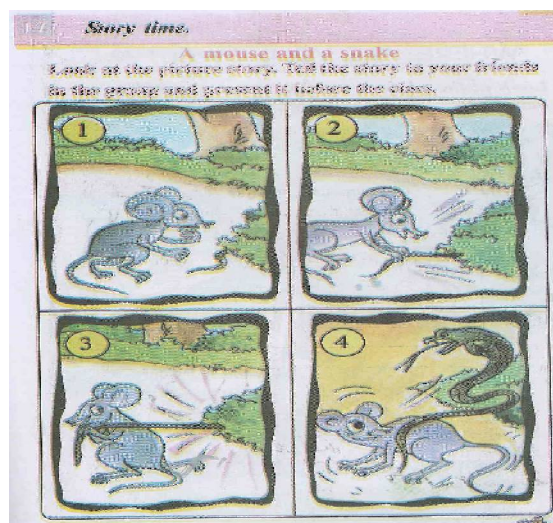
The basis for this speaking activity is a visual/graphic which is a common aid found in most of the textbooks for young learners. There are four pictures, numbered in the order of the story. Students are required to use these picture prompts and make up the story. Learners have to *Look at the picture story. Tell the story to your friends in the group and present it before the class* (emphasis added). The visuals are in colour and occupy the entire page.

Applying the framework discussed above task demands can be analysed as follows:

Task demand:

1. **Cognitive**: Learners have to understand the characters in the story; understand that the actions are to be reported in the past tense and recognize the key actions in each picture and sequence them accordingly. Learners have to narrate the story in a group and make a public presentation.

2. **Language**: Learners have to find appropriate vocabulary to describe each action apart from selecting appropriate grammatical items (verbs in their past tense, nouns, and adjectives). They are expected to use lexis in the right

order, pronounce the words correctly with correct sentence stress and appropriate intonation (for example, rising tone to express shock in the last picture). Further, they have to understand the teacher's instructions and feedback on the activity.

3. **Interactional:** Learners have to work on the story and narrate it in groups first, and then to the class.

4. **Metalinguistic**: This activity places high demands on learners since they have to understand the instructions given in the story, then the teacher, and process the feedback of the teacher in terms of fluency and accuracy of the task.

5. **Involvement**: Task stage is lengthy as learners have to first construct the story, narrate it to the group and then present the same to the class.

6. **Physical**: This activity has been designed for six-year olds. It might be difficult for them to work in groups and sit and listen to each other's stories, as the activity demands.

Thus, it can be seen that the activity places high demands on the learners. Using the same framework, the activity is analysed for its support for learning.

Task support

1. **Cognitive**: Visuals provide support for understanding the structure and characters involved in the story there by helping learners to contextualize the language to be used. The format of a story might be familiar to the learners in that it has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is not clear whether the learners are familiar with the content because the previous lessons expose them only to names of animals in a zoo.

2. **Language**: There is no language support as the language expressions and the necessary vocabulary to be used are not introduced in any of the previous lessons.

3. **Interactional**: Since it is a group activity it is hoped that some support can be expected from members of the group.

4. **Metalinguistic**: Minimal support is provided from this perspective as the learners may not be able to draw entirely from their prior learning experience or long term memory.

5. **Involvement**: This task can engage the learners as the theme of the story (related to the amimals) can be of interest to the young learners.

6. **Physical**: This activity does not provide learners any scope for fine motor skills.

Analysis of the activity in terms of demands and support leads us to decide that this activity is highly demanding and way beyond the capacity of the learners. The next section discusses how teachers can ensure that the balance of demand and support enables learners acquire and produce language.

In order to ensure that learners produce language appropriate to the activity, teachers need to set clear and achievable language learning goals. Since a teacher is required to know the learners very well, the syllabus and the task can be made workable by him/her alone and not any outsider. In setting language learning goals, a teacher would be following Vygotksy's ZPD and scaffolding principle. Scaffolding will enable the teacher break down the task into manageable steps, with each having its own sub-goals. These sub-goals will help the learners and the teacher ensure success and achievement at each step, leading to the success of the task as a whole. Breaking down the task into activities will make the learners comfortable and motivate them to accomplish the language goals. Learner participation is crucial for the success of a task. A task needs to have a clear purpose and goal. Some of the key features of tasks for young learners, according to Cameron (2010), are as follows:

- Have coherence and unity for learners (from topic, activity and/or outcome)

- Have meaning and purpose for learners

- Have clear language learning goals

- Have a beginning and end

- Involve the learners actively

Following Skehan's (1996) model to activity-based language learning the following sequence is adopted

Preparation ⟶ Core activity ⟶ Follow up
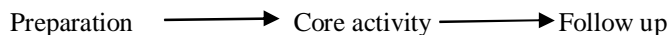
Based on this sequence and the model proposed by Cameron (2010), the following activities can be created:

Task: Narrating the story of a mouse and a snake

Turning an activity into a task

	Preparation	Core activity	Follow up
Language learning goals	Teach necessary lexis required to carry out the task; Practice the past tense forms of verbs; Practice pronunciation, sentence stress, and intonation	Oral production of the story in a group	One member from each group to present the story to the class

Activities	Teacher-led: a) Use a single picture to practice lexis, tense forms, and pronunciation	The whole class looks at the picture and the teacher models sentences with appropriate pronunciation, sentence stress, and intonation	a) The teacher writes key words on the board next to the visual b) The teacher models sentence from the grid c) Students practice the sentences d) Students work in groups to check for accuracy
Demands on learners	i) To learn lexis and pronounce the words correctly ii) To understand the structure of a narrative, use of past tense to express actions/events in a sequence	i) To learn necessary lexis, past tense forms ii) To understand the sequence of the story iii) To narrate the story in sequence with proper stress and intonation	i) Narrating the story to the class ii) Remembering words and forms
Support for learning	i) Pictures of animals ii) Teacher modeling of lexis, language forms, pronunciation iii) Group work—peer support	i) Familiar pictures ii) Sequence indicated by numbering the pictures iii) Practice of lexis and language forms iv) Teacher modeling v) Group work	i) Key words on the board ii) Teacher feedback after narration

Conclusion

A task environment can be arrived at by analyzing the demands and support of activities presented in a textbook. By breaking down an activity into manageable units a conducive learning environment for language learning can be created. However, it would be interesting to see how this plan was used in action.

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