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## LANGUAGE IN THE SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF LEV VYGOTSKY

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**Abstract:** In recent years, there has been a growing interest in Lev Vygotsky's theoretical postulates and his contribution to education and, especially, to the development of linguistic ability depending on factors such as the social context, culture, progress cognitive and biological limitations, which allowed establishing a new ontological support from philosophy and social sciences. Due to the growing interest in his work in the contemporary scientific and social context, this article makes a theoretical review about the most significant aspects of his work; specifically in relation to the field of evolutionary psychology in terms of the relationship between culture, thought and language, and how social factors have a determining role in the development of people. This evolutionary perspective represents the essence of his work in which it is revealed that learning processes stimulate development processes and that it is the members of the social group who act as mediators of the socio-cultural context and the individuals. The results of a survey on perceptions regarding how language development is influenced by the context, cognitive functions and biological characteristics of people are also presented.

**Keywords:** Vygotsky, language, psychological development, sociocultural context, cognitive processes.

## INTRODUCTION

In the current context in which we live and especially in the educational field, aspects of a social, cultural, political and economic nature demand the development of theories, doctrines, postulates and knowledge that offer solutions to the great global issues related to the intellect, didactics and pedagogy; even more so if the sociocultural perspective of Vygotsky (1934) is considered, in which he highlights the relationships of the individual with society, noting that the sociocultural

context influences the development of personality, knowledge and culture. In this regard, in his theory he emphasizes that the thought patterns of individuals are not due to innate factors nor are they built individually (as Piaget proposed) but rather through interactions between people, so that these models of thought are products of cultural institutions and social activities. This way, according to Vygotsky, the development of human beings is influenced by the socio-cultural context, for which they constitute a mold of culture and a product of society.

Vygotsky is one of the most outstanding theoreticians in socio-cultural and socio-constructivist perspectives, and his work has been presented as epistemological support for some approaches to learning and development in which terms such as appropriation, scaffolding and zone of proximal development have passed become part of the standard language used in contexts related to education. However, some aspects of these theories could be problematic in relation to children's learning and teacher training (Norbahir & Radzuwan, 2018), which would lay the groundwork to argue that teachers must base their pedagogical practices on various theories without being limited to one in particular, since the ways of thinking and learning of students not only vary according to their individual characteristics, but also depending on the contexts in which the teaching-learning processes take place. Consequently, the interest arises to carry out a review of the literature from which the fundamental aspects of Vygotsky's work can be found and to find possible divergent points of view regarding the relevance of his theoretical postulates in the contemporary context.

According to Hernández et al. (2021), Vygotsky's theory of learning and development marked in a special way different areas of evolutionary psychology (thought and

language, the unity of the cognitive and the affective, etc.) being its fundamental axiom that:

[...] socio-historical aspects determine the configuration of the human psyche. This evolutionary perspective directed the different variants of his genetic analysis (comparative-genetic and the experimental-evolutionary method), pointing out that the understanding of human behavior can only be carried out if its phases and the multiple movements that compose it are studied, or whatever, its history” (Hernández et al., 2021, pp. 215-216).

In response to the growing interest in knowing and putting into practice the central postulates of Vygotsky’s work, and based on a bibliographic review, the most outstanding aspects of his sociocultural theory are described below, proposing a set of reflections on the context-learning triad. -development and its implications in the educational field.

## DEVELOPMENT

In his theory, Vygotsky seeks explanations for what he calls “higher forms of behavior” (Vygotsky 1978, cited by Newman & Latifi, 2020, p. 4), with three principles forming the basis of this approach: (1) analyze the process, not the objects, which highlights that the process by which a psychological function is developed is more important than the external characteristics of the final product; (2) explanation versus description, emphasizing that it is more interesting to explain the underlying development of psychological functions than to describe their external manifestations; and (3) so-called automated or mechanized psychological processes must be studied in terms of their development and not in terms of their final automated appearance.

For Piaget (1981), the main problem presented by Vygotsky is that of the adaptive and functional nature of the activities of every

human being. On this postulate, he presents his criticisms by pointing out that this adaptation between the child and the environment is not always successful, since, in the first place, its development is usually a long and difficult process (p. 38) and, furthermore, because the adaptive efforts can cause “systematic errors [...] at all levels of the behavior hierarchy” (Piaget, 1981, p. 38). In this regard, Piaget coined the term “cognitive egocentrism” to express that the idea of knowledge progress is not reduced to a mere addition of details or new levels, as Vygotsky points out, but rather requires a continuous reformulation of the points of view. previous view, through a process of permanent correction of systematic errors, both the initial ones and those that arise throughout said process.

What Piaget and Vygotsky do converge on is two fundamental issues: the first is based on the idea that the main function of language must be global communication; and the second lies in the idea that later speech is differentiated into ‘egocentric’ and ‘communicative’: however, both theorists maintain differences in that these two linguistic forms are equally socialized and only differ in terms of their function. In this regard, the expression “egocentric language” can be understood from a double perspective: (a) as a language incapable of rational reciprocity, and (b) as a language of little significance to others (Piaget, 1981); both perspectives would have the same value from the point of view of intellectual cooperation. Likewise, both Piaget and Vygotsky highlight activity as the origin of cognitive development; while “Piaget does it focused on the relationship with the material world, Vygotsky does so by privileging interpersonal interaction through reason, affectivity and instincts” (Aparicio & Ostos, 2018; pp. 116–117).

In Vygotsky’s theory, social factors have a central role in the development of people;

however, when behaviorist and constructivist conceptions converge in it, some implications arise in the educational field that are problematized by the fact that Vygotsky does not manage to point out, in a clear way, what are the forms of social assistance to be taken into account during the children development. In this regard, some educators draw behaviorist practices from Vygotsky's work, while others do so via constructivism; the differences between them lie in how the teacher intervenes, under what circumstances and how often.

Regarding the relationship between language and thought, Vygotsky tries to show how formal education can generate cognitive development in the child; For this, he starts from the idea that there is a long way between the moment when the child hears a word for the first time (which designates a concept) and the moment in which he manages to understand the true concept that the word represents (Gómez, 2017).

At first, the child associates the word with syncretic groupings. His generalizations are of a very primitive type, since they are based more on the subjective impressions of the child than on the characteristics of the objects. At a later stage, the child thinks in complexes. His generalizations rest mainly on the objective characteristics of things, but he is not yet capable of abstracting a single attribute that allows him to make his groupings based on a common criterion. Finally, and only after a long cognitive journey, which encompasses pseudo-concepts and potential concepts, does the child successfully combine their processes of abstraction and generalization, forming what Vygotsky calls true concepts: the child guides his generalizations based on the same criteria which has been previously abstracted from various objects. (Gomez, 2017, pp. 57-58)

This way, Vygotsky comes to suggest that systematic learning plays a fundamental role

in conscious understanding, implying that the child's access to formal education favorably influences his mental development. She also argues that language is a social product, produced by communities, so that its meanings are also constructed and socially shared. In this dialogue, five fundamental aspects emerge to understand Vygotsky's thought: (i) everyday conversations are key elements for the construction and transmission of meanings; (ii) thought is an internalized linguistic process or an internal dialogue that is built from the meanings of language, (iii) memory is constituted and communicates mainly with language, this being what makes it possible, (iv) memory is collective, not individual, and (v) both language and thought and memory converge in a mental entity (Mendoza, 2017, pp. 15-16).

This is how Vygotsky implies that these three elements (language, thought and memory) are psychosocial processes that are found in the field of culture and that, therefore, transcend individual interiorities. This is consistent with what Vygotsky himself stated (cited in Parra et al., 2020), when he states that "the brain itself did not produce logical thought, but the brain acquired the form of logical thought in the process of historical development of man" (p. 132).

At this point, Pardos (cited by López et al. (2017), makes a particular interpretation of Vygotsky's work, specifically in terms of the relationship between thought and word, and the differentiation between external language and the In this regard, he points out: "external language is the conversion of thought into words, its materialization and objectification; internal language is internal language, the process that is reversed: speech is transformed into internal thoughts" (p. 132 ). Later he states: "It could seem like a materialist explanation of language; it would inevitably mean instantiation as sound or text" (López

et al., 2017, p. 135). In any case, Vygotsky does not fail to highlight the importance of language during the socialization process by pointing out that it is a social and interactive tool that allows communication, thought and knowledge (Calderón, 2017).

According to Vygotsky's vision of the socio-cultural dimension of thought and language, all forms of human mental activity of a higher order are derived from social and cultural contexts, being shared by their members, since these mental processes lead to knowledge and understanding. essential skills for success within a given culture. In this sense, "sociocultural theory significantly emphasizes the wide variety of cognitive capacities among human beings" (Mota & Villalobos, 2007) and posits that individuals cooperate with each other to build a meaning that is internalized. That is why the influence of language on the development of the mind has been widely recognized (Bruner & Haste, 1987), thus suggesting that the child's development must be mediated through interaction with others.

Sociocultural theory also recognizes that humans are inherently social and communicative beings; in fact, Mota and Villalobos (2007) highlight that the tendency of children to develop important conversational skills from two or three years of age has been observed, following the rules of human verbal interaction materialized in the right of communication. word, eye contact, appropriate responses and maintenance of the common thread on a given topic. However, although these advanced communication skills could be the product of early interactive experiences, and having recognized that both the social and cognitive dimensions converge in their essential aspects, the emphasis on the universal cognitive pillars has inhibited efforts to more fully address depth the social basis of knowledge. In this sense, there is currently no doubt that social influences are

always present in cognitive skills, and that the so-called "social adjustment" intervenes significantly in the transformation of children's thinking, accepting the idea that knowledge is determined by the social context in which it occurs.

From here come the three basic premises of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory: (1) all forms of human mental activity of a higher order are derived from social and cultural contexts, (2) said mental activity is shared by the members of a given context, and (3) mental processes, being adjustable, lead to knowledge and skills essential for success within a particular culture. This way, Vygotsky (1981) significantly emphasizes the wide variety of cognitive capacities among human beings, arguing that in order to understand the development of the individual it is necessary to first understand the social relationships of which he is a part. For Vygotsky, the role that language plays in learning and development becomes explicit during these same processes because, according to him, language is the mechanism through which the negotiation of meaning occurs, even during cognitive activities. solitary, such as: reading a book, drawing, solving a crossword puzzle, writing or reflecting on past events.

The previous approaches lead to understand that for Vygotsky, the construction of knowledge is not an individual process but, on the contrary, it represents a process of a social nature in which higher order mental functions are the product of an activity mediated by society and where language is the most influential psychological tool (Mota & Villalobos, 2007). These higher-order mental functions are manifested first on the social level and later on the individual level, thus revealing the powerful contribution of culture to shaping cognitive development. Consequently, the impossibility of structuring universal patterns of development lies precisely

in the fact that cultures are inseparable from different kinds of tools, abilities and social conventions.

In any case, according to Vygotsky, language and knowledge develop separately. Children first acquire the language of their socio-cultural environment; then, cognitive and language developments come together to guide verbal behavior based on the meanings of their particular culture. Thus, progressively, language becomes a tool that supports thoughts and controls behavior. From this sociocultural perspective, language extends from the social world to be internalized later in the individual cognitive world, being recognized as the means through which children transfer the regulatory role of others to themselves. Through language, social interaction finds its footing in the scaffolding that promotes communication. This scaffolding is reduced to the extent that the child exercises his self-regulatory function to become more independent, acquiring the possibility of affirming or denying and becoming aware of the possibility of acting according to his own her will. Language is, consequently, the primary form of interaction with other individuals and, therefore, it is considered as the psychological tool with which each person appropriates knowledge. In this sense, as Bravo (2018) refers, “the knowledge derived from the neurosciences of education and based on neuroimaging, show a close relationship between brain cognitive processes and the psychopedagogy of school learning” (p.1).

The foregoing suggests that individuals cooperate with each other to build the meaning that they manage to internalize. Bruner and Haste (1987) support this social interactive perspective when they point out that developmental psychology has begun to “place greater weight on interaction with others and the use of language in the development of

concepts such as the developing structure of the mind” (p. 8). Therefore, they suggest that the child’s development must be mediated through interaction with others. This is also consistent with Wells’s (1986) statement that language is a social activity that is learned through interaction with others. In this sense, Vygotsky (1978) argues that the new abilities in the child are first developed during collaboration with more capable adults or peers, and then are internalized to become part of the child’s psychological world. According to him, the region in which this skill transfer occurs, from the shared to the individual world, is called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), implying “the gap between what they do and what they still haven’t achieved by themselves.” themselves, but that they can achieve with the right guidance” (Marulanda. 2021, p. 9).

In this sense, Velarde (2020) mentions that one of the first aspects highlighted by Vygotsky was the specific function that inner language fulfills, without limiting itself to being an inhibited external language. The origin of inner language must be sought in egocentric language, whose characteristic is to pace the child’s activity, all the more the higher the level of complexity of the action. From here he deduces that egocentric speech is only externalized inner speech and that whenever the human being must plan his action in order to solve problems or when he acts consciously and voluntarily, he must submit his behavior to the inner language. In this order of ideas:

[...] the psychic process of internalization involves that a social practice (the daily social language of the child at the preschool or school level) is gradually transmuted into a language of intellectual uses (the daily socio-language of the child is transformed into thoughts), and has as its intermediate stage egocentric speech. To the extent of this improvement, the subject develops its autonomy or independence with the real,

concrete objects that they begin to mentally present in their abstract aspect. In this last stage of internalization, the child has the possibility of forming generalities of a signal or concept and, when he achieves it, the language has become aware because now its use has been transformed (Sesento, 2017, p.4).

On the other hand, Marulanda et al. (2021) state that for Vygotsky the child has knowledge that allows him to perform certain tasks (zone of development), so the mission of teachers, parents and caregivers is to work on the 'Zone of Proximal Development', focusing on the functions that have not yet matured or are in the process of maturation. To do this, adults or more advanced peers must help direct and organize the child's learning so that he can internalize it.

Based on the preceding points of view and affirmations, and transcending from theory to an empirical plane, it was considered opportune to carry out a survey in an educational community in order to know the perceptions about the factors that influence the development of language and abilities. cognitive. Using a Likert scale with four response options, the following results were obtained: (Table 1)

In view of the results obtained, the majority recognizes the determining influence of the socio-cultural context, the cognitive processes and the natural biological limitations for the development of language in human beings, especially in infants (Figure 1).

It is striking that the power attributed to each of these three factors is equivalent in practical terms, which could be an indication of the internalization of Vygotsky's theoretical postulates in most of the informant subjects.

On the other hand, the influence of the socio-cultural environment on cognitive development has been recognized (75%), as well as the importance of language as a means of communication (80%) and the use

of language as a means of transmitting culture between generations (75%);

## CONCLUSIONS

One of Vygotsky's most significant contributions to the field of psychology and education is represented by the relationship he establishes between the ability to think and the development of language. According to him, in the development of speech there is a pre-intellectual stage and a prelinguistic stage. Although these stages follow parallel courses for a certain time, at a certain moment of intellectual and cognitive development these lines converge and it is then that thought becomes verbal and language acquires a rational category. In this effort of rational and intentional transmission of experience and thoughts to others, a mediating system that is represented by human language intervenes. Vygotsky points out that the unit of verbal thought is none other than the internal meaning attributed to words, although he also clarifies the use of other auxiliary instruments that serve as mediators to understand social processes. In this regard, the creation and use of tools and signs to solve certain problems and act consciously and voluntarily, is related to the different ways in which individuals guide human activity, including learning and development.

For Vygotsky, all learning has a previous history, so learning and development are interrelated from the first days of the child's life. To explain this interaction he refers to two developmental levels: (1) the real developmental level, which includes the level of development of mental functions and assumes those activities that children can perform on their own and that are indicative of their mental capacities ; and (2) the level of potential development, which is determined by the individual's ability to solve a problem with the help of others.

Items considered in the survey	Very littlr	Little	A little bit	A lot
Influence of the socio-cultural environment in the development of language	10%	12%	18%	60%
Influence of cognitive processes on language development	15%	15%	25%	45%
Influence of biological limitations on language development	2%	20%	28%	50%
Influence of the socio-cultural environment on cognitive development	10%	15%	27%	48%
Importance of language as a means of communication	10%	10%	20%	60%
Intergenerational transmission of culture through language	10%	15%	5%	70%

Table 1: Perceptions about the relationship between language, cognitive development and socio-cultural environment

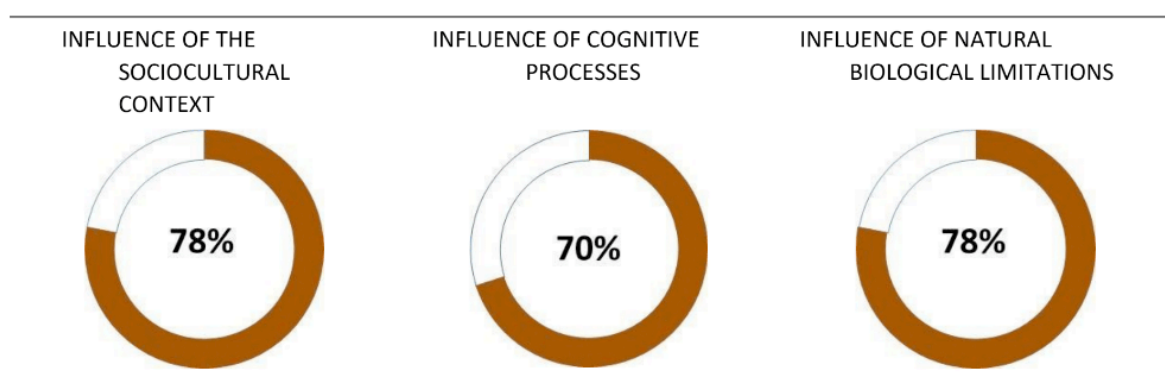


Figure 1: Recognized influence of the socio-cultural environment, cognitive processes and natural biological constraints on language development

Source: survey conducted by the authors (grouped results of the categories 'some' and 'a lot')



The difference between the two levels is what Vygotsky called the Zone of Proximal Development, which is none other than the distance between the actual level of development (determined by the ability to independently solve a problem) and the level of potential development (determined through the ability to solve a problem under the guidance of an adult or thanks to the collaboration of another more capable partner. Thus, while the actual level of development defines the functions that have already matured, the Zone of Proximal Development defines those functions that are in the process of maturation, thus revealing that learning stimulates and activates a whole of mental processes that occur through interaction with other people, which, regardless of the sociocultural contexts in which it occurs, will always be mediated by language. Such processes reproduce different forms of social interaction and are internalized during the social learning process, becoming modes of self-regulation of behavior.

Having said this and by way of conclusion, at least three implications of Vygotsky's theory in the educational field emerge: first, in general, in educational processes there is a tendency to evaluate the capacities or functions that the child completely masters and that it can be exercised independently, but based on the theoretical postulates already mentioned, the idea emerges that what is really beneficial is to identify those processes that are in an embryonic state in order to be able to develop them in the most effective way possible. In this sense, teachers must pay more attention and intervene in the Zone of Proximal Development, with a view to provoking advances in their psychological development in students. In other words, such psychological development of the child must be viewed prospectively. Secondly, the trajectory of development must be seen from the outside

in, in the sense that it is the learning processes that energize and set in motion the internal development processes of the individual. This way it is glimpsed that the school has a fundamental role in the psychological development of the child. Finally, as a third implication, the intervention of other members of the social group, understood as mediators between culture and individuals, promotes inter-psychological processes that will later be internalized. In this regard, given the contribution of teachers in the formation of a certain sociocultural context, their deliberate intervention in children's learning is essential for their corresponding and individual integral development processes.

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