

Reading for Riches: a Vygotskyan Analysis of Learners Writing

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Introduction

This article addresses the question: what do Xhosa-speaking students, products of DET education, do with English?

The question arose in the context of the first year English course at Good Hope College of Education, Khayelitsha, Cape Town. Colleagues and I had observed that students had rebelled against what I expected them to do in the course. One of the questions which arose from that experience was: *What can the students do with English?* I rejected the inherent deficit thinking in that question and it was transformed into: *What do the students do with English?*

To answer that question I decided to collect a sample of data written by English Second Language (L2-English) speakers and analyse it in terms that would avoid deficit assumptions about students' use of English.

Vygotskyan Guidelines for Analysis

This research was conceptualised within a Vygotskyan approach which avoids deficit thinking and sharpens the focus on what learners actually do with language. It asks what learners bring to the writing task and takes into consideration the strategies they adopt to make meaning. This approach is elaborated in the work of Lantolf & Frawley (1985) and Joseph Foley (1991).

Regulation

Lantolf and Frawley and Foley make the point that language output should be read from the point of view of **regulation** of the linguistic forms that are used. The forms should be viewed as markers of how speakers relate to the task rather than as markers of their general linguistic competence.

In the Vygotskyan perspective, there are three types of regulation:

- object-regulation**, which takes place when a person is controlled by the environment;
- other-regulation**, where a person is controlled by another person;
- self-regulation**, when speech is used to control oneself and others.

In terms of regulation, mature learners are those who have achieved self-regulation which represents 'mature linguistic ability' (Foley, 1991: 63). This is reached by working through object-regulation and other-regulation to self-regulation, when the learners are in control of their lives. For the purpose of my study the students would be deemed to be "mature learners" and "in control of their lives" when they engage in successful "dialogue" with the DET marking examiner. The success would be judged by whether the intended meaning was successfully communicated.

Tension between Vygotskian and mainstream thinking

The Vygotskian approach judges the success of communication in ways which are different from that of mainstream research (mainly British and American). In mainstream research, successful communication is judged in terms of definitions of **proficiency**. Thus, there is a tension regarding definitions of linguistic competence and/or proficiency between mainstream research and the Vygotskian perspective I have developed. Mainstream research tends to adopt deficit assumptions when engaged in debates about evaluation.

Mainstream research also analytically separates the psychological or mental level and the product/performance level of language use. It is my view that these dimensions are intimately and inextricably intermeshed and, as such, they are interdependent and mutually supporting. Instead of thinking of them in terms of levels, it is more useful to think in terms of a complex network where everything links to everything else via a system of nodes and networks (Spolsky, 1989). It is this understanding of language as a dynamic, complex construct that enables the researcher to analyse texts within an affirmative framework. On the other hand, it is the analytic separation of the conceptual and performance levels that underlies a deficit approach to text analysis.

A Framework for Data Analysis

The data selected for this project are a sample of essays written by DET matriculants. One third of the essays of successful matriculation candidates from DET schools in the Cape Town area were photocopied — 116 in all.

Most data used in this sort of research (including Vygotskian research) has been oral data, but Bakhtin and others have argued for the equivalence of written data. Bakhtin argues that all texts, whether oral or written, are valid discourse and a 'model for the reconstruction of individual consciousness', as well as a 'fully developed individual language' (Kozulin, 1990).

The analysis of the essays is informed by Vygotsky's understanding of the relationship between **writing**, **consciousness** and **reflection**. Vygotsky saw consciousness as activity engaged in reconstructing representations of the environment. The mental activity of representation involves intellect, affect and change. These components all combine in the process of dynamic organisation (Wertsch, 1985: 190) which is integral to Vygotsky's theory of consciousness. One of the ways in which we represent our environment is through writing; writing reflects, in activity, what is going on in the mind (Wertsch, 1985: 188). According to this view, reflection is an active effort to manifest the mind's organisational power in the written word. The ability to formulate thoughts and concepts in writing is the result of coming to self-regulation via other- and object-regulation (Foley, 1991: 63).

The essays analysed in this research represent the individual consciousness of each writer. They represent the mental activity of the writer, the moving of thoughts in the brain through **inner speech** to their manifestation as utterances on paper as literary discourse.

Some of the components of this discourse — the vocabulary, the metaphors and the idiosyncratic expressions — give the readers indications as to the writers' cognitive states in the task and their level of **regulation**. The process of writing is conscious and purposeful, and produces symbols and hypotheses that demonstrate the writers'

ability to create new knowledge for themselves (*vide* Hornung, 1987: 25; Kozulin, 1990: 184 & Smagorinsky, 1991: 340).

Research Tools

To discover to what extent the writers of the data in this study have reached self-regulation, linguistic forms were identified as appropriate analytical tools.

Some of the linguistic forms used to make meaning are **words**, **metaphors** and **idiosyncratic expressions**. These forms seemed to be suitable tools to demonstrate the innate potential of the writers to create meaning and therefore constitute their worlds. Through these tools the writers' ability to represent the environment, reflect, and formulate thoughts and concepts could be revealed. The **word count** is used because words are basic to any utterance, **metaphors** because of their imagistic properties and **idiosyncratic expressions** because they are part of the spoken township idiom, the Xhosa-English Version (XEV). All three tools jointly inform the reader about what the writers bring to the task. They indicate what the writers' cognitive states are and what level of reflection is brought to the writing task.

The Word List

For Vygotsky, words are the basic unit of thought; without them no ideas can be communicated, conceptualised, developed or explored; they remain unarticulated. Our ideas are internalised and developed through **inner speech** where they are transformed through intellectual processes that produce words with meaning and sense. Language exists in the learners' minds and will become available as the concepts form and demand expression.

In a discussion of the word and its relation to concepts and concept formation, Vygotsky quoted Mandelstam:

The word I forgot
Which once I wished to say
And voiceless thought
Returns to shadow's chamber.

Vygotsky then went on to say that

[T]he relation between thought and word is a living process; thought is born through words. A word devoid of thought is a dead thing.

He then took this position a step further by quoting Gumilev:

...and like bees in the deserted hive
The dead words have a rotten smell (1986: 255).

In order to assess the vocabulary available to writers of the essays analysed in this research, a list of words was generated from the data. A core list was developed by eliminating misspelt and made-up words, structure words, pronouns, proper nouns, and words derived from others. When this list was compared with Michael West's Minimum Adequate Vocabulary (MAV) (West, 1960) and the University Word List (Xue and Nation, 1984), it appeared that the writers in the study had more than adequate vocabularies for ordinary social conversation and about half what they would need for first year university study.

It would seem, therefore, that the writers in this study have a bank of concepts that are related to the words they used to develop their arguments and tell their stories. The same words are used in their metaphors which contribute richly to their meanings and in their idiosyncratic expressions which are reflective of a version of language which operates at the level of communicative competence while not conforming to conventional use.

The Idiosyncratic Expressions

Idiosyncratic expressions are meaningful forms that are composed in non-standard ways. They are also representative of fossilised forms that are in frequent use. They could be argued to be representative of what could develop into a Xhosa English Version (XEV), or what Jessica Williams (1989) called an NIVE (non-nativised institutionalised variety of English) composed of communicative norms or norms of interaction and usage.

In these essays idiosyncratic expressions are part of what learners consider to be their best writing, produced to impress an examiner. At the same time, what they write clearly represents their own vernacular XEV, harnessed to tell their stories and present their arguments.

English First Language (L1-English) speakers and educated L2-English speakers reading these essays would usually have a mind-set that would assume linguistic and possibly intellectual incompetence in the face of the non-standard forms apparent in the output. A Vygotskian approach proposes an alternative receptive stance which recognises and appreciates the strategies used and the positive 'state in the task' of the L2-English Xhosa speakers. This mind-set would enable readers and listeners to appreciate the 'self-regulation' of the learners and the innovative ways in which they make meaning.

I am not arguing that this sort of writing should or could become part of academic language. What I am saying is that the writing is indicative of the life experience writers bring to the writing task. Meanings are constituted within that life experience. These meanings, together with the metaphors they generate, are indicative of a cognitive state that suggests greater intellectual competence than might at first be suggested by the essays.

Examples of Idiosyncratic Forms

1. Some of the common forms involve using one part of speech as if it were another. For example:
 - most** is used as an intensifier: *the British were the most invader of the world countries.*
 - too** is often used as an adverb (in the sense of "very"): *If you use English too much...and forget your own language.*
 - made + to-Infinitive** is another common construction to express intensity: *...for making me to dislike my area.*
2. A number of lexical idiosyncrasies are in common use. For example:
 - if we're bored about the fighting*: meaning we are sick of fighting;
 - Worried* is used to mean sad, or upset;
 - Regret* has become a verb that means reject;
 - To voice out* means to express an opinion.

3. There are some examples of L1-Xhosa influence, such as the creation of single words from two words but without the "new" word developing a new meaning. For example:
 - inlove* means that the couple referred to are sleeping together;
 - other examples include: *incharge, inbetween, invain, cleanup, forinstance, watchout* and *oneday*.
4. The English preposition system causes difficulties that do not always interfere with meaning. For example:
 - There are nuns who sponsor pupils about their clothes;*
 - ...it is difficult to us blacks.*
5. The Xhosa influence produces new English pronunciation and spelling. In terms of intonation, there is confusion between:
 - bit/beat, this/these, live/leave, neating/knitting, ship/sheep* etc.
6. Intonation can influence spelling, for example:
 - upscorned = abscond.*
7. Generalising is a strategy that commonly appears in interlanguage:
 - blacknaming, cultureless, debateful, evilness, jungleness, leadered (led), speakable language, once upon in time, forms have to be filled, fail rate, good paying jobs, in a very bad way (badly), in a wrong way, were schooling, workless, you must be watchout (careful).*
8. Difficulties in defining time using *when* also caused the creation of idiosyncratic expressions. The word *when* often seems to elude writers who then make use of other strategies:
 - ...by the time they were sending;*
 - ...the time I went to Form 2.*
9. Expressions of time also generate structures like:
 - last of last year*: meaning the year before last;
 - the other Friday*: used as last Friday.

This is a small sample of the communicative norms used by L2-English speakers to achieve communication and self-regulation in the writing task. Much wider research needs to be done to establish the viability of the XEV postulated here and to provide a richer analysis of its forms. But what is evidenced is that the producers of the texts in the data sample have created meaning, often original but also often within norms that are current in their own speech community.

The Metaphors

Another of the forms used to indicate the writers' state in the task and their state of 'regulation' is the metaphor. The function of metaphors can be understood in terms of a view of language as 'a universe of meaning':

The nature of human thinking is essentially metaphoric and the metaphorising process is the primary means for creating and, especially, transferring meaning from one universe of knowledge to another (Di Pietro, 1976; Kaput, 1979 & Nietzsche, 1971 cited in Kessler and Quinn 1987: 179).

In terms of this understanding, it can be argued that one of the ways L2-English users transfer meaning from their L1 to the L2 is by means of metaphors. The quality

of the metaphor and the particular vocabulary used will be adducible as evidence of the process at play in terms of the writers' striving for self-regulation. It will be indicative of the socio-cultural life-world of the writer. This in turn assists the analysis of what the writer **does** with language and also what psychological and cognitive strategies are in use to create meaning.

According to Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors structure more than language: they structure thoughts, attitudes and actions and come from our experience. The making of metaphors is a way of 'conceiving of something in terms of another...and [their] primary function is understanding' (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980: 37). Furthermore, the generation of successful metaphors indicates the ability to think analogically, which is also arguably a sophisticated intellectual process. It involves the construction of mental models and comparisons that interact and cause reformulation of the communication by the receiver.

The ways in which writers create metaphors in their efforts to communicate are indicative of how they express the concepts and ideas that have formed in their inner speech. For example, McNeill asserts that

[M]etaphors are essential tools for thinking and speaking about abstract concepts. Without them speech and thinking beyond the concrete level would be impossible (1987: 168).

The linguistic symbols generated in inner speech are 'cognitive tools' for creating meaning and for expressing abstract concepts in 'semantic complexes' (Sokolov quoted in McNeill 1987: 101). Metaphors are the outer expression of these linguistic symbols, and McNeill argues that 'the function of metaphor is to produce images in thinking' (1987: 168). If the metaphors generated in this data do this successfully, then the processes that produce the metaphors are indicative of complex intellectual activity synthesised in inner speech and expressed as metaphors that produce images in thinking. They are also indicative of self-regulation in that the abstract concepts are present and being communicated albeit in non-conventional ways. Metaphorisation may sometimes occur because the writer does not have a more "usual" word in his/her lexicon; nevertheless if meaning is created (and created richly) then it stands as a legitimate metaphorisation which enriches the text and discourse.

The objective of the learners who wrote the essays used in this study was to make themselves understood by the examiners who marked their essays. In their endeavour to communicate with the examiner, learners sometimes resorted to the use of metaphor. These writers used metaphors richly and originally to explain their attitudes and tell their stories. The analysis of the metaphors will reveal much of what the writers bring to the task of making meaning in the way of cultural experience and psychological and intellectual processes.

A Selection of Metaphors Used in the Data

Writers generated a range of metaphors in response to each of the essay topics. In an essay about the use of English as a medium of learning students wrote about how *English conquers the African languages*, how it *spoils the minds of African people* and *changes* them. Learning English means that the speaker's *own mother tongue reaches a cul de sac*; and when a person learns English very well, *he strips himself of his own culture* or she *thinks she is on top of the mountain when she can speak*

English. English was also seen as a weapon, something that *develops people who have been under dark for a long time*. It could be used as a unifying force between countries to *bind them all to speak and agree together*.

Another topic related to the area where the writer lives. One writer described his area as *a cruel squartered area* where the houses were *very much easy to be torched* and the people *who live in zink houses are as hard as zink materials*. The area was ruled *with a gun*, by Mali Hoza, a *man who likes swimming in the blood of the young comrades* who were trying to *put their people in the light of what is happening*.

One of the essay topics required the writers to express their feelings after being let down. It generated predictable accounts of broken hearts:

- it is far better to trust a stone than a man;*
- The girls of Port Elizabeth tackle you down and leave you helpless.*

A similar topic generated experiences of wrongful arrest. One young man was treated *like terrorists* and got a *full boot kick* on his mouth.

In an account of a motor accident the *bus had been staded* (stabbed) *into a big truck* and we (the injured) were *laid on the side of the road like sardins* (sardines).

One of the writers wrote about looking for a job in Johannesburg: he went to engage in *researching of job*. He described Johannesburg as a *busy like bee town* and himself as *a bird without a nest*.

A vivid image to emerge from the least popular topic, on the lot of women in South Africa, was that a woman will not get a job unless she agrees to be the *boss's night stand!* Other metaphors generated by this topic are also revealing of self-regulation: women were not born *to be the tools of men*, although they are treated *as the property of men*. They are also responsible for *the building up of their children*. One candidate used two lush similes, comparing women to *rivers which provide us with sources of life* and *trees which bear fruit that feeds the nation*. This person felt that women are the only people who can bring about peace in our country which had turned into "*little Kuwait*". This last example demonstrates some knowledge of international politics.

These writers, all matric students in 1991, created meaning and put points and arguments across vividly and purposefully by generating metaphors, many of which were original and derived from their personal life experiences. Some were not original but, even then, they revealed knowledge of the discourse appropriate to the particular subject domain, which is also evidence of self-regulation.

Conclusion

A possible response to the question "what do these L2 writers do with English?" would be: they make meaning, richly and appropriately.

Readers of L2 writing should focus on the richness of the metaphoric content and the cognitive strategies used by the writers to create meaning. They would then be able to penetrate the impression created by the non-standard structures and expressions and appreciate the richness of the content and concepts that are communicated through the metaphors and other linguistic strategies.

The fact that meaning is made in these ways is indicative of intellectual potential that might not be appreciated unless the reader has some experience of the XEV and

is aware of the implications of metaphorisation — that images are being created that convey meaning and put across arguments. The writers are sharing ideas which, unlike Gumilev's bees, live and transform in concert with the understanding of their readers and interlocutors.

The DET matriculants in the study showed a level of conceptual development in the way they generated metaphors. They showed sufficient knowledge of a close enough approximation of mainstream English to communicate and make meaning in a variety of writing tasks to be considered "self-regulated" and mature learners, at least in this task.

In terms of the Vygotskian notion of the writers' 'state in the task', the writers have achieved a level of consciousness that has enabled them to tell factual and fictional stories, present arguments based on direct experience and hypothesis and communicate accurately enough to make meaning for an ordinary reader, and for an examiner who has awarded each writer a pass mark.

The educational implications for this are significant, especially for L2 students' access to tertiary study and employment. If an instrument could be developed using the tools suggested above, then employers and tertiary institution administrators would be in a better position to assess the potential of applicants. This would reduce wastage caused by less effective selection processes that are currently used. Many candidates who are unsuitable for tertiary study and employment would be saved serious disappointment, while many applicants who have hitherto been denied access might be found to have appropriate potential and be included. This could enhance the success rates of tertiary institutions as well as employers' productivity.

This approach also has implications for teachers of English who have tended to despair at the errors that persist in their L2 students' writing. Teachers can now view those "errors" differently, and focus on the richness of the texts, knowing that the "errors" do not necessarily represent intellectual ineptitude. L2 users of English can now regard their own writing with more satisfaction, knowing that their readers will value their product, even though the surface structures may be non-standard.

The argument is not to assert that this sort of writing is acceptable academic writing; it is not. However, the writers who produce this kind of writing are undoubtedly capable of greater intellectual achievement than assumed by those readers unable to read their writing for the riches it contains.

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