

Scaffolding Under Constraints: A ZPD-Based Teaching Approach for Exam-Oriented CSL Classrooms

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Abstract: International Chinese language education has introduced the concept of constructivism, but the actual classroom teaching is still constrained by the examination-oriented summative evaluation. This article believes that Vygotsky's zone of proximal development theory can provide an effective framework for solving this problem. Based on the concept of scaffolding, this article proposes three interrelated directions based on ZPD teaching, namely diagnosis learners' zone of proximal development, scaffolding with planned fading, and dynamic assessment. The framework of the integration of the three can be used as a reference for international Chinese teaching. This article is a conceptual research and does not provide empirical verification. It aims to provide a theoretical basis for future research and practice.

Keywords: Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD); scaffolding; exam-oriented assessment; international Chinese language education

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1. Introduction

1.1 The Pedagogical Transition in International Chinese Language Education

In recent decades, constructivism has become one of the most influential theoretical paradigms in the field of education. The theory emphasizes that learners actively build knowledge in the process of interacting with the environment, rather than passively receiving information. In the field of language education, constructivism enables people to rethink classroom dynamics and realize a new shift from the traditional teacher-centred teaching mode to the learner-centred mode. The learner-centred model emphasizes the active participation, social collaboration and the construction of contextual meaning ^{[1][2]}. Constructivism thoughts emphasize social construction and situational learning. Learning is realized in interpersonal interaction, not isolated individual behaviour ^[3]. As a social phenomenon, language has a deep intrinsic connection with human interaction, which is consistent with the idea of constructivism. International Chinese language education is a sub-field of second language teaching, which also shows the innovation of teaching methods by constructivist ideas. In recent years, constructivist ideas have increasingly penetrated teaching Chinese as a second language, encouraging educators to reexamine traditional practices and try to adopt a more interactive and student-led instructional design, emphasizing that teaching should be based on students' needs, cognitive characteristics and cultural backgrounds^[4].

However, there is a key problem in the existing teaching and research of international Chinese language education. Although there is a trend of changing from the traditional model to the new model, it faces many challenges in the actual transformation, such as the mismatch between textbooks and students' needs, insufficient teacher training and the pressure of examination orientation limiting the exploration of new model ^[5], teachers also face difficulties in technical integration ^[6]. In addition, the innovation of teaching practice combined with the specific characteristics of Chinese is insufficient ^[7]. These practical difficulties reflect the gap and mismatch between the existing teaching framework and teaching concept, which hinders the development of international Chinese language education.

1.2 Research Question and Scope

At present, the research and application of constructivist theory in international Chinese language education is mostly at the level of standard principles, and insufficient attention is paid to how to specifically implement the learner-centred teaching method within the framework of examination orientation. Broad constructivism is often too

abstract in exam-driven teaching design and classroom, which is difficult for teachers to put into practice. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory provides a focused analysis tool. Examination-oriented teaching focuses on learners completing tasks independently, and ignores the actual goals that learners can achieve with appropriate support. The teaching framework based on ZPD can supplement this theoretical perspective^[1]. Therefore, this article takes ZPD theory as a theoretical framework, discusses how to design scaffolded instruction in exam-oriented courses, and puts forward the following research question: How can Vygotsky's ZPD framework provide guidance for the design of scaffolded instruction in international Chinese language education under the examination system?

2.Theoretical Anchors

2.1 The ZPD framework and its pedagogical logic

Vygotsky believes that the zone of proximal development is the distance between the actual level of learners and the potential development level they can achieve under the guidance of experienced people. Learning precedes development and guides development ^[1]. That is to say, teaching is consciously involved at the initial stage of learning to help learners activate the cognitive function that is still developing. ZPD theory believes that learning is realized through interaction with others, and it is not immutable, but changes dynamically with the development of learners' abilities. With the improvement of learners' ability, they can finally independently complete tasks that require the assistance of experienced people in the initial stage. ZPD itself will also continue to move up with the progress of the learner level. Therefore, teaching should not only focus on the tasks that learners can complete independently at present, but should also continue to track the potential development space of learners. Teaching should provide learners with appropriate support to avoid learners' over-reliance. ZPD theory emphasizes the future-oriented teaching perspective^[8]. This perspective reflects the role of learning in promoting development. The task of teaching and teachers is to help learners reach their potential development level. This teaching principle establishes that the goal of teaching is to guide learners to develop cognition and help them realize their potential.

Scaffolding process is closely related to ZPD theory and provides a specific operating framework for ZPD. Scaffolding means that teachers provide temporary support to learners so that they can complete tasks beyond their current level. This teaching concept transforms ZPD from the theoretical level to the classroom teaching level and provides an operational path. The core of scaffolding is to dynamically adjust the support intensity, provide high support in the initial stage of learning, gradually reduce the support with the improvement of learners' ability, naturally fades, and finally help learners master independently ^[9]. The goal of scaffolding is to enable learners to finally complete similar tasks independently without support as the learning process develops. The final removal of the scaffold is the proof of the development of learners' independent ability. Therefore, removing the scaffold and dynamic adjustment are important factors in scaffolding.

2.2 The structural conflict with exam-oriented assessment

There is a structural conflict between the teaching model based on the ZPD theory and the exam-oriented assessment. The exam-oriented assessment method is mostly a summative evaluation, which measures the current actual development level of learners, and does not pay attention to the potential development space of learners. The ZPD framework focuses on the highest level that learners can achieve with appropriate help. This shows that the two have different focuses. This difference is not a simple difference in teaching methods, but reflects the difference in teaching views. The exam-oriented assessment focuses on testing learning outcomes and students' independent completion of tasks, while the ZPD framework aims to guide cognitive development.

This contradiction has also brought difficulties to teaching. How to pay attention to the zone of proximal development of learners under the requirements of examination orientation, so that the test results and cognitive development can be balanced, is a question worth thinking about in depth. This article recognizes the screening and evaluation functions of summative assessment. At the same time, it advocates exploring the teaching model based on

ZPD to support the cognitive development of learners within the scope of summative assessment. This approach allows educators to provide appropriate learning support under the premise of meeting the examination requirements and to maximize the development of learners' potential.

3.Three Directions for ZPD-Aligned CSL Instruction

Based on the above theoretical analysis, this section focuses on the field of international Chinese education and puts forward three directions of combining the ZPD concept in examination-oriented teaching. These three directions are in line with the natural order of the teaching process. Taking the ZPD of the learner as the starting point for teaching, then designing a planned scaffolding within the learner's ZPD, gradually removing the scaffold as the learner's level improves, and finally carrying out dynamic evaluation and continuous observation. This teaching design not only responds to the conflict between the exam-oriented goal and ZPD teaching, but also constitutes a complete teaching chain, which is conducive to the development of learners' cognitive ability.

3.1 Diagnosing the learner's ZPD

ZPD-based teaching begins with diagnosis. In addition to the current level, teachers need to pay special attention to the development level that learners can achieve with appropriate support. To achieve this goal, it is necessary to combine hierarchical task tests or interviews with learners. Through these methods, teachers can judge the learners' reaction ability to the support provided and differences of performance, thus exposing the gap between the current level and potential development goals. This gap is the ZPD of learners, and it is also the target part of instructional intervention.

This diagnostic process can be explained through the situation of the business Chinese classroom. In a simulated writing task, the learner, as the marketing director of the software development company, received a letter from the client company and needed to make an appropriate reply in Chinese. This task not only requires accurate writing grammar, but also conforms to the business etiquette in Chinese culture. By observing the task performance of learners, teachers can identify their writing difficulties and accurately locate the gap between the learners' current language ability and the ability required for actual business communication. This kind of learner cannot complete tasks independently at the current level, but can complete them under the guidance of teachers, that is, their ZPD, and also the focus of follow-up scaffolding.

3.2 Scaffolding with planned fading

After diagnosing the learner's ZPD, the design of scaffolding should be dynamically adjusted and gradual fading should be arranged. Effective scaffolding should provide just enough support for learners to complete the task. The timing of fading is also very important, and it should be systematically withdrawn as the learner's autonomy increases. Without planned fading, the scaffold may become the dependence of learners. This will cause learners to continue to rely on external help without really internalizing the new ability.

Teachers need to design scaffolds scientifically and carefully in the teaching process. For example, in the oral class of international Chinese language education, teachers can design a role-playing task: in the first round, teachers participate in the whole process, providing necessary knowledge tips and real-time correction. In the second round, teachers does not interrupt students' performance, and only provides feedback after the task is completed, and the third round requires students to complete it independently. This progressive design reflects the execution process of fading, ensuring that the scaffold can effectively promote the cognitive development of learners while avoiding learners' dependence on the scaffold. In addition, from teacher support to situational support is also a form of fading. For example, in the initial stage of Chinese character learning, teachers can provide students with relevant vocabulary and strategies, and then teachers can guide students to extend their learning to the real environment outside the classroom, such as independently looking for Chinese characters, public signs and advertisements in the environment. This is also a way for teachers to withdraw the scaffold.

3.3 Capturing developmental evidence through dynamic assessment

The way of evaluating students needs to be reconsidered. Teachers need to dynamically assess the situation of learners and observe what types and how much support learners need. The dynamic assessment can be used as a supplementary means for summative assessment to help educators judge the development of students. In the CSL classroom, many forms of dynamic assessment can be adopted. Teachers can evaluate students' learning outcomes based on their performance in language learning projects. From the perspective of students, the gains and difficulties of different learning stages can be recorded by maintaining the learning log. In addition, it can also be evaluated through peer evaluation of group members in cooperative projects. These three evaluation perspectives provide multi-angle information, which is an effective supplement to the examination evaluation. These supplementary forms of assessment show the changes in the development level of learners, which is conducive to the timely adjustment of teaching, and also allows learners to see their own progress more clearly.

4. Implications and Limitations

4.1 Contributions and Practical Implications

This article applies the ZPD framework to the specific educational field of international Chinese language education at the theoretical level. Studies have focused on the application of ZPD in Chinese teaching and the impact of examination orientation on teaching, but the combination of the two is rarely discussed. This article fills this theoretical gap by focusing on the balance between teaching based on ZPD and summative evaluation. In addition, the article transforms scaffolding into three specific directions: diagnosis, scaffolding with planned fading and dynamic assessment, and transforms the learner-centred teaching concept into actionable framework.

At the practical level, this article has certain reference significance for teacher training, textbook design and curriculum planning. It is necessary to carry out teacher training projects to help teachers gradually establish a development-oriented teaching awareness in daily teaching. The teacher training program can include ZPD diagnosis and scaffolding into the training content. Specifically, teachers need to cultivate diagnostic ability and accurately identify learners' ZPD through specific tasks and observation. In addition, teachers also need to have good curriculum design ability to determine the timing and speed of fading in the curriculum, so as to avoid insufficient support or excessive support leading to the dependence of learners. These abilities require teachers to gradually form through training and practice. For the design of textbooks, the content of different difficulty levels can be arranged in advance, so that teachers can better adjust the difficulty of teaching tasks flexibly according to the ZPD of learners, and avoid using the same standards for all learners. For example, two or three tasks of different difficulty can be set in each unit of the textbook, so that teachers can choose according to the diagnosis results. In terms of curriculum planning, the operational framework proposed in this article supplements the formative assessment, which can take into account the cognitive development process of learners while meeting the basic examination requirements, which is conducive to achieving diversified learning goals and promoting the sustainable development of learners' abilities.

4.2 Limitations and Future Directions

This article is a conceptual study. The three directions proposed are based on the ZPD theory and its subsequent development, and have not been empirically verified. Therefore, the contribution of this article is to provide a theoretical teaching framework, rather than a verified teaching scheme. Future research can test the feasibility and effectiveness of these directions in actual teaching through classroom action research or experimental design. In addition, different groups of learners, such as business people, international students and Chinese enthusiasts, may present different ZPD characteristics. Exploring these differences will help provide more targeted guidance for the design of scaffolding in different Chinese teaching situations.

5. Conclusion

Examination-oriented assessment and development-oriented teaching are not necessarily ant-acts, but a clear

theoretical basis is needed to balance the two in actual teaching. This article focuses on international Chinese language education and puts forward three interrelated directions, diagnosing learners' zone of proximal development, using scaffolding with planned fading, and integrating dynamics assessment. This framework not only meets the needs of students' cognitive development, but also meets the reality of examination orientation. From this perspective, scaffolding is not optional, but a necessary strategy to create a meaningful teaching space in the exam-oriented CSL classroom.

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