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Applying Vygotsky's theories for the development of young children's acting

Vida Kazragytė

Abstract

The article presents a study of the application of L.S. Vygotsky's theory of play and theory of semiotic mediation in helping young (5-7 year old) children to transit from pretend play as a non aesthetic activity towards acting as a form of symbolization which has aesthetic qualities. The study involved 112 children, half of whom (n=56) participated in a 6-month acting learning programme. The results showed that the majority of children (70-90 per cent, $p < 0,001$) without acting learning practice were not able to represent a character. Following L. S. Vygotsky, in play a child is acting in an imaginary situation according its meaning, but the child's behaviour remains non aesthetic, it "occurs just as in reality". The child lacks perception of the meaning of his/her own gestures, actions, speech, intonations used in play and therefore these are not converted to symbols.

After a special acting learning practice, the majority of children (about 50-60 per cent, $p < 0,001$) were able to represent a character, with enrichments of such aesthetic qualities as emotional expressions and hints of metaphoric meanings. Meta-analysis allows to suggest that using, according to L.S. Vygotsky, semiotic mediation (gestures, words) to encourage child's appreciation of meaning of his/her own gestures, actions or words used in an imaginary situation as well as practising the interpretation of representation of a character help children to internalize cognitive functions (perception, reflection, communication), which form the basis for the representation of a character.

Key words: young (5-7 year old) children, theories of L. Vygotsky on play and semiotic mediation, representation of a character, aesthetic achievements.

Introduction and background

The idea to explore young (5-7 year old) children's aesthetic development in the area of dramatic activity was born out of my disappointment which I felt after watching theatrical performances in day-care centers shown on festive occasions. Usually teachers instruct children "how" to perform a role without taking into account acting abilities necessary for representing a character on stage in general. Therefore, during such performances children feel uncreative. They are just trying to repeat memorized means of representation of a character and are "showing" or, to use Sh. Bailin's words, "signaling the emotions to an audience" (1993: 14). Obviously, such activity is worthless from the developmental and aesthetic point of view.

In the 1950's, Peter Slade, prominent theorist and practitioner, paying respect to such priorities of progressivism as self-expression, creativity, spontaneity, argued that in play or drama children reach aesthetic qualities (Slade 1954). Research of P. Slade in the area of young children's dramatic activity has remained of considerable significance until now (Fleming 2008). From another perspective, a number of contemporary theorists do acknowledge that for young children most available are various types of creative drama activities, based on child's ability to play. Theatre, or acting in front of an audience, according to Tompkins and Hoskisson (1995) "focuses more on technique rather than spontaneous self-expression" and is considered as not developmentally appropriate (Isenberg & Jalongo 1997: 173). So the educational value of young children's acting is rejected. In contrast, now drama is criticized as it has little to do with aesthetic and cultural aspects of child development (Schonmann 2000; 2005).

In the middle of the 20th century cognitivists (E. W. Eisner, R. A. Smith, B. Reimer, J. M. Parsons, H. Gardner) shaped up the cognitive conception of aesthetic education. Theorists insist that a child has to be educated as an artist, since mastering artistic symbol systems draws upon and develops cognitive capacities: imagination, perception, thinking, reflection etc. This inspired a growing interest in acting abilities and their development (Schonmann 1997; Krusic 1997; Bolton 1998). However, it is also important to investigate young

children's symbolization abilities in play. As F. G. Guss noticed, H. Gardner holds pretend play as the manifestation of intellect, but not of the aesthetic symbols. Playing is not "proto-artistic" or an embryonic artistic practice (Guss 2005: 43-54). Why is this the case?

From the explanations of J. Piaget, L. S. Vygotsky, H. Gardner it is obvious that young child's behaviour in play is not sufficient in terms of symbolization. A child cannot make his/her play artistic through informal learning, something that occurs in other areas, for example, drawing. Therefore, it is particularly important to investigate L. S. Vygotsky's theory of play from this point of view.

L. S. Vygotsky's theory of play (Vygotsky 2002) and its reflection in the practice of young children's acting

L. Vygotsky insists that neither actions in play, nor real objects used in it, nor play itself is ever symbolic in the proper sense of the term. He writes: "A symbol is a sign, but the stick is not the sign of a horse" (Vygotsky 2002: 13). (Here L. Vygotsky is closer to Saussure's definition of a symbol, which describes a symbol as motivated and personal, whereas a sign is arbitrary and understood by convention, according to Leninnger 2006). In play a child learns to guide behaviour by the meaning or the rules of an imaginary situation: "action arises from ideas rather than from things" (Vygotsky 2002: 12). And only actions that fit the idea, or meaning, or rules, are acceptable in the play situation. For example, if a child plays the role of a mother, then she behaves according to the rules of a mother. This behaviour can be explained as the child's learning to derive meaning from an object or an action which leads to a more independent behaviour in relation to externally visible realm and formation of abstract thought. For this the child needs a pivot. "In order to imagine a horse, he needs to define his actions by means of using the horse in the stick as the pivot" (Vygotsky 2002: 12).

The point here is that in play the child acts in a mental situation, i.e. acts differently in relation to what he/she sees. His/her behaviour is guided by the meaning of the situation, but the very action within it "occurs just as in reality", "the child operates with the alienated meaning in a real situation" (Vygotsky 2002: 14). Consequently, the child's detailed actions in play, as, for example, riding, are not symbolic and communicative, because they become such through perception. The child lacks perception of the meaning of his/her own gestures, actions, speech, intonations used in play and this is one of the reasons why these are not symbols. According to L. S. Vygotsky, the child can't act otherwise, for perception is not an independent feature of consciousness yet.



The statements of L.S. Vygotsky are reflected in our research which was performed in 6 day-care centers with involvement of 112 children (60 girls and 52 boys) aged 5-7 years. The results showed that the majority of children (70-90 per cent, $p < 0,001$) without acting learning practice were not able to represent a character after listening to a short tale with a summary of the main features of a character. They did not know "how" to do it and they behaved like in a play situation unable to perceive the meaning of their body actions and speech to the extent which would turn them into meaningful symbols. For example, a child following the general meaning presented in a tale imagines that he or she is a mouse and gathers tithes and rags and asks a partner where he could find more crumbs. But these actions are performed in a rather abstract way, without seeing (perceiving) the imagined crumbs clearly, therefore, the gathering actions do not have concrete emotional features. On the other hand, this can be considered as the rudiments of representation of a character, as the child creates some meanings despite the fact that they are rather vague.

Application of the theory of semiotic mediation by L. S. Vygotsky (1978) to help young children to progress in acting

L.S. Vygotsky's theory of semiotic mediation can help to create strategies for strengthening children's abilities to perceive the meaning of their gestures, or actions, or speech used in an imaginary or play situation and, accordingly, their abilities to represent a character. L. S. Vygotsky explains that "The essence of sign use consists in man's affecting behaviour through signs" (Vygotsky 1978: 54). The semiotic mediation involves regulation and organization of behaviour through cultural tools and signs, which at first occurs externally and after that - internally. According to L.S. Vygotsky, the movement of a young child who tries to grasp some object is clumsy, so the endeavour to reach it by him/herself, or to refer to another person to do it, is not effective. But when the child's mother helps him/her to grasp the object and by doing so gives a sense to the child's movement as referring, then the situation changes. Thanks to mother's movement which refers to the object and is a mean of communication, the child's grasping is converted to referring. It assumes the form of a refer-

ring gesture and becomes a referent for the child him/herself. We can say that “this is a gesture for oneself“. The child finally perceives and understands that his/her own gesture has a meaning. But the gesture becomes meaningful (as referring) only by way of being understood by someone else as such (as referring) and not in any other way (Vygotsky 1978: 112-113;169).

Also, L. S. Vygotsky asserts that semiotic mediation can be used effectively when certain abilities of children are not yet mature, but can mature with the help of an adult or other, more experienced children. Higher mental processes, such as perceiving, thinking, creating etc., appear twice. At first, they are seen in social interaction with others: children watch other people speak, think, or behave in certain ways and thus can learn how to speak, think or behave this way themselves. In social interactions an adult is mediating child’s contact with the world using signs, words and other cultural tools. The child internalizes all that, i.e. cultural tools become psychological tools for organizing his/her own behaviour, they become the inner manner of the child’s thinking, which is an intrapsychological function.

In this study our purpose was to enhance the moments of perceiving and to reflect on the application of semiotic mediation in two developmental stages which, according to L. S. Vygotsky, are called zones of proximal development. L. S. Vygotsky maintains that the zone of proximal development is the area between what the child can do independently and the level which he/she can reach with some help (Vygotsky 2002: 33). At each developmental stage, we gave the children new tasks of representation of a character, which were more sophisticated with regard to the deployment of the actors and the audience, the length of a tale, improvisation and formal elements of theatre. At each stage, at first, the children needed the maximum help from me as their teacher. After some time, the children needed less help and, finally, most of the children could perform the tasks independently.



Stage I. Representation of separate symbolic actions of a character jointly with teacher and peers.

At this developmental stage, acting activity is organized as play. A small group of children (6-8) and a teacher stand or squat beside each other in many various settings in the group room: on the floor, by the window, at the door, under the table etc. Such deployment does not indicate directly who are the audience and who are the actors and helps to mitigate the negative effect of audience and “showing”.

At the start, the teacher says 1-2 sentences describing briefly an imaginary situation and then creates separate symbolic actions and verbal phrases. The children accept these sentences as

the rules of play and are ready to involve actively. For example, *the teacher looks up at the imagined night sky, pints to it and says, “Look! There are so many small bright stars on the sky!” After a pause which helps the children to imagine the sky, she goes on, “Here is my star.” and points to it. “Where is your star? she asks. The children begin to look for their stars. One of them says, looking up and pointing, “Mine is here.” The teacher suggests another idea for the development of improvisation: “My star is red. What colour is yours?” and so on. The acting situation is open-ended.*

The teacher behaves as a mediator helping to convert the child’s actual gestures and verbal phrases to symbolic. The main goals at this stage are to develop children’s abilities to perceive what is done or said by the teacher or peers and also to develop the symbolic actions and speech consistently, while the emotional expressions can be slightly restrained. Also, during the pauses the children have some time for reflection which is necessary for creating artistic knowledge, i.e. “how” to use gestures, actions and speech symbolically (Gardner 1988: 157-167).

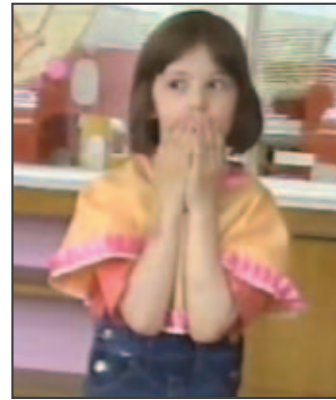
The majority of children, in 2-3 months, acquire the necessary understanding of “how” to create short actions and verbal phrases symbolizing the circumstances of the character and become full-fledged partners of the teacher. After 5-6 months children can symbolize in such situations independently.

Stage II. Representation of a character in front of a small group of peer-audience with the help of the teacher.

At this stage, the organization of acting activity slightly resembles a formal theatre: there is an audience (8-10 of peers) and the children-actors (1-3) come to the front (1-1,5 m.). Before acting, the teacher tells a short fictional tale which provides children-actors with the ideas or images about the main character’s physical properties, circumstances, thoughts, attitudes or emotional states. The children-actors are asked to retell the tale adding their impressions and facts from their own experience. The telling of a tale

is also semiotic mediation. For example, *the children are preparing to represent small frogs and the teacher tells them in a low, quiet voice, "Imagine that outside the window there is a stork"*, and points to it. By these means the teacher prompts for meaningful symbolic action on the stage as well as emotional expression of some fright.

During the acting, the teacher, who is among the audience, may use various means of semiotic mediation. (1) When the child-actor's inner image fails away, the behaviour becomes monotonous, without the character. The teacher herself imagines new circumstances and proposes new images, for example, *"There is a small insect on the grass"*. (2) When the child's perception of short actions is insufficient, they look rather abstract. The teacher may directly require more conscious perception by saying, *"Look at..."* or *"See what a big spider..."* or *"Who is sitting on the bush over there?"*



(3) When the child creates symbolic actions successfully, the teacher reacts emotionally (*by laughter*) or/and physically (*leaning forward*), by using interpretational phrases (*"The frog is not afraid of the stork"*) to show clearly that the created meaning is understandable. When these means are inefficient, the teacher goes onto the stage and models possible variations of the development of the character's thoughts, feelings and actions.

After acting, the teacher interprets the child's meanings created on the stage. This is like telling an illusory story which was just seen (*"The frogs were running along the bridge"*). Sometimes the teacher shows examples from the children's acting and repeats the phrases and symbolic actions to justify her interpretations. The interpretation helps to reinforce the images of the tale in the child's memory. What is more, it enriches the images and orientates the children indirectly as to how they should create meanings through symbolic actions more distinctively. For example, the teacher says at the end of her interpretation: *"What a cool frog!"* and hereby urges the child to organize his/her behaviour better with the purpose to create symbolic actions imbued with appropriate emotional attitude. According to H. Mead (Cronk 2005; Gillespie 2005: 19-39), signs (meaningful symbols) without taking account to "other's" point of view do not emerge and do not exist. If we want certain behaviour by a person to acquire some meaning, this meaning must be determined by the situation, where somebody reacts to this behaviour and gives feedback on the way they were understood.

The teacher's interpretations also promote children's – actors' and audience's – reflection of and learning from experience. By relating what they saw on the stage with what their teacher interpreted, the children create an inner understanding of "how" to "translate" verbal description into theatrical representation of a character.

After 2-3 months of learning on the stage the majority of children (about 50-60 per cent, $p < 0,001$) are rather confident, active and independent from the partner. They can use many images from the tale they have heard in activating their imagination and they can freely create denotative (referring) as well as connotative (expressive) meanings for themselves and for others. The representation of a character has rather clear emotional expressions and hints of metaphorical meanings, i.e. attachments of aesthetic qualities. From the following examples we can infer that the girl is representing a cat as a whimsical and curious character, Carol is shiftless, while Edwin is a more nimble character. When the emotional expressions function, it means that the child has used his/her own actions as "the medium employed" and that the character's representation unfolds as a rather conscious process. It can be considered as a basis for symbolic representation of a character which can be improved further alongside with the growing cultural and learning experience.

The tale. *Two frogs frisked to the meadow to pick some earthworms, flies, mosquitoes and other small bugs. But they know that there is a stork nearby, slumbering. If they awaken the stork, it will be hard to escape his beak. The frogs managed to collect a bucketful of bugs. This time they were lucky – they did not wake up the stork.*

An example of acting. *Two boys, Carol and Edwin, are playing two frogs frisking in the meadow and collecting food into small buckets. Sometimes they use nets to catch a butterfly or a spider or a fly. Carol is slower and stays in one place. Edwin is faster and more dexterous. All of a sudden, he catches a ball which is on the stage. "Football!",*



the audience shout. After kicking the ball off the stage he goes back to collect more food. For a moment he stops and points to the window saying, "Stork!" The boys get worried and keep looking at the imagined stork for a while. Then they glimpse around the stage looking for a place to hide. Failing to find a suitable place, they go back to work. Carol explores his own bucket carefully. Edwin asks, "Brother, tell me if your bucket is full?". Carol once again looks at his bucket, looks at Edwin and says in a sad voice, "No, it isn't". Edwin also looks into his bucket and announces, "Neither is mine. We have to keep working". While Carol shouts out, "Look! The stork is awake!" The boys run away and hide under a desk.

Conclusion.

It seems that for young (5-7 year old) children's progression in acting, theories of L. S. Vygotsky can be very important. As our study showed, the transition from a play towards dramatic acting should be regarded as a process, where cognitive development is crucial. It is possible that applying the means of semiotic mediation helped the children to better handle such cognitive processes as perceiving and reflecting. This led children to the avoidance of motoric-affective reaction (characteristic of this age) in dramatic activity. Also, it helped them to overcome the weakness of symbolization which is typical to a play. Consequently, through the deep-end process of perception, the children were able to convert their own gestures, actions, speech and intonations to the "medium employed", i.e. mediums of symbolization or representation of a character. Furthermore, the improved processes of perceiving and reflection enabled the children to attach to the representation of a character emotional expressions as well as embody hints of metaphorical meanings. So the greater part of the children who participated in the acting learning practice were able to achieve aesthetics.

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