

Looking For Lev In All The Wrong Places

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Abstract

This paper attempts to bring together concepts and frameworks from several diverse sources that will be of use to language teaching professionals. Some of these ideas are making their way into the mainstream of our craft, but others are not yet on the radar of most teachers, material or curriculum developers, or program coordinators. Our point of departure in offering this collection is the work of the Russian educational psychologist Lev Vygotsky, especially his work related to social cognition and the zone of proximal development. Our destination is a list of prescriptive advice for our profession.

Introduction

Language teaching as a profession continues to evolve through the efforts of dedicated and creative individuals in a variety of contexts. Growth often comes in predictable areas such as the fields of educational psychology, second language acquisition (SLA) and instructional design. Other times, however, we are lucky enough to stumble upon stimulation in places where we least expect it. This paper introduces some unexpected sources of inspiration and encouragement that might offer hints for how to strive and survive in our profession.

The title of this paper and the presentation it is based on have their roots in a mini conference hosted several years ago by the Osaka chapter of Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT). The theme (and title) of this mini conference was What's Lev Got To Do With It? The organizers had invited several speakers to introduce the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky, especially as it relates to the fields of language education and second language acquisition. While acknowledging that much of Vygotsky's work dealt with educational psychology and childhood development, the presenters made a strong case for applying key concepts and findings from his extensive writings to our second language teaching contexts. Besides being attracted by the catchy title of the mini conference (a pun on Tina Turner's hit song), I was impressed by how far ranging Vygotsky's works actually were, and how the presenters had used these ideas as a lens through which to look at our own profession.

Although the current paper will not go into much depth regarding the findings of Vygotsky, we

will use some of the above-mentioned key concepts as a point of departure for looking at other works that may inform us as second language educators. We will start with some concepts and ideas that are gaining acceptance in SLA circles and then move into some other areas that may not be so familiar. Our journey will hopefully lead us to a working list of prescriptive advice to help second or foreign language teachers, curriculum and materials developers, and program coordinators.

Lev

Vygotsky broke ground in several key areas of psychology but his work on the influences of culture and interpersonal communication have been cited as his biggest contributions (Santrock, 2004). The influences of culture and social interactions on an individual's cognitive development seem especially important for teachers of second or foreign language, i.e. the milieu in which we teach is at least as important as what we teach, and development cannot be separated from its social context. Other key influences on our profession are Vygotsky's belief that language plays a central role in mental development, and his concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD), or targeting our instruction at the area between the level of independent performance and assisted performance. The reader is encouraged to keep these key concepts in mind as we continue on our journey.

Flow Theory

Most readers will have at least heard about Flow Psychology (Csíkszentmihályi, 1990) and the pioneering work of Mihály Csíkszentmihályi. Wikipedia (2009) defines Flow (in psychology) as “. . . *the mental state of operation in which the person is fully immersed in what he or she is doing by a feeling of energized focus, full involvement, and success in the process of the activity.*” Csíkszentmihályi, psychologist at University of Chicago, was interested in what makes people happy and developed a research protocol to investigate when people are most engaged and experience high levels of satisfaction and enjoyment. Based on his findings, he theorized that people experienced flow when presented with tasks that were challenging, in relation to the skills they possessed, but not overly so (Fig. 1).

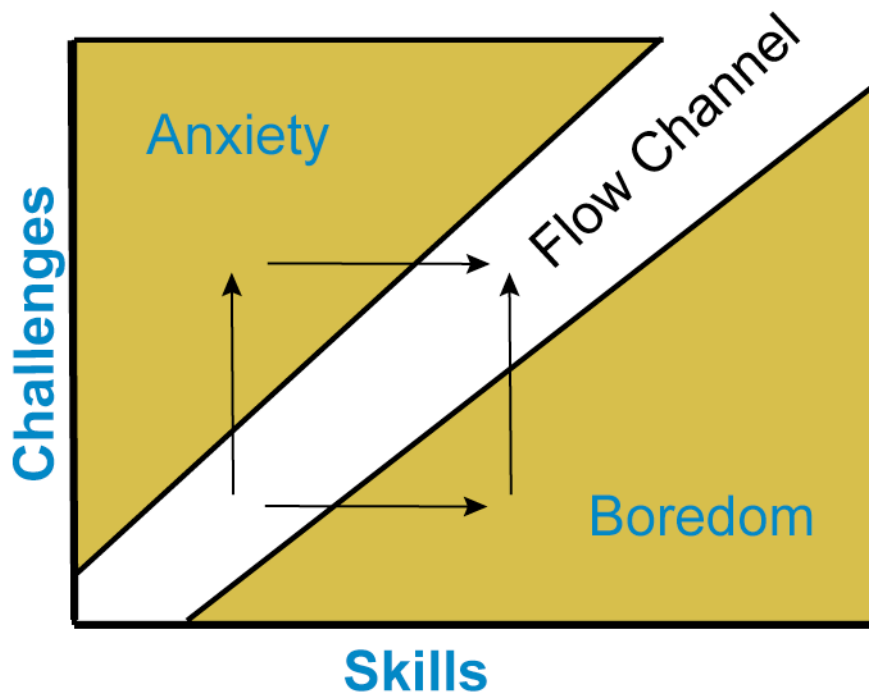


Fig. 1. Conceptualization of the Flow Channel (adapted from Csíkszentmihályi, 1990)

Looking at the arrows in Fig. 1, we see that as the level of the challenge increases, greater individual skills are required. As the level of skills increases, more challenge is needed to maintain a state of flow. Please think about your own experiences. You will likely realize that with the right balance of challenge to skills we become completely absorbed in an activity. There is no excess psychic energy to spare for anything else and we become so involved in the activity that our actions become spontaneous. This is FLOW.

We can see in this discussion of Flow a connection to Vygotsky's ZPD. Teachers need to be vigilant about finding challenges that are not too difficult (frustration level) or too easy (boredom level) in relation to the current skills possessed by students. Lowering the level of the challenge or raising of skills can both be accomplished through scaffolding. The following two lists (where can we find flow and path to flow) can thus be added to our language teachers' framework.

Where can we find FLOW?

- Challenge requiring skills
- Joining of action and awareness
- Clear goals and feedback
- Sense of control
- Loss of self-consciousness
- Transformation of time

- Concentration (focused attention)

Path to Flow

1. Make the task a game. Establish rules, objectives, challenges and rewards
2. Have a powerful goal
3. Focus your attention (no distractions)
4. Let go (enjoy the process)
5. Put everything into the activity
6. Push your limits (creativity, skills, energy)

A Whole New Mind

Moving away from mainstream SLA research we arrive at the doorstep of Daniel H. Pink, who wrote *A Whole New Mind: Why Right-Brainers Will Rule the Future*. In this book (2005), Pink outlines historical developments through the agriculture age (farmers), industrial age (factory workers), and information age (knowledge workers), to where we find ourselves now, the conceptual age. In this age, he argues, right-brain qualities (inventiveness, empathy, meaning) will be in much higher demand. He uses the left-brain, right-brain dichotomy as a metaphor for understanding changes in the economic and business landscapes.

The argument runs that until now left-brain thinking has dominated, but a shift to right-brain is occurring. Table. 1 offers a synopsis of what are believed to be the differences between left and right-brain thinking.

Table. 1. Comparison of left and right-brain thinking.

The LEFT side of the brain	The RIGHT side of the brain
- controls the right side of the body	- controls the left side of the body
- is sequential	- is simultaneous
- specializes in text	- specializes in context
- analyzes the details	- synthesizes the big picture

Although Pink is writing more for a business audience, there are many nuggets of wisdom to be gleaned by the language teaching professional. Specifically, his list of six essential senses for what he describes as “High Concept, High Touch.”

Design - Moving beyond function to engage the senses.

Story - Narrative added to products and services - not just argument. Best of the six senses.

Symphony - Adding invention and big picture thinking (not just detail focus).

Empathy - Going beyond logic and engaging emotion and intuition.

Play - Bringing humor and light-heartedness to business and products.

Meaning - the purpose is the journey, give meaning to life from inside yourself.

Experience Economy

A bit further off the beaten SLA path, we find the work of Joseph Pine and James H. Gilmore. The work of these two gentlemen on the concept of an experience economy (Pine & Gilmore, 1999) created quite a buzz in business circles and has taken up a central position in many business programs. Basically, the authors tell the story of how different company offerings fall somewhere on a value scale from commodities to products to services to experiences and eventually transformations where the customer is the product (Fig. 2).

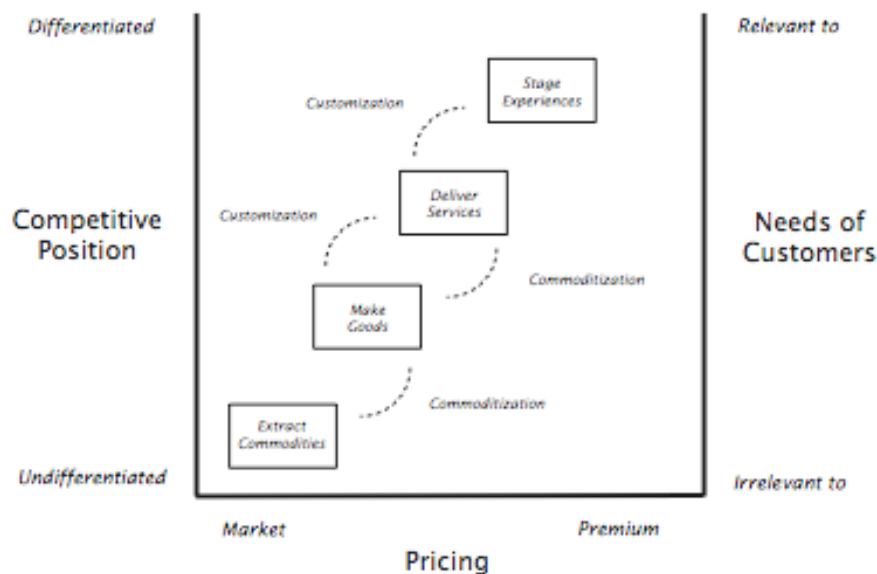


Fig. 2. Progression of Economic Value (Pine & Gilmore, 1999)

They offer the example of coffee. Raw coffee beans are one of the world's big commodities. Buyers are interested in quality, but the competition is usually over price. Per cup of coffee, this commodity is worth only about 2 or 3 cents. If someone roasts this coffee, grinds it and puts it in a bag, the value goes up . . . Maybe 10 or 20 cents. Then, if someone buys this coffee, brews it and puts it in a cup, we have a service . . . up to one dollar or more per cup. Now, can coffee be

an experience? There is a place called Café Florentine in Venice where people pay more than ten dollars for a cup of coffee. But are they paying that much for the coffee . . . or the experience? The answer should be evident.

Several aspects of their theory can be seen in Figure 2. The progression up the economic value ladder occurs on a number of dimensions. The competitive position of offerings progresses from undifferentiated to differentiated (left vertical axis). At higher levels, offerings are more relevant to the needs of customers (right vertical axis). There is also a progression from market price to premium pricing (horizontal access). Finally, the authors stress that offerings can move both up the scale (customization) as well as down (commoditization).

As language teaching professionals, I feel we should be trying to make each meeting with our learners an experience. This takes a new way of thinking, but it is necessary if we want to avoid commoditization, i.e. movement down the economic value ladder to where price is more of a consideration than value. Hints for how to move our offerings up the scale toward experiences (and even transformations) are sprinkled throughout this paper.

Pine and Gilmore (1999) also talk about four experience realms: entertainment, educational, escapist and esthetic (Fig. 3).

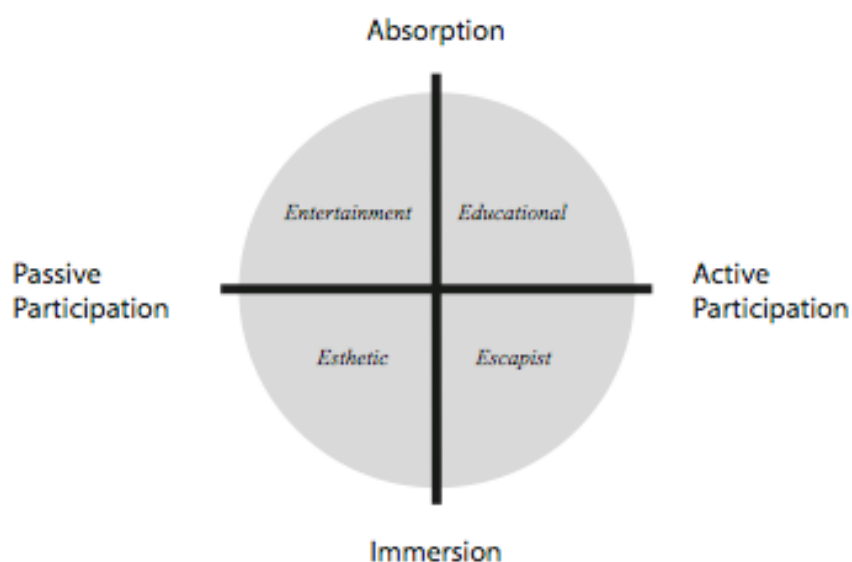


Figure 3. The Experience Realms (Pine & Gilmore, 1999).

We can recognize that businesses higher on the scale of economic value concentrate their offerings on one or more of these realms. The authors stress that the richest experiences encompass aspects of all four realms, and offer Disney as an example of a company that excels at offering just such experiences.

I do not want to suggest that we turn our language classes into Disney-like experiences, but targeting various experience realms when designing curriculum, activities and materials might make for powerful language-learning experiences. Prescriptive advice we can glean from this work can be summarized as follows:

- Set the stage by exploring the possibilities of each realm.
- The first step is envisioning a well-defined theme.
- Theming an experience means scripting a participative story.
- Experience staggers eliminate anything that distracts from the theme.
- The more sensory the experience, the more memorable it will be.
- Look for ways of shifting up the progression of economic value.

While not directly related to the work of Vygotsky, these ideas can strengthen our framework for providing language learners with rich cultural and social interactions ala Lev.

Made to Stick

Next stop on our journey, we find the work of Dan and Chip Heath related to stickiness (Heath, C. & Heath, D., 2007). These author brothers introduce several stories and case studies to explain why some ideas or concepts are memorable (and thus stick) and others are doomed to oblivion. They draw on a variety of sources including urban legends, folk tales, marketing and advertising.

Their definition of sticky is something that is “*understandable, memorable, and effective in changing thought or behavior.*” Here we have another lens through which to view Vygotsky’s work related to cultural and social interaction. The question is how can these ideas inform our decisions in the language classroom.

Looking at the findings, they identified key elements or characteristics that can help make an idea “sticky.” They use the acronym SUCCEs as follows (see Appendix 1 for the authors’

description):

Simple — find the core of any idea

Unexpected — grab people's attention by surprising them

Concrete — make sure an idea can be grasped and remembered later

Credibility — give an idea believability

Emotion — help people see the importance of an idea

Stories — empower people to use an idea through narrative

We need to acknowledge that much of this is common sense. Still, the Heath brothers have done us a great service by bringing these ideas together. Here again are more useful items for our language professionals' checklist or framework.

Together, the SUCCEs framework helps people to

- Pay attention
- Understand and remember
- Believe and agree
- Care
- Act

Do-It-Yourself Customers

Now we are venturing into areas way off the language teaching and SLA maps. Honebein & Cammarano (2005) explore the co-production revolution, and offer much anecdotal evidence to support the notion that business success (and I believe language teaching success) will increasingly hinge on our ability to educate customers (or students) how best to make use of our services. This, I believe, will be especially true as we pursue more and more blended-learning environments and platforms.

Figure 4 outlines the authors' concepts of how to enhance customer performance, and thus satisfaction. The starting point is helping customers to clarify their vision of what a successful interaction with your offerings is. The next steps are to educate customers on how to access our offerings, provide incentives for successful interactions with our offerings and disincentives for failures, and finally develop expertise and thus groom expert customers.



Fig. 4. Customer Performance Wheel (Honebein & Cammarano, 2005).

Tactics in these endeavors can be summarized as follows (Honebein & Cammarano, 2005):

Tactics for improving the customer's vision focus on:

- Appropriate goals for what customers should accomplish
- Clear customer expectations describing the measurable outcomes of activities
- Succinct plans that provide customers a script upon which they can act
- Fluid feedback that lets customers know how they are doing

Tactics for facilitating customer access focus on:

- Articulating company policies that establish rules for customer performance
- Specifying procedures that affect customer experiences
- Identifying the people, both employees and customers, who are best suited for the experience
- Developing tools that enable customers to do more work
- Designing interfaces that make the work customers do easy
- Creating information customers need to make decisions
- Coordinating nuances that influence the customer's natural reflexes

Tactics for structuring customer incentive focus on:

- Conceiving rewards that encourage desirable behaviors
- Crafting punishments that discourage undesirable behaviors

Tactics for enhancing customer expertise focus on:

- Creating basic tools to orient customers to goods and services
- Planning problem tools to hand-hold customers during usage
- Developing premium tools to teach customers high-level skills
- Publishing support tools to guide choice and usage
- Integrating embedded tools into goods and services themselves

We can see some definite hints of behaviorism in this discussion, but again we also have another lens through which to view Vygotsky's concepts of cultural and social interactions. The twist is that many of these interactions will be increasingly conducted online, on-demand and just in time.

Conclusion

We have covered quite a bit of scholastic ground on our journey, but where does all this leave us? Hopefully we have gained some insight along the way and have a few more pieces of the teaching philosophy puzzle in place. The prescriptive advice I have gleaned from these meanderings can be summed up as follows:

- Offer learners real-life challenges that are closely matched to their current skills.
- Don't limit ourselves to left-brain activities and thinking.
- Wrap everything in an experience.
- Make use of the power of story.
- Design in "stickiness."
- Teach students how to be better consumers of our academic offerings.

Each teacher has their own unique teaching philosophy and assumptions, and these intimately influence how they think about our profession and what they do in the classroom. It is hoped that readers will go away with at least a few seeds for thought that may blossom into full grown convictions that expand our profession and promote better language learning among our students.

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Websites

Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die <http://madetostick.com/>

A Whole New Mind www.danpink.com/wnm.html

Appendix. Made to Stick (Chip Heath & Dan Heath)

PRINCIPLE 1: SIMPLICITY

How do we find the essential core of our ideas? To strip an idea down to its core, we must be masters of exclusion. We must relentlessly prioritize. The Golden Rule is the ultimate model of simplicity: a one-sentence statement so profound that an individual could spend a lifetime learning to follow it.

PRINCIPLE 2: UNEXPECTEDNESS

How do we get our audience to pay attention to our ideas, and how do we maintain their interest when we need time to get the ideas across? We need to violate people's expectations. We need

to be counterintuitive. For our idea to endure, we must generate interest and curiosity. We can engage people's curiosity over a long period of time by systematically "opening gaps" in their knowledge — and then filling those gaps.

PRINCIPLE 3: CONCRETENESS

How do we make our ideas clear? We must explain our ideas in terms of human actions, in terms of sensory information. Naturally sticky ideas are full of concrete images because our brains are wired to remember concrete data. In proverbs, abstract truths are often encoded in concrete language: "A bird in hand is worth two in the bush."

PRINCIPLE 4: CREDIBILITY

How do we make people believe our ideas? Sticky ideas have to carry their own credentials. We need ways to help people test our ideas for themselves — a "try before you buy" philosophy for the world of ideas.

PRINCIPLE 5: EMOTIONS

How do we get people to care about our ideas? We make them feel something. Research shows that people are more likely to make a charitable gift to a single needy individual than to an entire impoverished region. We are wired to feel things for people, not for abstractions. Sometimes the hard part is finding the right emotion to harness.

PRINCIPLE 6: STORIES

How do we get people to act on our ideas? We tell stories. Firefighters naturally swap stories after every fire, and by doing so they multiply their experience; after years of hearing stories, they have a richer, more complete mental catalog of critical situations they might confront during a fire and the appropriate responses to those situations. Hearing stories acts as a kind of mental flight simulator, preparing us to respond more quickly and effectively.