# Application of the Zone of Proximal Development in College English Teaching

## Lulu Ni[*]

*Department of Educational & Counselling Psychology, McGill University, Montreal, Canada*
*\*Corresponding author*

*Abstract:* As an important teaching theory, Vygotsky's theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) has an undeniable guiding role in English teaching. This article is mainly aimed at college students' English teaching classrooms and provides teachers with specific teaching processes and methods based on ZPD theory. Among them, heuristic teaching method, interactive teaching method and scaffolding teaching method are all based on the actual development level and potential development level of students in ZPD theory, as well as the peer help point of view emphasized by ZPD. This article uses the literature analysis method, combined with the actual classroom situation, to illustrate the effectiveness, limitations and further research directions of ZPD. In terms of effectiveness, this article focuses on the actual application results of ZPD in college English classrooms; In terms of limitations, this article discusses the limitations of ZPD and the deficiencies of the research in this article; In terms of future research, this article proposes empirical research necessity.

## 1. Introduction

As society's demand for talents continues to increase and education reforms continue to deepen, all countries are exploring teaching theories and methods that are suitable for their own educational development in the new environment. This prosperous educational background has led to more and more scientific teaching and development theories that conform to the law of student development. Vygotsky put forward the theory of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) on the relationship between teaching and development, especially the relationship between teaching and intellectual development [1]. This theory has had a profound impact on contemporary pedagogy. Although the development of ZPD in theoretical innovation was lagging and it seemed difficult to make a breakthrough [2], the application of ZPD in teaching, especially in the field of language teaching, was very extensive and effective [3,4]. More specifically, the teaching effect of ZPD in English teaching classes had been analyzed and discussed by many researchers [5,6]. Scaffolding, as an extension of the actual teaching method of ZPD, was a hot spot because of applying peer cooperation and teacher-student interaction in ZPD [7-9]. From the point of view of stakeholders, for teachers, ZPD provided teachers with basic factors that affected their career development, and teachers could expand the main points of ZPD into practical teaching strategies [10]. For students, the application of ZPD could not

only provide effective English learning methods, as well as improving English learning motivation, most importantly, it could also provide a theoretical framework for the development of critical thinking [11]. Therefore, ZPD has deep and meaningful influences on teachers and students in English teaching and learning.

On the basis of ZPD, this article studies how teachers should effectively cultivate students' independent innovation and learning ability in college English teaching, and at the same time achieve the purpose of improving students' comprehensive ability. This topic not only meets the needs of current education, but also provides theoretical support, practical measures and examples for college English teachers. The research is aimed at college students and provides a clear and practical research framework for teachers and students to use ZPD. The main body of the paper is composed of theoretical basis, teaching objective, teaching process, teaching methods and teaching examples. Finally, the paper discusses implications for practice, limitations, further research and conclusion.

## 2. Literature Review

Vygotsky believed that children had two levels of development [12]. The first was the current level of development, that was, the level of the child's mental function formed on the basis of the completed development [2,9]. The second was that with the help and guidance of the outsiders, such as teachers, parents or capable peers, children could reach the level of problem-solving that they had not formed before, that was, the level of development potential obtained through teaching [8,13]. In such intellectual activities, there might be differences between children's potential and current levels of development, and such differences could be eliminated through teaching. This was the zone of proximal development (ZPD) theory. Vygotsky pointed out that teaching created ZPD [1], so teaching should be at the forefront of ZPD. It was worth noting that Vygotsky emphasized that in actual teaching [1], teachers should adapt to the current development level of students and turn the potential development level into a realistic level of development.

## 3. Zone of Proximal Development Theory and College English Teaching

### 3.1. Teaching Object

The teaching object is college students, and the stakeholders are mainly college English teachers as well as students. Before explaining why college students are chosen as the application group, we must clarify two theoretical premises of ZPD. Firstly, it was impossible for two students' development tracks were exactly the same [13]. The theory emphasized that according to the actual development of each student and different ZPD, teachers should choose appropriate methods and strategies to formulate their own teaching plans and implement education interventions [5,6,10,13]. Secondly, the two development levels included in ZPD required teachers not only to study and understand the current development level of students, but also to estimate the potential development level of students [3,4]. If the estimated level is too low, they will miss the optimal development period of students and eventually cause obstacles to the intellectual development of students; If the estimated level is too high, the students will not be able to achieve the teacher's expected goals, resulting in a lack of self-confidence and even loss of interest in learning. Both of these results are unwilling to be seen by teachers. Therefore, compared with students of other age groups, in addition to having the opportunities to be guided one-on-one by teachers, even in a large class, college students can be controlled between 10 to 20, while other age groups usually have 30 to 50 students. So it is easier for teachers to provide academic guidance under the ZPD theory for a small class. In addition, college students already have a certain ZPD foundation, that is, their current level of development is similar, which can be roughly stratified by different unified exams in different countries, such as the College

Entrance Examination, GRE, etc. This makes it more convenient for teachers to guide students and reduces the pressure on teachers.

## 3.2. Teaching Process

In order to further improve the accuracy of teaching interventions, teachers should first find the student's ZPD. Specifically, teachers can determine the current development level of students through tests, questionnaires, interviews or other methods before the actual class. Secondly, according to the results of the pre-class survey, teachers should not only meet the requirements of the teaching goals and complete the necessary teaching content, but also accurately find the potential development level of the students to eliminate the gap between the current and potential development level, then predict the difficulties students will encounter when studying, and provide them with necessary support and help. Thirdly, teachers should take practical solutions according to different situations. For some students with a good foundation and strong classroom acceptance, teachers can provide some additional reading materials or exams that may exceed the overall level of the class; But for students who have difficulty keeping up with the overall progress of the class, it is obvious that the current teaching content exceeds their ZPD. In this case, teachers need to give them more attention and guidance, such as frequent email communication and one-on-one consultations. Besides, in classroom teaching, teachers can encourage students to dictate or answer the teaching content and questions to judge students' mastery, then guess their ZPD based on the different questions put forward by the students, and finally assign different assignments.

In short, as guides and helpers, teachers must emphasize the subject status of students in teaching [5,7,14]. In detail, in the classroom, different levels of learning materials and assignments are arranged according to the ZPD of different students, then teachers should answer the students' questions, which can effectively help students improve their creativity, thinking ability, critical ability and independent learning ability, and finally students get better development and real benefits in ZPD. In other words, as a dynamic and constantly changing field, ZPD required teachers to make constant adjustments in the teaching process according to different situations, different students, and different feedback [8,10,13].

## 3.3. Teaching Method

ZPD reflected the ability of students to solve problems under the guidance of adults or cooperation with more capable partners, which was the level of development that students could achieve after education [1,3,11]. The following provides three teaching methods based on ZPD.

First, teachers can adopt heuristic teaching methods. That was, teachers created a situation related to the content or problems in the classroom, and left space for students to actively think and create [10]. When creating a problem situation, teachers are required to be familiar with the content of the textbook, master the structure of the content, and understand the internal connection between old and new knowledge. In addition, teachers are required to strive to form an appropriate span between the new learning content and the students' existing level. There are many ways to create a problem situation. It can be raised by the teacher's questioning or assignments, be introduced from the connection between the old and new textbook content, or from the daily experience of the students. The creation of problem situations can be carried out either at the beginning or at the end of the teaching process.

Second, teachers can use interactive teaching methods. This method also emphasized the student-centered approach, using teacher-student dialogue or student display to express the students' internalized knowledge, constructed system, and existing problems [8]. At the same time, the teacher gives corresponding suggestions and solutions. Under this method, students can express their views

and problems as much as possible in a free learning environment based on the content and materials provided by the teacher. In order for students to express better, teachers should first demonstrate to students so that students understand the basic form, instead of making students confused without a hint, and then ask students to guide others in the role of the teacher in turn. After students' presentations, the teacher should give feedback in time or even ask other students to give peer feedback. The purpose of giving feedback is to allow students to better improve their self-learning ability and realize their own innovations or deficiencies in thinking of problems, rather than criticizing students with scores.

Third, teachers can adopt the scaffolding learning method, that is, the collaborative learning method. Both Vygotsky and Bruner emphasized the importance of peer tutoring in their interpretation of ZPD [1,15]. Among them, Bruner believed that ZPD was the integration of collectivist concepts and the role of consciousness [15], which meant that when people expressed themselves in their own way, it involved the sharing of consciousness. The application of this theory in reality could be regarded as group cooperation and discussion, that was, the teacher only provided the questions to be discussed and the necessary knowledge background, then gradually reduced teaching interventions to the students [7,9,11]. The entire inquiry process is mainly carried out in groups. When grouping, teachers can arrange students with different development levels to conduct cooperative learning according to different needs. Because of the help and guidance of peers, students are more receptive to knowledge. The scaffolding learning method is one of the most effective ways to promote ZPD.

### 3.4. Teaching Examples

Rezaee and Azizi selected 86 high school students and distributed them in the control group [5], ZPD error correction experimental group and non-ZPD error correction experimental group for comparative experiments. The experiment used comparative analysis and data analysis methods (mean, SD, t, df, etc.), and it was concluded that teaching English adverbs in students' ZPD would enable students to understand more deeply and remember more firmly [5]. In addition, when the group learning and teacher-answer mode were adopted, the learning effect of students would be significantly improved [5]. Even though the participants in this experiment were not college students, this teaching method and conclusion were still applicable to college students. The biggest difference may be that the English adverbs learned by college students are more difficult to understand and difficult to remember.

### 4. Implications for Practice

### 4.1. Understanding the Current Development Situation of Student Is the Basis of Teaching

When using ZPD teaching, it was critical and necessary for teachers to understand the current development level of students [10]. Indeed, every student is unique. If the teacher can find the similarities and differences in ZPD of the students, it will save a lot of time and energy in the teaching process. In view of the common points in ZPD of students, teachers can uniformly or hierarchically teach in the classroom and predict the potential development level of students; For different points, teachers can take the form of personal presentation, group interaction, one-on-one tutoring, etc. In short, students' ZPD needs to rely on the teacher's advance, planned and in-depth understanding in order to be better developed.

### 4.2. Emphasizing the Interaction among Students, Peers and Teachers

Compared with the help of teachers and parents, the guidance of excellent peers was more

persuasive and easier to be accepted by students [7,14]. Therefore, in the mode of teacher-student interaction classroom, teachers should play a guiding role. By helping students create situations that meet the requirements of the teaching content and prompting clues of the relationship between new and old knowledge, teachers should establish the subject status of students in the learning process. By creating an atmosphere of student interaction within the group, giving students opportunities to express and question, teachers should make timely summaries and feedback, which can promote students' independent innovation and continuous improvement of their ZPD. The interactive mode based on ZPD is the prerequisite and guarantee for students to learn effectively and realize their potential.

## 5. Limitations

The limitations discussed here are mainly divided into two aspects, one is the defects and shortcomings of the ZPD itself, the other is the lack of research in this article. First of all, ZPD theory emphasizes the importance that teachers need to understand the two development levels of students. But how many teachers can really do that in reality? How teachers judge students' ZPD? The specific theoretical support and strategies still need to be explored. Moreover, one of the teaching methods emphasized by ZPD theory is peer interaction in groups. So how can teachers ensure that grouping is effective and that the ZPD of each member can be fully developed? To sum up, the standards for teachers are very high in the practical application of ZPD, especially college students belonging to the group with a higher knowledge level, which means the responsibilities and pressure of college English teachers are greater. Therefore, how to apply and master the core of ZPD theory is a great challenge for college English teachers.

On the limitation of this paper, first of all, this paper mainly adopts the way of literature analysis without empirical research and proof, that is, the examples and methods used are all from the researches in other articles. That makes the authenticity and validity of this paper questioned. In addition, the factors considered in this paper are not complete. While the paper tries to narrow the group of ZPD theoretical analysis as much as possible, whether a student's ZPD is affected by gender, socio-economic status and family background (urban or rural) are not clearly analyzed and explained in the group of college students. When analyzing college English teachers' teaching process, it is not pointed out whether they are restricted by English majors and non-English majors. Thirdly, the main background of this paper is Chinese college English teaching, that is, discussing the teaching effect of ZPD in a country where the native language is not English. So it is unknown whether the teaching process and methods discussed in this paper are the same in native English countries. Finally, only one of the references in this paper written by Wass et al. conducted in-depth research on college students under the guidance of ZPD theory [11]. Although ZPD theoretical conclusions in other literature can be applied to college students, the relevant evidence is still insufficient.

## 6. Future Research

First of all, the article needs to carry on the empirical research and establishes the prompt group and the control group, respectively using the ZPD theory and the traditional teaching method to conduct the college English teaching. Empirical investigation requires complete, long-term, structured research and analysis, and bases on the final conclusions to make an informed judgment for the effectiveness of ZPD in college English teaching. Secondly, the article needs to take as many forms as possible to carry out ZPD-based English teaching, not just in class, such as an English performance or competition. Students are required to use English to simulate the performance of fragments in learning, life or a subject given by the teacher, combine lesson content and perform enlightening content.

## 7. Conclusions

In summary, the paper analyzes the college English classroom practice based on ZPD theory and provides specific teaching methods and ideas. Although there are still some deficiencies in empirical research, this paper affirms the significance and applicability of the scaffolding method and group learning in ZPD theory. With the further improvement of the research, it is believed that this project can provide more evidence for ZPD and further enhance the innovation of ZPD teaching practice.

## References

[1] Vygotsky, L. Interaction between learning and development. Readings on the development of children, 1978, 23 (3): 34-41.

[2] Valsiner, J., vander Veer, R. Encountering the border: Vygotsky's zona blizaishego razvitya and its implications for theory of development//The Cambridge handbook of cultural-historical psychology. Cambridge University Press, 2014: 148-174.

[3] Lantolf, J.P., Thorne, S.L., Poehner, M.E. Sociocultural theory and second language development//Theories in second language acquisition. Routledge, 2014: 221-240.

[4] Van Compernolle, R.A., Williams, L. Promoting sociolinguistic competence in the classroom zone of proximal development. Language Teaching Research, 2012, 16 (1): 39-60.

[5] Rezaee, A. A., Azizi, Z. The role of zone of proximal development in the students' learning of English adverbs. Journal of Language Teaching and Research, 2012, 3 (1): 51-57.

[6] Nassaji, H., Cumming, A. What's in a ZPD? A case study of a young ESL student and teacher interacting through dialogue journals. Language teaching research, 2000, 4 (2): 95-121.

[7] De Guerrero, M.C.M., Villamil, O.S. Activating the ZPD: Mutual scaffolding in L2 peer revision. The Modern Language Journal, 2000, 84 (1): 51-68.

[8] Guk, I., Kellogg, D. The ZPD and whole class teaching: Teacher-led and student-led interactional mediation of tasks. Language Teaching Research, 2007, 11 (3): 281-299.

[9] Khaliliaqdam, S. ZPD., scaffolding and basic speech development in EFL context. Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2014, 98: 891-897.

[10] Fani, T., Ghaemi, F. Implications of Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) in teacher education: ZPTD and self-scaffolding. Procedia-Social and Behavioral Sciences, 2011, 29: 1549-1554.

[11] Wass, R., Harland, T., Mercer, A. Scaffolding critical thinking in the zone of proximal development. Higher Education Research & Development, 2011, 30 (3): 317-328.

[12] Vygotsky, L.S. Thought and language. MIT press, 2012.

[13] Gregg, K.R. The input hypothesis: Issues and implications. 1986.

[14] Mirzaei, A., Eslami, Z. R. ZPD-activated languaging and collaborative L2 writing. Educational Psychology, 2015, 35 (1): 5-25.

[15] Bruner, J. Vygotsky's zone of proximal development: The hidden agenda. New directions for child development, 1984.