

The thinking skills of most children in elementary school are at the concrete operations stage, and experience plays a major role in all learning. Piaget points out that children are not simply miniature adults who have less experience and thus less knowledge to work with as they approach problems and new situations. They do not think like adults because their minds are not like adult minds. It is the privilege of the elementary school teacher to share their world and learn to work within it.

### **The world as offering opportunities for learning**

If we take Piaget's idea that children adapt through experiences with objects in their environment, and turn it around, we can see how that environment provides the setting for development through, the opportunities it offers the child for action. Transferring this idea metaphorically to the abstract world of learning and ideas, we can think of the classroom and classroom activities as creating and offering opportunities to learners for learning. This view coincides with 'ecological' thinking that sees events and activities as offering *affordances* or opportunities for use and interaction that depend on who is involved (Gibson 1979): for example, to a human being, a tree 'affords' shelter from the rain or firewood, to a bird, the same tree 'affords' a nest site or buds to eat.

*Children learning a foreign language*

## **Vygotsky**

### ***The child as social***

Vygotsky's views of development differ from Piaget's in the importance he gives to language and to other people in the child's world. Although Vygotsky's theory is currently most noted for his central focus on the social, and modern developments are often labelled 'sociocultural theory', he did not neglect the individual or individual cognitive development. The development of the child's first language in the second year of life is held to generate a fundamental shift in cognitive development. Language provides the child with a new tool, opens up new opportunities for doing things and for organising information through the use of words as symbols. Young children can often be heard talking to themselves and organising themselves as they carry out tasks or play, in what is called private speech. As children get older they speak less and less aloud, and differentiate between social speech \_for others and 'inner .speech', which continues to play an important role in regulating and controlling behaviour (Wertsch 1985). Adults sometimes resort to speaking aloud when faced

with a tricky task, like finding the way to an unfamiliar place, verbalising to help themselves think and recall: *Turn left then right at the roundabout. . .*

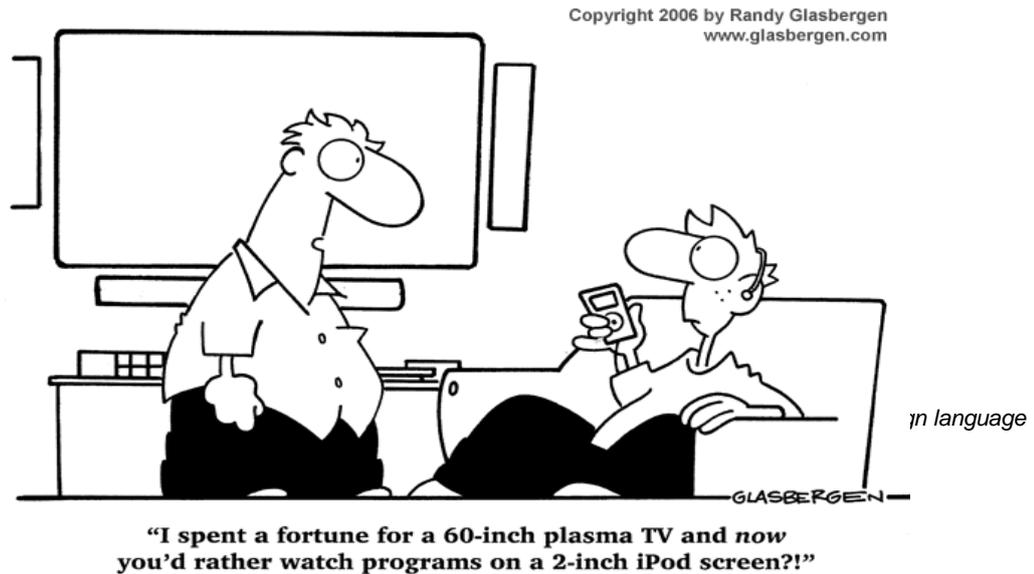
In considering the early speech, of infants and its development into language, Vygotsky {1962.) distinguishes the outward talk and what is happening in the child's mind. The infant begins with using single words, but these words convey whole messages: when a child says *juice*, s/he may mean *I want some more juice* or *my juice has spilt*. As the

child's language develops, the whole undivided thought message can be broken down into smaller units and expressed by putting together words that are now units of talk.

Underlying

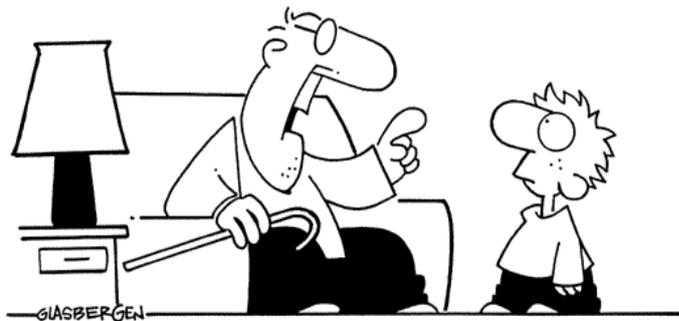
Vygotskian theory is the central observation that development and

learning take place in a social context, i.e. in a world full of other people, who interact with the child from birth onwards. Whereas for Piaget the child is an active learner alone in a world of objects, for Vygotsky the child is an active learner in a world full of other people. Those people play important roles in helping children to learn, bringing objects and ideas to their attention, talking while playing and about playing, reading stories, asking questions. In a whole range of ways, adults *mediate* the world for children and make it accessible to them. The ability to learn through instruction and mediation is characteristic of human intelligence. With the help of adults, children can do and understand much more than they can on their own. To illustrate this idea, let's return to the example of the baby learning to feed herself with a spoon. At some point in learning to use a spoon to eat with, the baby may be able to get the spoon in the food and can put a spoonful of food in her mouth, but cannot quite manage the middle step of filling the spoon with food. A helpful adult may assist the baby with the difficult part by putting his hand over the baby's and guiding it in filling the spoon.



In this way, adult and child together achieve what the baby was unable to do by herself, and the baby receives some useful training in turning the spoon at the angle needed to get hold of the food. Before long the baby will master this step and can be left to do the whole feeding process by herself. The adult could have helped the baby in many different ways, including just doing it all to save time and mess! The kind of spoon-filling help, targeted at what the baby can nearly but not quite do herself, is seen as particularly useful in promoting development; filling the spoon with food was an action in the baby's *zone of proximal development* (or ZPD). We can note before we leave this example that parents are often very 'tuned-in' to their own children and know exactly what help is needed next, and that skilful teachers also manage to do this in a class of thirty or more different ZPDs.

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**“You can live a perfectly normal life if you accept the fact that your life will never be perfectly normal.”**

subtraction problems for the first time. For some pupils, a demonstration by the teacher using counting bricks may be all they need to grasp the idea and do other sums of the same type. Others will be able to do the same sum again but not be able to generalise to other sums. In foreign language learning, we might imagine children listening to the teacher model a new question: *Do you like swimming?* and being encouraged to ask similar questions.

Learning to do things and learning to think are both helped by interacting with an adult. Vygotsky saw the child as first doing things in a social context, with other people and language helping in various ways, and gradually shifting away from

Vygotsky used the idea of the ZPD to give a new meaning to 'intelligence'. Rather than measuring intelligence by what a child can do alone, Vygotsky suggested that intelligence was better measured by what a child can do with skilled help. Different children at the same point in development will make different uses of the same help from an adult. Take as an example seven or eight year olds learning to do arithmetic and perhaps meeting

*in language*