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CHILDHOOD MULTILINGUALISM: CONTRIBUTIONS OF VYGOTSKY AND SHCHERBA

Дитячий мультилінгвізм: внесок Л. Виготського і Л. Щерби

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Abstract

This work presents reflections on childhood multilingualism and child development. We reviewed the works of two Belarusian authors: Lev Semionovitch Vygotsky and Lev Vladimirovitch Shcherba. As a result, we indicate the relevance of the dialogue between psychology and linguistics. Vygotsky wrote the text “K voprosu o mnogoiazitchii v detskom vozraste” (“The Question of Multilingual Children”) between 1928 and 1929. Shcherba wrote Metodika: k voprossu o dvuieztichii (Methodology: On the question of bilingualism) in 1930. Both texts became sources of our bibliographical research. By approaching Vygotsky and Shcherba’s works, we highlight the complexity and breadth of childhood multilingualism.

Key words: *childhood multilingualism, Vygotsky, Shcherba, multilingual education, Child development.*

Introduction

Вступ

Multilingualism is a phenomenon present in social and scientific domains. It attracts the interest of researchers from different areas. Research findings point to the advantages and disadvantages of childhood multilingualism. Some researchers argue that children who know two or more languages can gain a cognitive, academic, and social edge over monolinguals. However, other researchers believe that early childhood multilingualism can cause language delay and psychological developmental delay (King & Mackey, 2007).

Thus, multilingualism is a broad and complex field and definite answers are not available yet. Furthermore, some issues are difficult to define due to the differences between families, communities and cultures that have been studied. While we were looking for publications on the subject, we came across two Belarusian authors: Lev Semionovitch Vigotski (1896 – 1934) and Lev Vladimirovitch Shcherba (1880 – 1944). Therefore, we suggest an analysis of childhood multilingualism based on the dialogue between psychology and linguistics.

Methods and Techniques of the Research *Методи і методики дослідження*

This work grew out of a bibliographical research in which we analyzed childhood multilingualism studies. With this purpose, the texts of Vygotsky and Shcherba became our research sources.

The writings of Vygotsky and Shcherba became popular outside Russia in different times and formats. Vygotsky's writings were banned in the Soviet Union and only became available in the West in the 1960's. This fact contributed to cuts and editorial interference in his work, which led to distortions and misinterpretations of his thought. In Brazil, most of the works that we study were translated from English into Portuguese, with significant cuts and distortions on the part of the organizers (Prestes, 2010). Shcherba's writings were also controlled by Stalinism. Even though Shcherba was an outstanding linguist, his work seems to have been restricted mainly to Russia and other Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan and to some European countries, as Switzerland.

Vygotsky's theoretical contribution to our research comes from his text *K voprosu o mnogoiazitchii v detskom vozraste* (The question of Multilingual Children). He wrote it between 1928 and 1929, but it was published without some excerpts in 1981. In 2004, Eksmo (a Muscovite publisher) printed the article in the book *Psirrologiia razvitiia rebionka* (Psychology of Child Development). In 2021, the text was published in Brazil in the book *Psicologia, Educação e Desenvolvimento: Escritos de L. S. Vigotski* (Psychology, Education and Development: Writings by L.S. Vygotsky). The Brazilian edition was translated and organized by Prestes and Tunes.

Believing in the contribution of Shcherba's principles to the multilingualism theme, we translated the text *Metodika: k voprossu o dvuieizitchii* (Methodology: On the issue of bilingualism). In 1930, the "Əлəngə" Magazine published this article in the Uzbek language. In 1974, the text was published in the book *Iazikovaia sistema i retchevaia deiatelnost* (The linguistic system and the speech activity). In 2017, we translated and published Shcherba's text in Brazil as part of our Master's Thesis.

Results *Результати*

Despite having been written more than a century ago, the texts by the two authors reinforce the importance of research on multilingualism. Based on analyzes of some antagonistic studies that point out the advantages and disadvantages for multilingual children, Vygotsky brought on debate ideas that might collaborate with research on teaching foreign languages to children. Similarly, Shcherba aimed to draw readers' attention to the issue of bilingualism in the Soviet Union. He highlighted important reflections on the concept and types of bilingualism.

According to Vigotsky (2021), the context of immigrants or foreigners who face the need to master two or more languages evidence the phenomenon of multilingualism. As well as multilingual countries and families, that send their children to bilingual schools. Shcherba (1974) added that there are bilingual situations in which one language is used in family life and the other in social life. For him, there are relationships a little more complex, for example, intermarriages between people belonging to different language groups when each parent speaks a distinct language to the children. Nowadays, a well-known approach used with children who are acquiring two languages simultaneously is for each parent to use his or her own language with their child. The strategy is known as one person–one language strategy (OPOL). Vygotsky (2021) mentioned Jules Ronjat, a French linguist, who had a German wife and they wanted to bring up their son bilingual. Thus, Ronjat would always speak French to Louis, and his wife German, without ever reversing the pattern.

Speaking of being multilingual in childhood, Vygotsky considers it as one of the most complex and intricate question in modern psychology. Vygotsky argued that childhood multilingualism is a broad phenomenon and that it deserves attention. Researchers should take into account observations of speech development in children.

The influence of the mother tongue in the second language learning is only a part of a more complex and broader question that includes studies on speech development in children within all the richness of the psychological content that is usually included in this concept. All the child's speech development, not just the purity of his mother tongue, all intellectual development of the child and, finally, the development of character and emotional development reflects the direct influence of speech.

Shcherba (1974) defined bilingualism as the ability of certain populations groups to explain themselves in two languages. Being a bilingual means being a representative of several societies. In "pure bilingualism", social groups use two different languages completely isolated from each other. For example, children use one language at school, but they speak another language at home, as their parents do not understand the language they

study at school. In the second type, called “mixed bilingualism”, people constantly switch from one language to the other and sometimes use one or the other, without realizing which one they are using at that moment. For Shcherba, in this second type of bilingualism, to a certain degree, the two languages are mixed.

We note that both authors reflected on the antagonistic perspectives regarding multilingualism that prevailed among scholars at that time. The researchers with whom Vygotsky (2021) dialogued encompassed different perspectives on multilingualism research. Some of them conducted investigations involving tests and observations of their own children, such as Pavlovitch, Folts and Ronjat. Others author, as Sepp, Epstein and Hents, analyzed pathological disorders polyglots faced as speech delay and thought disorder. Vygotsky criticized their radical empiricism. Likewise, Shcherba (1974) denounced that the antagonistic ideas at that time overshadowed the importance of the formative advantage of bilingualism and, especially, of mixed bilingualism. The linguist argued that comparing two languages, which takes place in mixed bilingualism, allows the improvement of language awareness. Shcherba said that researches considering bilingualism as harmful were extremely insignificant in number and their ratings were related only to pure bilingualism.

In addition, the linguist warned that any impediment in relation to the foreign language because of the mother tongue influence is inevitable and does not represent anything else, that is, it is a natural challenge in foreign language learning. Vygotsky (2021) also addressed this issue of the deviation in language acquisition. Experimental psychology called it associative inhibition. In contrast to Epstein’s negative research results, Vygotsky presented Stern’s opinion. Stern argued that the deviation between languages might serve as a powerful factor that drives the child to mental acts, to the comparison and differentiation activity, to become aware of the volume and limits of concepts, to the understanding of delicate nuances in the words meaning.

Analyzing Shcherba and Vygotsky’s studies, we see that both highlighted the importance of pedagogical action in the process of learning two languages simultaneously. According to Shcherba, the comparative analysis of languages is particularly important in teaching a foreign language in multilingual contexts. The linguist highlighted that people who do not experience bilingual contexts have to create bilingual situations artificially. That is, children should learn foreign languages at bilingual schools. The linguist also emphasized the importance of mixed bilingualism from an educational point of view. Similarly, Vygotsky (2021) highlighted the peculiarity of child development when the child learn two or more languages at once. The author emphasized the importance of teaching approaches in multilingual education and indicated the current need for investigations about teaching a foreign language to children and its relationship with child development.

Finally, we understand that the works of Vygotsky and Shcherba encourage us to continue with the discussion regarding the object of multilingualism in the child development process.

Conclusions

Висновки

For the study of childhood multilingualism, the dialogue between the conceptions of Vygotsky and Shcherba becomes fundamental. The reflections addressed here highlight the remarkable contribution of the studies of both Belarusian researchers and the complexity and breadth of current issues in childhood multilingualism.

Both authors criticized some research related to multilingualism. While Shcherba considered that studies as a mistake, Vygotsky reproved the inconsistency of the surveys. Vygotsky and Shcherba developed their studies at the beginning of the 20th century, but their ideas remain up to date with the discussion of childhood multilingualism. We believe that the reflections presented by them provide us with a theoretical basis for future research.

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