Vygotsky, Sign Language, and the Education of Deaf Pupils

Galina Zaitseva
Pedagogical University, Moscow

Michael Pursglove
University of Exeter

Susan Gregory
University of Birmingham

This article considers the impact of Vygotsky on the education of deaf children in Russia and is a translation/adaptation of an article currently being published in *Defektologiia*. While Vygotsky perceived sign language as limited in some aspects, nevertheless, he always considered that it had a role in the education of deaf pupils. He believed that sign language should not be "treated like an the enemy" and said that "bilingualism of deaf people is an objective reality." However, sign language was banned from Russian schools following a conference decision in 1938. The changing political climate in Russia has lead to the reevaluation of many aspects of life, including approaches to education, and to a reassessment of Vygotsky's ideas and an appreciation of their continuing relevance. Among other things, this has resulted in a reevaluation of the role of sign language for deaf pupils and an emerging interest in sign bilingualism.

In 1996, the centenary of Lev Vygotsky's birth was observed by the academic community throughout the world. A number of conferences were held, including those in Brighton, Geneva, and Hamburg. This stimulated a reassessment of the legacy of this outstanding Russian psychologist and his theories relating to education, history, and culture.

Vygotsky began work in the field of special educational needs at the beginning of the 1920s. At that time the majority of deaf schools in America, in Europe, and in post–Revolutionary Russia used the oral method. In the 1920s, following the lead of N. M. Lagovsky and other distinguished teachers of the deaf, Vygotsky had a highly skeptical attitude to sign language. While he accepted that sign language was the natural language of deaf people, he nevertheless considered it to be a primitive, impoverished, and limited language that never aspired to "abstract concepts and ideas . . . condemning deaf people to a total lack of development" (Vygotsky, 1983, p. 78).1 At that time, the "manual approach," in which sign language was one of the basic methods of instruction together with speech, was judged by Vygotsky to be unacceptable.

Vygotsky was, however, to develop reservations about the oral method. In his opinion it failed because teaching language2 through this approach was ineffective since it "diverts attention from all other aspects of education and becomes an end in itself" (1983, p. 215). In such circumstances the acquisition of spoken language, by taking up too much time and by becoming rote learning (a chore) for the deaf child, has disastrous consequences (p. 54). For deaf people, spoken language "plays almost no part in their development and is not a tool they can use to accumulate cultural experience or to participate in social life" (p. 323). Secretly children communicate through sign language and "teachers have to act as policemen and seek out and remonstrate with those pupils who are resorting to sign language" (p. 80). Thus, even at this stage, Vygotsky was acknowledging that sign language is a natural means of inter-

This is an edited and adapted version of an article entitled "Dialog s L. S. Vygotskim o problemakh sovremennoi pedagogiki," which is to be published in a forthcoming issue of *Defektologiia*. It is published here by permission of that journal and the original author, Professor Galina Zaitseva of the Moscow Pedagogical University, Director of the Moscow Bilingual School for the Deaf. Correspondence should be sent to Susan Gregory, School of Education, University of Birmingham, Birmingham B15 2TT, England (e-mail: s.gregory@bham.ac.uk).

personal communication among deaf people and, as a result, one of the means of acquiring social experience. Neither the oral method nor the manual method was thus totally acceptable. What then was the solution to this "truly tragic problem of deaf education" (p. 79)?

Vygotsky was to have less than 10 years to search for an answer to this problem. Theoretical research, analysis of practice in Russian and foreign schools, and experimental studies in the laboratory at the medical teaching center of the Ministry of Education led him to devise a fundamentally new methodological approach to the problem. His conception, based on his historico-cultural theory, derives from the following main interconnected ideas:

1. the significance of the social as well as the physical aspects of deafness,
2. the acknowledgment of the important role of language and communication in the development of the child,
3. the recognition of the role of language in the development of the child's higher psychological functions and the necessity for the inclusion of sign language, alongside written/spoken language, in the linguistic activity of deaf children,
4. the assertion that bilingualism is "an unavoidable and highly productive path of language development and education" in the deaf child (Vygotsky, 1983, p. 217), and
5. the inevitability "of a multiplicity of paths of language development" in deaf children and a need for a range of approaches in their education, including a study of questions of "collective cooperation" with hearing children (p. 218).

By the end of the 1930s, the approach to deaf education that Vygotsky had proposed was further developed by his pupils. Vygotsky's conception and the results of research by R. M. Boskis and N. G. Morozova (1939) formed the basis of decisions taken at the 1938 conference that put an end to the de facto domination of the oral method in Russian deaf schools. At this conference, while the spoken and written forms of the language were acknowledged as fundamental, sign language, as well as fingerspelling, were acknowledged as auxiliary means in the educational process. However, further research in this direction soon ended, and Vygotsky's ideas were not fully implemented within deaf education in the years that followed. Educationalists' appeals "to Vygotsky," which have become so widespread in recent decades, have been so selective that they not only frequently failed to reflect his views but also frequently contradicted his basic ideas.

The publication in 1950 of Stalin's notorious work *Marxism and Questions of Linguistics* made the situation in deaf education worse. The "Coryphaeus" of linguistics asserted that deaf people were without language and therefore abnormal and that their manual language was "not even a surrogate language" (Stalin, 1950, p. 40). There soon followed a revision of the decisions of the 1938 conference (though officially they have not been rescinded to this day); sign language began to be removed from schools (it was not, after all, even a surrogate language!). For many years there was simply no research carried out based on proper experimental data. The very name of Vygotsky became taboo, his works were not republished, and many of his important ideas were kept from the new generation of researchers. Unfortunately, it must be admitted that echoes of *Marxism and Questions of Linguistics* are still apparent in deaf education in Russia today.

Nevertheless, current developments in contemporary Russian society and scientific thought reflect the views first put forward by Vygotsky. Attitudes have changed substantially; society is now viewed as a conglomeration of different communities (cultural, religious, linguistic, and so on). It is acknowledged that each of them is, in theory at least, entitled to its own way of life. As Vygotsky said (1983, p. 72), the very concept of "defectiveness" is a social concept, a "sign of the difference" between the behavior of deaf or blind people and that of other people, and is gradually receding from public consciousness. The deaf person is no longer obliged (if he or she does not wish it) "to be the same as hearing people." According to Vygotsky's theory, the pattern of a child's development depends above all on the nature of society's development, since "the higher psychological functions of the child, the higher characteristics, specific to humans, arise originally as forms of collaboration with other people and only subsequently become internal individual functions of the child itself" (Vygotsky, 1996a, p. 95). The changes that have occurred in the culture itself, which, according to

Vygotsky, is the source of the development of higher psychological functions, have given rise to the formation of new relationships between the "hearing majority" and the "deaf minority." This attitude toward the Deaf community, as toward other cultural and linguistic minorities, has coincided with a recognition by many countries of the status of sign languages and the right of deaf people to be educated through the medium of sign language. In countries such as Norway, France, Sweden, and others, this right is reinforced by the law.

The adoption of similar measures by national parliaments, the European parliament, and UNESCO was a direct consequence of two basic (and interconnected) factors: the struggle by national associations and by the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) for the civil rights of deaf people and the findings of contemporary linguistic and psycholinguistic research into sign language (World Federation of the Deaf, 1993). A significant movement against discrimination is developing among Deaf communities as part of a process of change in the self-awareness of deaf people and the identification of themselves as members of the Deaf community. This was reflected especially in the victory of the "revolution" among students and staff at Gallaudet University, when in 1988 they succeeded in ensuring the selection of a deaf president (Rector) who knew sign language (Gallaudet in the news, 1988). It was also reflected in official WFD documents, for example, resolutions concerning the status of sign language and WFD policy in the sphere of sign language (Status of Sign Language, 1993). In their struggle for the recognition of sign language, for the right to receive their education in sign language, deaf people have used the latest research into sign language, the basic ideas of which were anticipated in the later works of Vygotsky.

The attitude of Vygotsky to sign language had changed by the beginning of the 1930s. He concluded that the sign language of deaf people is a complex language with its own syntax, a "very richly developed language" (Vygotsky, 1996a, p. 91) fully capable of expressing different abstract concepts, including ideas, thoughts, and facts of a socio-political nature. (1983, p. 216). Sign language was seen as "a genuine language with all the richness of function of such a language" (1983, p. 215). According to Vygotsky, it is not only a means of interpersonal communication among deaf people but also a means of "inner thought in the child himself/herself" (1996b, p. 95).

However, from the point of view of Vygotsky, sign language, unlike written/spoken language, was not a complete (ideal) language with the full range of linguistic properties. A full language can be defined as language encountered from birth and internalized by the individual as part of the process of development (Zinchenko 1996, p. 9). Vygotsky assumed that deaf children, together with their social group, create sign language (at no point did he discuss the situation of deaf children of deaf parents where sign language could be the language of the home and thus their mother tongue). Vygotsky did not consider that sign language existed independently, and thus in the absence of full linguistic properties, its use by deaf children could be of a limited and restricted nature (1996a, p. 91). Therefore, he saw it as essential that there should be an interaction between the first language (sign language) and the dominant language of society (written/spoken language), the result of which was bilingualism. According to Vygotsky, "The bilingualism of deaf people is an objective reality, and education cannot close its eyes to the fact that, by driving sign language out from the permitted means of communication between deaf children, a huge part of their social life and activity is destroyed" (1983, pp. 217–218). Vygotsky saw the denial of sign language as restricting the general intellectual development of deaf children; that "which we take away from deaf children in communication will also be deficient in their thinking process" (1983, p. 215).

In reassessing the traditional attitude toward sign language, Vygotsky maintained that it was necessary to "exploit all the possibilities for linguistic activity in the deaf child, not taking a loftily contemptuous view of sign language and not treating it like an enemy." We must therefore consider the question, both in theory and in practice, of "how sign language and spoken written language are to used in conjunction" at different stages of teaching (Vygotsky, 1983, p. 218).

Thus, Vygotsky reconsidered the whole issue of sign language, defining the essence of its linguistic structure and evaluating the role of sign language in the communicative and cognitive activity of deaf people and its place in the educational system. It is important

to note that in the 1930s there were extremely few facts available about sign language, and there was an almost complete absence of experimental data. What is the current status of Vygotsky's ideas? Data from numerous research projects on national sign languages carried out in recent decades in many countries of the world confirm Vygotsky's views. It has been demonstrated that every national sign language is a unique system, distinguished by its own unique lexicon and by highly complex syntax (Zaitseva, 1995). However, while Vygotsky believed that sign languages were created on an ad hoc basis between small groups of children, it is now known that national sign languages exist and are handed on from generation to generation. (It should be noted that the process of acquisition of sign language by deaf children has been subject to detailed study for a number of different sign languages, (see, for example, Volterra and Erting, 1990).

This finding is totally applicable to Russian Sign Language (RSL) as well. In the Russia of the early twentieth century, sign language not only served as a means of informal communication among deaf people but was also used in official situations, in public speeches, and so forth (Skripov, 1996, p. 27). However, in recent years the role of sign language has grown immeasurably. The growth of deaf awareness and the new status of national sign languages have given rise to a significant increase in their use. If previously sign language was used by deaf people in unofficial circumstances, today sign languages have become the working languages of academic and other conferences in which deaf people participate. Deaf parliamentarians make speeches in their national sign language, there are television broadcasts for deaf people, and so on. This has substantially enriched the lexicon of sign languages; signs that denote various political, scientific, and other concepts now constitute a crucial part of their vocabulary. International academic conferences for deaf researchers, in which the only working languages are sign languages, now take place—a new phenomenon, which Vygotsky did not encounter.

However, the recognition of sign languages as a complete language like the written/spoken language, strengthens the position of its advocates even more and is a powerful argument in favor of the use of sign language in the education of deaf children. Supporters of Total Communication and of bilingual teaching—two contemporary systems of teaching deaf children—can certainly be considered as following in the steps of Vygotsky.

At the present time, teachers in many countries are occupied with research into bilingualism, including the staff of the Moscow Bilingual School for the Deaf, which was opened in 1992. It would not be correct to see the creation of a Russian approach to bilingual education and the opening of the school as a simple adoption of Western ideas and educational models into Russia. The appearance of an alternative educational system has been a natural stage in the development of deaf education in the new, post-1991, political environment in Russia. Contacts between Russian deaf people, teachers of the deaf, and researchers into deaf education have increased to a level that would have been unthinkable in Soviet times.

The basis of Soviet deaf education and, consequently, the development of the content, methods, and so forth of the educational process were formulated in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. These were a new approach to deaf education based on different degrees of hearing loss (R. M. Boskis), the setting up and development of systems for teaching Russian that took account of the special development of deaf pupils (S. A. Zykov and others) together with hard-of-hearing pupils (R. M. Boskis, K. G. Korovin, A. G. Zikeev, and others), the creation of an original system for the development of spoken language (F. F. Rau, N. F. Slezina, and others), and for using the residual hearing of deaf people (E. P. Kuz'micheva and others). The developments in these areas, the publication of relevant literature, and the training and professional development of teachers facilitated the adoption of research into school practice.

However, by the mid-1980s, the concepts underlying this approach to the education of deaf children started to be challenged. In the climate of openness of that time, *glasnost,* virtually all aspects of Soviet life, political, cultural, historical, and educational, were subject to question. The main drawback of the Soviet system—its monolithic nature—became apparent. Soviet deaf education was based on the assumption (which reflects aspects of Soviet science at the time) of a dominant role for the written/spoken language, mainly for the spoken language. Alongside this, the stated aim—

the all-round development of deaf children—remained nothing more than a declaration of intent, insofar as the main focus of attention in schools was devoted not to the personality of the child but the formation of his or her written/spoken language. However, the level of acquisition of the Russian language (both oral and written form) in the majority of children passing through special schools remained low (Koltunenko, 1994; Zaitseva, 1992a; and others). Many of them had high intellectual potential but experienced huge difficulties in the acquisition of the written/spoken language, especially the spoken form, and found themselves disadvantaged. Their access to information was extremely limited, and they were not able to realize their creative potential when the basic means used in the educational process was spoken language. By the same token such pupils could not fully avail themselves of their right to an education equal to that of their hearing contemporaries. Thus, the basic conclusions promulgated by Vygotsky in the early 1930s were still relevant: "[T]he demands made for the speech development of the deaf child in present conditions cannot be fulfilled" and therefore "the main part of the problem cannot be considered solved—the part which concerns the link between the linguistic development and general development of the deaf child" (1983, p. 329).

Of course, some deaf pupils can be successfully taught using the traditional system, which must be constantly reviewed in the light of developments in new technology. At the same time other approaches need to be developed, for example, Vygotsky's idea about the important role of sign language in the education of deaf children. These views are currently being revisited in deaf education in Russia (Vygotsky, 1994). Research has shown that deaf pupils with a fluent grasp of RSL understand, process, and remember information communicated to them via RSL substantially better than information communicated orally. (Rozanova, 1978; Zaitseva, 1992a, 1992b; and others). Furthermore, it has become clear that in the overwhelming majority of special schools teachers often ignore the directive that only the written/spoken language can be used in formal work with children. Sign language is widely used not only in extracurricular activities but also in lessons (Zaitseva, 1992a, p. 93).

Thus, the theoretical work of Vygotsky, current research, the situation in deaf education in Russia, and Russian traditions have led to the creation of a Russian model of sign bilingual education. The changes in education, together with state and public support for innovative projects, created the opportunity to open the Moscow Bilingual School in 1992. The task was as follows: to create the most favorable possible environment for the expression and development of the abilities and creative potential of the deaf pupils and to facilitate the development of a positive deaf identity. Sign bilingualism "is an approach to the education of deaf children in which the language of the Deaf community and the language of the hearing community are used" (Pickersgill & Gregory, 1998). In the Russian context, this assumes the functioning of Russian and RSL as means of communication of equal status between deaf and hearing members of the school: children, teachers, parents. This approach ensures conditions whereby the school takes the child as the main focus of the educational process in as much as it takes into account the child's special educational needs, including the role of sign language in the life of the Deaf community.

However, the use of sign language in education has created a number of problems. One of them is the need to raise substantially the level of sign language competence in the hearing teachers. To this end the school has devised and put into practice a special RSL training program, taught by deaf teachers, for teachers (and also for parents and other family members). It should be noted that the children, too, take great pleasure in this work by taking on the role of consultants and instructors. The second problem is to define the roles of Russian and RSL and the place of spoken language in the educational process. This problem has become the subject for research by all the teachers at the school, both hearing and deaf (Goroshkov, 1996; Limina, 1996; and others.). Deaf teachers at the school, who have a fluent grasp of both Russian and RSL, are responsible for literature, mathematics, biology, sign language, and other subjects. In addition to their key role as teachers, they also act as role models. Close and friendly cooperation between deaf and hearing teachers and the inclusion of sign language in the educational process help to eliminate communication difficulties and to establish good relationships between adults and pupils. The aim is to address both thinking and feeling, to give signifi-

cance to the social and emotional development of the pupils because "the emotional aspect of the personality has no less significance than the other aspects and is the subject and concern of education, just as much as mind and will" (Vygotsky, 1996b, p. 106). Dialogue between teacher and pupil in lessons, using sign language, allows for a significant increase in the scope of educational information and enables the delivery of a broad curriculum, including English and Sign Language. This has resulted in a shortening of the usual basic education period for deaf pupils from 12 years to 10 years.

Experience from various countries around the world, including Russia, gives grounds for asserting that bilingual education is effective for many deaf pupils. This experience informed much of the discussion at the conference on bilingual education of deaf children, held in Moscow in April 1996, and attended by delegates from 15 countries. This confirms Vygotsky's position when he said that "the maximum use of all types of language accessible to the deaf child is an essential condition for the radical improvement of the education of deaf children" (1983, p. 218). Contemporary theory and practice of education also confirm a further assertion of Vygotsky's that concerns the multiplicity of ways of language development in deaf children and the necessity for a "range of approaches" to their teaching and education (p. 330).

This discussion of Vygotsky's views, and their relevance to the problems of contemporary deaf education, points to the following conclusions. Today, the whole education system in post–Communist Russia is searching for a new paradigm, and the education of children with special needs is no exception. The road to its creation lies not so much in the invention of the New as in a rethinking of the Old. Educating deaf children requires a multiplicity of approaches, development, cooperation, and mutual recognition. They should be guaranteed equal state support and public recognition. Only then will parents, fully in possession of information, receive a guaranteed right of choice, while children, as they grow up, will be able to choose their own lifestyle, and find their place with respect to the deaf and hearing communities. Society itself, in its attitude to people with disabilities, must change. Therefore, one of the main aims must be the "re-education of society," something that as early as 1924 Vygotsky viewed as a "social issue of the utmost importance" (1983, p. 78).

Notes

1. References to the work of Vygotsky are the the Russian editions cited. All translations are the work of the authors. Readers may be interested to note that there is an English translation of the 1983 Vygotsky: R. W. Rieber and A. S. Carton (Eds.), (1993), *The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky,* Volume 2, *The Fundamentals of Defectology.* Translated by J. E. Knox and C. B. Stevens. London: Plenum.

2. In most instances, we have translated the contentious *rech'* (which may be translated either as "speech," implying in this context, "oral speech," or, more generally, "language") as "language." The adjective derived from it, *rechevoi,* has been rendered as "linguistic."

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