

Learning through A. A. Milne's Winnie the Pooh Books

Sibila Ramakrishnan

In writing *Winnie-the-Pooh* and *The House at Pooh Corner*, even though A. A. Milne's intentions are didactic, he plays along with the child in them, i.e. his son, and his intentions get concealed in the pleasure of storytelling. The resultant literature leaves space for interpretations of the text based on the child's cognition and learning because of Milne's realistic portrayal of children's minds through his characters. One of the possible explanations for the origin of the Pooh books is that Christopher Robin, as a child actually, fully or partially, lived these tales during his playtime, and his tropes and games with his toys were thematically represented and narrated by Milne. He explains this in his autobiography, *It's too Late now*:

The animals in the stories came for the most part from the nursery. My collaborator (his wife) had already given them individual voices, their owner by constant affection had given them the twist in their features which denotes character, and Shepard drew them, as one might say, from the living model. They were what they are for anyone to see; I described rather than invented them. Only Rabbit and Owl were my own unaided work. (Milne, 1964, p. 9)

The child in these stories has animal toys which interact with him, which means that the child made up these stories, gave roles to his toys and then played out those roles to amuse himself. A closer look at this would

explain how the ground is prepared in the child's brain to build up his rationale. A story or a play essentially comprises a set of characters, a plot and a setting. In the context of the Pooh stories, Christopher Robin and his toys were the characters and the Forest, the Hundred Acre Wood, was the setting. Christopher Robin invented a plot which involved a series of events with a central motif that was developed during the course of the story. Such ideas generally originated either from a real life experience—personal or otherwise—or an acquired idea.

Essentially, the child selected what he was interested in from his environment, and applied his creativity to it. So if one story is about a bear and some bees, the next one is about say, Wozzles and Wizzles, or a Heffalump hunt, or an expedition to the North Pole, or a flood, and finally, even parting from friends features as a motif in the stories. Many of these topics are clearly inspired from introduced ideas rather than ones noticed or chanced upon by the child himself. The factors that go into the molding of these ideas into stories reveal the mechanism involved in a child's cognition.

The works of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky gave the researcher the framework for explaining the story-making and the character-building processes in the Pooh books. It is evident that in addition to Christopher Robin, the other characters such as the toys are also considered as children and interpreted on the same level.

In the essay “*The Social Origins of Self-Regulation*” jointly written by Rafael M Diaz, Cynthia J Neal, and Marina Amaya-Williams, Lev Vygotsky’s development theory is used to describe how basic, “biologically determined processes” transform or develop into “higher psychological functions” (1990, p.135). They find that:

According to the theory, the human child is endowed by nature with a wide range of perceptual, attentional, and memory capacities, such as the capacity to perceive contrast and movement, the capacity for eidetic memory, and arousal or habituation responses to environmental stimuli, to name a few. Such basic processes (also referred to as by Vygotsky as “biological,” “natural,” or “elementary”), however are substantially transformed in the context of socialization and education, particularly through the use of language, to constitute the higher psychological functions or the unique form of human cognition. (1990, p.135)

In the story “In Which Pooh and Piglet go Hunting and Nearly Catch a Woozle”, Pooh and Piglet were presumably tracking the paw marks of a Woozle, but they came to know at the end of the story that they were in fact tracking their own paw marks (Milne, 1977, p. 54). The initial hunt thus happened because of a lack of familiarity with themselves as they could not identify their own tracks, which were a part and extension of their identity. The way in which they learn the truth about the marks illustrates the progressive stages in learning—from simple biological processes such as perception through the senses (vision, in this case) to higher psychological processes (understanding or learning).

Vygotsky stresses on the importance of language in the cognitive development of a human being. According to Vygotsky, beyond a point, language for children is not just a means to communicate, but it helps to “guide, plan, and monitor their activity” (1990, p. 135). From this initial stage where a child studies his surroundings using language (although just for labelling), he reaches a stage where language or speech starts to precede the activity of the child thereby enabling him to plan his activity. In the story, “In Which Piglet Meets a Heffalump” Pooh explains to Piglet his plan to catch a Heffalump by trapping him in a “Very Deep Pit”. Piglet replies that it was a “cunning trap”. The ensuing conversation shows that here the characters are thinking strictly in line with the spoken words and not about the practical success of what they are planning to do. The following passage illustrates the “sequential processing” of independent elements required by speech, as opposed to the integral processing of independent elements in a visual field during visual perception (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 33):

Pooh was very proud when he heard this, and he felt that the Heffalump was as good as caught already, but there was just one other thing which had to be thought about, and it was this. *Where should they dig the Very Deep Pit?*

Piglet said that the best place would be somewhere where a Heffalump was, just before he fell into it, only about a foot further on. (Milne, 1977, p. 80)

Pooh and Piglet made this plan sequentially, processing it only in terms of speech, and not in terms of a visual space and hence failed to figure out a strategic place to dig the pit. Thus for Pooh and Piglet, language becomes a tool of thought that enables them to plan their activity.

An example to demonstrate meaning-making process in Winnie the Pooh is the broken wooden board outside Piglet's house which says "Trespassers W". Piglet explains the words on the board saying that they were the names of his grandfather and uncle respectively. Jonathan Tudge, in his essay "Vygotsky, the Zone of Proximal Development, and Peer Collaboration: Implications for Classroom Practice", said that Vygotsky had indicated of "a seemingly teleological view of the developmental process, a process in which children come to be socialized into the dominant culture" (1990, p. 157). For the English, to have a display board with one's name in front of the house is a common practice. Piglet obviously explained the board in front of his house in the Hundred Acre Wood on the same premise, thereby normalizing a broken board that held his address. He also justified having two names by pointing out that Christopher Robin also had two names. "Thus language, a tool of immense power, ensures that linguistically created meanings are shared meanings, social meanings" (Tudge, 1990, p. 157).

Ronald Gallimore and Ronald Tharpe in their essay, "Teaching Mind in Society: Teaching, Schooling, and Literate Discourse" state that "Word meaning is the stuff of verbal thinking. It also resides in the community of language users," (1990, p. 193). They further elucidate the term "word" as explained by Vygotsky:

It refers to both vocabulary and discourse competencies, which develop in the context of social use in joint activity... these signs and symbols take on new and shared meanings, as they are hallowed by use during joint productive activity. The social meanings of words are internalized by individuals through self-directed

speech, taken underground, and stripped down to the lightning of thought. (1990, p. 193)

In the story "In Which Rabbit has a Busy day, and we Learn What Christopher Robin Does in the Mornings", Milne deals explicitly with the theme of learning to read and write. The note that Christopher Robin leaves on his door when he goes missing from the Hundred Acre Wood in the morning says:

GON OUT

BACKSON

BISY

BACKSON

C.R. (Milne, 1956, p. 42)

The word "Backson", misspelt by Christopher Robin was actually "back soon", but Rabbit and Owl assumed that Backson was a person or something with whom Christopher Robin had gone away. Once he returned to the forest after that day's lessons, he changed "Backson" to "back soon". This can be read in relation with Tudge's observation, "Words that already have meaning for mature members of a cultural group come to have those same meanings for the young of the group in the process of interaction" (1990, p. 157).

A major part of the research done by both Piaget and Vygotsky strongly suggests that "children come to learn adult meanings, behaviours, and technologies in the process of collaboration" (Tudge, 1990, p. 156). One of the most widely recognized and well-known ideas of Vygotsky—the zone of proximal development (ZPD), introduced in his *Mind in Society*—is defined as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem

solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (1978, p. 86).

By considering the characters in the stories as peers, the point about problem solving with the help of more capable peers can be explained. In the story “In which Tigger comes to the Forest and has Breakfast”, Tigger comes to the Hundred Acre Wood one morning with not much knowledge about himself. Although he believed that Tiggers eat everything, it turned out that he did not like honey, haycorns or thistles, all of which were offered to him by his peers Pooh, Piglet and Eeyore to help him figure out what he could have for breakfast. Eventually, he had the extract of malt, which was Roo's strengthening medicine and he decided that's what Tiggers like (Milne, 1956, p. 29-30).

Piaget in *The Language and Thought of the Child* explains how exchange of ideas between a child and his/her peers occurs mostly through conversations. Since this is made possible through language, this becomes an easily observable and understandable learning process in children. According to Piaget, “the egocentric child assumes that other people see, hear and feel exactly the same as the child does” (1955, p.113-114).

Children, while telling a story or giving an explanation for something, seldom convey it in the right order. They assume that the order of events in the story is somehow understood by the listener beforehand or by default (Piaget, 1955, p. 122). To illustrate this, a scene from “In Which Eeyore has a Birthday and gets Two Presents” will be helpful. Pooh visits Eeyore on his birthday, and finds him in a very gloomy state. Their conversation goes:

“Why, what's the matter?”

“Nothing, Pooh Bear, nothing. We can't

all, and some of us don't. That's all there is to it.”

“Can't all *what*?” said Pooh, rubbing his nose.

“Gaiety. Song-and-dance. Here we go round the mulberry bush.”

...It sounded to him (Pooh) like a riddle... (Milne, 1977, p. 102)

Eeyore does not bother to put his thoughts in order for Pooh. He talks in bits and pieces and expects Pooh to put them together coherently and Pooh actually thinks of it as a riddle. The explanation given for this by Piaget is that the explainer in such cases speaks for himself rather than for the listener, an effect of egocentrism.

Inventing is an important part of conversation-making and understanding in children because very often they depend on this method to fill in “the gaps by inventing in all good faith” (Piaget, 1955, p. 139), both when they communicate and when they remember something elaborate. Piaget links this phenomenon with ego-centrism to reach the conclusion that:

It is because he is still egocentric and feels no desire either to communicate with others or to understand them that the child is able to invent as the spirit moves him, and to make so light of the objectivity of his utterances. (Piaget, 1955, p. 139)

In the story “In Which Pooh and Piglet go Hunting and Nearly Catch a Woozle”, Piglet invents an animal named Woozle since they are unable to identify the original animal whose pawmarks they were tracking. Pooh even goes on to ascribe a mysterious trait to the Woozle saying that one never can tell if it's a Woozle simply by looking at the pawmarks. Later when they find a different

set of pawmarks going alongside the first set, Pooh invents another animal named Wizzle. In this way, both of them try to fill in the missing pieces in their story to complete their adventure.

While investigating certain aspects of the Pooh stories through this paper, I got an insight into how imagination works in children and how a base is built for the development of language in a child. I also observed that narratives in the form of stories and poems were excellent tools for imparting knowledge. Personalized stories give children an added advantage by helping them to expand their horizons by filling their mental world with more details.

References

- Diaz, R. M., Neal, C. J. & Amaya-Williams, M. (1990). The social origins of self-regulation. In L. C. Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology* (pp. 127-154). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gallimore, R. & Tharp, R. (1990). Teaching mind in society: Teaching, schooling, and literate discourse. In L. C. Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology* (pp. 175-205). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Milne, A. A. (1956). *The House at Pooh Corner*. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd.
- Milne, A. A. (1977). *Winnie-the-Pooh*. London: Methuen Children's Books.
- Milne, A. A. (1964). *It's too late now: The autobiography of a writer*. London: Methuen & Co., Ltd.
- Moll, L. C. (1990). *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Piaget, J. (1955). *The language and thought of the child*. New York: Meridian Books.
- Tudge, J. (1990). Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development, and peer collaboration: Implications for classroom practice. In L. C. Moll (Ed.), *Vygotsky and education: Instructional implications and applications of sociohistorical psychology* (pp. 155-174). Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Sibila Ramakrishnan has a Masters degree in English Literature from the University of Hyderabad. Her research interest lies in English Language Teaching, children's literature, and learning through narratives.

sibila.ramakrishnan@gmail.com