

*In the Name of God,  
The All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate*

Ministry of Science, Research and Technology



**Allameh Mohaddes Nouri University**

(Non-Governmental, Non-Profit)

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**A Vygotskian Perspective on Teachers' Zone of Proximal Development  
(TZPD) in an EFL Context**

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FACULTY OF ECONOMICS AND ADMINISTRATIVE SCIENCES**

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*WE HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT THIS THESIS*

*BY:*

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*ENTITLED:*

*A Vygotskian Perspective on Teachers' Zone of Proximal  
Development (TZPD) in an EFL Context*

**BE ACCEPTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF  
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## **DEDICATION**

To My Family

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## ABSTRACT

Vygotsky's zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a key concept used in different fields of study nowadays. This thesis employed Vygotsky's ZPD, and his sociocultural theory (SCT) as its theoretical framework, and aimed to explore the teachers' professional development from a neo-Vygotskian perspective, meaning to uncover the overlapping zones of development namely ZPD, ZPA (zone of promoted action), ZFM (zone of free movement) and IZ (illusionary zone) in language teachers (Blanton, Westbrook, and Carter, 2005; Valsiner, 1987; Vygotsky, 1978) in Iranian context. To this aim, a piloted questionnaire-based survey was adapted. The questionnaire was administered online through the Google Forms. Among the 2000 randomly-selected EFL teachers, 121 teachers from all over Iran, teaching in different educational settings, having different educational degrees (ranging from BA to PhD), with different years of experience, participated in this research. The gathered data were analyzed and the results revealed internet and technology, TESOL discourse, teacher education, collaboration, journal or diary writing, action research, access to resources, curriculum and assessment requirements, salary and income, cultural context and sociopolitical context as contributing factors to teachers' professional development. It is concluded that an ideal place for teaching and development is where the identified boundaries are limited or removed and the identified sources of assistance are promoted; in such a situation teachers' potential can be actualized. The findings of this study bear useful theoretical and pedagogical implications for teacher education in general and for TEFL area in Iran in particular.

### **Key Words:**

*Professional Development, Zone of proximal development (ZPD), Zone of promoted action (ZPA), Zone of free movement (ZFM), Illusionary zone (IZ).*

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## List of Abbreviations and Transcription Conventions

<b>Abbreviation/Symbol</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
H0	Null Hypothesis
IP	Information Processing
IZ	Illusionary Zone
KMO	Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin
PACT	Performance Assessment for California Teachers
PCA	Principal Component Analysis
SCT	Sociocultural Theory
SD	Standard Deviation
SPSS	Statistical Package for the Social Sciences
TEFL	Teaching English as a Foreign Language
TESOL	Teaching English as a Second or Other Language
TPA	Teacher Performance Assessment
ZAD	Zone of Actual Development
ZBR	Zona Blizaishego Razvitia
ZFM	Zone of Free Movement
ZPA	Zone of Promoted Action
ZPD	Zone of Proximal Development

# *Introduction*

## 0.1. Introduction

The great Vygotsky (1986) once said: "We 'instruct' ourselves as others 'instruct' us - through the use of 'words' as 'tools'". One of the most popular concepts advanced by Vygotsky was the notion of zone of proximal development (ZPD) in every learner. He didn't live long enough to widen its horizons, but this was done through the works of many keen researchers in different fields of studies. Researchers approached ZPD from many different angles, by altering their focus of attention to different elements of its definition. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) has been 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*" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86, emphases added). ZPD is believed to be a non-measurable intangible psychological concept, although many researchers have attempted to define borders for it in order to capture it in a statistical cage. ZPD is the English translation of the original Russian concept, *Zona Blizaishego Razvitia* (ZBR) proposed by Vygotsky (Valsiner, 2014). Another translation of the Russian term can be the zone of closest/nearest development.

Valsiner (1987) has broadened the interpretation of the concept of the ZPD to propose the existence of two additional zones, zone of free movement (ZFM) and zone of promoted action (ZPA). The ZPA is what adults (experts) are promoting, with no obligation for the child (learner) to receive what is being promoted. Further development of the zone when interpreting the ZPD of practitioner, Valsiner (1987, p. 193) found the presence of what he called "illusionary construction" (Galligan, 2008). Blanton et al. (2005) by the use of Valsiner's zone theory as a way to interpret the professional development of teachers in mathematics and science concluded that "understanding the zone of promoted action and the

zone of free movement the teacher organizes in the classroom can indicate the existence or absence of an illusionary zone (IZ) and thereby provide insight into a teacher's potential for development" (P. 5). These illuminating zone theories shed light on the concept of ZPD. Since the appearance of these concepts many researchers used them in order to identify the ZPD. The researches are varied in scope and variables; whether they are investigating the ZPD of children, learners, or teachers. All of them had the treating-the-participants-as-learners in common. But this research is going to be different; it tends to investigate the ZPD, or the potential development of teachers-as-learners as they teach, using Valsiner's and Blanton et al.'s zone theories along the way.

## **0.2. Purpose of the Study**

The study tackles over the issue of learning and development in teachers-as-teachers not the student-teachers. Some researchers said that ZPD does not stand alone in the process of professional development; that there are other zones, other variables affecting learning. The present study should consider the topic from a sociocultural or a sociopolitical perspective. So we should look at this issue from different angels, by considering the other factors and variables such as the teachers' ZFM, ZPA, and IZ. This is what this research is going to investigate as its purpose.

The purpose of the study is to investigate the teachers' zone of proximal development with respect to the other zones as variables, and therefore to provide insights into teachers' professional development. The entire research proposal is going to be conducted and investigated in the EFL area, in Iran.



### **0.3. Significance of the Study**

The concept of zone of proximal development (ZPD) was originally restricted to the children's mental development. Limited attention, if any, has been given to the ZPD of the teachers (TZPD), and almost all the researches that have ever been conducted about teachers' development were focused on novice teachers.

The published papers or articles, which directly investigate the concept, are rare. And most of these published ones are among other disciplines such as mathematics and science areas. The number of researches that have ever been done in the Iranian EFL area, concentrating exclusively on the TZPD would not surpass three.

The ZPD does not stand alone, and can only be conveyed by knowing the teachers' ZPA, ZFM, and even their IZ. So investigating TZPD is in close relation with investigating Valsiner's and Blanton et al.'s zone theories.

This research study is unique in the sense that it tends to investigate the ZPD of not just novice teachers but the experienced (not essentially expert) teachers as well. And it took the view of teachers-as-learners during their teaching not in their courses in teacher education where they are just learners.

The proposed study has many significant implications. It may benefit and help the future researcher as their guide. Lecturers, teachers, and principals, can consider these zone theories (e.g. ZPD, ZFM, ZPA, and IZ) before commencing a course and they also can plan for the improvements. It will help teachers to have a deeper understanding of their capabilities. By this study they will come up with easier and powerful program. It will also suggest that policy makers and executives to utilize the results in pedagogy and also in curriculum.

#### **0.4. Statement of the Problem**

Learning and professional development have always been the main concern in the area of EFL. Fortunately zone of proximal development (ZPD) came along to answer lots of questions about learning. Researchers approached ZPD with different perspectives, by focusing on different elements of its definition. The concept was originally restricted to the children's mental development. Today, researchers investigate the ZPD of not just children, but learners' ZPD and even teachers' ZPD is gaining attention too. Most of them are conducted in the area of teacher education where the teachers are not different from learners.

This research with a different view raises the questions about how learning occurs in teachers; how professional development occurs in teachers.

The process of learning is always important in all the areas of education. There is this view that teachers learn what they need as a teacher in their teacher education courses and after that they are fully prepared to teach for the rest of their lives. The world doesn't stand the same for eternity. The students of different generation are different. The students change, both literally and metaphorically. The world around teacher (society, politics, science, technology, and philosophy) is changing. Despite this fact, it is believed that the guidelines and manuals that were given to the teacher's on their graduation will serve them helpful till their retirement.

Teachers change, even after their graduation. They move along with the changing of the areas surrounding them. They also learn, not just learning the knowledge explicitly; they learn to teach; they learn to change; ultimately they learn to develop expertise. Not just students learn, but teachers also learn. So teachers also have ZPDs. What has been done till now is to shift the focus on learners' ZPD to teacher's ZPD. This has been done in the area of teacher education, where teachers are being seen as learners.

Teaching and learning does not take place in a vacuum. There are a lot of factors that influence learning. There are other zones involved in teachers' learning or changing. They should be taken into account when investigating their ZPD. These zones which influence ZPD are rooted in Vygotsky's sociocultural theory.

## **0.5. Research Questions and Hypotheses**

According to the purpose of this thesis, which is investigating the teachers' potential for development, that is their ZPD, in relation with their ZFM, ZPA, and IZ, the following research questions are raised:

### **Research Questions:**

- 1) What are the variables affecting teachers' ZPD?
- 2) What are the variables affecting teachers' ZPA?
- 3) What are the variables affecting teachers' ZFM?
- 4) What are the variables affecting teachers' IZ?
- 5) Is there any relationship between teacher's professional development and their gender?
- 6) Is there any relationship between teachers' professional development and their age range?
- 7) Is there any relationship between teachers' professional development and their educational degree?
- 8) Is there any relationship between teachers' professional development and their years of teaching experience?
- 9) Is there any relationship between teachers' professional development and their educational setting?

10) Is there any relationship between teachers' professional development and the province where they teach?

According to the research questions, the following null hypotheses are raised. It should be noted here that these hypotheses are raised with the intention of investigating the questions; they are going to be tested while there are no proof for them at the beginning.

### **Research Hypotheses:**

H01) There is no significant relationship between teachers' professional development and their gender.

H02) There is no significant relationship between teachers' professional development and their age range.

H03) There is no significant relationship between teachers' professional development and their educational degree.

H04) There is no significant relationship between teachers' professional development and their years of teaching experience.

H05) There is no significant relationship between teachers' professional development and their educational setting.

H06) There is no significant relationship between teachers' professional development and the province where they teach.

## **0.6. Definition of Key Terms**

The key terms that are used in this thesis are defined as follows:

**0.6.1. ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development):** The term has been defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and