

The Social World of a Child and Language Learning

A Socio-constructivist Perspective

SUJATA SHARMA*

Abstract

English language learning has undergone a major change in the way knowledge is transacted and acquired, with social constructivism being a crucial backdrop, wherein learners negotiate and arrive at shared meaning through peer and group activities. This paper explores the journey of social constructivism as a major impact on language learning. How meaningful negotiation by learners in groups through teacher intervention acts as a support for enhanced acquisition of language is highlighted in the paper with illustrations.

INTRODUCTION

Social constructivism has become a catchword in the field of education in recent years. It was the outcome of development in cognitive educational psychology, which marked a shift from teacher and teaching to learner and learning. It signified the growing importance of a learner-centred approach. It is important to understand the applicability of social constructivism as a philosophy to understand its applicability to our

English language classrooms. The term has been used by philosophers, curriculum-planners and educators. The social constructivist's perspective is grounded in the works of theorists such as Piaget, Vygotsky and Bruner as well as the philosophy of John Dewey. An in depth study of the existing literature revealed that there is no one constructivist theory of learning. However, most theorists adhere to two ideas (i) Learners are active in constructing their own

*Research Scholar, Central Institute of Education, University of Delhi, Delhi-110007.

knowledge (ii) Social interactions are important in the process of knowledge construction (Bruning, Schraw and Norby 2011, in Woolfolk 2014)

Social negotiation and interaction are key components of a constructivist classroom. Thus, learners understand the importance of their contribution to the classroom's process. As Prawat (1994) says, "Constructivist theory involves a dramatic change in the focus of teaching, putting the learners' own efforts to understand at the centre of the educational enterprise."

A learner comes to a learning situation with existing ideas, which may be temporary or deeply-rooted and well-established in his/her mind. Learners carry their own individual ideas about the world, but some of these are socially and culturally shared. The teacher needs to give precedence to the learners' ideas and challenge them. Teachers have an important role in changing a monotonous classroom into a dynamic unit through various activities (Shukla 2013). Thus, according to Taber (2007), knowledge, in one sense, is personal and individual but, in another, learners construct knowledge through their interaction with the physical world, collaboratively in social settings and in a cultural and linguistic environment.

Before looking into the effectiveness of the social constructivist learning theory in the English language classroom, it is important

to take a close look at various forms of constructivism.

The decade of the 1940s and 1950s advocated the structural or descriptive school of linguistics, (Bloomfield) and the 1960s boast of the generative transformational school of linguistics, which emerged through the influence of Noam Chomsky. In later years, cognitive psychologists sought to understand the deeper structures of human behaviour with keywords such as logic, reason and inference. There is, now, an expansive body of research on student-learning, which focuses on the ideas learners bring with them to the classroom and the way these affect 'how and what' they learn. Learners come to classes with a range of ideas. It was necessary, in the context of the present research, that learners show awareness and concern for the learning process. They are not 'empty vessels' waiting to be filled. As teachers, we should recognise the richness and variability of learners' ideas and find ways both to challenge and make use of their ideas.

From the beginning, researchers recognised that learning should not be seen as some sort of 'conceptual implanting process' (the 'jug and mug' metaphor), but involved an interplay between the learners' existing ideas and the knowledge or experiences they are exposed to in the classroom. From this perspective, learning is viewed as the construction of personal meaning and learning in classroom is simply

an extension of the same process, by which the existing ideas are developed from the learners' active engagement and meaning making with the world from the earliest age.

This personal constructivist view of learning can be summed up in the following points, adapted from a document produced by an influential children's learning science group based in Britain. The view pertains to learning and knowledge, and lies firmly in the Piagetian tradition focusing on the development of the individual mind. A personal constructivist view of learning emphasises the following:

- Learner outcomes depend not only on the learning environment, but also on the knowledge of learners. The knowledge of learners can assist or can interfere with learning.
- Learning involves the construction of meaning. Meaning constructed by learners from what they see or hear may be different from those intended, and are influenced by existing knowledge.
- The construction of meaning is a continuous and active process. Learners begin learning from the time they are born and struggle to construct meaning about their world, and this process continues, both inside and out of school, throughout their lives.
- Learners have the final responsibility for their own learning. Thus, teachers can never learn for a learner and teaching is more

often promotion of opportunities and support for learning.

Among current approaches to teaching, constructivism advocates learning, where learners actively construct things and learn from their own experience; they actively build and create meaning and knowledge; can hypothesise, question, investigate, imagine, invent and reflect (Ojha 2011). Philips (1995) identified three distinct roles in constructivism viz. the active learner, the social learner and the creative learner. An active learner, instead of just listening, reading and working through routine exercises, discusses, debates, investigates, hypothesises and takes a stand on issues. A social learner co-constructs knowledge through dialogues with others. A creative learner creates and recreates knowledge.

LANGUAGE LEARNING AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

The field of language learning is vast and is growing at a fast pace. The classroom pedagogy is a dynamic source of action, wherein learners and teachers align to make learning possible. Coleman (1996) in his book, *Society and the Language Classroom*, delved into the topic of language classrooms and everyday practices. Language learning has often, been described as one of the most impressive "mental operations of the human mind, in view of the complexity of grammatical structures, the size of the mental lexicon and

multiple functionality learners of any language are confronted with" (Schwarz 1992). English language education is a complex field of teaching and learning. Education in English language borrows its theories from a range of disciplines, numerous theorists and innumerable translators of theory such as constructivism and social constructivism. It draws on the developmental work of Piaget (1977) and Kelly (1991). Fosnot (1989) defines constructivism by referring to four principles: learning in an important way depends on what we already know; new ideas occur as we adapt and change our ideas; learning involves investing ideas rather than mechanically accumulating facts; meaningful learning occurs through rethinking old ideas and coming to a conclusion about new ideas, which conflict with our old ideas.

There has been a distinct change from teachers' acceptance of learners' passive presence in class towards active learners' participation in class. Learners tend to interact and become autonomous and learning occurs through dialogue. This dialogue can be between the teacher and learners or between two or more learners.

A study of various research projects, taken up on English language learning, suggests that mere training in structural (grammatical) and vocabulary knowledge will not result in real linguistic competence and language proficiency. The aim is to have greater learner autonomy

in language learning. The social constructivist view of language learning emphasises on experience and interaction with others in a child's language development.

Language and thinking are dynamically related. A typical learner brings to school a healthy and confident grasp of the powers of language and how it can be used to communicate with others and think about the world. Over the years, the school has played a distinct, formative role in his/her learning process. Amid social interaction with peers, meaningful learning may be facilitated through authentic tasks in any language learning activity. The teacher helps in the developmental process of learners with subtle initiation towards knowledge construction and self-regulation. It is crucial for English Language Learners (ELL) to be allowed to construct knowledge through their personal lives and to overcome language and culture barriers, in order to personally construct knowledge in the English language.

In cognitive psychology, there is a strong leaning towards social constructivism, which is a variety of cognitive constructivism that emphasises on the collaborative nature of learning.

Thus, education can become an enriching experience for learners. Constructing knowledge, then, can become a socio-linguistic process, where there is a gradual advancement

of understanding built upon previous knowledge resulting in “multiple dimensions of truth” Spiro and Jehng, (1990). The influence of constructivism in education today can be seen in a variety of published curricula, as well as instructional practices. Social constructivist applications can be used through the widespread use of cooperative and collaborative teaching strategies such as — team games and tournament, student/teams achievement division, peer-peer tutoring (Slavin 1980).

The theory of language learning has seen a shift from the highly guided to the more open learning environment through constructivism, as a learner-centred paradigm for learning. The aim is to initiate learners into self-structured and self-motivated process of knowledge construction. He/she becomes a self-governed creator of knowledge through discovery learning. Translated into language learning such an approach favours project-based, process-oriented, product-centred learning within a rich and facilitative learning environment (Wheatley, 1991). Thus, as Lipman (1991) says, “Much of the impetus for constructivism stems from a reaction to over-reliance in classrooms on rote memorisation, which is regarded as a serious problem in education.” It hinders a child’s capability to think and impedes his/her problem-solving ability. The need is to develop English language curricula based on learner-centred constructivism to promote

learners, who can successfully function in real-world contexts. It is also for teachers to help learners to “improve thinking.”

We can distinguish between ‘cognitive constructivism,’ which is about how the individual learner understands things in terms of developmental stages and learning styles, and social constructivism, which emphasises how meaning and understanding grow out of social encounters. The emphasis is on the learner as an active maker of meaning. The role of the teacher is to enter into a dialogue with the learner trying to understand the meaning of the material to be learnt and to help him/her to refine his/her understanding, until it corresponds with that of the teacher.

Vygotsky was a cognitivist, but he rejected the assumption made by cognitivists such as Piaget and Perry that it was possible to separate learning from its social context. He argued that all cognitive functions originate in the mind, and must, therefore, be explained as products of social interactions and that learning was not simply the assimilation of new knowledge by learners; it was the process by which they were integrated into a knowledge community. It reiterates the need for active learners, linking of new knowledge to prior knowledge and the application of understanding to authentic situations.

Vygotsky’s main interest was the study of language development.

He claimed that learning occurs through dialogue. Engaging in talking certainly helped the learners to extend and consolidate their understanding of the concepts involved in investigation. According to Wilson (1999), this dialogue is initially inter-mental. It takes place between teachers and learners, between learners themselves or even between the text and the reader. Vygotsky proposes that the learner makes sense of what is said or written through internal or intramental dialogue. Thus, learning is both interacting with ideas or knowledge in social settings as well as in the sense that they must take an active part in reconstructing ideas or knowledge within their own minds.

Language allows the child to imagine, manipulate, create new ideas and share those with others. Language acts as a cultural tool because it is created and shared by all members of a specific culture. It is also a mental tool because each member of the culture uses language to think. In the course of daily interaction, the teacher or parent can provide the child with new or appropriate words and phrases in a language. They can jointly reconstruct shared experiences.

This principle of collectively constructed support affirms that learners themselves provide guided support to each other, hence,

furthering their learning (Donato 2000). The learners can act as a good source of L2 knowledge, while working in a group to bring about a developmental change not only in themselves but also in others. This enables them to guide themselves in problem-solving activities and provide support to other learners in a group task.

CONCLUSION

The field of language education is changing at an ever-increasing pace. Traditional notions of education are giving way to newer, more innovative ways of thinking about how we learn, teach and acquire knowledge. In an Indian classroom, the challenges of learning another language are immense. Moreover, English language is known for its global presence. Language proficiency is essential for learners. Oral and written communication, along with critical thinking and problem-solving skills, are important for success in every field. Significant observations concluded upon by many research studies on English language teaching and learning in India are low confidence level of learners, inadequate exposure to and practise of language skills, lack of students' participation in classroom discussions due to lack of vocabulary.

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