Translating Social Constructivism into English Language Teaching

*Some Experiences**

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Abstract

This paper is based on the author's own experiences generated through the actual classroom situations involving constructivist approach to English Language Teaching (ELT).The author of the paper holds the view that language is both a cognitive constructivist and social constructivist process and product. It is cognitive constructivist in the sense that learners construct their own language and its grammar. It is social constructivist in that it is only in, for and through society that language is used. No human language may evolve, function, operate, develop and be dynamic without social interaction. Language encompasses all forms of constructivism. However, its framework is largely social which helps the learners in acquiring/learning the rudimentary language skills (LSRW), grammatical / linguistic and communicative competence. This paper discusses some social constructivist activities and tasks to make the main point clear.

Introduction

Let me make it clear at the very outset that this paper is based on my own experiences generated through the actual classroom situations involving constructivist approach to English Language Teaching (ELT).

Constructivism has recently emerged as a powerful force to be reckoned with especially in the context of school education across the globe. Unlike the behavioural approach to education, constructivism believes in helping the child acquire new *knowledge*, information, skills, etc., and *construct* meaning through *exploration, experience, engaging, exploiting* varied contexts with the assistance of convergent, divergent, reflective, critical and creative thinking

on the basis of *previous knowledge, experience and skills.*

'Social Constructivism'

Vygostsky's social constructivism stresses the value of culture and the social context for cognitive development. He discusses the 'zone of proximal development'. For Vygotsky, the culture provides the child with the cognitive tools required for development. The term 'social constructivism' is used in this paper in a purely linguistic sense and obviously it is slightly different from Vygostsky's 'social constructivism'. For the author of the paper, social constructivism is constructing knowledge, information, and relationship, a network of linguistic properties through conversation, dialogue, discourse, discussion and all those social inputs which believe in dualism and/or pluralism. Notwithstanding some differences of opinions, it is both a theory of learning and approach to teaching-learning.

The author of the paper holds the view that language is both a cognitive constructivist and social constructivist of process and product. It is cognitive constructivist in the sense that learners construct their own language and its grammar. It is social constructivist in that it is only in, for and through society that language is used. No human language may evolve, function, operate, develop and be dynamic without social interaction. It is also a radical constructivist in nature. Language encompasses all forms of constructivism. However, its framework is largely social.

The author's basic assumption in this regard is that social constructivism helps the learners in acquiring/learning the rudimentary language skills (LSRW), grammatical/linguistic and communicative competence.

The above mentioned basic assumption is based on the following two accepted and other testable sub-assumptions:

Assumption one

Learners generally acquire/learn a language through social interactions in a meaningful social setting.

The vast and abundant literature on the mother tongue (MT) or home language (HL) acquisition researches has enlightened us on this issue. It informs us that children acquire their MT and HL in the company of their family and social relations.

This hypothesis has been accepted by way of a large number of fundamental researches with empirical evidence at various points of time in varied linguistic contexts. It has been proved umpteen times beyond doubt that it is not possible to acquire a human language without 'social interaction'. Language and society go together and they cannot be separated for individual existence with the mutual support for each other.

Assumption two

Learners generally construct words, phrases, clauses, sentences, dialogues, conversations and discourse in social settings.

This hypothesis too has been accepted by a large number of researches in linguistics and applied linguistics. As proved correct, children listen to the language spoken/used around them and

they learn it through observation, imitation, experiencing, doing, etc. In fact, they 'discover' the inherent grammar on the basis of which they start 'constructing' words, phrases, clauses, sentences, and discourse. (For the adult, these constructions may be the old ones but for the learners they are afresh and of course novel).

They generally learn to construct, deconstruct, reconstruct not only phonological, morphological, lexical, structural, syntactic and grammatical properties but also *semantic world* in a variety of enormously rich *social settings*, through meaningful social interactions. However, it may be quickly added here that mistakes, errors, and their natural, spontaneous rectification, eradication are part of the language learning which, is essentially a constructive process.

Assumption three

Learners generally acquire / learn communication skills through social interactions such as dialogues, conversations, role play, discussions, simulations, etc., in meaningful social settings.

Assumption four

Learners generally construct the fundamental linguistic properties such as vowel, diphthong and consonant sounds, accent, stress, juncture, pause, rhythm, lexis, structures, syntax, semantic values by way of the following:

(a)   Previous experience (through LSRW)
(b)   Role play
(c)   Simulation

(d)   Conversation
(e)   Dialogue
(f)   Brainstorm (involving reflective, critical, creative, divergent, convergent thinking)
(g)   'Tasks', 'speech acts', etc.

Assumption five

Learners generally construct the fundamental linguistic properties and skills through the following:

(a)   Engaging
(b)   Experiencing
(c)   Enquiry
(d)   Knowledge discovery
(e)   Exploitation of the oral/written texts
(f)   Exploration
(g)   Elaboration

Assumption six

Learners generally construct their own 'grammar' for linguistic development and social communication.

They have   an innate ability to construct their own grammar. Noam Chomsky's theory of 'language acquisition device' (LAD) is a strong argument in this context. Learners have a natural ability to communicate whatever they have decided to communicate with whatever linguistic properties and resources they have. They may not know 'metalanguage' but they do learn the language used by the 'society' they live in. They learn the grammar of listening by listening, the grammar of speaking by speaking, the grammar of reading by reading and the grammar of writing by writing (Jane Willis).

Assumption seven

Learners generally construct 'grammar' and 'sense' for appropriateness, fluency and genuine communication.

It is only through 'social interactions', 'speech acts' that children pick up the rules other than the rules of grammar and these rules are the rules of social behaviour, the rules of linguistic appropriateness, fluency and communication. They also learn what is appropriate and what is inappropriate to say in particular social settings at various points of time. They do learn to observe the rules of social relationships to be established and/or maintained and social themes to be discussed.

Assumption eight

Learners generally construct new knowledge and / or skills through the following sequence:

(a) Exposure to the language
(b) Elicitation of ideas
(c) Restructuring of ideas
  ● Clarification of ideas
  ● Exposure of ideas
  ● Construction of new ideas
  ● Evaluation of ideas
(d) Application of ideas
(e) Review of change in ideas

Let it be mentioned here that the above mentioned constructivist pedagogic framework is based on John Sagy constructivist ideas.

A. Some Pedagogic Experiences

The above mentioned eight assumptions (hypotheses?) were informally tested the details of which are as follows:

Being a teacher educator, the author of this paper conducted a number of classes in the actual school situations at different points of time during the last five years. He himself conducted some classes with a view to finding out whether or not school students could 'construct' various linguistic properties in English as a second language. The B.Ed. students under his supervision during teaching practice phase were also oriented towards the 'new' pedagogic techniques devised by him and they were suitably motivated to try out the 'new' techniques in novel situations for greater reliability, acceptability and for more refinement, modification. The lessons were conducted in the 'constructivist framework' to the extent possible.

The author has been fully aware of the efficacy of the tools prepared, of the potentiality of the devices employed, the delimitations of the sample, conclusions drawn and generalisations reached. Therefore, he does not make any claim for sweeping generalisations. Nonetheless, he wishes to share his successful and encouraging experiences in the constructivist classrooms which are described and elaborated in the following section of the paper for greater discussions and if possible for dissemination of the 'idea of translating social constructivism into teaching English, as a second language in India.

B. The Observations and Feedback

The general framework of the lesson plan designed, adopted and adapted for teaching English as a second language is as follows:

(a)   Orientation and Exposure
(b)   Elicitation
(c)   Construction (language elements, skills and ideas)
IV.   Application

The specific details of the above-mentioned points are as follows;

1. Orientation and Exposure

As a first step the teacher decides to break the ice in the class by way of discussing something very general related to their life such as :

1.   How did they spend the previous evening/ Sunday/holiday, etc?

2. Elicitation

● **Brainstorm**

(i)   What do they expect of the   topic written on the blackboard?

   (The teacher writes a theme word on the blackboard. For example,   s/he, writes"FOREST' on the board. The students are asked to suggest some words related to the theme. They may suggest words like: jungle, woods, trees, plants, wild animals, birds, darkness, dense, hunting, deforestation, cut down, furniture, pollution, medicines, etc.)

 (ii)   What words, structures, do they think, would occur in the text they are going to read on the theme/ topic/text chosen?

(iii) What ideas would the author of the text present and how?

(iv) What new things, do they think they would learn through the text/ lesson?

   The tasks like the ones discussed above generally help the learners in:

(a)   Thinking
(b)   Recalling
(c)   Imagining
(d)   Producing ideas
(e)   Listening
(f)   Speaking
(g)   Reading
(h)   Writing
 (i)   Communicating
 (j)   Negotiating, etc.

   The other' tasks 'which help in realising the above mentioned objectives are as follows:

(1)   Word games
(2)   Crossword puzzles
(3)   Riddles
(4)   Picture dictation
(5)   Picture composition
(6)   Role play
(7)   Simulation, etc.

● **Role play**

   The teacher assigns some interesting and known roles to the class and asks some pairs of the students to act out the roles involved in the text or roles such as;

(1)   The shopkeeper and the customer
(2)   The doctor and the patient
(3)   The teacher and the student
(4)   The mother and the child
(5)   The bus conductor and the passenger, etc.

   The tasks like the ones mentioned above generally help the learners in developing the skills of:

(1)   Thinking
(2)   Improvising
(3)   Creating new contexts
(4)   Meaning making

(5) Negotiating
(6) Starting and winding up a dialogue, etc.

The learners revise, consolidate, reinforce and cement the previously acquired/learnt linguistic, communicative 'experiences' but also creates, construct new lexical, structural, ideational and semantic sets and thus communicative competence.

● **Text based Tasks**

The teacher takes up an authentic text (say, from a newspaper, a magazine, a brochure, an advertisement, etc.) and sets some specific tasks like the following;

(1) Read through the text.
(2) Make a list of the new words occurring in it.
(3) Make a list of the new structures occurring in it.
(4) Make a list of the new grammatical items occurring in it.
(5) Make a list of the articles/verbs/ adverbs/adjectives/pronouns/ connectives/prepositions occurring in it.
(6) Find antonyms/synonyms/one words in the text.
(7) Look up the words in the dictionary and find the meaning of the new words, their pronunciation and grammatical categories, etc.
(8) Work in pairs and check each other's work.
(9) Read the text and frame questions.
(10) Use the new words/ structures in new sentences.
(11) Write out/act out a dialogue/ conversation between the two people discussing the theme of the text.

(12) Write a summary of the text read, etc.

The tasks like these (which need not be in the above sequence all the time), not only help the learners construct ideas but also linguistic properties on their own or with the assistance of the peers, groups. Meaningful interactions take place between the learners, the text and the teacher.

These 'tasks' also help in 'organising' learning experiences for construction of knowledge and fostering creativity and connecting knowledge to life outside of school (NCF 2005, NCERT). Through these types of tasks (as mentioned earlier on) learners become more active, interactive, linguistically and communicatively empowered thanks to the inherent culture of the socially rich-linguistic and communicative inputs.

In the whole business of ELT, the teacher plays a role of a facilitator, manager of activities, supervisor of the 'tasks', participant, philosopher, guide and friend.

The texts are 'explored', 'discovered', 'exploited', 'enquired into', engaged with, elicited, emitted, created, constructed, destructed, reconstructed for the purpose of meaning-making by the learners. Learner's contribution helps in arriving at the composite culture of the text-construction involving lexis, structures and sense. Authentic materials are 'means' to the 'end' (that is, the construction of linguistic, communicative knowledge and skills for linguistic and communicative competence to be translated into what Noam Chomsky calls 'communicative performance'.

C. Challenges and Possibilities

The experiences described in this paper have been gathered in actual second language classroom situations in which students *encountered* cognitively challenged tasks, *explored* linguistic possibilities, *experienced* the language learning process and product by *engaging* themselves in meaningful tasks. It is high time a full-fledged research project equipped with a formal design in the Indian context was conducted for more insights into the constructivist approach to ELT. This would help us spell out learners' needs and their roles, to study teachers' perceptions, their roles, the roles of the texts and the design of the constructivist testing, etc.

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