A Social Constructivist Approach to Teaching Reading: Turning the rhetoric into reality
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Social constructivist rhetoric often seems remote and even irrelevant to practising teachers. In this paper, I will briefly explain the constructivist approach to teaching reading to students of English as a foreign language. I will show how a dialogic approach to reading empowers readers to position themselves as participants in making meaning together with the text and its authors, rather than remaining as mute outsiders to the reading process. However, this shift in constructing reader-roles means that our students need to take a strategic approach to their reading, and will need careful scaffolding to help them develop effective, independent reading strategies. I will discuss how such scaffolding can help transform the rhetoric of social constructivist discourse into classroom realities.

INTRODUCTION

The rhetoric of social-constructivism is beginning to pervade EFL literature and teaching, but it is often presented in terms which are rhetorical rather than realistic. In this paper, I will attempt to translate the theory into some practical suggestions for teaching reading in ELICOS classes.

WHAT IS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM?

Social constructivism emphasises that learning takes place in a sociocultural environment. We learn not as isolated individuals acquiring chunks of disassociated quasi-permanent truths, but as members of society. What we learn, and how we make sense of knowledge, depends on where and when we are learning. Learning takes place through dialogue and is mediated through language and other systems of signs, such as gestures or diagrams. This dialogue is initially intermental - it takes place between teacher and student, between students, or even between text-author and reader (Wilson, 1999:172). However, the learner makes sense of what is said (or written) through internal or intramental dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus learning is both interactive in the sense that learners must interact with a source of ideas/knowledge, as well as in the sense that they must take an active part in reconstructing ideas/knowledge within their own minds.

Further, Vygotsky points out that learning depends on the purpose or motivation for learning: activity theory (Lantolf, 2000). For example, students acquire knowledge quite differently if they are preparing for a test on irregular verbs, or if they are browsing a glossy article on Madonna.

Fundamental to social constructivism is the concept of scaffolding, and working within the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Too often this is taken to mean nursing students along, whereas Hammond and Gibbons (2001) interpret scaffolding as 'high challenge, high support' - enabling students to achieve beyond their current capacity.

WHAT IS READING?

Constructivists see reading as social practice(s) which affect when you read, what you read, where you read, who you read with, and of course WHY and HOW you read. Interacting with text can involve practices as diverse as reading instructions, scanning a newspaper or reading an English Australia
academic article. So when we are designing curricula for reading in EFL classes we need to ask ourselves first of all: what do our students need to be able to do in terms of social practice?

Luke and Freebody (1990, 2002) defined four different reader roles, or resources: code breaker, meaning maker, text user, and text analyst. At the most basic level there is code breaker: deciphering text at letter, word and sentence-level. For many students decoding text is synonymous with 'reading' because this is the social practice they have been taught. Bottom-up strategies can become an obsession for some English language students who equate reading with using the dictionary to note down translation equivalents.

Obviously, there is more to reading than simply decoding. Luke and Freebody point out that making meaning is another fundamental element of reading. This is where dialogue comes in (Wertsch, 1991). It is not enough to just hear/see the words - the reader also has to listen, and to struggle to make sense of what the writer is saying, conscious of the fact, however, that readers rarely if ever understand exactly what the writer had in mind (Lewis & Slade, 1994, chapter 1). Reading in a foreign language and culture is particularly hard, because the words and grammatical structures, the images and text conventions that are used are all less than familiar. There can be no perfect way to understand. Even something as apparently factual as a train-timetable can be interpreted through different cultural lenses. Students need to understand that all readers construct meaning from texts differently, depending on their motivation, their background and even their state of mind. There is usually no single, unequivocal meaning in a text.

Readers also have to know how to use texts. They can be used for pleasure, for gathering information, for writing essays, and indeed for language learning. Our students have expectations of how texts can and should be used based on their prior experience of texts as social practice. As teachers we need to encourage and facilitate students’ use of texts in new social contexts - for example in EAP knowing how to exploit sources appropriately in academic writing (Cadman, 1997; Fox, 1994).

Finally, as text analysts, students need to gain text awareness, observing how language is used within different genres to achieve different purposes. They also need to develop a 'suspicious eye' (Wallace, 1995) detecting bias, and identifying the author's stance. Karacsany (2002) suggested that these skills can be developed through visual literacy as a first step.

WHAT DOES SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORY MEAN FOR ELICOS READING CLASSES?

The constructivist view of reading has many implications for language teachers. First, we need to stop teaching reading by simply practising reading, and focus on assisting students to extend their capacity to read constructively. Second, we need to escape from teaching reading through the kind of disembodied texts which are so common in EFL classrooms. Reading without a purpose positions the reader as an onlooker, a ‘mute outsider’ rather than a text participant (Penrose & Geisler, 1994; Wilson, 1998). Third, we need to ensure that we, as teachers, are not reading on behalf of the students in our reading classes - our pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading exercises can sometimes provide so much scaffolding that the students do not really have to read the text at all! Instead we need to empower students to choose what and how to read in ways which suit their needs and purposes.
SOME STRATEGIES FOR ELICOS READING CLASSES

Providing a context and purpose for reading

Students need to have a clear idea of why they are reading and to know how the text relates to other aspects of their course. For example, before tackling a reading passage in your coursebook, set up some context first (perhaps through visual cues), and make sure that the students know which reader role you want them to adopt: making meaning, exploiting the text for useful vocabulary, looking for a model text for some other task? Is the text meant to be used as a language resource, or is it meant to stimulate dialogue? Students also need encouragement to move beyond this teacher-textbook controlled situation into reading texts which they themselves have selected for their own purposes.

Modelling

A useful form of scaffolding is to model the reading practices we want our students to adopt. I often do this by using a modified version of the think-aloud research technique (Faerch & Kasper, 1987). I stand in front of the class - not reading aloud as much as verbalising my thought processes as I read. This is a good way to model skimming for example, or processes such as relating one text to another, asking questions of the text, guessing the meaning of difficult words. I demonstrate that reading is not necessarily a linear process, but involves jumping forwards, linking back, re-reading sections which are problematic. Students find it very reassuring when I verbalise thoughts such as 'What does that mean? Hang on, better read that bit again'. It helps to break down the myth that many of our students have: ‘If only I were a native speaker, I would understand this perfectly.’ Above all, modelling helps students to see what it means to enter into dialogue with the text.

Asking questions

Not enough research has been done in EFL classes on the role of questioning in teaching reading. The art of asking questions which are easily within the students' grasp, but which lead them to engage more interactively with the text is very tricky. After all, the students will not have a teacher by their side asking questions for ever: we want to enable them to become independent readers.

Constructivist theory emphasises that we need to encourage students to create their own meaning from text, rather than to impose our interpretation of the meaning upon them - though of course we may help as resources to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap that students experience in reading a text. Too often, though, reading teachers dominate the lesson by ‘telling’ students the meaning of the text rather than assisting them to create meaning themselves. Our questions need to show a genuine interest in the meanings the students construct rather than insisting on our own understandings. In fact, what we want students to learn from an EFL reading class is not the content of the reading text: rather we want to them to strengthen their ability to use the four reader resources. So our questions need to focus on text awareness rather than text content.

Perhaps the most effective text awareness questions are those which help students gain insight into the way texts are structured. 'What words tell you that the author is introducing a new point?' 'In this paragraph, how many times can you find the word X (the topic of the paragraph).'
Similarly, questions which allow students to identify the author's stance are useful: 'Do you think the author admires [Princess Di]? How do you know that? What other words could the author have used?'
Integrating the four macroskills

Other people's texts serve as excellent models for students' own writing. Close analysis of a reading text can enable students to emulate the text in their own writing. For example, if students are required to write a tourist brochure, it is a good idea to have them analyse other tourist brochures first - gathering useful vocabulary and sentence structures, observing the format and layout, comparing texts to see which ones work best, or which ones achieve the sort of effect they would like. This does not mean uncritically applying models as in the behaviourist approach, because it involves the students in informed and analytical choice of language for a defined purpose. Gray's Scaffolding Literacy Project with Aboriginal children in remote schools encourages children to borrow liberally from model texts in creating their own texts: a skill which is essential for EFL students, especially EAP students (Wilson 1997).

Creating awareness of the author behind the text

Text analysis can develop a strong sense in our students that texts are not God-given phenomena. Our questioning can help students to see that texts are written by real people for a range of different purposes, and that some are more successful than others in achieving this purpose. An interesting exercise with advanced students is to compare two reports of the same news item from different sources: how reliable are they? what sources have been used? what has been picked out as the key point? what verbs have been used and to what effect? which one concords most with their own perceptions of the situation? Obviously, this sort of activity is not only more motivating, but also leads to a much better appreciation of text, its participants and its purposes than the traditional 'Write a summary of this article.' The outcome is also more interesting: rather than being led towards plagiphrasing (Wilson 1997) from the article, students can develop a critical stance. They can later be asked to write their own article using the information - and the vocabulary and structures of the original articles where appropriate - to create their own construction of the situation.

Using peer-scaffolding

Although teacher support is essential in scaffolding, it is essential also to unleash students from the teacher-fronted classroom setting. Peer-scaffolding is a step towards independent use of the four reader-roles. Working together on reading tasks can expand students' use of these roles, helping them to become more effective decoders and users of text, more participatory makers of meaning and more aware of how authors manipulate text. Small group work exercises include information gap exercises (decoding), comparing texts (text analysis); comparing notes students have made from texts (meaning-making), or co-constructing a response to a text. An effective group task that I have set is to get students to find and read texts on a given topic and then prepare a group presentation making a visual representation of the topic. It is very enlightening for students to see how differently they all visualised the topic.

Setting your students free

Allowing your students to work independently is an essential aspect of social constructivist theory. Setting tasks which allow students to read in areas which interest them and for purposes which are important to them is the best motivator. However, freedom without support is a recipe for disaster. Once again, scaffolding before and during individual, or small group tasks is essential.
Using macrotasks

Macrotasks can provide an excellent framework to motivate students to work independently and integrate all four macroskills, especially if the task will have an authentic audience. The web comes in very useful both as a source of reading material and as a publishing tool which reaches out to a wider audience. For example, having the class set up a web resource for other students in the School, or beyond, can be a great motivator. Webquests (Dudeney, 2003) can be an end in themselves, but are better embedded into a more substantial macrotask.

Some possible macrotasks are:

- Produce a web-based magazine for the school
- Plan an excursion for your class, and act as tour guide
- Write an article for a tourist magazine and submit it for publication
- Write a script for a play or movie and produce it for the School
- Make a documentary/CD Rom on a subject you are passionate about
- Prepare a mini-conference or trade fair (including poster presentations, individual and group presentations) and invite guests of honour
- Conduct an advertising campaign
- Compile an anthology
- Produce a radio broadcast on local radio.

A note of caution, however: students can get much more out of macrotasks if they are supported by good scaffolding in reading and writing strategies.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the social constructivist approach to reading offers tools and principles for ELICOS teachers which can help them to draw their students into energetic participation in text events, entering into active dialogue with texts (and their authors), not as outsiders, but as active participants.

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REFERENCES


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