

Creating Learning Opportunities for Language Learners

Mariana COANĂ
Romanian-American University

Abstract

The paper discusses the principles and components of constructivist pedagogy and its implications in language teaching and learning, and highlights the student-centred learning approach which is considered a genuine and meaningful learning where tasks are relevant to real-world contexts. The key components of student-centred learning are project work, group work, problem solving, reflective thought and variation in language learning tasks. The second section of our paper focuses on the role of the language instructor as a facilitator who encourages students to work independently and interdependently, provides supportive ICT resources and creates thinking opportunities for students to extend their understanding of the languages for specific purposes. The third section addresses the barriers to the implementation of constructivist instruction and proposes a stakeholder framework which favours the development of a platform for learning and inclusion to align pedagogy with technology in order to foster students' motivation and engagement. The paper concludes that technology access is an important resource for today's constructivist pedagogy of language learning and teaching. Students need to learn and produce cooperatively (Pitler et al., 2007) in an ecosystem based on inclusive teaching strategies which support and incentivize them to think outside of the box. If motivated intrinsically students are more likely to use more logical information-gathering and decision-making strategies, while the use of ICT allows them to explore various real-life issues and become more autonomous learners. Many researchers assert that ICT usage encourages practices that promote deeper cognitive opportunities and engage the learner in intellectual activities with some control over learning. However, the role of the teacher is critical in scaffolding, mentoring, guiding the learners and facilitating the outcome of the language learning tasks (McKenna et al., 2013).

Key words

English, constructivist instruction, digital resources.

1. Introduction

Constructivism emphasizes socially interactive and process-oriented hands-on learning in which students work collaboratively to expand and revise their knowledge base (Airasian & Walsh apud Ornstein & Levine, 2008: 189). Teachers who embrace constructivism are open to access technology in the classroom, and students are encouraged to work together collaboratively, especially on projects. Therefore, the results of their learning are open ended as they lead to more experiences and bring individuals into social contact (ibidem). Kilpatrick believes that teachers who use the project method could transform their classroom into collaborative and democratic learning communities. Being motivated by their

own interests and working collaboratively, students would be engaged in purposeful activity in which they design and complete a project (Beineke, 1998: 106-107).

2. The Constructivist Paradigm for English Teaching & Learning

Starting from Smith's definition, who asserts that teaching is "a system of actions designed to induce *learning*" (Smith apud Kneller, 1966: 264), language teachers should design actions to meet the needs of their students. In interpreting Smith's study, Kneller points out that these actions can be performed differently by different teachers and in different cultures, but the categories to which they belong are common to all teachers and cultures (Kneller, 1966: 264). According to Smith, *teaching* does not entail *learning*. *Learning* corresponds to words like: *to elaborate, to arrive or to find*, telling what we have worked out or where we have arrived, or what we have found. Therefore, *teaching* is what we can call a "task", and learning is the parallel "accomplishment" (Smith apud Kneller, 1966: 264).

Is there any need for manuals in a constructivist paradigm? From a constructivist perspective, the manual has to be designed in such a manner to create and maintain a collaborative environment, where students construct their own knowledge, and teachers act as facilitators and guides. Professor Găvănescul identifies two major requirements that must be met by an effective manual: background requirements and form requirements. The first refer to indicators such as the scientific value of the content selected and admitted as instructional-educational message. Another requirement is the compliance with scientific truth.. The formal requirement is the most important because it is dictated by the special purpose of the book and the intellectual environment to which it relates (Găvănescul apud Petre, 2010: 144-145).

In a comprehensive study coordinated by Joita (2007), one can understand that the learning activities, carried out by constructivist models, involve the coordination of all personality structures (cognitive, affective, motivational, attitude, aptitude) in order to overcome obstacles, limits, difficulties in solving tasks (research, investigation, experimentation, solving exercises or problem situations, etc.). The main advantages of the constructivism paradigm for English teaching and learning are listed below (Joita, 2007):

- Each student builds their understanding at the mental level.
- Learning and development are social and collaborative in activities.
- Building the new knowledge is facilitated by the guide teacher, who also acts as a mentor.
- The teacher creates authentic situations and provides accessible means for an optimal learning.
- Learning in context requires the provision of relevant and authentic situations for students.
- The student's preferred context is provided and relates to his or her experience.
- Structure of training follows the principle of the spiral.
- Requires varieties of information that are presented differently.

- There is no student-type, but individuals who require other interpretation, mental processing and personalized guidance.
- One cannot foresee a systematization of the construction of knowledge in all students, being first subjective and then social.
- Self-evaluation is real and valid as a type of measurement.
- Effectiveness of learning is seen in further integration into reality and adaptation to situations.
- Teachers are leaders and are responsible for how students are looking for solutions.
- Students become autonomous and accountable in using the provided support, context, and conditions.
- Prioritizes specific training objectives.
- Encourage learners to have proactive attitudes in setting goals, content, situations, strategies, through interpretations, hypotheses and understanding.
- The curriculum and the training are centred on student.
- Teaching and training are seen as an art, affirming the flexibility and creativity of the teacher.

The universities of the future will be environments which will stimulate autonomous learning whereas alternative architectures and design will integrate autonomy in learning, practical learning in real projects, learning through play, practice communities, learning through travelling and adventures (Bruma, 2015: 324).

We believe that the constructivist approach in the Digital Age can be used to reshape the principles of *utilitarian education* and *scientific method* which were formulated by Spencer and Dewey. Despite the fact that Spencer was a naturalist in education, he believed that people in an industrialized society needed a *utilitarian education* to learn useful scientific skills and subjects (Spencer apud Ornstein & Levine, 2008: 105-106). As a pioneer in modern curriculum theory, Spencer wanted education based on the activities that people needed to survive, especially the modern survival skills found in science and technology that prepared individuals to be intelligent producers and consumers in an industrial society (ibidem). Another view which concerns other principles of teaching and learning is formulated by Dewey who saw knowledge as an instrument to solve problems; more precisely, as a *scientific method* that is enforceable through the following steps (Dewey apud Ornstein & Levine, 2008: 107):

- The learner, involved in a genuine experience encounters a problem that truly interests him or her.
- Within this experience, the learner locates and defines the problem.
- The learner acquires the information needed to solve the problem by reading, research, discussion, and other means.
- The learner constructs possible, tentative solutions that may solve the problem
- The learner chooses a possible solution and tests it to see if it solves the problem.

Chapelle expressed a futurist view of English language learning and technology through multiple perspectives (see Figure 1) as follows: the

perspectives offered by technically-minded people who base their vision on analysis of existing technologies and trends, by socially-minded analysts who consider the pragmatic human and social dimensions of technology use, and by the critically minded who question the ethical implications of technology (Chapelle, 2003: 2). These perspectives urge for a critical, technologically-informed pragmatism to help professionals in applied linguistics navigate the complex environment (ibidem).

Technologist's vision of technical possibilities Social pragmatist's view of
situated reality

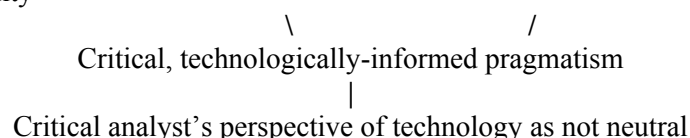


Figure 1. Perspectives to a critical, technologically-informed pragmatism

(Source: Adapted from Carol Chapelle in *English Language Learning and Technology*, 2003, p.3)

Kurzweil (1999) predicted that English language teaching and research will embrace significant changes in areas of direct concern, making detailed predications about the changes he expects to take place in communication and education due to advances in technology. His analysis is based on his model of the speed of intellectual progress that he calls the “Law of increasing chaos.” (Kurzweil apud Chapelle, 2003: 4). He also argued that within the next 20 years, a large portion of communication would take place between humans and computers. Moreover, he contended what nowadays is common practice in the sense that much of the instructional time learners spend consists of interaction with a computer (ibidem).

To illustrate various methods employed in class, Killen (1998) established seven categories of teaching strategies (*direct instruction, classroom discussion, small group work, cooperative learning, problem solving, student research, and performance activities*), conceptualizing basic principles for these strategies and highlighting advantages or disadvantages for using or not using a single strategy. Hence his study revealed that student-centred strategies are much more emphasised. In line with Killen, the contemporary scholar Hattie (2009) underlines the fact that strategies which are more student-centred are usually effective (Hing Wa Sit, 2017: 100). Furthermore, Hing Wa Sit's view concerning research of language teaching is not restricted to analysis on a theoretical level but extended to the reality of classrooms. In this regard, her recent study focuses on the evaluation of the seven strategies, in terms of the preference of teachers and students and the effectiveness of each strategy in the discipline of English studies within Hong Kong's higher education sector (ibidem). The results of the study reveal that DI (Direct Instruction), as the only teacher-centred teaching strategy, must be used

with other teaching strategies. The investigation of its use in practice revealed that DI was always followed by other student-centred teaching strategies among which *classroom discussion*, *small group work* and *cooperative learning* (Hing Wa Sit, 2017: 101).

We strongly believe that language teachers evaluate these strategies not only to identify their advantages and drawbacks, but also to find seeds for new methods that foster students' motivation and engagement. Therefore, we can add that case study methods in English pedagogy can be a support for inductive knowledge, in the sense that one can start from particular premises that lead to general conclusions, and a support for deductive knowledge, by passing from general to particular, in the sense of carrying out procedural transfers, elaboration of assumptions, applications in similar or different contexts. Student interactions in a real, authentic situation, taken as a typical example, give participants the opportunity to mould their attitudes towards the others and the respective case, along with the exercise of organizational, evaluation and decision-making abilities. A worth-mentioning and relevant resource of case studies that has sparked the interest of our students is Business Case Studies (businesscasestudies.co.uk). Each case study is designed using real information, around a key topic and displaying facts and complexities of business organizations to engage students and help them learn from relevant business contexts (e.g. *Business organizations*, *Developing people*, *Product portfolio*, *Corporate responsibility*, *Business start-up*, *Sectors of industry*, *Management of change*, *Research and Development*, etc.). The advantage of this method is also given by the fact that the situations that represent the case are similar to those in the real life, so it offers the possibility that certain applicative situations can be solved as learning tasks. In using the method, the following steps are listed by Popescu in Joita (2007):

- Choice of case: the case can be chosen by the teacher or by using the constructivist paradigm the teacher, depending on the objectives proposed, can help students to refer to the data of situations that can become cases;
- Realizing the nuances of the case while understanding the need for it to be solved by the participants (establishing unclear aspects, clarifying questions);
- Individual case resolution (documentation, notification and marking of solutions by each participant);
- Group discussion of the ways of solving (making a match of the variants and their critical analysis);
- Formulate optimal conclusions based on the decisions taken in the previous stage; the teacher has the role of strengthening students' conclusions;
- Qualitative assessment of how to solve the case-situation and evaluation of the degree of participation.

This Digital Age promotes resources like Coursera, Iversity, edX, Udacity, Udemy, Khan Academy, etc. which have demonstrated the importance of autonomous, intrinsically motivated learning.

We also encourage our students to use the Expemo app developed by Linguahouse (see Figure 2) as it accelerates language acquisition and helps them remember what they learn, even after many years. It is a knowledge management and acquisition tool for individuals and innovative organizations. Expemo

optimizes the preparation, learning and testing of knowledge ensuring that important information is quickly acquired and retained indefinitely. Our students use Expemo to review new words and phrases from learning English or phrasebook pages and to review the material from printable classroom and online worksheets (see Google Play Store).

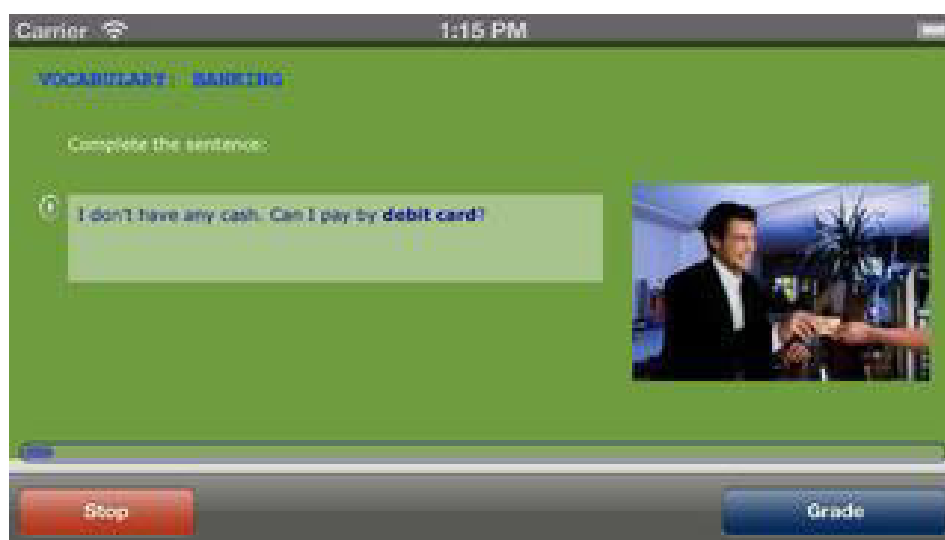


Figure 2. Expemo app in action

3. Forming a Constructivist Learner beyond the Class Instruction

The barriers to a constructivist approach in the language class that we identified are: the curriculum does not emphasize relevant concepts to spark students' interest, lack of interactivity between teachers and students, students' reluctance to work in groups, students' point of view are neither valued nor assessed. To overcome these barriers teachers have to create a more collaborative environment:

- Teachers should be aware that they deal with a social generation. According to Straus and Howe each generation is an archetype in itself, depending on the temporal position relative to the great crises, influenced largely by the choices of the previous generation, which hold the greatest influence and power during the youth of the former, an archetype that is cyclically repeated in the succession: hero, artist, prophet and nomad (Straus & Howe apud Stanescu & Toiu, 2015: 492).
- Teachers should create a variety of tasks as learners prefer different task types, task structures and task sequencing. Paulus (2005) pinpoints the fact that collaborative and cooperative tasks are different. In collaborative tasks, learners engage in constructive dialogue to develop a shared concept of a product, whereas in cooperation tasks they focus on how to organize the interaction, specifically by using role assignment to divide up the work (Paulus apud Müller-Hartmann & Schocker-v. Ditfurth, 2010: 31)

- Teachers need to encourage students to participate in extracurricular activities/events or to become members of key organizations that have a positive impact locally and globally through collective strategies. For example, The Global Shapers Community was founded by the World Economic Forum but it is independent from it and is organized in hubs, in cities around the world. This network boasts visionary youth leaders who are at the top of their domains, with a curiosity that crosses the borders of their country and a demonstrated passion to contribute to solving the problems that we face (Stanescu & Toiu, 2015: 492). The status of shaper is voluntary and the Global Shapers Community is dedicated to facilitate access, as partners of dialogue, in global conferences, in the network of agents of change through the online platform and the medium for dialogue, collaboration and feedback (ibidem). With the aid of this community, this new wave of leaders has curated opportunities to connect and collaborate through the network and the WEF with the entire community of business people, policy makers, and researchers, innovators in technology, educators and social entrepreneurs (ibidem).
- Teachers and their students should attend networking events that aim to facilitate interaction between young people and business people. A relevant example is the event *Idea Exchange*; it includes a presentation by a special guest who addresses a topic of interest for people who have entrepreneurial aspirations, followed by the participants' business ideas, and ends with an open discussion session (Sancariuc, 2015: 410). In this way, students can become more interactive in class, without being shy to express their ideas and to think out of the box.
- Teachers should recommend projects dedicated to acquiring work experience, such as *Career Leader* which gives them the possibility to better understand the area in which they wish to perform as entrepreneurs in the sense that they have the chance to work for one day with leaders from different industries, solving case studies and participating in training sessions held by representatives of leading companies (Sancariuc, 2015: 411). To enhance their writing skills, the language teacher will ask students to make a report on their activity in this one-day project.
- Students should be encouraged by teachers to embrace experiential education, too. For example, the entrepreneurship school *Start me up* is held each year and offers participants the possibility to work among international trainers and mentors to generate ideas, to design business plans and finally, to validate their business concept in front of investors (ibidem). In this way, students can talk about their experience in class and will come up with more ideas as communication on related topics emerges.

4. Conclusions

Within the constructivist paradigm, ESP teachers aim to facilitate students' learning and to enhance their language attainment in real life contexts. Therefore, the frequency and preference of an innovative strategy depends on the contents and contexts of teaching and learning with technology. Identity theories provided the

major theoretical perspective that shaped our original ideas about digital technology and teacher education (Bullock & Fletcher, 2017:35).

The Digital era affects the context and approach for teaching and learning a language. Nowadays technologies support learners to explore experiences and practices in various contexts. To face the challenges of this digital society, language instructors use e-learning, M-learning and Skype (with the purpose of enhancing the skills of students when they participate in a job interview on Skype), thus making the digital constructivist pedagogy an effective tool in the sense that it provides a more participant-centred and flexible ecosystem.

References

- Beineke J. (1998). *And There Were Giants in the Land. The life of William Heard Kilpatrick*, New York: Peter Lang.
- Bruma T. (2015). The 4th Quadrant – Transforming education by design. In Stoian, M., Gavrilă, B. (coordinators). (2015). *Romania's New Wave*, special edition, Bucharest: The Resource Center for Civil Society.
- Bullock, M. S. & Fletcher, T. (2017). Teaching About Teaching Using Technology: Using Embodiment to interpret Online Pedagogies of Teacher Education. In Garbett & Ovens (Eds.). (2017). *Being Self-Study Researchers in the Digital World: Future-oriented research and pedagogy in teacher education*, Springer International Publishing, Switzerland.
- Chapelle A. Carol (2003). *English Language Learning and Technology*, John Benjamins Publishing.
- Hing Wa (Helena) Sit (2017). *Inclusive Teaching Strategies for Discipline-Based English Studies: Enhancing Language Attainment and Classroom Interaction in a Multicultural Learning Environment*, Springer Nature Singapore Pte Ltd.
- Joita, E. (Coord). (2007). *Profesorul și Alternativa Constructivistă a Instruirii: material – suport pedagogic pentru studenții – viitori profesori* (II), Universitaria Publishing House.
- Kneller F. George (1966). *Logic and Language of Education*, John Wiley & Sons Inc., New York, London, Sydney.
- McKenna, Tarquam and Cacciattolo, Marcelle and Vicars, Mark and Neal, Gregory and Yelland, Nicola and Nolan, A. and Vale, C. and Livy, S. and Watt, A. and Slee, Roger and Carpenter, Cathryn and Burridge, Peter and Woods, D. and Carroll, J. and Steinberg, SR. (2013). *Engaging the Disengaged: Inclusive Approaches to Teaching the Least Advantaged*. McKenna, Tarquam and Cacciattolo, Marcelle and Vicars, Mark, eds. Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.
- Müller-Hartmann, A. & Schocker-v. Dittfurth, M. (2010). Research on the Use of Technology in Task-Based Language Teaching. In Thomas, M. & Reinders, H. (2010). *Task-based Language Learning and Teaching with Technology*, Continuum International Publishing Group.

- Ornstein, A., Levine, D. (2008). *Foundation of Education*, tenth edition, Houghton Mifflin Company.
- Petre Cristian (2010). *Pedagogie românească. Modele: Ion Găvănescul*, Iași: Institutul European.
- Pitler, H., Hubbell, E.R., Kuhn, M., & Malenoski, K. (2007). Using technology with classroom instruction that works. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Stanescu, C., Toiu, O. Global Shapers, The Generation That Transcends The Myth Of The Sole Savior To The Collective Hero. In Stoian, M., Gavrilă, B. (coordinators). (2015). *Romania's New Wave*, special edition, Bucharest: The Resource Center for Civil Society.
- Sancariuc, R. (2015). How Can We Grow New Generations of Young Entrepreneurs? Case Study: AKCEES. In Stoian, M., Gavrilă, B. (coordinators). (2015). *Romania's New Wave*, special edition, Bucharest: The Resource Center for Civil Society.