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## Critical Constructivism and Language Teaching: New Wine in New Bottles\*

### ABSTRACT

The traditional craft of the teacher can be rescued and strengthened by understanding the connection between the content area of the curriculum and how it will be understood by the student. Understanding this connection involves recognizing the cultural pattern of thought (the episteme) that underlies the organization of knowledge in the curriculum unit as well as the phenomenological world of the student. The latter is essential for grasping what the student is likely to understand and how that understanding will be integrated into the student's pattern of thinking.

(C.A. Bowers (1984: 78)

Constructivism is very much in vogue at the present time. Indeed, constructivism has taken on the force of a slogan in many educational circles – a slogan that, like “student-centered curriculum,” “reflective practice,” and “learning by doing,” has become so commonplace as to inhibit rather than promote clear thinking about teaching and learning. Its popularity has also resulted in something of an intellectual backlash, demonstrated perhaps most clearly in Michael Devitt's assertion that it is “the most dangerous contemporary intellectual tendency” as well as in efforts to link constructivism with other postmodern challenges to science and rationality.

Constructivism is very much in vogue at the present time. As the educational philosopher D. C. Phillips has noted, “‘Constructivism’ is a currently fashionable magic word in the Western intellectual firmament, one which has beguiled a great many educational researchers, curriculum developers, trainers of teachers and teachers themselves, school administrators, sociologists, philosophers, and anti-philosophers who regard themselves as being of postmodern disposition” (2000a: 1). Indeed, constructivism has taken on the force of a slogan in many educational circles – a slogan that, like “student-centered curriculum,” “reflective practice,” and “learning by doing,” has become so commonplace as to inhibit rather than promote clear thinking about teaching and learning (see Komisar & McClellan, 1969). Its popularity has also resulted in something of an intellectual backlash, demonstrated perhaps most clearly in Michael Devitt's assertion that it is “the most dangerous contemporary intellectual tendency” (1991: ix), as well as in efforts to link constructivism with other postmodern challenges to science and rationality, as in Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's *Impostures intellectuelles* (1997; English version published 1998).

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In my comments today, I want to discuss, in the context of language education, (1) the metaphorical rather than scientific nature of “theories” about language learning, (2) what constructivism is (and is not), (3) what the implications of constructivism are for second and foreign language pedagogy, and (4) how constructivism relates to critical pedagogy and critical language awareness. My theme will be that constructivism has the potential to be profoundly useful and valuable for language educators, and that it can provide insights into how we can make language learning both more relevant and powerful. I also want to suggest that although the rhetoric of constructivism may be relatively new, the underlying concepts – especially as they relate to teaching practice – are in fact “old hat” for experienced educators. As Ernst von Glasersfeld, one of the most widely recognized proponents of constructivist epistemology, commented, “Constructivism does not claim to have made earth-shaking inventions in the area of education; it merely claims to provide a solid conceptual basis for some of the things that, until now, inspired teachers had to do without theoretical foundation” (1995a: 15).

### **The Nature of Learning Theory**

Traditionally part of philosophy, the attempt to understand what learning is really all about – and, concomitantly, how one might best encourage or support learning – has a long history, spanning thousands of years. Although the debate about learning precedes him, the ancient Greek philosopher Plato formulated a learning theory that remains credible today. In the *Meno*, Plato demonstrates how an uneducated slave boy could, through a process of guided questioning, seemingly produce an understanding of certain relatively sophisticated mathematical concepts. Plato’s explanation for this was that since no explicit teaching of content took place, the knowledge demonstrated by the slave boy must have come from the boy. In other words, learning is essentially a matter of remembering or recalling what we already know (see, e.g., Conford, 1957; Grube, 1980; Nettleship, 1968). The Socratic teaching method, which involves active questioning by the teacher as well a continuous debate with students, is grounded in this idea. While obviously limited, such an approach to teaching does promote learning at least in those cases when knowledge and understanding can be gained deductively. More than this, though, the Platonic view of learning has a modern-day parallel that will be familiar to anyone interested specifically in language teaching and language learning. Noam Chomsky’s conceptualization of universal grammar, coupled with the hypothetical “learning acquisition device,” is fundamentally a modern version of the Platonic view of learning, as applied to the case of language (see Cook & Newson, 1996: 273–310). Children, as Steven Pinker has summarized the Chomskian position, “must be innately equipped with a plan common to the grammars of all languages, a Universal Grammar, that tells them how to distill the syntactic patterns out of the speech of their parents” (1994: 22). As Chomsky himself has explained,

Even knowing very little of substance about linguistic universals, we can be quite sure that the possible variety of language is sharply limited . . . . The language each person acquires is a rich and complex construction hopelessly underdetermined by the fragmentary evidence available [to the child]. Nevertheless individuals in a speech community have developed essentially the same language. This fact can be explained only on the assumption that these individuals employ highly restrictive principles that guide the construction of grammar. (1975: 10–11)

Plato’s view of learning was fundamentally speculative in nature, as were most of the learning theories that followed. The British philosopher John Locke, for instance, argued that the child’s

mind is essentially a *tabula rasa* – a “blank slate,” onto which the teacher may write whatever he or she thinks that the child should know (see Chambliss, 1987: 71–85). Learning on such an account is, then, a matter of pouring knowledge into the child, rather than bringing knowledge out of the child. This Lockean perspective in turn served to support parts of nineteenth century psychology, which emphasized the different “faculties” of the mind and the need to furnish the mind with the best intellectual products of humanity (Tozer, Violas & Senese, 1998: 35–37). Nineteenth century psychology also contributed the idea that the mind can be best understood as a muscle, and that learning is thus comparable to exercise. Just as with exercise, learning is only meaningful and worthwhile if it is challenging. Coaches often remind their athletes that “no pain, no gain,” and nineteenth century psychology advocated the training of the mind on the most challenging and difficult intellectual content – which was widely believed to be the study of the classical languages, and especially of Greek.

The development of psychology as a discipline distinct from philosophy led to an increasing emphasis on more “scientific” approaches to understanding human learning, and it is these non-speculative approaches to learning that dominated the twentieth century (see Biehler & Snowman, 1990; Karier, 1986; Ormrod, 1995). Behaviorist learning theories obviously played a key role in education, perhaps nowhere more clearly than in the dominance of the audiolingual method in foreign language education for a good part of the twentieth century (see Richards & Rodgers, 2001: 50–69).

What is especially intriguing in contemporary studies of learning is that although presented in the guise and rhetoric of scientific research, such theories remain in fact largely speculative in nature. Indeed, learning theories are not “theories” in a truly scientific sense at all – rather, they are metaphors that are used to try to represent, by analogy, what appears to be taking place as the individual engages in the learning process. The metaphors of Platonic and Lockean learning theories (pulling knowledge out of the student, and pouring knowledge into the student) are actually not all that different in kind from those of the behaviorists and other contemporary psychologists.

A recent publication of the National Research Council’s Commission on Behavioral and Social Sciences in Education, entitled *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience and school*, begins with the assertion that:

The revolution in the study of the mind that has occurred in the last three or four decades has important implications for education . . . a new theory of learning is coming into focus that leads to very different approaches to the design of curriculum, teaching, and assessment than those often found in schools today . . . Thirty years ago, educators paid little attention to the work of cognitive scientists, and researchers in the nascent field of cognitive science worked far removed from classrooms. Today, cognitive researchers are spending more time working with teachers, testing and refining their theories in real classrooms where they can see how different settings and classroom interactions influence applications of their theories. (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 2000: 3)

Although I, too, am very interested in and excited by the developments in cognitive science, I have to say that I believe that the Commission’s enthusiasm is a bit premature. Cognitive science is indeed making fascinating discoveries about the human brain, and our knowledge of neuroscience is growing at a phenomenal rate (see Carter, 1998; Opler & Gjerlow, 1999; Purves et al., 1997; Solso, 1997; Thagard, 1996). Still, there is a huge chasm between what we know scientifically about the way in which the human brain functions and what the implications of this knowledge are for understanding individual learning, let alone for classroom practice. We are beginning to

develop powerful tools that allow us to observe the brain and brain activity in previously unimaginable ways, and such observations will almost certainly some day lead to scientifically-based learning theories. They have not done so yet, though, in spite of the plethora of books and articles purporting to apply brain research to the classroom (see, e.g., Jensen, 1998; Sylwester, 1995). In short, while a true science of learning is certainly possible, it has not yet emerged, nor is it likely to be articulated in pedagogically useful ways any time soon. We are, then, at least for the time being, reliant on metaphors to understand the nature of learning – one of the more powerful of which today is clearly constructivism.

### **Conceptualizing Constructivism**

One very useful way in which one can make sense of what takes place in the classroom context with respect to learning is by focusing on what might be termed the epistemological lens utilized by those in the particular classroom setting: that is, by considering the assumptions that are being made by teachers, students and others about what knowledge actually is and how one becomes knowledgeable. Underlying all pedagogical practice, ultimately, are questions of epistemology. The way in which we think about knowledge and what it means to know are directly and necessarily linked to all aspects of how we teach (see Reagan, 1999, 2002, in press). In recent years, a number of academic disciplines – most notably, mathematics and science, as well as literacy and language arts – have begun to undergo a significant change in the epistemology which underlies their pedagogical practice (for science education, see, e.g., Fensham, Gunstone & White, 1994; Mintzes, Wandersee & Novak, 1997; Tobin, 1993; for mathematics education, see, e.g., Davis, Maher & Noddings, 1990; Steffe, Cobb & von Glasersfeld, 1988; Wood, Cobb & Yackel, 1995; for literacy and language arts, see, e.g., Cooper, 1993; Kamii, Manning & Manning, 1991; Nelson, 1996; Spivey, 1997). This change, which might well be considered a paradigm shift (even in the face of the ubiquitous over- and misuse of that phrase), has been grounded in the growing popularity and credibility of constructivist approaches to epistemology and learning theory. Such views are far from uniform, and are also far from new, dating back at least some sixty years to the work of Jean Piaget (see Piaget, 1976, 1979, 1986, 1993, 1996), and on at least some accounts as far back as the work of Kant (see Boulter, 1997; Spivey, 1997: 6). They have nonetheless been slow to impact significantly educational thought and practice in many areas, and have only started to come into their own in terms of pedagogical practice during the past decade (see Coll, Martin, Mauri, Miras, Onrubia, Solé & Zamala, 1994; Fosnot, 1989, 1996a; Grennon Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

Although constructivism has gained considerable attention in the educational literature in recent years, there is no clear definition or consensus of what is actually meant by the term (see Duffy & Jonassen, 1992; Forman & Pufall, 1988; Kafai & Resnick, 1996; Nicaise & Barnes, 1996; Schwandt, 1994; Steffe & Gale, 1995). As Virginia Richardson has noted, “One cannot think of constructivist teaching ... as a monolithic, agreed-upon concept . . . . There are fundamental theoretical differences in the various constructivist approaches” (1997b: 3). Indeed, there is even debate about whether constructivism is best understood as an epistemology, an educational philosophy, a pedagogical approach, a theory of teaching, or a theory of learning (see Kaufman & Grennon Brooks, 1996: 234). Arguably the best articulation of the nature of constructivism in the educational literature is that of Catherine Fosnot, who has suggested that:

Constructivism is a theory about learning, not a description of teaching. No “cookbook teaching style” or pat set of instructional techniques can be abstracted from the theory and proposed as a constructivist approach to teaching. Some general principles of learning

derived from constructivism may be helpful to keep in mind, however, as we rethink and reform our educational practices. (1996b: 29)

In other words, at its heart, the constructivist enterprise should be understood as “a theory about knowledge and learning. Drawing on a synthesis of current work in cognitive psychology, philosophy, and anthropology, the theory defines knowledge as temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated, and thus, non-objective. Learning from this perspective is understood as a self-regulated process of resolving inner cognitive conflicts that often become apparent through concrete experience, collaborative discourse, and reflection” (Fosnot, 1993: vii).

Such a view of constructivism essentially confirms its status as an epistemology – a theory of knowledge and learning, rather than a theory of teaching (see von Glasersfeld, 1993: 23–24). As an epistemological metaphor, constructivism entails the rejection of traditional transmission-oriented views of learning, as well as behaviorist models of learning. Instead, emphasis is placed on the individual learner’s construction of his or her knowledge. Beyond this, though, constructivism assumes not only that learning is constructed, but also that the learning process is a personal and individual one, that learning is an active process, that learning is collaborative in nature, and that all learning is situated (see Merrill, 1992: 102). In other words, what constructivism offers is a radically different view of the nature of the learning process – a view that is grounded in a rejection of what von Glasersfeld has called the “domination of a mindless behaviorism” (1995a: 4). This view includes a number of general principles of learning, including that:

- Learning is not the result of development; learning is development. It requires invention and self-organization on the part of the learner.
- Disequilibrium facilitates learning. “Errors” need to be perceived as a result of learners’ conceptions and therefore not minimized or avoided ... Contradictions, in particular, need to be illuminated, explored, and discussed.
- Reflective abstraction is the driving force of learning. As meaning-makers, humans seek to organize and generalize across experiences in a representational form.
- Dialogue within a community engenders further thinking. The classroom needs to be seen as a “community of discourse engaged in activity, reflection, and conversation.”
- Learning proceeds toward the development of structures. As learners struggle to make meaning, progressive structural shifts in perspective are constructed – in a sense, “big ideas” ... These “big ideas” are learner-constructed, central organizing principles that can be generalized across experiences and that often require the undoing or reorganizing of earlier conceptions. This process continues throughout development. (Fosnot, 1996b: 29–30)

Up to this point, we have discussed constructivism as a single entity, although keeping in mind Richardson’s warning that it is in fact far from monolithic. In reality, it has become fairly commonplace in discussions of constructivism to distinguish between what are often taken to be two fundamentally distinct, competing types of constructivism (see Cobb, 1994, 1996; Magadla, 1996). The first type of constructivism, radical constructivism, is fundamentally an epistemological construct that has been most clearly and forcefully advocated in the work of Ernst von Glasersfeld (1984, 1989, 1993, 1995a, 1995b, 1996). Radical constructivism has its philosophical roots in Piaget’s genetic epistemology (Piaget, 1979; Sinclair, Berthoud, Gerard & Veneziano, 1985), and is essentially a cognitive view of learning in which “students actively construct their ways of knowing as they strive to be effective by restoring coherence to the worlds of their personal experience” (Cobb, 1996: 34). Radical constructivism is premised on the belief

that an individual's knowledge can never be a "true" representation of reality (that is, in an observer-independent sense), but is rather a construction of the world that she or he experiences. In other words, knowledge is not something that could be passively received by the learner; it is, rather, the result of active mental work on the part of the learner.

The alternative to radical constructivism is social constructivism, which has as its primary theoretical foundation the work of Vygotsky (1978, 1986; see also Moll, 1990). Social constructivism, while accepting the notion that the individual does indeed construct his or her own knowledge, argues that the process of knowledge construction inevitably takes place in a sociocultural context, and that therefore knowledge is to some extent socially constructed. As Driver et al. have argued with respect to science education, "it is important . . . to appreciate that scientific knowledge is both symbolic in nature and also socially negotiated . . . The objects of science are not phenomena of nature but constructs that are advanced by the scientific community to interpret nature" (1994: 5).

The tension between radical and social constructivism, between the personal and the social construction of knowledge, is to a significant extent more apparent than real, and in any event, is certainly amenable to resolution on a practical level. As Paul Cobb has pointed out, "the sociocultural and cognitive constructivist perspectives each constitute the background for the other" (1996: 48), and von Glasersfeld has recognized that "we must generate an explanation of how 'others' and the 'society' in which we find ourselves living can be conceptually constructed on the basis of our subjective experiences" (1995a: 12). Ultimately, even D. C. Phillips, a leading critic of the philosophical foundations of radical constructivism (see Phillips, 1995), has agreed that:

It is worth stressing that these philosophical issues do not have to be settled before the business of education can proceed. I suspect that von Glasersfeld and I are very close in the kinds of educational attitudes and practices that we endorse. If you are about to undergo brain surgery, you do not have to wait until surgeons reach agreement about the thorny philosophical issues surrounding the body-mind problem. Similarly, a student can manipulate geological samples without having to settle upon a defensible philosophical account about the nature of the existence of these samples. (Phillips, 1996: 20)

Perhaps the most reasonable way to articulate the common, shared elements of radical and social constructivism is to talk about knowledge as "socially mitigated but personally constructed," a formulation which at the very least moves us away from a strong bifurcation of radical and social constructivism and allows us to move on to a discussion of the implications of constructivist epistemology in general for teaching practice.

### **Constructivist Pedagogy**

A critical issue that is often discussed, but seldom implemented in meaningful ways in the schools, is the need for students to engage their learning on matters of values and problems they confront in their lives and their communities. In other words, students must take ownership of what they are learning – they must be empowered as learners. The challenge for us as educators, as John Dewey expressed it in *The child and the curriculum*, is to avoid the temptation to view the subject matter as something unrelated to the child:

Abandon the notion of subject-matter as something fixed and ready-made in itself, outside the child's experience; cease thinking of the child's experience as also something hard and fast; see it as something fluent, embryonic, vital; and we realize that the child and the

curriculum are simply two limits which define a single process. Just as two points define a straight line, so the present standpoint of the child and the facts and truths of studies define instruction. It is continuous reconstruction, moving from the child's present experience out into that represented by the organized bodies of truth that we call studies. (Dewey, 1943: 11)

All too often, "learning" is equated with formal, direct instruction – a connection that our students also learn to make. A few years ago, I was involved in evaluating a summer educational program for urban children, which was held in a delightful rustic camp setting. In spite of daily, well-designed educational activities, toward the end of the program one of the participating children commented that he hadn't learned anything all summer at camp. When asked to elaborate, he explained, "We don't learn anything here. Learning is when they write stuff on the board and you copy it down. We don't copy nothing down here – there aren't even chalk boards." Although direct instruction certainly has its place in the classroom, there are many other ways in which students can learn, some of them far more appropriate and effective for particular students and specific subject matters. Certainly we know that if we wish to change attitudes and behaviors, for instance, direct instruction is likely to be ineffective. Even where specific skills are being taught, though, direct instruction has its limitations and drawbacks. All too often, textbooks and lectures simply do not engage students, nor do students have any sense of ownership or interest when subjects are presented in this manner.

While it is obviously important to keep in mind that constructivism is not, and could not be, a pedagogical theory or approach per se, it is also true that certain characteristics of the constructivist-based classroom can be identified. For example, Grennon Brooks and Brooks (1993) and Kaufman and Grennon Brooks (1996) have identified a number of characteristics that are common to effective constructivist classrooms:

- Use raw data and primary sources, along with manipulative, interactive, and physical materials.
- When framing tasks, use cognitive terminology, such as classify, analyze, predict, create, and so on.
- Allow student thinking to drive lessons. Shift instructional strategies or alter content based on student responses.
- Inquire about students' understandings of concepts before sharing your own understandings of those concepts.
- Ask open-ended questions of students and encourage students to ask questions of others.
- Seek elaboration of students' initial responses.
- Engage students in experiences that might engender contradictions to students' initial hypotheses and then encourage a discussion.
- Provide time for students to construct relationships and create metaphors. (Kaufman & Grennon Brooks, 1996: 235)

These characteristics function both as descriptive and normative attributes in that they have not only been observed in practice, but in that they have also been used for evaluation purposes. It is important to note here, incidentally, that "Many of these attributes are not unique to constructivist teaching but are representative of good teaching in general" (Kaufman & Grennon Brooks, 1996: 235) – a point which would seem to confirm von Glasersfeld's claim, quoted earlier, that, "Constructivism does not claim to have made earth-shaking inventions in the area of education; it merely claims to provide a solid conceptual basis for some of the things that, until now, inspired teachers had to do without theoretical foundation" (1995a: 15). Furthermore, while it is the case

that “constructivist principles of learning do not automatically engender principles of teaching ... [since] learners construct meaning on their own terms no matter what teachers do,” (Winitzky & Kauchak, 1997: 62), it is also true that:

Constructivist theorists would maintain . . . that learning is better or more effective when teachers use constructivist teaching methods, like culturing and keying bacteria as opposed to lecturing about bacteria. Constructivist teaching typically involves more student-centered, active learning experiences, more student-student and student-teacher interaction, and more work with concrete materials and in solving realistic problems . . . Nevertheless, students still create their own meanings based on the interaction of their prior knowledge with instruction, and the meanings they make may not be the ones the teacher had in mind, no matter how constructivist the instruction ... (Winitzky & Kauchak, 1997: 62–63)

Constructivism has a wide range of implications for language educators, both in terms of its significance for research and its relevance for pedagogical practice. With respect to the former, studies of the social nature of language learning and acquisition are increasingly grounded in constructivist epistemological positions. Christian Faltis, for instance, has noted that “a shift toward the constructivist, social nature of learning and language acquisition is also increasingly evident in new research efforts” (1997: 194). Similarly, the veritable explosion in discourse studies is ultimately, albeit often implicitly, linked to constructivist approaches to understanding, whether one is concerned with academic discourse (see Achard, 1993; Bourdieu, Passeron & de Saint Martin, 1994; Fairclough, 1995), classroom discourse (see Bartolomé, 1998; Craig, 1995; Woods, 1996; Measures, Quell & Wells, 1997; van Lier, 1996), or scientific discourse (see Boulter, 1997). Typical in this regard is the most recent volume of the *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, which is devoted to the topic “discourse and dialogue” (McGroarty, 2002).

Such research foci emphasize, not surprisingly, the social construction of language and discourse, but there is room as well for concern with the personal or individual construction of language. One powerful way in which we can conceptualize the personal construction of language has to do with the linguistic notion of idiolects: “The unique characteristics of the language of an individual speaker are referred to as the speaker’s idiolect. English may then be said to consist of 400,000,000 idiolects, or the number equal to the number of speakers of English” (Fromkin & Rodman, 1993: 276). In other words, a transmission-based view of language learning is simply incompatible with the final outcome of such learning, since each individual speaker (whether native or non-native) in fact constructs his or her own understanding of, and competence in, the target language, which will, in turn, be modified and can be evaluated by comparison with other speakers of the language. This is not, of course, to minimize in any way the key role played by interaction in the process of language learning. As Katherine Nelson (1996: 332) has cogently observed,

Competence in constructing and using culturally defined categories of entities (objects, events, properties, etc.) has been shown to involve a number of different linguistic components, including superordinate labels and the vocabulary of inclusive hierarchies. These verbal components can account for aspects of conceptual development previously held to be perceptually based (e.g., grouping along lines of shape similarity) or logically based (e.g., set relations). The verbal contributions to the development of cultural categories are integrated with experientially derived categories . . . The coordination and integration processes involved in the assembling of cultural taxonomies . . . exemplify the more general problem encountered during the preschool years of reconfiguring individual experientially based representations established independently of linguistic input to



accommodate knowledge systems displayed in language. This reconfiguration cannot be accomplished through individual constructive processes alone, but requires implicit and explicit collaboration with knowledge bearers ...

Although Nelson's focus is on language acquisition in early childhood, the same general claim would of course apply to foreign language learning with respect to the complementary and interactive roles of the individual and the social constructions of language. This brings us to the implications of constructivist epistemology for foreign language pedagogy.

In the context of the foreign language classroom, the application of constructivist epistemology would necessarily undergird virtually all classroom practice. As Williams and Burden have explained,

The literature on language teaching provides comprehensive accounts of different language teaching methodologies and is rich with ideas and techniques for teaching a language. However, what has become increasingly clear to us is the fundamental importance to teachers of an understanding of what is involved in the process of learning to inform and underpin our teaching of the language. Teachers' own conceptions of what is meant by learning, and what affects learning will influence everything that they do in the classroom. At the same time, in order to make informed decisions in their day-to-day teaching, teachers need to be consciously aware of what their beliefs about learning and teaching are. (1997: 1–2)

This is, as far as it goes, true not only of foreign language teaching, but of all teaching. To be sure, foreign language pedagogy does indeed have many common features with other sorts of teaching, but it is also distinct in some key ways. Successful foreign language learning entails far more for the learner than merely learning content and skills. Gardner has suggested that, "Languages are unlike any other subject taught in a classroom in that they involve the acquisition of skills and behaviour patterns which are characteristic of another community" (1985: 146), while Crookall and Oxford argue that, "Learning a second language is ultimately learning to be another social person" (1988: 136). It is this need for the learner to reconstruct one's personal identity that is at the heart of foreign language learning, and it is in this process of reconstruction, rather than merely in terms of learning vocabulary and grammatical forms, that constructivist epistemology may be most useful.

Williams and Burden, in an effort to summarize and consolidate the implications of constructivism for foreign language learning, have identified the following basic propositions that they believe to be essential for language teachers to understand:

- There is a difference between learning and education.
- Learners learn what is meaningful to them.
- Learners learn in ways that are meaningful to them.
- Learners learn better if they feel in control of what they are learning.
- Learning is closely linked to how people feel about themselves.
- Learning takes place in a social context through interaction with other people.
- What teachers do in the classroom will reflect their own beliefs and attitudes.
- There is a significant role for the teacher as mediator in the language classroom.
- Learning tasks represent an interface between teachers and learners.
- Learning is influenced by the situation in which it occurs. (1997: 204–208)

One example of a constructivist approach to foreign language teaching is provided by a teacher in an introductory Spanish class whose lesson focuses on the use of the verb *gustar* to indicate likes

and dislikes. The class begins with the teacher presenting the following short passage in Spanish, in which *gustar* is used in a number of different ways:

A mí me gusta bailar, pero a Ana no le gusta bailar. A mi hermana le gustan las flores, pero a mi padre no le gustan. A mis hermanos les gusta la música americana. A mí me gustan todos los tipos de música. A Juan y a Diana les gusta hablar francés. A Kelly y a mí nos gusta hablar español. ¿Qué te gusta a ti?

Utilizing pictures and dramatic techniques, the teacher ensures that the students understand the meaning of the passage, although they have yet to learn the specifics of the use of *gustar*. The teacher then begins to elicit class input using the basic forms of *Me gusta* + singular object (as in *Me gusta el vino*). After several students have produced correct forms of this type, the teacher then introduces a plural object (*Me gustan las flores*), and asks a student, ¿Te gustan las flores? Using additional elicitation techniques, the teacher moves around the room, by this point alternating both the first and second person forms and the singular and plural forms, as well as gradually introducing negative forms (*No me gustan las flores*). Students are now encouraged to converse in pairs, in a round-robin fashion, asking questions and giving answers. The teacher provides input only as needed, generally using stress to indicate a student error and encourage student self-correction. During this activity, the teacher also introduces the *Me gusta* + infinitive form (*Me gusta bailar*), and then encourages students to use constructions of this type to indicate activities that they enjoy. At this point, the teacher might also introduce the third person form (*Le gusta el chocolate*) and have students discuss the likes and dislikes of other students in the class, based on the information obtained in the earlier part of the class. By the end of the class, students have begun to master the use of the verb *gustar*; additional practice and further development of the use of *gustar* will be needed, of course, but students should already be in a position to offer a reasonably accurate description of how *gustar* is used – and should be able to do so without ever having explicitly encountered a formal explanation of the grammatical rules involved. Similar approaches can be used to teach virtually any linguistic structure, semantic relationship or lexical item in the target language, as well as helping students to develop their own personal competence in (and hence construction of) the target language broadly conceived. In fact, a fairly compelling case could be offered for the claim that the greater the difference between a particular structure or vocabulary item in the learner's mother tongue and the target language, the more appropriate and effective a constructivist approach to language learning may prove to be. This point is similar to, and certainly compatible with, that made recently by Widdowson when he commented that:

we now know much more than our predecessors about what makes language real for its users, and we know what learners have to do if they are to aspire to be foreign language users themselves. My main point is that this heightened understanding about language, communication, community, and social identity has also to be applied to the contexts of the classroom and the realities and identities of language learners. To do this is really only to recognize, as our predecessors have done, that what we are teaching is not language as experienced by its users but a foreign language which, as a subject, has to be designed for learners. (1998: 332)

Thus, telling students about the difference between the verbs *ser* and *estar* in Spanish will almost certainly be less useful than simply having them employ the verbs and gradually come to know, in part as a result of teacher correction, when each is appropriate.

The discussion thus far might lead one to believe that constructivist approaches to foreign language pedagogy are appropriate primarily in introductory and entry-level settings, but this is in

fact not the case. For instance, in a second year (or even more advanced) Russian course, after students have mastered some of the grammatical basics of the language and have acquired at least a limited vocabulary, one could revisit student understandings of the *HZ* / *&Z* distinction (analogous to the *tu* / *vous* distinction in French) by presenting students with Pushkin's short poem "*ГЗ 4 %Z*" in which this distinction is the central focus of a love poem:

А 9ΦH≡, &Z Φ,Δ\*,P>Z< HZ  
 ?>∇, ≡∃<≡:&βΦ .:, 2∇<,>4:∇  
 3 &Φ, ΦP∇ΦH:4&Z, <,PHZ  
 % \*9T, &: ∅:.>>≡6 &≡2∅9\*4:∇.  
 AΔ,\* >,6 2∇\*9<P4&≡ ΦH≡ ,  
 E&,ΦH4 ≡P,6 Φ >., >,H Φ4:Z;  
 3 (≡&≡Δ ,6: 8∇8 &Z<4:Z!  
 3 <ZΦ: : 8∇8 H,∅β: ∅: !

In English translation, the poem reads as follows:

The empty *you* by the warm *thou*  
 She, by a slip of the tongue, replaced  
 And all happy daydreams  
 Stirred up in the soul in love.  
 Before her pensively I stand,  
 To take my eyes off her I have not the strength;  
 And I tell her: how nice of *you!*  
 And think: how I love *thee!* (Arndt, 1972: 222–223)

The typical student understanding of the *HZ* / *&Z* distinction is fairly simplistic, with students mastering the singular/plural distinction reasonably well but not really internalizing the significance of the informal/ formal semantic relationship. This is, of course, understandable since the distinction is alien to most English speakers. Pushkin's poem, however, *requires* that one understand this semantic relationship, and provides a tool which can be effectively utilized in a classroom setting to help students to construct a more meaningful and productive understanding of the distinction. This is, incidentally precisely the way in which this particular poem is introduced in the *≡∃:≡Φ∇* textbook series, where the Russian version of the poem is presented with a partial English translation:

A simple *&Z* by a heartfelt *HZ*  
 She replaced in passing,  
 And all (my) happy dreams  
 She aroused in my enamored soul.  
 Before her pensively I stand;  
 I've not the strength to take my eyes off her.  
 I tell her: 8∇8 &Z<4:Z!  
 And think: 8∇8 H,∅β: ∅: ! (Henry, Robin & Robin, 1994: 149)

In all of the instances that have been discussed here, while explicit and directive teaching is certainly possible, the alternative of teacher modeling and individual student construction of the linguistic target has much to commend it.

At this point, a few words about what constructivism is not, and what it does not call for in terms of educational practice, are needed. Given its contemporary popularity, it is hardly surprising that constructivism has been not only widely discussed, but that it had also been widely misunderstood and misapplied. We have already seen that constructivism is best understood not as a theory of teaching, but as a theory of learning. While there may be more or less effective ways of teaching that encourage or discourage student learning on a constructivist account, it is important to understand that no pedagogical approach would be excluded by a commitment to constructivist epistemology. Indeed, not only is there no such thing as a constructivistic teaching theory, but in fact conceptually such a thing could not even exist. By its very nature, constructivism encourages an eclectic approach to classroom instruction. The idea that direct instruction or lecturing is incompatible with constructivist learning theory is simply untrue.

Furthermore, while constructivism is clearly student-centered in its focus, this does not mean that the content and skills to be learned must be determined by the student. Constructivism provides us with a way to conceptualize the process of student learning, and certainly requires active participation by the student in his or her learning. It also entails the recognition that the ultimate responsibility for learning is the student's, not the teacher's. The student, rather than the teacher, has the absolute veto on whether learning takes place. The particular content and skills to be learned, though, are not necessarily determined by the student at all. The identification of instructional and learning objectives clearly falls in the area of the teacher's responsibilities, though the student's acquiescence is also necessary.

Finally, it is important to understand that constructivism explains not only how students learn, but also explains how they mis-learn: in other words, students construct knowledge, but they can also misconstrue knowledge. Simply because a student has constructed knowledge in a particular way does not mean that the knowledge constructed is true. Constructivist epistemology, at least in its more moderate forms, does not entail epistemological relativism. The beginning student in a French class who says, "Nous parlez français" may well have constructed knowledge, but if so, has done so incorrectly. The fact of knowledge construction (or in this case, knowledge misconstruction) carries no significance for the determination of the accuracy of the knowledge constructed.

## **Constructivism and Critical Pedagogy**

It is hard to imagine how we might exaggerate the role of language in human life. In a wonderful essay entitled, "How to be the centre of the universe," Neil Smith has argued that:

Language makes us human . . . . Whatever we do, language is central to our lives, and the use of language underpins the study of every other discipline. Understanding language gives us insight into ourselves and a tool for the investigation of the rest of the universe. Proposing marriage, opposing globalization, composing a speech, all require the use of language; to buy a meal or sell a car involves communication, which is made possible by language; to be without language – as an infant, a foreigner or a stroke victim – is to be at a devastating disadvantage. Martians and dolphins, bonobos and bees, may be just as intelligent, cute, adept at social organization and morally worthwhile, but they don't share out language, they don't speak "human." (2002: 3)

If the centrality of language in human life is a given, this centrality must be even more true in the case of education. Leo van Lier has noted that,

There was a time, from the ancient Greeks to the late Middle Ages, when language was

central in educational practices, in the form of the three branches of the trivium: grammar, logic, and rhetoric. Then, increasingly, language study became separated from other subjects . . . and became merely one other subject . . . . As a result, language lost its centrality and relevancy as an educational focal point, and it became difficult to see how it connected to other parts of the curriculum. (1995: 7–8)

Whether recognized or not, though, language has in fact continued to be the central element that not only makes education possible, but which plays a key role in the construction of knowledge on both the part of the student and the part of the teacher. Assumptions and beliefs about language, as well as attitudes toward language, function in important ways to color and set the parameters of the educational experience, and can, in the classroom and school contexts, serve either positive or negative ends (see Corson, 2001; McKay & Hornberger, 1996; Reagan, 2001, in press). At this point, I want to turn to a discussion of the nature and rationale for critical language awareness, as well as to an exploration of how such critical language awareness can be manifested in classroom practice, how it overlaps and interfaces with critical pedagogy more broadly conceived, and how it is tied to constructivism.

Critical language awareness actually constitutes a subset of “language awareness,” a concept that gained increasing popularity in the language education professions in the 1980s and 1990s. “Language awareness” has all of the characteristics of an educational slogan, and thus has been elusive with respect to any clear definition of its exact meaning. However, one reasonable attempt at defining the concept was made by a number of educational linguists in the early 1990s, and their working definition for the concept, which still seems reasonable, was that language awareness involved, “a person’s sensitivity to and conscious awareness of the nature of language and its role in human life” (James & Garrett, 1992: 8). Such an awareness is certainly desirable and appropriate, but is, in the view of many educators and scholars, far from sufficient. As Norman Fairclough has suggested, critical language awareness is “an urgently needed element in language education [and] . . . coming to be a prerequisite for effective democratic citizenship, and should therefore be seen as an entitlement for citizens, especially children developing towards citizenship in the educational system” (1992: 3, emphasis in original). Fairclough also notes that critical language awareness:

presupposes and builds upon what is variously called “critical language study,” “critical linguistics,” or “critical discourse analysis” . . . It also presupposes a critical conception of education and schooling . . . It is vital first of all to situate both critical language study and [critical language awareness] in their social and historical contexts . . . (1992: 2)

And what is it that makes language awareness critical ? Ultimately, language awareness is critical when one is concerned with the social, political, economic, historical, and ideological context in which language is used, and in which language must be metalinguistically and metacognitively understood (see Andrews, 1998). In other words, critical language awareness involves the rejection of efforts and tendencies to reify or to objectify language and linguistic discourse. Hywel Coleman, in a description of the implications of an ideological approach to the study of student and teacher behavior in the English language classroom, provides a powerful analysis that also applies to the case of critical language awareness. Coleman argues that among the implications emanating from an ideological perspective on language teaching are the following:

- We should be aware that every manifestation of classroom practice may have meaning and value in its own context.
- Before seeking to sweep away traditional modes of behaviour, therefore, we must examine them with care and seek to understand them.

- When making recommendations for innovation in English language methodology, we must carry out the equivalent of an environmental audit of the impact of our proposed changes. In other words, we must seek to predict what the knock-on effect of methodological change is likely to be.
- When making recommendations for innovation, we must explore the possibility – at least – of exploiting cultural patterns of behaviour as a way of achieving the desired change.
- In particular, we must be alert to the possibility that learners are making effective use of learning opportunities in non-classroom contexts.
- We must be very cautious in making evaluative judgments of current classroom practice, particularly if as observers we do not share the same ideology as the principal participants in the classroom event.
- We must question whether there are universally appropriate ways of evaluating the success or otherwise of English language teaching projects.
- We must learn to question the ideological origins of our own assumptions about all aspects of English language teaching in institutional contexts. (1996: 13)

Critical language awareness requires this same openness and flexibility. It also requires a fair degree of honesty about our own personal and institutional objectives, motives and motivations.

Beyond this, critical language awareness must also be understood to be not only an outgrowth of critical pedagogy (see Kanpol, 1994), but a necessary element of critical pedagogy in the foreign language context (see Janks, 1991, 1997; Janks & Ivanič, 1992; Osborn, 2000; Pennycook, 2000). As Catherine Wallace has suggested,

A critical pedagogy presupposes an approach to language education in which learners and teachers aim to achieve some critical distance from language use in a range of spoken and written texts. Conversely, approaches under the broad umbrella of critical language awareness need to be located within a critical pedagogy if they are to have credibility as educational practice . . . Critical understanding can be understood at two broad levels: first, in the cognitive sense of “conscious awareness”; secondly . . . a deeper sense of “critical” as the ability and willingness to critique the ideological bases of language choice and variation. (1997: 241)

Critical language awareness, like critical pedagogy in general, is in the final analysis concerned with empowerment. Empowerment involves not only helping students to recognize, understand, and question discourse, but also, as Fairclough has pointed out, it “has a substantial ‘shock’ potential, and it can help people overcome their sense of impotence by showing them that existing orders of discourse are not immutable. The transformation of orders of discourse is a matter of the systemic de-structuring of existing orders and restructuring of new orders” (1989: 244). An important facet of this process of empowerment is recognizing that discourse is in fact negotiated between and among students and teachers. In short, as Karabel and Halsey observed in the late 1970s, “Teachers and pupils do not come together in a historical vacuum: the weight of precedent conditions the outcome of ‘negotiation’ over meaning at every turn” (1977: 58). Even the disempowered are not, after all, completely powerless.

Why should language educators be concerned with being critical? Why, indeed, should any teacher be concerned with being critical in the sense in which the term is used in both critical pedagogy and critical language awareness? There are any number of ways in which these questions might be answered. We might, for instance, ground a response in the various “codes of ethics” that undergird the teaching profession (see Strike, Haller & Soltis, 1988; Strike & Soltis,

1998). We might, alternately, base a response of the role, place of functions of schooling and education in a democratic society, with especial emphasis on the develop of meaningful critical thinking skills as a necessary preparation for the life of the citizen (see Apple & Beane, 1995; Gutmann, 1987; Soder, 1996; Stevens, Wood & Sheehan, 2002). We could, even, address the questions by pointing out that the ability to generate a critical perspective is a key component of being an educated person – whether as a teacher, parent, citizen, or student. All of these are credible and valid responses, I believe, but perhaps the clearest and most forceful justification is that provided by Joan Wink for critical pedagogy in general:

Why in the world does it matter? Kids matter. That's why. Our future matters. That's why. It is as simple as that. It is also something we all know. This is serious business we are talking about here. Students and teachers are hurting. We in education are a mirror of society that is more and more polarized. (2000: 165)

Precisely the same claims can be made for critical language awareness. Educators should be committed to encouraging the development of critical language awareness in our students because it is the right thing to do. It is a powerful way to promote social justice and the formation of a just, humane and democratic society. It is also a way of helping individual children better understand the society in which they live, and better negotiate that society. It is, in essence, giving students the tools that they need to make their own decisions – and decisions not just about language, but about every aspect of human life. This is why we should be critical, and seek to promote the same in our students. Anything less is an abrogation of our duties as educators, and as human beings.

What would critical language awareness, properly conceived and conducted, look like in a typical language classroom? The most immediate answer that comes to mind is that it wouldn't look very much like a typical classroom at all; indeed, it could not do so and still be critical language awareness. What it would look like, though, is basically what some writers have called a "postmethod pedagogy." As Kumaravadivelu (2001: 537) has explained, a postmodern pedagogy, which moves us beyond a simplistic transmission mode of instruction, would necessarily be one which:

Must (a) facilitate the advancement of a context-sensitive language education based on a true understanding of local linguistic, sociocultural, and political particularities; (b) rupture the reified role relationship between theorists and practitioners by enabling teachers to construct their own theory of practice; and (c) tap the sociopolitical consciousness that participants bring with them in order to aid their quest for identity formation and social transformation.

This is not, to be sure, an easy thing to imagine, let alone to implement in practice. It is a pedagogy that is grounded in not only a rejection of, but also a critical sensitivity to, issues of linguisticism broadly conceived (see Pennycook, 1994, 1998; Phillipson, 1988, 1992, 2000; Skutnabb-Kangas, 2000). It is a pedagogy that seeks to help students construct not only knowledge of the subject matter, but of an understanding of the social, cultural and ideological role of the subject. In other words, it is ultimately a pedagogy that moves students and teachers far beyond simple models and conceptions of teaching, learning and knowing. It is, in short, a wonderful example of what constructivist teaching might look like.

I have already argued that critical language awareness needs to be understood not only as an outgrowth of critical pedagogy, but also as a necessary element of critical pedagogy in the foreign language context. This is a start toward understanding the relationship between critical pedagogy and critical language awareness, but it is only a start. Pedagogy itself is a potentially problematic term; it has a long history, and thus considerable baggage, and beyond this, it differs in important

but not always recognized ways from “teaching.” Roger Simon has provided a very clear way of thinking about pedagogy:

Pedagogy is a more complex and extensive term than teaching, referring to the integration in practice of particular curriculum content and design, classroom strategies and techniques, a time and place for the practice of these . . . and evaluation purpose and methods. All of these aspects of educational practice come together in the realities of what happens in classrooms. Together they organize a view of how teachers’ work within an institutional context specifies a particular version of what knowledge is of most worth, what it means to know something, and how we might construct representations of ourselves, others, and our physical and social environment. In other words, talk about pedagogy is simultaneously talk about details of what students and others might do together and the cultural politics such practices support. To propose a pedagogy is to propose a political vision . . . we cannot talk about teaching practices without talking about politics. (1987: 371)

If pedagogy is intrinsically political in nature, so too is language education – whether or not we seek it to be (see Lippi-Green, 1997). Just as one can argue that moral education “comes with the territory” of public schooling, so must politics and ideology come with the territory. Thus, critical language awareness becomes not merely an option for the language educator, but an imperative.

Beyond simply encouraging such sociolinguistic understanding, the foreign language classroom is also an ideal place to help students to begin to develop what can be called critical language awareness. The study of language needs to include not only the communicative and cultural aspects of language, but also the political and ideological issues related to language. Students need to understand the ways in which language is used to convey and protect social status, as well as how it can be used to oppress and denigrate both individuals and groups. The foreign language classroom can either reinforce negative language attitudes and prejudices, or can be used to empower students to better understand the social roles of language in society. The choice is very much ours to make in our classrooms and in our interactions with our students. It is an important choice; perhaps among the most important choices that we can make as educators.

## **Conclusion**

Constructivist epistemology has, then, clear implications for classroom practice, the curricula, student assessment and evaluation, and, indeed, virtually all aspects of the teaching/learning process (see Henning, 1995; Zietsman, 1996). It also has the potential to impact in significant ways the preparation of foreign language educators (see Richardson, 1997a; Condon, Clyde, Kyle & Hovda, 1993; Rainer & Guyton, 1994) and the challenge of preparing such educators to engage in reflective and analytic classroom practice (see Norlander-Case, Reagan & Case, 1999; Parker, 1997; Reagan, Case & Brubacher, 2000; Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). The ultimate purpose of taking constructivist epistemology seriously in foreign language education, though, is helping teachers to learn to empower students to acquire language more effectively, and to assist students in becoming thoughtful and critical with respect to linguistic and language-related issues in the classroom and in the world. It is, in short, to help students become educated persons.



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