The Effect of Constructivist Classroom Procedures in FL Writing Development

Rıdvan Tuncel, Anadolu University, Turkey

Abstract: There has been a great shift from teacher-centered “instructionism” to student-centered approaches for about thirty years. This paper aims at providing and presenting some possibilities towards improving primary and secondary learners’ foreign language development through student-centered writing activities. In view of the fact that communicative language teaching has proved to have some limitations or shortcomings, many supportive methods such as Task-Based, Content-Based, Cooperative learning and some others have emerged in recent decades. Constructivist Language Teaching is one of the spreading approaches in math, science and language teaching. As opposed to teacher-centered, product oriented, non-interactive and prescribed teaching, today, constructivism often refers to student-centered, interactive, process oriented and meaning based classroom procedures. Within the framework of constructivist view, learners are encouraged to create and build knowledge. Thus, the learner is in the center of the education, and the teacher acts as a guide in designing appropriate settings for learners to learn. Writing activities, leading learner imagination and creativeness, include, “story starters (prompts)”, “picture writing (comic script)”, “writing an ending for a story”, “photo description (from a paper)” and some other constructivist ones. This study was carried out with two groups of 6th year pupils attending a Primary School. Thirty two students were in the control group, and another 32 students were in the experiment group of the study. The data were collected through the activities of “story starters (prompts)” and “writing an ending for a story”. The findings of the study reveal that constructive writing procedures, two of which were piloted for this study, are effective with regard to the student involvement and production. As activities are mostly student centered, they motivate learner participation, trigger task achievement and bring a lot of student-student and student-teacher interaction. For example, the study activity, writing the end of the story, encouraged learners in creating their own story endings, which in turn may create enthusiasm on writing and reading. When students are allowed to express their own ideas students are able to bring forth contradictory ideas and have a chance to justify and discuss their own ideas. Finally it was also observed that writing through some student oriented activities improved the amount of adjective usage to a considerable extent in an attempt to describe, narrate, imagine and create something their own.

1. INTRODUCTION

Today, constructivism often refers to student-centered, interactive, process-oriented and meaning based classroom procedures as opposed to teacher-centered, product oriented, non-interactive and prescribed teaching (Honebein 1996; Jonassen 1991). As frequently emphasized on the renovated Primary Education curriculum of the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MEB), the constructivist understanding of teaching and learning has been considered important. In the last couple of years, the Ministry of Education, in Turkey, has been trying to establish the constructivist understanding of education almost in all fields, including Turkish, Mathematics, Science and English teaching. On the official MEB web-site, the emphasis is on the constructivist approach in the recently designed curriculum, especially
for 8-year primary education. Additionally, the curriculum designers of MEB clearly put forward that almost all the courses have been redesigned and the course books reprinted according to the socio-constructivist approach.

Yangın (2005) in her research, evaluated the renovated Primary Education Curriculum, published by Ministry of Education in 2005, and in her summary she states that constructivism, learner-centered learning, learner participation, individual differences and resolving problems are the concepts that have been considered in the curricula. Yangın also claims that constructivism is one of the innovations in the curriculum that supports individual learning enabling his/her to learn how to learn. Thus, the learner is in the center of the education, but the teacher acts as a guide in designing appropriate settings for learners to learn. Although the theoretical bases of constructivism emerged for more than forty years ago, it has been a recent understanding of learning in educational area.

### 2. State of the Art

The renovated Primary Education curriculum of the Ministry of Education for primary education puts importance upon the constructivist understanding of teaching and learning. For this reason, the new approach has been on the spot of many educators and researchers. There is limited number of studies on the new curriculum and very few teachers in primary education are unaware of the innovative views of constructivist teaching and learning. The interviews done with the classroom teachers at Sinan Alaagac primary school, the Turkish teacher, the principal and some other teachers revealed the fact that the curriculum designed according to the constructivist understanding has been progressing in a very slow pace. Ercapan et. al. (2008) who investigated the new program of Turkish, in primary education, discovered that there are quite a lot of shortcomings in the curriculum. These are some requirements ranging from teacher in-service training to materials development. One of the findings of their study revealed that Turkish teachers are in urgent need of how to prepare supplementary materials for effective language instruction. Sert (2008), who studied the state of the constructivism in the elementary school curricula in collaboration with 1 Turkish, 4 Mathematics, 3 English and 3 Science and Technology teachers, found out that the program was partially congruent with the principles of constructivism. Sert’s findings also reveal that there are some difficulties in the contents, learning and evaluation processes. For this reason, it is worth investigating the state of the issue. Due to the fact that most of the teachers are accustomed to teacher-centered teaching, they may have some difficulties in adapting themselves to the innovations brought by the new curricula. Yet, there seems to be a shift from teacher instructionism towards student-centered constructivism, thus, researchers, teachers who are actual practitioners, reformers and all the related people in the ministry can jointly dwell upon the constructivist understanding of learning and teaching. This study may also shed light on the state of the new curriculum and the results are thought to be beneficial for researchers Turkey. The effects of constructivist, student-centered, participatory approaches have not been investigated in a broad sense yet. For this reason, this study may be beneficial to language teachers in understanding both the theoretical views and practical procedures of student centered reading and writing within the framework of constructivism.

### 2.1 Literature Review

The constructivist theory primarily derived from the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1985). Constructivism is one of the philosophical theories on how individuals learn, yet there are three understandings
in constructivist approach about how knowledge is built. These are: cognitive, social and radical constructivism. Vygotsky stated that culture and language have important effect on learning, and learning occurs via social interactions. The major theme of Vygotsky’s theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky argues that every function in the child’s cultural developments appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people and then inside the child. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All of the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. Teaching-learning processes which are organized through implications of these three approaches let students construct their own learning permanently by interacting with their environment.

Vygotsky accepted Piaget’s claim that learners respond not to the external stimuli but to their interpretation of those stimuli. However, he argued that cognitivists such as Piaget had overlooked the essentially the social nature of language. As a result, he claimed they had failed to understand that learning is a collaborative process. Vygotsky (1978) distinguished between two developmental levels: the level of actual development which is the level of development that the learner has already reached, and this is the level at which the learner is capable of solving problems independently. The level of potential development (the “zone of proximal development”) is the level of development that the learner is capable of reaching under the guidance of teachers or in collaboration with peers. The learner is capable of solving problems and understanding material at this level that they are not capable of solving or understanding at their level of actual development. The level of potential development is the level at which learning takes place. With respect to the processing knowledge and benefiting learning in cognitive level, Yaşar (1998) states that students do not construct learning as it is presented to them but they do this process in their cognition through the way they construct it. According to von Glasersfeld (1987) the constructivist view of learning involves two basic principles: knowledge is actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment and coming to know is a process of adaptation based on and constantly modified by learner’s experience of the world. He maintains that learning is a process of comparing new experience with knowledge constructed from previous experience, resulting in the reinforcing or adaptation of that knowledge, and the social interaction facilitates individual knowledge construction. Similarly, Deryakulu (2002) asserts that constructivist learning approach and meaningful learning are quite similar or overlapping in that both are engaged with the cognitive development of individuals. In describing learning, he maintains that individuals attach meaning to what they get from outside world, compare it with the old ones and place the new knowledge to an appropriate part of their cognition. Gürol (2002) also states that learning is achieved through reinterpreting and reconstructing the old knowledge in the light of new experience. Some research provide evidence that student centered literature reading lead more learning than student centered classrooms in developing the first language of primary education students (Almasi and Gambrell 1994).

The following principles are the collection of desired properties from a constructivist view (Özden 2003, Brooks and Brooks 1993; Honebein 1996; Marlowe and Page 1998):

- Student preferences are taken into account with regard to the common core of research topics and the content.
- In the process of acquiring new knowledge, the milieu is established in which the student activates any experience.
- Students are allowed to process and defend their own views.
- The autonomy and venture of learners are supported.
- By enriching the material and the learning setting, learners can easily make use of the knowledge.
A classroom environment is provided, where learners can easily interact with each other and the teacher.

The construction of new knowledge is facilitated based on the current knowledge rather than regenerating it.

The teacher not only deals with what the students learn but how they learn as well.

As student-centered teaching is carried out, the course content and the teaching methods are flexible enough to make any changes.

By bringing forth contradictory ideas, learners are allowed to justify their own ideas.

Many learning experiences, supporting different point of views, are attained.

Interactive group works are designed.

The creativity power of the learner is provoked.

The technology is utilized effectively.

The principles given above depict that students’ activity and participation in activities are of great importance in constructivist theory. In constructivism, learning environment should be enriched with teaching materials, technology should be used, group studies and interactive setting should be encouraged. Activities in which students can show their creativity should be organized, only then can students construct their new knowledge by the help of their prior knowledge and experience. Teacher, in the constructivist learning setting, takes the responsibility of helper, facilitator of learning and a friend that can be administered when needed (Brooks and Brooks, 1999). As for the learner, s/he is always active in teaching-learning process, inquires, collects information, constructs the new ones in the cognition level by relating it with the old ones, finds solutions to problems, develops projects, and evaluates him/herself and classmates (Alesandirini and Larson 2002).

References


