CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

The paper discusses some aspects of postmodernism in education [1], focusing specifically on the potentialities of the constructivist pedagogical approaches [2 – 4], and taking as an example linguistic and intercultural education in tertiary level contexts. Constructivism as a learning theory emphasises the standpoint that expert knowledge should not be simply ‘supplied’ by the teacher in a monodirectional way, but rather that the students, through an interactive dialogue with their teacher and peers, arrive at their own conclusions, ‘constructing’ their own knowledge and building on their expertise and experience. The teacher’s role in that process is very special, as they guide, prompt, facilitate, creating an effective and flexible learning environment, able to support a variety of learning needs and preferences [4 – 7]. We illustrate this position by presenting an instructional model that draws on the key principles of the Constructivist learning theory, which we have developed during years of pedagogical practice in higher education contexts. The model is designed to optimise the development of intercultural communicative skills of university students, preparing them for the globalised professional arena. Initially designed for Slavonic-speaking university students learning English, it enables them to see the language an integral part of culture which is deeply embedded in its structure, reflecting the worldview, values, attitudes and identity of its speakers (e.g. [8 – 16 to name but a few]). Additionally, the model supports the development and refinement of a number of general and academic skills and competences, such as cultural sensitivity, critical and analytical thinking, existential competence, etc. It responds to the educational requirements of the 21st century, contributing creatively and innovatively to the paradigm shift from teacher-centred to learner-focused education.

Keywords: innovation, constructivism, intercultural communication, intercultural communication competence.

1 INTRODUCTION

We live in the digital age, characterized by high speed communication technology and abundance of easy to get information. Students across educational levels today have become more pro-active, autonomous and goal-oriented, requiring their educational institutions to follow suit and embrace the latest approaches to teaching and learning, combined with advances in information and communication technology as well. The educational systems globally are expected to take these changes into account and respond to the challenges. Their task is to respond to current needs and predict future requirements, understanding fully their pivotal role in the formation of future global leaders and professionals. What is also required is a redefinition of the teacher's role, who ceases to be the sole provider of factual knowledge, distributing it mono-directionally and taking centre stage in the classroom. Instead, the teacher becomes a partner in the learning process, prompting the students’ intellectual inquisitiveness, facilitating and supporting their academic development, mentoring their research initiatives and inspiring their subsequent career choices. The whole process, although undoubtedly student-focused, actually allows for a free flow and exchange of ideas, enabling the learning process to go multi-directionally: from the teacher to the students, from the students to the teacher, and – very importantly – peer to peer, i.e. students can learn from each other’s experiences and expert knowledge, building on their own expertise, academic and existential competences.

The approach described above, epitomising Constructivist-inspired pedagogy, represents the foundation building blocks in teaching and learning interculturality across educational levels and domains. More precisely, the development of intercultural communicative skills and competences, enabling the student to confidently and competently participate in the communicative event, intercultural or otherwise, should be the key component of an effective curriculum across all educational levels. Bringing it to life in classroom settings would mean encouraging the students to...
reflect on cultural and communicative specificities of languages and cultures they are familiar with, systematize their previous knowledge and experience, draw conclusions based on these observations. They are also in a position to actively participate in interactive discussions, express their own opinion freely, ask questions, and as a result create new factual knowledge autonomously, consolidate and expand further their existential competence.

The importance of the development of intercultural communicative skills can hardly be overestimated. Among many benefits, the one that should specifically be singled out is the promotion of tolerance and open-mindedness, enabling the students to overcome ethnic stereotypes, avoid ethnocentric worldviews and, more generally, any ‘in-group’ mentality, reservedness and negative attitudes towards ‘Other’. We argue that what is required is a joint educational effort that would give topics in interculturality cross-curricular presence. Although traditionally found almost exclusively in language education curricula, raising intercultural awareness and intercultural communicative competence is nowadays among desired learning outcomes in a much wider spectrum of academic and vocational curricula. When it comes to language education itself, it can be noted that interconnectedness between language and culture and topics pertinent to interculturality have been largely recognized as pivotal. The ultimate goal of a well designed language learning programme is to enable the student to be an effective communicator and interlocutor in intercultural settings, professional, public or personal.

2 CONSTRUCTIVISM AS A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

Constructivist-inspired pedagogical approaches are by no means new, having already been on the horizon for a number of decades. Drawing from Constructivism as an interdisciplinary perspective on and within social sciences, arts and the humanities, it “has multiple roots in the psychology and philosophy, among which are cognitive and developmental perspectives of Piaget, the interaction and cultural emphases of Vygotsky and Bruner, the contextual nature of learning, the active learning of Dewey, the epistemological discussions of von Glasersfeld, postmodernist views, and the paradigm and scientific revolutions of Thomas Kuhn” [2: 375].

Vygotsky’s influential and far-reaching viewpoints substantially transformed our understanding of the nature of knowledge and its pedagogical implications. As summarized in Kozulin et al.’s critique [17], “instead of offering a definite model, Vygotsky prompts us to inquire into the nature of knowledge used in the classroom, for example, knowledge as information versus knowledge as concept formation. His theory makes us aware of our vision of students, for example, students as defined by their age and IQ versus culturally and socially situated learners. It forces us to formulate our ideal of a teacher, for example, a role model versus a source of knowledge, versus a mediator, and so on” [18: 2].

Vygotsky’s ideas lie in the very foundation of the post-modern approaches to education, generally recognised as more diverse in terms of processes, goals and, consequently, in terms of organisation, methods, curricula, and participants in the educational process. Compared to traditional educational paradigms, it is characterised by a much more open, flexible and autonomous approach, decentralised and free from a ‘top-down’ control, less-restrictive, non-uniform, adaptable and able to respond to cultural and societal idiosyncrasies [1]. Additionally, and very importantly for the point we are trying to make here, the post-modern educational paradigm recognises the importance of cultural contexts and their ubiquity in the process of human interaction, broadly defined and understood. Usher & Edwards summarize it in the following way: “Education in the postmodern, based as it is on cultural contexts, on localised and particular knowledges, on desires and on the valuing of the experience of learning as an integral part of defining a ‘lifestyle’, cannot help but construct itself in a form which would better enable greater participation in a diversity of ways by culturally diverse learners” [1: 212].

Constructivism as a learning theory entails a simple principle assuming that factual knowledge is not provided mono-directionally by the teacher, who used to be the focal point in the traditional classroom, but is essentially ‘constructed’ by the students themselves, through creative, exploratory and interactive dialogues which the teacher prompts and moderates, but also takes part in as an equal partner and fellow co-creator. The following characteristics of the constructivist pedagogical approach should be singled out (cf. also Murphy [4] and Nomnian [7]):

- Multiple perspectives and representations of concepts and content are presented and encouraged;
- Goals and objectives are derived by the students in the process of negotiation with the teacher or the educational system;
• The teacher assumes the role of a guide, mentor, coach, tutor, facilitator;
• Activities, opportunities, tools, and environments are provided to encourage metacognition, self-analysis, self-regulation, self-reflection, and self-awareness;
• The students play the pivotal role in mediating and controlling the process of learning;
• Learning situations, environments, skills, content, and tasks are relevant, realistic, authentic and represent natural complexities of the “real world”;
• Knowledge construction rather than reproduction is emphasized;
• This construction takes place in individual contexts and through social negotiation, collaboration, and experience;
• The learner’s previous knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes are considered in the knowledge construction process, reflected upon, consolidated and expanded;
• Problem-solving, higher-order thinking skills, and deep understanding are emphasized;
• Errors provide an opportunity for insights into the students’ previous knowledge construction;
• Exploration is a favored approach in order to encourage the students to seek knowledge independently and to manage the pursuit of their goals;
• The learners are provided with the opportunity for apprenticeship learning in which there is an increasing complexity of tasks, skills, and knowledge acquisition;
• Knowledge complexity is reflected in an emphasis on conceptual interrelatedness and interdisciplinary learning;
• Collaborative and cooperative learning are favored in order to expose the learner to alternative viewpoints;
• Scaffolding is facilitated to help the students perform just beyond the limits of their ability;
• Assessment is authentic and interwoven with teaching.

Summing it up, it can be stated that constructivism as a learning theory is about creating, discovering knowledge, not receiving it; about thinking, analyzing, reflecting, rather than accumulating, memorizing and regurgitating; about understanding, applying, and being active and cooperative [3]. In a constructivist classroom learning is dynamic and the students are active creators of their own knowledge, deepening and widening their existential competence as well. The learning process is interactive and the teacher assumes the role of a facilitator and equal partner; it is dialogic, as it is constructed through exploratory dialogues and negotiations between all the participants in the process. Constructivist learning is also collaborative: students participate in learning communities, reflecting on the learning process together and exchanging ideas, taking part in coursework, etc. Finally, constructivist learning is both reflective and transferable, in that the students re-visit previous knowledge and understanding of the world, consolidate it and then expand it, feeling confident that the principles they have acquired can be applied to other learning and experiential settings as well. [6]. As noted by Can [5], the constructivist theory poses knowledge as a “web of relationships” which is constructed actively by the learners who attempt to make sense of their experiences and environments. Therefore, as he claims, learners are not “empty cans” to be filled with knowledge, but dynamic organisms seeking meaning [5: 62].

3 CONSTRUCTIVIST PEDAGOGY AND INTERCULTURAL EDUCATION

Having briefly revisited the foundations of constructivism and its potentialities in a variety of educational contexts, we would now like to shift our focus to issues pertinent to intercultural education, elaborating on why we believe the Constructivist approach easily lends itself to being an efficient instructional method in the area of linguistic and intercultural education. More specifically, in a constructivist classroom the students are given the opportunity to engage themselves in a thorough and systematic investigation into topics related to language, culture and society, and gain deeper insights into their interrelatedness and interconnectedness. Through interactive and exploratory dialogues, collaborative coursework and project-like initiatives, they look introspectively into their current knowledge of the world and experience, comparing and contrasting it with the worldview, values and attitudes of the culture(s), language(s) and society(-ies) they are exploring. Using authentic material, they critically and analytically evaluate new factual knowledge, arriving at their own
conclusions autonomously and internalising it into their personal experiential repertoire, building on their intercultural communicative skills as well. The teacher is their equal partner and co-creator, facilitating and moderating the process during which they discover that what, on the face of it, looked like an intricate, peculiar list of random linguistic and cultural differences, is essentially a relatively simple structure with easy to grasp internal logic.

In order to become a competent and effective interlocutor in intercultural communicative settings, one has to have their intercultural communicative competence developed to a high level of sophistication, alongside a range of other skills, competences and expert knowledge. Let us now briefly revisit the key characteristics of intercultural communicative competence in order to better understand their place and importance in the constructivist language classroom.

Intercultural communicative competence includes linguistic, communicative and cultural competences, which, in turn, include a range of interrelated sub-set of competences. Linguistic competence is typically defined as the knowledge of the specific language code. It presupposes linguistic knowledge and skills, i.e., the mastering of the vocabulary and grammar of the target language. Communicative competence, on the other hand, focusses on the actual communicative activity. As observed by Hymes, who coined the term [19] “(...) a normal child acquires knowledge of sentences not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He or she acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others” [19: 277]. To be able to internalise a solid repertoire of speech acts in a second or additional language, the speaker also needs to develop cultural competence, which enables them to possess deeper insights into norms and values of the target culture, a mandatory prerequisite for any communicative success. The interrelation of these three main components of intercultural communicative competence can be graphically represented as follows [20: 168]:

![Diagram of intercultural communicative competence](image)

In order to engage in an intercultural communicative event it is mandatory for the interlocutors to possess a sufficient level of linguistic competence of the language they wish to communicate in, but they can perform successfully only if they are equipped with the adequate level of cultural competence as well. Without this vital component, the interlocutors may encounter difficulties while conveying and interpreting each other’s ideas and intentions. Despite the fact that they are using the linguistic code they have both mastered sufficiently well, the underlying culture codes would be different, emanating the ones that the interlocutors experientially belong to. In order to rectify the situation what is required is to step out of their ‘comfort zone’, upgrade and systematise their cultural fluency and cross-cultural awareness.

Typically, the second language speaker is more likely to have their linguistic competence developed to a higher level of sophistication, while experientially still being firmly couched in their first/native cultural norms and conventions. Their communicative behaviour follows these norms and conventions even when they operate in their second or additional language, bringing about conditions for a potential critical communicative incident. Namely, this could lead to a serious communicative failure and intercultural misunderstanding, due to the fact that the interlocutors are much more likely to overlook and ‘forgive’ lexical and grammatical inaccuracies in the second language speakers’ linguistic performance, but any shortcomings in their cultural fluency could potentially be perceived as a much more serious stumbling block. In extreme cases of communicative misunderstandings, the participant in a communicative event may interpret their interlocutor’s low(er) level of cultural fluency as their deliberate intention to offend and disrespect.

The above mentioned considerations lie in the foundations of our pedagogical approach and, more specifically, have shaped the instructional model we have developed over the year of teaching practice in higher education contexts. Originally developed for Russian and Slavonic-speaking students learning English at the tertiary level, the model is adaptable enough and can be implemented
into other linguo-cultural contexts as well. In what follows we will briefly illustrate our approach, presenting its main characteristics and benefits.

In order to make the students fully understand the interrelatedness between language, communication and culture and inspire them to engage with issues pertaining to interculturality, we find it useful to start with the analysis of a selected set of critical incidents illustrating specific instances of culture specific communicative failures. The one below is taken from our own collection of authentic critical incidents, which we use to illustrate the culture-specificity in expressing the speech act of giving requests, more specifically in the teacher-student communicative setting:

A Russian astronaut, attending a training course in Huston, USA, had a verbal mishap with his English teacher who was not happy about his behavior and almost refused to be his language instructor any longer. When the interpreter tried to resolve the issue, the astronaut assured him that he did not mean to hurt his teacher’s feelings and added:

“Actually she is a bit strange. Yesterday, for example, we were working on an activity and she asked me if I would like to write the exercise down. I just said ‘No, let’s do it as a speaking practice exercise’ but she suddenly got offended.”

The reaction of the Russian astronaut in this situation is not surprising at all, but quite predictable, as in the Russian cultural context the speech act of making requests does not give the addressee any options if in reality there is none. The Russian teacher, due to the characteristics of the Russian culture and in accordance with the Russian communicative style, would normally give directions, instruct and make requests in the classroom setting using only the imperative verbal form (e.g. Open your books on page 25!; Revise paragraph 2 on page 7.), whereas their English-speaking counterparts (particularly in the British cultural context) would typically opt for the interrogative or modal forms in the same communicative situation (e.g. Would you please open your books on page 25?; You may wish to revise paragraph 2 on page 7.). Bearing this in mind, it is not difficult to understand why the interlocutors in the above critical incident encountered a communicative mishap. The Russian astronaut, although having demonstrated enough linguistic competence to understand the literal meaning of the teacher’s utterance, clearly did not possess enough sociocultural competence to decode the pragmatic meaning of the utterance. In other words, he understood what the teacher said, but failed to decode what she meant. The teacher’s reaction, on the other hand, shows that she did not have enough sociocultural competence, either, as she completely misinterpreted her student’s reaction.

We present our students with the critical incident, inviting them to critically evaluate the situation and suggest a possible solution. To facilitate the process, we give them the following prompt:

1. Is there some sort of miscommunication here? If so, what seems to be the issue?
2. Why was the teacher not happy with the student’s response?
3. What did the teacher say to her student? What were her exact words?
4. What did the teacher’s utterance mean?
5. How was it interpreted by the Russian astronaut?
6. How do Russian / Slavonic-speaking teachers usually give their instructions and requests to the students if they want them to write an exercise down, to read a book chapter, to check out the meaning of an expression, etc.? What grammatical form do they typically use?

We normally find that at the beginning of the course in intercultural communication only a tiny minority of our students are able to identify the problem and explain why the communicative mishap occurred, despite the fact that their linguistic competence in the English language is at a solid B1 level. The situation is rather typical and well described by Thomas in her article “Cross-Cultural Pragmatic Failure” [22]:

…native speakers fairly predictably assign certain pragmatic force to certain utterances. Thus can you X? is a highly conventionalized politeness form in British English, likely to be interpreted by native speakers as a request to do X, rather than a question as to one’s ability to do X. In other languages, French and Russian, for example, the opposite is true. Similarly, the utterance X, would you like to read? which in an English classroom would be a highly conventionalized polite request/directive to do so, in a Russian classroom often elicited the response no, I wouldn’t (from students who had no intention of being rude, but who genuinely
thought that their preferences were being consulted). Notice that theirs was not an impossible interpretation, but simply a less likely one [22: 101].

We discuss the critical incident with the students at the beginning of the course in intercultural communication, but do not initially go into a detailed analysis of the sociocultural reasons that caused the communicative failure. Instead, we encourage the students to revisit the issue regularly and try to arrive at their own conclusions gradually and methodically. We go back to the issue at the end of the course, once the students acquired a sufficient level of socio-cultural knowledge, looking not only for a more insightful interpretation of the nature of the communicative failure, but also for possible solutions and recommendations. At this point the students normally find the task easy to complete, having developed their intercultural awareness skills to a higher level of sophistication. They are now able to explain that the English or, more generally, Anglo-culture, as termed by Wierzbicka [23], belongs to the type of I-culture [13], traditionally referred to as individualist. It values personal autonomy and independence, preferring negative politeness strategies, which are recognised as 'avoidance-based' [24] and are aimed at showing respect to the interlocutors' privacy and independence. As a result, representatives of the Anglo-culture tend to avoid directness, even when there is no other option for the addressee but to comply. This has been defined in Wierzbicka’s Theory of Cultural Scripts [25] in the following way:

\[
\text{when a person is doing something} \\
\text{it is good if this person can think about it like this:} \\
\text{‘I am doing this because I want to do it} \\
\text{not because someone else wants me to do it.’} \text{ [25]}
\]

Having acquired a sufficient level of intercultural awareness and factual knowledge, the students are now able to act independently and participate confidently and successfully in intercultural communicative events.

4 CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have discussed the pedagogical potentialities of Constructivism, taking specifically into account its application to linguistic and intercultural education.

Our aim was to demonstrate how, in our opinion, it enables the students to arrive at the conclusion that language and culture are fundamentally interrelated. It helps students to see that many peculiarities of language and language usage are systematic and logical. The task of the teacher is to encourage the student to comprehend this internal logic through reflective thinking. This requires a curriculum focused on problem solving, and availability of primary sources and authentic material for analysis.

The constructivist approach to learning and teaching has proved to be a powerful instructional method, responding successfully to the requirements of the modern-day linguistically and culturally diverse classrooms. Entailing a simple principle whereby the students themselves ‘construct’ their own knowledge and build on their expertise and experience through creative, exploratory and interactive dialogues, collaborative initiatives and investigative coursework, the teacher assumes the role of a facilitator and moderator, taking part in the learning process as an equal partner and fellow co-creator.

Looking into the future and exploring further developmental opportunities for our instructional model, we are currently piloting a version that will embrace the latest technological advances combined with the key principles of the Constructivist-inspired pedagogy. Addressing specifically the needs of ‘digital natives’ [26], the model makes ample use of digital (social) technologies, encouraging the students to explore the world in a manner more attuned to their cognitive processing and facilitating their intercultural journey, professional, academic and personal.

REFERENCES