

I've Been a Constructivist and Didn't Know it

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Özet

Bu çalışmanın amacı yabancı dil öğretmen eğitiminde Konstrüktivist yaklaşımı tanıtmaktır. İngiliz Dili Eğitiminde kullanılan genel öğretim anlayışlarının ele alınmasından sonra çalışma Kelly'nin Kişisel Konstrukt Kuramının tanıtımı ile sürmektedir. Konstrüktivist yaklaşımın yabancı dil öğretmen eğitimine katkıları da çalışmada tartışılmaktadır.

Abstract

The aim of this study is to introduce Constructivist Approach to language teacher education. It starts with a review of general conceptions of teaching prevalent in English Language Teaching. Then Kelly's Personal Construct Theory, the theoretical framework underlying Constructivist Approach, is presented. This is followed by a discussion on what a constructivist perspective actually mean for language teacher education.

One repeated theme arising in recent research on language teaching is the topic of teachers' thinking. The researchers (Calderhead 1987, Freeman 1996) describe teaching as an active process in which teachers' perceptions, that is, their beliefs, their reasoning and how they conceive of teaching have an important part to play in teacher education. Freeman and Richards'(1993) article, for example, called for "substantial research to examine how teachers' conceptions of their work unfold throughout their careers" (p.213). They argue that in second language teaching considerations of technique and procedure should give way to discussions on investigating how teachers think and work together with the conceptions of teaching which underlie them. To them, the nature of the work and the role of the teacher determine the ways in which second language teaching is conceived. "Teaching can, for example, be seen as a science, a technology, a craft, and each of these characterizations carries with it defined orientations toward the activity of teaching and the knowledge base of the teacher. Thus, different views of language teaching lead to different approaches to the preparation of teachers "(p.194).

Freeman and Richards (1993) review general conceptions of teaching on the basis of Zahorik's (1986) classification into three main categories: science/research conceptions, theory/philosophy conceptions, and art/craft conceptions.

1) Scientifically based conceptions of second language teaching

These conceptions of second language teaching are derived from research and are supported by experimentation and empirical investigation. Zahorik divides these conceptions into three groups: those which operationalize learning principles, those

which follow a tested model, and those which are based on what effective teachers do.

All these conceptions of teaching come under the paradigm of process-product research. They view teaching as a process which produces student learning. In these conceptions, teaching is conceived as appropriate behavior and the role that teachers and learners play as thinking participants is neglected.

2) Theory- and values-based conceptions of teaching

Theory-based conceptions of teaching tend to draw support from systematic and principled thinking instead of classroom results which are empirically measured or compared, such as pre- and posttest gains resulting from the use of a method (Freeman and Richards 1993:201). Conceptions of teaching based on values, on the other hand, views the aim of teaching practice as promoting particular values. Examples of values-based conceptions of teaching include team teaching, humanistic approaches, reflective teaching, and learner-centred curriculum movement.

3) Art/Craft conceptions of teaching

It views teaching as an art or a craft. Individual teacher's skill and personality are central to this conception of teaching. Thus, a good teacher is the one who "analyzes a classroom situation, realizes that a range of options is available based on the particular circumstances, and then selects the alternative which is likely to be most effective in that instance" (Freeman and Richards 1993:206).

As Pennington (1990) observes

...individual acts of teaching are essentially irreplicable and noncomparable, and the inherent characteristics of individual teachers are the strongest predictor of classroom outcomes. (p.133)

Summarizing the main difference in orientation towards the sources of solutions in classroom practice among the three conceptions, Zahorik (1986) writes, "science-research provides ready-made specific solutions, theory-philosophy provides ready-made general solutions, and art-craft provides custom-and self-made solutions" (p.23).

As our brief review of conceptions of teaching presented above suggests, each perspective emphasise a particular dimension of the process of learning to teach. Scientifically based conceptions of teaching, for example, gives importance to behavioural dimension since learning to teach is conceptualized as a process of habit formation. Therefore, it is apparent that there is a need for a theoretical framework which integrates all the dimensions of teaching process (the behavioural, the personal, the cognitive and the social). And this is what constructivist approach sets out to do.

Personal Construct Psychology

Personal Construct Psychology was developed by George A. Kelly (1955). Kelly uses the term construct to refer to bipolar concepts we use to construe the world, that is to interpret our reality and to predict future events. He suggests that persons use their construct systems “to observe, classify, explain, predict and control the events they are interested in” (Sendan 1995:24)

Kelly claims that each person develops a unique repertoire of constructs based on his/her experiences of the world and bases his theory on a fundamental postulate, and a set of eleven corollaries which elaborate it:

1. Fundamental Postulate: A person's processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events.
2. Construction Corollary: A person anticipates events by construing their replications.
3. Individuality Corollary: Persons differ from each other in their construction of events.
4. Organization Corollary: Each person characteristically evolves, for his convenience in anticipating events, a construction system embracing ordinal relationships between constructs.
5. Dichotomy Corollary: A person's construction system is composed of a finite number of dichotomous constructs.
6. Choice Corollary: A person chooses for himself that alternative in a dichotomized construct through which he anticipates the greater possibility for extension and definition of his system.
7. Range Corollary: A construct is convenient for the anticipation of a finite range of events only.
8. Experience Corollary: A person's construction system varies as he successively construes the replications of events.
9. Modulation Corollary: The variation in a person's construct system is limited by the permeability of the constructs within whose ranges of convenience the variants lie.
10. Fragmentation Corollary: A person may successively employ a variety of construction systems which are inferentially incompatible with each other.
11. Commonality Corollary: To the extent that one person employs a construction of experience which is similar to that employed by another, his psychological processes are similar to those of the other person.
12. Sociality Corollary: To the extent that one person construes the construction processes of another, he may play a role in a social process involving the other person (See Sendan 1995: 25-32 for further information).

Before discussing how constructivism have affected ELT, we need to clarify constructivism as a general approach to learning. The basic principle of constructivism is that people “will make their own sense of the ideas and theories

with which they are presented in ways that are personal to them... each individual constructs his or her own reality” (Williams and Burden 1997:2).

We need to mention Piaget’s contribution to the development of constructivism. Piaget’s theory has centred upon the claim that we internalise knowledge and perceive the world through mental representation or construction (Roth 1990 in Roberts 1998). Chomsky (1957) has also paved the way for a shift from behavioural to cognitive perspectives on learning, which in turn led to constructivist models of learning in contemporary educational thinking.

To Roberts (1998:23), a constructivist approach suggests the following learning cycle:

- The person filters new information according to his or her expectations and existing knowledge of the world;
- S/he constructs the meaning of the input;
- This meaning is matched with her prior internal representations relevant to the input;
- Matching confirms or disconfirms existing representations;
- If there is a match, then s/he maintains the meaning as presently constructed (assimilation);
- If there is a mismatch she revises her representation of the world to incorporate the new information (accomodation).

As for the major tenets of constructivism, first, we need to mention that constructivist perspective recognises the personal dimension of learning to teach. It helps us understand personal change since it explains why “each individual ... learns different things in very different ways even when provided with what seem to be very similar learning experiences” (Williams and Burden 1997:2).

Related to the point mentioned above, constructivist approach points to the need to uncover teachers’ implicit theories and beliefs in order to make them available for conscious review. As Pennington (1990:135) suggests “since every teacher and learner is different, teaching is most effective when it is based on two kinds of knowledge: knowledge of the students and knowledge of oneself.”

However, Roberts (1998) argues that a view of a learner-teacher as an individual constructivist is too limited because “it focuses on inner proceses and thereby abstracts the person from the sociocultural landscape in which they live and work” (p.28). To him, an adequate approach to language teacher education should consider cognitive, affective, and behavioural dimensions, and given the social nature of teaching, language teacher education must also address the social dimensions of experience and learning. Thus, he uses the term **social constructivism** to refer to the dynamic interaction between personal change and social circumstances.

The second principle implied by constructivist view is that language teacher education should “start from where teachers are”, that is, teachers’ personal differences in perception and behaviour need to be taken into account and all new learning should be related to teachers’ prior practices and beliefs (Roberts 1998:43).

Bell and Gilbert (1996:58) also suggest that Teacher development as learning by teachers needs to take into account the existing knowledge, experiences, opinions and values of the teachers. This will include their prior knowledge of teaching and learning, and the nature and status of knowledge. It will also include taking into account their ways of learning. In doing so, teacher development convenors or facilitators need to expect and plan for unintended learning outcomes.

Repertory grid method is used to uncover personal theories and considered as the methodological component of Kelly’s (1955) Personal Construct Theory (Sendan 1995: 33). It “allows both researcher/teacher and participant/subject/learner a means of monitoring and reflecting on the idiosyncratic frames of reference which the learner evolves” (Pope and Keen 1981:2 in Sendan 1995:33). It consists of a structured interview to elicit constructs the person uses to discriminate a set of elements (for details of the method, see Sendan 1995).

The third principle that constructivist view upholds is that reflection on experience is central to professional growth in teacher learning. Learners can reconstruct their knowledge through reflection. Meta-cognition is an important part of learning and can involve reflection on the degree of understanding or the nature of thoughts... (Bell and Gilbert 1996:58)

This principle is highly compatible with reflective thought which have influenced thinking in education in recent years. As Sendan (1995) discusses, Schön’s (1983, 1987) theoretical construction of reflective practice is consistent with Kelly’s Personal Construct Theory in that while Schön views professional learning as ‘engaging in reflective conversation with one’s own practice through which practitioners test out, reframe and reconstruct their implicit understanding of professional situations’, Kelly proposes that “individuals utilise hypotheses to anticipate events, and perpetually revise or reconstruct their construct systems based on validation or invalidation of their anticipations of their experiences” (in Sendan 1995:36).

Constructivism and ELT

Roberts (1998) argues that ELT has been widely influenced by the constructivist views of language learning. He states that comprehension, for example, as a result of that influence has come to be seen as “the mental representation of a text according to the person’s purpose, knowledge of the world, expectations of discourse and linguistic knowledge. Comprehension-skill teaching now emphasises the exploration

of learner expectationa and prior knowledge, and reasonable interpretations of text” (p.24).

Kaufman and Brooks (1996) accepts constructivism as a theory of human development. In the constructivist classroom, teacher’s role is to create dynamic learning environments that promote interplay among students, materials and ideas. Kaufman and Brooks (1996:234-235) summarize the characteristics of constructivist-based classrooms (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1

Creating Constructivist-Based 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 reponses.
 - 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.
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Based on Grennon Brooks and Brooks (1993) as cited in Kaufman and Brooks (1996:235)

To them in the constructivist classrooms, first, teachers pose problems of emerging relevance for which the teacher and the student jointly search for answers. Second, teachers structure lessons in such a way that learning occurs in context. The third principle is that teachers value students’ point of view and create opportunities for students to reflect on their assumptions, beliefs etc. Finally, constructivist teachers find ways of assessing student learning within the context of teaching. When evaluating students’ work they avoid using judgemental responses.

Similarly, Roberts (1998:46) suggests that in a social-constructivist framework teacher learning is best promoted by a combination of the following activity types:

- Access to new information;
- Activities to raise the learner-teachers’ self-awareness of past experiences, and current beliefs, practice and knowledge;
- Direct personal experience, in language learning, micro-teaching and teaching practice;
- Indirect experience of teaching, for example by structured observation;

- Opportunities to reflect privately on these inputs and experiences, for example by means of reflective writing;
- Opportunities for dialogue with fellow teachers and others, addressing one's practice, beliefs and the social pressures affecting one's work;
- Development of skills and attitudes which enable teachers to get the most from the above activities: study skills, observation skills, and team skills.

The kinds of activities suggested by Roberts, which included reflective writing and having teachers articulate their beliefs about teaching, allow teacher trainees to evaluate their own growth and confront their present perceptions about teaching act.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been the presentation of the basic premises of Constructivist Approach to language teacher education. The reader may find that the principles of the Constructivist Approach do not put forward anything brand new in the field of second language teacher education. As the title of the article suggests, that is how I personally felt when I first started to read on the theory. Only when I started to search for windows into the teachers' thinking, did I realise that, thanks to Constructivist Approach, I was able to locate my personal learning theories of language teacher education in a theoretical framework. It is my hope that this article will help readers make explicit their own approach to language teaching.

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