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# English Reading Base on Social Constructivist Approach

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#### **Abstract**

This paper explains the constructivist approach to reading teaching and shows how a dialogic approach to reading empowers readers to position themselves as participants in making meaning together with the text and its authors, rather than remaining as mute outsiders to the reading process. This shift in constructing reader -roles means that our students need to take a strategic approach to their reading, and will need careful scaffolding to help them develop effective, independent reading strategies and dispositions.

Keywords: Social constructivist approach, Reading, Strategies

#### 1. Introduction

Language teachers views of language and language learning profoundly influence their practice on a day-to-day basis. Traditionally in the Chinese classroom, students have been expected to accept unquestioningly the words of the teacher and the texts they produce for their students to read. The student's role has been that of passive receiver of ideas. This view is beginning to change, however, increasingly, teachers believe that their students should participate actively in class, joining in interactive language learning tasks and becoming autonomous learners. This shift in attitude opens the door for a new approach to learning and teaching: social constructivism. This paper presents the key concepts underlying social constructivism together with some practical suggestions for teaching reading —perhaps the most important route by which Chinese students acquire competence in English.

#### 2. What is Social Constructivism?

Social constructivism provides a psycholinguistic explanation for how learning can be fostered effectively through interactive pedagogical practices. It emphasizes that learning takes place in a sociocultural environment and views learners as "active constructors of their own learning environment" (Mittchell &Myles 1988). We learn not as isolated individuals, but as active members of society. What we learn, and how we make sense of knowledge, depends on where and when we are learning.

Vygotsky, the father of constructivism, claimed that learning occurs through dialogue (Vygotsky 1978). This dialogue is initially intermental —it takes place between teacher and student; between students; or even between text and reader (Wilson 1999). However, the learner makes sense of what is said or written through internal or intramental dialogue (Vygotsky 1978). Thus learning is interactive in the sense that learners must interact with sources of ideas/ knowledge in social settings, as well as in the sense that they must take an active part in reconstructing ideas/ knowledge within their own minds.

Further, Vygotsky points out that learning depends on the purpose or motivation for learning: activity theory (Lantolf 2000). As learners, what we select to focus on in our learning, and how we go about that, depends on the social purposes of the activity. For example, students acquire knowledge quite differently if they are preparing for a test on irregular verbs, or if they are reading an email from a penfriend or a magazine article about their favorite music. Teachers can play a large part in setting up learning environment which exploit different learning purposes — but what really counts is how the students themselves view the activity. For example, are they simply learning the verbs in order to pass tomorrow's test, or are they striving to learn the language in order to use it in communicative settings.

## 3. What is Reading from a Constructivist Point of View?

Constructivists see reading, like learning, as social practice. The social context affects when you read, what you read, where you read, who you read with, and of course WHY and HOW you read.

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Interacting with text can involve practices as diverse as reading instructions, scanning a newspaper, or reading an academic article. So when we are designing curricula for reading in EFL classes we need to ask ourselves first of all: what do our students need to be able to do in terms of social practice?

Luke and Freebody (1990, 2002) define four different reader resources: code breaking, meaning making text using, and text analyzing. The most fundamental resource is code breaking: deciphering text at letter, word and sentence-level. For many students decoding text is synonymous with "reading" because this is the social practice they have been taught in schools. Decoding practices, including both top-down and bottom-up strategies, are usually the main focus of school reading classes. Top-down strategies include guessing meaning from context, predicting, using background knowledge, using text structure. Bottom-up strategies include looking up unknown vocabulary in a dictionary or glossary, working out sentence grammar, deciphering reference chains. Classroom reading practices which are based on bottom-up strategies may help to scaffold students development of reading skills. However, if students are not encouraged to go beyond these strategies, they may learn reading habits which are over-focused on decoding to the detriment of other reading resource. In the field of English as a foreign language teaching, reading aloud is one common classroom reading practice. It purports to support decoding, but it in fact has little to do with making meaning from texts and all to do with decoding the sound-symbol relationship. Many students have to work so hard to decode the sound-symbol relationship at the word level, that they lose sight of the bigger picture: decoding the overall meaning of the text. Yet classroom practices of sub-vocalizing or of diligently writing down translation equivalents often remain with students long after they are appropriate.

Obviously, there is more to reading than simply decoding. Luke and Freebody point out that making meaning is another essential reading resource. This is where dialogue is involved (Wertsch 1991). It is not enough to just hear/see the words on the page; the reader also has to listen, and to struggle to make sense in their own minds of what the writer is saying — intermental dialogue in Vygotsky's terms. In listening to the author's words, students need to construct their own representation of the author's message — intramental dialogue. Rarely do readers understand exactly what the writer had in mind (Lewis &Slade 1994). For example, in writing a recipe the author may write "Cut the carrots finely". This apparently simple phrase can be understood in many different ways, as different readers will have different interpretations of the meaning of "finely", different conceptions of what sort of knife should be used, how the carrots are to be held while chopping, and so on. Reading in a foreign language is particularly hard, because the words and grammatical structures, the text conventions and the cultural context are all less than familiar. In fact, there can be no perfect way to understand most texts. Even something as apparently factual as a train-timetable can be interpreted through different cultural lenses. Students need to understand that all readers construct meaning from texts differently, depending on their purpose for reading, their background and even their state of mind. There is usually no single, unequivocal meaning in a text. Thus, reading entails constructing meaning from text through intermental and intramental dialogue.

Finally, as text analysts, students need to gain text awareness, in order to build their own skills aswriters, observing how language is used within different genres to achieve different purposes. They also need to develop a "suspicious eye" (Wallace 1995) detecting bias, and identifying the author's stance. They need to learn how writers use language to persuade, entertain, inform, and influence their audiences.

# 4. What Does Social Constructivist Theory Mean for Foreign Language Reading Classes?

To give an idea of how the constructivist theory translates into action in teaching reading in EFL, we propose the following strategies.

## 4.1 Providing a context and purpose for reading

Students need to have a clear idea of why they are reading and to know how the text relates to other aspects of their course. For example, before tackling a reading passage in your coursebook, establish the context first using visual cues, discussion questions, or a link to students' own lives. Make sure that the students know which reader role you want them to adopt: making meaning, exploiting the text for useful vocabulary, looking at the text as a model for some other task, learning some new information in preparation for an assignment, finding out the author's opinion on the topic, or do you expect them simply to enjoy the story ?Is the text meant to be used as a language resource, or is it meant to stimulate dialogue ?Students also need encouragement to move beyond this teacher-textbook controlled situation into reading texts which they themselves have selected for their own purposes.?

#### 4.2 Modeling

A useful form of scaffolding is to model the reading practices we want our students to adopt. You can do this by using a modified version of the think-aloud research technique The teacher stands in front of the class —not reading aloud as much as verbalizing her thought processes as she reads. This is a good way to model skimming for example, or processes such as relating one text to another, asking questions of the text, guessing the meaning of difficult words. It can demonstrate that reading is not necessarily a linear process, but involves jumping forwards, linking back, re-reading

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sections which are problematic. Students find it very reassuring when the teacher verbalizes thoughts such as "What does that mean? Hang on, better read that bit again". It helps to break down the myth that many students have: "If only I were better at English, I would understand this perfectly." Above all, modeling helps students to see what it means to enter into dialogue with the text.

#### 4.3 Asking questions

Constructivist theory emphasizes that we need to encourage students to create their own meaning from text, rather than to impose our interpretation of the meaning upon them —though of course we may help as resources to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap that students experience in reading a text. Too often, though, reading teachers dominate the lesson by "telling" students the meaning of the text rather than assisting them to create meaning themselves. Our questions need to show a genuine interest in the meanings the students construct rather than insisting on our own understandings. In fact, what we want students to learn from an EFL reading class is not the content of the reading text: rather we want to them to strengthen their ability to use the four reader resources. So our questions need to focus on text awareness rather than text content.

Perhaps the most effective text awareness questions are those which help students gain insight into the way texts are structured. "What words tell you that the author is introducing a new point?" "In this paragraph, how many times can you find the word X (the topic of the paragraph)." Similarly, questions which allow students to identify the author's stance are useful: "Do you think the author admires Helen Keller? How do you know that? What other words could the author have used?"

#### 4.4 Integrating the four macroskills

Other people's texts serve as excellent models for students own writing. Close analysis of a reading text can enable students to emulate the text in their own writing. For example, if students are required to write a tourist brochure, it is a good idea to have them analyze other tourist brochures first —gathering useful vocabulary and sentence structures, observing the format and layout, comparing texts to see which ones work best, or which ones achieve the sort of effect they would like. This does not mean uncritically applying models as in the behaviourist approach, because it involves the students in informed and analytical choice of language for a defined purpose. Students own writing can benefit greatly from borrowing liberally from model texts in creating their own texts: a skill which is essential for EFL students, especially EAP students (Wilson 1997).

## 4.5 Creating awareness of the author behind the text

Text analysis can develop a strong understanding in our students that texts are written by real people for a range of different purposes, and that some are more successful than others in achieving this purpose. An interesting exercise with advanced students is to compare two reports of the same news item from different sources: how reliable are they? What sources have been used? What has been picked out as the key point? What verbs have been used and to what effect ?which one concords most with their own perceptions of the situation ?Obviously, this sort of activity is not only more motivating, but also leads to a much better appreciation of text, its participants and its purposes than the traditional "Write a summary of this article."The outcome is also more interesting: rather than being led towards "plagiphrasing" (Wilson 1997) from the article, students can develop a critical stance. They can later be asked to write their own article using the information —and the vocabulary and structures of the original articles where appropriate —to create their own construction of the situation.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the social constructivist approach to reading offers tools and principles for EFL teachers which can help them to draw their students into energetic participation in text events, entering into active dialogue with texts (and their authors), not as outsiders, but as active participants. In many ways this approach may challenge the traditional beliefs of EFL teachers. But if you believe that language is about communication, it is worth giving serious thought to social constructivist approaches to teaching reading so that your students learn to read as an authentic and meaningful activity rather than as a classroom exercise.

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