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## The swing of the pendulum : objectivism or constructivism in language education?

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## **The Swing of the Pendulum – Objectivism or Constructivism in Language Education?**

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### **Introduction**

In this paper, we shall explore the relation between the assumptions of a fundamental reality and general educational models in modern language teaching and learning. This aspect of post-method pedagogy has received the attention of scholars but needs further inspection because, as we shall demonstrate, it determines language education. The paper reflects on some marked differences among the existing language theories and practices within the traditions of objectivism and constructivism and their impact on early language education.

### **Objectivism and constructivism – educational ideologies which underlie different language teaching methods**

There are two principles which influence all educational practices including the theories and practice of language learning: objectivism and constructivism. Objectivists claim that the world is an existing reality which does not depend on consciousness and is an orderly structured system with defined units, qualities and relationships. The application of this in education is that in order to learn something, “one should isolate one or more units (the things which are being learned) and categorize those elements correctly according to their characteristics and relations” (Lakoff, 1987, p. 164). People’s knowledge is objective. Within this objectivist tradition we commonly find the “educational pyramids” noted by

Clark (1987), Duffy and Jonassen (1992) where the educational system provides the knowledge and activities to the teachers, and the students receive this knowledge from the teachers. Or in other words, teachers possess the knowledge which they in turn transfer or “give” to their students. In language teaching and learning, the objectivist tradition leads to methods orientated towards the language system; that is, the way the language works. In these teaching methods, the syllabus is designed around and according to the language material which needs to be learnt. Core planning is based around the selection and structuring of the phonetic, grammatical, lexical and pragmatic units. Arranged in this way, the materials are then taught to the students without necessarily taking into consideration their individual needs and learning styles, or the language learning process as a mental activity. A typical example of this approach is the Grammar Translation Method. Richards and Rogers (1986, p. 3) illustrate the principle of the method by giving an example of an exercise for translation from English to French in a textbook. Some of the sentences are: “The house is beautiful. He has a kind dog. We have a bread (sic). The door is black.” The sentence is the main unit in this exercise and the different sentences are unrelated to one another. They totally lack a contextual framework. The Audio Lingual Method follows the same tradition. It is based on the methodological principles of linguistic structuralism which see language as a hierarchical structure of different levels in which the sentence is viewed as the highest level (e.g. Bloomfield, 1933), and psychological neo-behaviourism (Skinner, 1957). Language learning is seen as a process of habit formation and positive reinforcement that helps students to develop correct habits in accordance with Skinner’s belief that learning depends on parents’ reinforcement of their children’s grammatical correctness. The method’s assumption is that the spoken form of the language is more fundamental to language than its written form. Students memorise language patterns in the form of dialogues and repetition drills (Larsen-Freeman, 1986). James Asher’s Total Physical Response (TPR) also follows the objectivist philosophy and is characterised by linguistic formalism, behaviourism, and competition. Asher (1977) sees acquisition of the second language as a parallel to the

process of children's first language acquisition. He believes that the human brain and nervous system are programmed biologically to acquire languages in a set sequence. Listening comprehension precedes speech, and the verb in the imperative form is seen as a central linguistic element around which language learning is organised. Imperative drills serve as a stimulus to form a habit formation (comprehension), and the reaction to this is a response by physical movement.

At the Northeast Conference in the U.S. in 1966, Noam Chomsky openly criticised and expressed his scepticism of the Audio Lingual theory and practice in language teaching. In time, the practice of pattern drills was rejected and neo-behaviourism, as a psychological theory, was also weakened. Structuralism in language teaching also gave way to new teaching methods.

Constructivism is the other ideology which underpins other traditions of language teaching practices. It claims that individuals gain knowledge from their own experiences and that there is no universal reality; rather, reality is a result of the constructive processes of the individuals. "There are many perspectives and meanings of each event or notion." (Duffy & Jonassen, 1992, p. 3). The view of constructivists is that learning is a process of personal interpretation of experience and construction of knowledge. "Learning is an active process in which meaning is developed on the basis of experience" (Bednar et al., 1992, p. 21). Early constructivism is related to the works of Piaget (e.g. 1953, 1970) who is considered the founder of the concept. "Piaget's and Dewey's theories of connecting what one sees with what one knows and can discover more about have been described as learning through experience." (Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill, 2012, p. 101). Piaget took particular interest in the education of children and conducted observations to understand how children acquire and construct knowledge. His extensive theory on cognitive development defines four stages, i.e. the sensor motor age (0–2), preoperational stage (2–7), concrete operational stage (7–11) and formal operational stage (11-onwards). Although he claimed that the physical and social environment were both important in children's learning, he placed greater emphasis on the former. "Piaget's (2002) interest and focus

were on understanding children's cognitive and mental process in constructing their ideas, as they experimented with the resources available. His ideas attracted the interest of educationalists who introduced the notion of learning by doing through the availability of appropriate resources and gradually shifted attention from *learning that* (knowledge transmission) to *learning how* (knowledge construction) (Hargreaves 2004)." (Papatheodorou, Luff & Gill, 2012, p. 7).

Constructivism lies at the heart of learner-oriented educational approaches, e.g. orientated towards active learning and learning by doing things as opposed to the language orientated approaches. As the theory of constructivism has developed, new versions have emerged. Social constructivism lays emphasis on social interaction as a source of knowledge. It views learners as individuals with their own specific needs and backgrounds. The socio-cultural constructivist theory places emphasis on learning in action, learning by taking part in social activities. According to Vygotsky (1997) children follow examples provided by more experienced adults, and with their help they gradually develop and enhance their abilities to perform tasks independently. He hypothesized the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which determines what a learner can achieve without any help, and with the help of more knowledgeable people. "ZPD is the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by the independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (p. 33). Vygotsky argued that "learning awakens a variety of developmental processes that are able to operate only when a child is interacting with people in his environment and in cooperation with his peers" (p. 35). Children learn within their communities, with the help of teachers, peers and other experienced adults.

Community Language Learning (Charles Curran, 1976); Silent Way (Caleb Gattegno, 1972), and The Natural Approach (Stephen Krashen & Tracy Terrell, 1983) were among the new teaching methods of the 1970s and 1980s within this paradigm shift in which teaching and learning are student-orientated. In Curran's Method, students are seen as members of a community, and their interaction with each other is of major importance.

It is the students who decide on what they want to learn. On the other hand the teacher recognises the learners' anxiety and fears and tries to help them overcome these negative emotions. Warmth and positive evaluation of the work of the team members develop within the interactions of teacher and students (Curran, 1976). The idea that teaching is to be totally subordinated to the learning manifests itself in the Silent Way (Gattegno, 1972), which in this method the teacher remains silent and the students do the talking. In "Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching" Larsen-Freeman describes the most typical techniques of the Silent Way (1986, p. 66–68). "The teacher does not supply a model for the students but gives them the opportunity to develop autonomously their own inner criteria for correctness of language. [...] Students learn from each other and not by repeating a model; [...] the teacher is a silent gesturer, his role is to moderate and facilitate the learning process." Colour Fidel pronunciation charts, word charts and Cuisenaire rods are some of the most typical materials used in the classrooms. The language model is an attempt to relate to the cognitive processes of language learning. However, the method did attract some criticism. In general, it has been criticised for its extreme model of a silent teacher who does not provide any language input for the students. It is an artificial communication where the teachers remain silent but on the other hand the students do the talking, and this does not mirror real communication. Constructivist ideology is also the framework of the The Natural Approach (Krashen & Terrell, 1983) to language acquisition which places great emphasis on the communicative role of language. Language is seen as a set of messages. Some of its techniques are similar to those of CLT. The model is based on five widely cited and spread theoretical hypotheses. The first and the most important of these according to the authors is language acquisition versus language learning: the former leads to implicit knowledge and the latter to explicit knowledge of the language being acquired. The natural order hypothesis refers to the order in which grammar structures are acquired. The monitor hypothesis claims that conscious learning functions as a monitor of what has been acquired. The input hypothesis (i+1) level of language input means that, in order to study a language, the students should be exposed

to language messages which are slightly above the level of their knowledge. The affective filter hypothesis accounts for the negative emotional experiences and states of the learners, so that, for example, a student who feels uncomfortable will have a high affective filter which impedes the process of language acquisition.

The shift in the educational paradigm from a student-oriented to a learner-oriented foreign language teaching style led to the rise of language practices which aimed at developing the communicative competences of the learners. The Threshold Level document of the Council for Cultural Cooperation of the Council of Europe was published in 1975 (Van Ek, 1975). It gives the specification for a basic level in a language which individuals need to have in order to establish personal or professional contacts in the countries where the foreign language is spoken. It marks the appearance of the so called Communicative Language Teaching or the Communicative Approach. Van Ek and Alexander (1975) and Wilkins (1976) proposed the functions and notions approach syllabus to syllabus design. This approach is based on the organisation of language material around notions, or contexts in which learners communicate, and functions or purposes for the learner to use language in a context. The approach underlines the need to teach communicative competence and use language effectively and appropriately as opposed merely to knowing how the language works. The threshold level for many languages has been published and work in this area is being defined in the document of the Council of Europe "The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Teaching, Learning and Assessment (CEFR)". Much has been said and written on communicative language teaching and the names of many authors are related to the development of this approach to language teaching. Dell Hymes (1972) introduced the notion of communicative competence in his famous work "On Communicative Competence". He drew the attention to the social context in which people learn languages and its influence on the linguistic competence. "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." (p. 269).

Constructivism in language education has been explored comprehensively by Tella and Mononen-Aaltonen (1998) at the Media Education Centre of the University of Helsinki. They relate constructivism to the concept of dialogism which they define as follows: "Dialogue is a crucial element in the creation of any language organisation and especially in establishing collaboration and networked environment. It suggests that the learning environment in the framework of dialogism cannot be a physical space, a classroom, not any particular media education tool. The learning environment is – dialogue." (p. 103).

Cummins (1994, p. 55) describes the pedagogical and social functions of educators and distinguishes between the objectivist and constructivist positions not only in methodological terms (the transmission of knowledge versus critical orientation), but also in sociological terms (social control versus social transformation orientation). "Educators' role definitions reflect their vision of society, and implicated in that societal vision are their own identities and those of the students with whom they interact. The outcome of this process for both educator and student can be described in terms of *empowerment*. Empowerment can thus be regarded as the collaborative creation of power insofar as it constitutes the process whereby students and educators collaboratively create knowledge and identity through action focused on personal and social transformation."

### **Changes in the focus of educational paradigms**

The purpose of education is, of course, the subject of incessant debate, but the mission of all educational institutions is to educate people. Dewey (1938), one of the most influential contributors to the development of modern philosophy in educational thought, noted that educators should be able to maximise the use of physical and social surroundings in order to construct valuable learning experiences for their

students. "Vygotsky and other educational professionals believed education's role was to give children experiences that were within their zones of proximal development, thereby encouraging and advancing their individual learning" (Berk & Winsler, 1995, p. 25).

Snow (1996) also poses the question of the principal aims of education. He lists the three broad functions of education in society as advocated by sociologists. Educational institutions are viewed as systems which "select and identify talent" for the needs of society; they exist to communicate and encourage knowledge – they teach the facts, concepts, culture. "Beyond these functions, however, education has also always been concerned with fostering human readiness for further stages of individual and collective life". He defines the main goal of education as "aptitude for new learning" which he further specifies as "learning to learn, learning to reason, learning to find and solve problems, learning to be interested and industrious, to persevere, to achieve in the face of novelty, complexity, adversity, and change – in short, to develop readiness, that is, aptitude, for new learning" (p. 536–537). His argument is that aptitude development is the most important result of education.

The focus of the new shift in educational thought has been on teaching students how to think critically, how to solve problems, how to participate in dialogues. McLeod (1986, p. 37) pointed out that, "being literate in the 1980s means having the power to use language – writing and reading, speaking and listening – for our own purposes, as well as those that the institutions of society require of us. The classroom processes by which that power is achieved include the first exercise of that power." It applies not just to the development of the first language, but also to the acquisition and development of the second language. Attention has been drawn to the need for students to take responsibility for their own learning, to find joy in learning and open their minds to new ideas. Students are expected to develop the skills and attitudes necessary to achieve lasting success in life. The learning process should continue throughout their lifetime, not just while during the period of formal schooling. Educators emphasise that one of the most important things students should learn is how to think for themselves, how to make conscious decisions about

the professional and personal direction of their lives. Students need help and guidance in order to learn to solve problems in a rational manner, experience compassion towards others and resolve conflicts, contradictions and differences.

There has been a strongly felt need to move away from the what is now perceived to be an obsolete traditional paradigm of teaching in schools in which the instructors are responsible for the learning of their students: it is instructors who design and select reading materials and transmit information to their students in the form of the same set of lectures or lessons regardless of the students' individual needs and differences. The need to address and accommodate the individual psychological needs of the students has now been recognised. Whereas previously it was common for teachers to select the best students in the class and honour them with their undivided attention, whilst ignoring the less able students, educators are now encouraged to use a range of strategies designed to cultivate and develop the talents of all students. Teachers are also expected to direct their attention to students who may have special needs in aspects of their learning. Educators may no longer be content with a teaching approach that is only partly effective and works for a handful of students while the rest leave the classroom without a satisfactory understanding of what they have been taught.

David Perkins (1992, p. 78) at the Harvard Graduate School of Education has adopted a "performance perspective" on understanding. "Understanding is not a matter of 'either you get it or you don't'. It is open ended and a matter of degree. You can understand a little about something (you can display a few understanding performances) or a lot more about something (you can display many varied understanding performances), but you cannot understand everything about something because there are always more extrapolations that you might not have explored and might not be able to make." Understanding concepts involves performances which show the ability to use concepts in new, creative ways, beyond the level in which they have been taught.

As well as the learning process itself, emphasis is now placed on the importance of creating a physical and emotional environment which

will promote the development of positive group dynamics which in turn will facilitate learning and meet the students' psychological needs. In their study, "The Concept of Happiness", Thomas and Stock (1988) observe that young adults associate the word "friendship" with the concept of happiness. Bonding and development of friendships stimulate students' performance and achievement whereas isolation, individualistic or competitive classroom activities have a counter effect on their motivation and achievement. Group cooperation and group activities have been widely recommended. In their research on effective group management Johnson, Johnson and Smith (1991) discuss, among the other factors necessary for successful collaborative learning, the role of positive interdependence. The teacher's main function is seen as the creation of a positive interdependence among the students where each member of the group depends on everyone else, and where all participate and contribute to the achievement of common goals. If only individual students participate and other students do not join in, the group serves no positive purpose. Students should also help and encourage one another and build up a caring attitude towards learning. Education is a social process which involves student-teacher interaction and the development of social and collaborative skills. However, the application of collaborative learning is by no means an easy task since it depends greatly on the professional and personal characteristics of the teacher in order to be successfully implemented in the classroom.

Even though the need for radical change in educational practices has been recognised and accepted, there remain many controversies and different policies and views on the best educational strategies to apply at all levels of the educational system. One example of an attempt to combine different educational strategies in order to achieve high quality pre-school environment is the application of the Reggio Emilia pre-school system in the context of the US education system. In their paper, Warash, Curtis, Hursh and Tucci (2008) discuss the two opposing philosophical foundations of behaviourism and constructivism and argue that, despite their diametrically opposing standpoints, both have as their aim the development of independent learners, and the need to

focus on the learning of individual students and to adapt teaching methods to accommodate these needs. They put in focus the debate of teacher-directed and child-directed strategies of instruction and state that “the controversy between predominantly child-initiated activity and predominantly adult-initiated direct instruction has left some children stranded in the middle, when a balanced position is in their best interest” (p. 443). They are of the opinion that integration of strategies can be applied successfully and that the Reggio Emilia preschool system is such an example. However, as the authors point out, it does not escape the attention of those critics who express concern that the instruction in the school is too-teacher oriented to be developmentally appropriate. The approach focuses on awareness of children’s capabilities and of ways of provoking children to exceed the expectations determined by external factors. The children are stimulated in such a way as to draw out that their ideas. They are frequently asked provoking questions in order to develop a better understanding of different perspectives. Children with learning difficulties are referred to as children with special rights in the school. Applied behavioural approaches and direct instruction, if done correctly, can help such children. Teachers observe their behaviour and apply teacher directed, peer directed or semi-directed instructions as appropriate. The school, which is a fusion of different theories and innovative practices, tries to reconcile many contrasting philosophies and thus achieve harmony.

A combination of principles from the two controversial and opposing philosophies is also recommended by specialists when working with children with special learning needs. For instance, Marcee Steele (2005), a researcher of special education at the University of North Carolina, Wilmington, discusses the benefits of applying an instruction which combines constructivist and behaviourist principles. In her view, teachers should be familiar with the strength and weaknesses of both philosophies and choose the most effective strategies as may be dictated by the child’s learning characteristics, and the nature and content of the task. Teachers should be aware of all the different options and not stick to one pre-determined method in their classroom practices.

### Early foreign language teaching and learning

The change in the paradigms, as we have seen, has led to new approaches aiming at applying various and innovative strategies as well as addressing and turning back to some tried and tested practices and principles found in previous methods. This applies equally to language teaching and early foreign language teaching where the pendulum has been swinging backwards and forwards between principles derived from objectivist and constructivist principles. The focus of research has once again been on finding the right “dose” in applying the teacher-student orientation strategies. One example of integrating different strategies and ideologies in early foreign language teaching is learning through actions or learning by doing things (Shopov, 2008). The environmental principles of the Total Physical Response combined with communicative strategies have been recommended as useful in the classroom practices. Within the total physical response the teacher’s role is described as one of a parent who initiates actions of children by giving commands like “point to the door!”, “draw a box on a chair”, etc. This is alternated by songs, for instance, “touch something” and other communicative techniques as, for example, changing roles, where students give the commands (p. 296–301). In his book, “Early Foreign Language Teaching”, Daloiso (2007) also discusses the usefulness of activities based on the Total Physical Response. He lists different playful techniques based on the game and postulates that TPR activities can also be rendered as playful. “Activities based on TPR method – a humanistic-affective communicative approach that considers the LA a slow process, one based on receptive experiences and easily stopped by events that are frustrating and cause anxiety, and also based on the involvement of the person’s total experiential modalities – can also be considered playful”.

The Narrative Format Model developed by Prof. Traute Taeschner from Sapienza University of Rome (The Magic Teacher, *Learning a foreign language at nursery school – results from the project*, 2005) is another innovative teaching method designed in the tradition of the Communicative

Approach. It is based on establishing an affective relationship between teacher and all pupils and sharing collaborative, long-lasting emotionally-charged experiences in the target language. It offers a consistent and holistic methodological framework that leads to the full development of children's foreign language skills and enhances their physical, emotional and psychological growth.

### Conclusion

The new socio-political and economic reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century requires a new educational paradigm in which mutual cooperation prevails in the classrooms, success is measured by the educational goals achieved, and students who can think critically, invent, experience and consolidate new knowledge on their own as autonomous learners. A shift from *learning that* to *learning how* has been observed. Modern education should be learner – oriented and learners should gain new knowledge and experiences by *doing things*, and not by “talking about the language”. Emphasis is now placed on creating an appropriate physical and emotional environment which promotes the development of positive group dynamics. Within such an environment, language learning can be greatly facilitated and enhanced and learners' psychological needs best met.

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**Abstract:**

This paper reviews objectivism and constructivism: the two educational ideologies which underlie different language teaching methods, applied in the classrooms for decades. It reflects on some marked differences among the existing language theories and practices within the two traditions and their impact on early language education.

The authors emphasize the changes in the focus of the educational paradigms and the need of working methodologies and classroom practices that are in line with the contemporary requirements of modern education. A shift from learning that to learning how has been observed. Young students should be able to have new experiences in a new language by doing things as autonomous learners within a group that has established a positive learning environment. The focus of research should be on developing and applying effective, age-appropriate approaches which will facilitate the language learning of children and enhance their overall physical and psychological development.

**Keywords:** language education, objectivism, constructivism

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*The Swing of the Pendulum –  
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189

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