# SECOND LANGUAGE CLASSROOM READING: A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

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## Abstract

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Social constructivist approaches to learning, based on the work of Vygotsky and others, are gaining momentum in the field of second and foreign language learning. However, social constructivist rhetoric often seems remote and even irrelevant to practicing teachers. In this paper, we will briefly explain the constructivist approach to teaching reading to students of English as a foreign language. We will show 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. We will suggest ways in which such scaffolding can help transform the rhetoric of social constructivist discourse into classroom realities.

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## 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 in classroom– perhaps the most important route by which Chinese students acquire competence in English.

# 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" (Mitchell & Myles, 1988, p. 162). 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, such as in what social context, we are learning.

Vygotsky, the father of social constructivism, claimed that learning occurs through dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978). This dialogue is initially *intermental*, meaning it takes place between teacher and student, between students, or even between text and reader (Wilson, 1999, p. 172). However, the learner makes sense of what is said or written through internal or *intramental* dialogue (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus learning is both 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 which Lantolf (2000) calls "activity theory" (p. 12). 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 pen-pal or a magazine article about their favorite music. Teachers can play a large part in setting up learning environments 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?

Another fundamental concept in social constructivism is the idea of *scaffolding*. In its literal sense, scaffolding is a support structure that is erected around a building under construction. When the building is strong enough, the scaffolding can be removed and the building will remain strong and stable. In the metaphorical sense used by Vygotsky (1978), scaffolding refers to the support provided by others—parents, peers, teachers or reference sources such as dictionaries which enables students to perform increasingly well. Hammond and Gibbons (2001) interpret scaffolding as high challenge, high support. In other words, teachers need to set up tasks which challenge students to perform beyond their current capacity. To enable students to achieve these tasks, teachers also need to provide support measures which make it possible for students to perform at this new level. If the task is not challenging enough, students will be bored and possibly become unmotivated; however, if there is not enough support, students will be frustrated and may give up. Thus, scaffolding enables students to achieve great leaps forward in their language learning.

The concept of scaffolding is also linked with what Vygotsky calls the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). By this he is referring to the range of tasks and activities which the student can achieve with scaffolding, but which may be beyond his current abilities if he is unassisted. Teachers need great skill in assessing and then exploiting their students' ZPD.

**What is Reading from a Social Constructivist Point of View?**

Social 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. Interacting with text can involve practices as diverse as reading instructions, scanning a newspaper, or reading an academic article. Thus, when we are designing curricula for reading in EFL classes, we first need to ask ourselves what 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, which is 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, and using text structure. Bottom-up strategies include looking up unknown vocabulary in a dictionary or glossary, working out sentence grammar, and deciphering reference chains.

Classroom reading practices which are based on both top-down and 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 resources. In the field of teaching English as a foreign language, 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 everything to do with decoding the sound-symbol relationship. Many students have to work hard to decode the sound-symbol relationship at the word level, ultimately causing them to 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 decoding. Luke and Freebody (1999) 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 or 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, which is 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 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.

Readers also have to know how to use texts. They can be used for pleasure, for gathering information, for writing essays, and for language learning. Our students have expectations of how texts can and should be used based on their prior experience of texts as social practice. As teachers we need to encourage and facilitate students' use of texts in new social contexts. For example, students of English for Academic Purposes need to know how to exploit references appropriately in academic writing (Fox, 1994; Cadman, 1997).

Finally, as text analysts, students need to gain text awareness. This is in order to build their own skills as writers, by 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.

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

The social constructivist view of reading has many implications for language teachers. First, we need to stop teaching reading by simply practicing reading, and to focus on assisting students to extend their capacity to read constructively. Second, we need to escape from teaching reading through the kind of disembodied texts which are so common in EFL classrooms. These disembodied texts have no context, no particular relevance to students, or to their broader learning purposes. The books are often chosen by teachers or by textbook writers to demonstrate a grammatical point rather than to engage students in meaningful and purposeful reading practices. Reading without a purpose positions the reader as an onlooker, a 'mute outsider' rather than a meaning-maker (Penrose & Geisler, 1994; Wilson, 1998). Third, we need to ensure that we, as teachers, are not reading on behalf of the students in our reading classes. Our pre-reading, during-reading and post-reading exercises can sometimes provide so much support that the students do not really have to read the text at all. Instead, we need to empower students to choose what and how to read in ways which suit their own needs and purposes.

The following strategies are proposed here to show how the social constructivist theory can be translated into action for teaching reading in an EFL classroom.

*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 a coursebook, establish the context first by 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, whether that be 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.

*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 (Faerch & Kasper, 1987; Pani, 2004). The teacher stands in front of the class, not reading aloud as much as verbalizing his or her thought processes as he or 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, and guessing the meaning of difficult words. It can demonstrate that reading is not necessarily a linear process, but involves jumping forwards, linking back, and re-reading 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.

*Asking Questions*

Not enough research has been done in EFL classes on the role of questioning in teaching reading. The art of asking questions which are easily within the students' grasp, but which lead them to engage more interactively with the text is very tricky. After all, the students will not have a teacher by their side asking questions forever. The goal is to enable them to become independent readers.

Social constructivist theory emphasizes that we need to encourage students to create their own meaning from text, rather than to impose a teacher's interpretation of the meaning upon them. Of course teachers may help as resources to bridge the linguistic and cultural gap that students experience in reading a text. Too often, however, reading teachers dominate the lesson by 'telling' students the meaning of the text rather than assisting them to create meaning themselves. The questions teachers ask need to show a genuine interest in the meanings the students construct rather than insisting on pre-conceived 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?"

Above all, however, we want to encourage our students to ask such questions for themselves. To scaffold this ability, one possible activity is to get students in groups to write quiz questions for other groups to answer. Generating questions can be used as either a pre-reading or a post-reading activity.

*Integrating the Four Acroskills*

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 behaviorist 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: which is a skill essential for EFL students, especially EAP students (Wilson, 1997). However, the borderline between using models and plagiarizing needs to be made clear.

*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 and see how reliable they are. 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 assignment of summarizing the 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.

*Using Peer-Scaffolding*

Although teacher support is essential in scaffolding, it is also essential to unleash students from the teacher-fronted classroom setting. Peer-scaffolding is a step toward independent use of the four reader-roles. Working in collaboration with peers on reading tasks can expand students' use of these roles, helping them to become more effective decoders and users of text, more participatory makers of meaning, and more aware of how authors manipulate text. Small group work exercises include information gap exercises (decoding), comparing texts (text analyzing), comparing notes students have made from texts (meaning-making), or co-constructing a paragraph based on the information in the text (text-using). An effective group task teachers can employ is to have students read texts on a given topic first, and then prepare a group presentation by making a visual representation of the topic. It is very enlightening for students to see how differently they all visualize the topic.

*Setting Your Students Free*

Allowing your students to work independently is an essential aspect of social constructivist theory. Setting tasks which allow students to read in areas which interest them and for purposes which are important to them is the best motivator. However, freedom without support is a recipe for disaster. Once again, scaffolding before and during individual or small group tasks is essential.

*Using Macrotasks*

Macrotasks can provide an excellent framework to motivate students to work independently and integrate all four macroskills, especially if the task will have an authentic audience. The web comes in very useful both as a source of reading material and as a publishing tool which reaches out to a wider audience. For example, having the class set up a web resource for other students in the school or beyond can be a great motivator. Webquests can be an end in itself, but are better embedded into a more substantial macrotask (Dudeney, 2003). Some possible macrotasks involving a reading component are:

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| 1 | Produce a web-based magazine for the school |
| 2 | Plan an excursion for your class, and act as tour guide |
| 3 | Write an article for a tourist magazine and submit it for publication |
| 4 | Write a script for a play or movie and produce it for the school |
| 5 | Make a documentary/CD Rom on a subject you are passionate about |
| 6 | Prepare a mini-conference or trade fair (including poster presentations, individual and group presentations) and invite guests of honor |
| 7 | Conduct an advertising campaign |
| 8 | Compile an anthology |
| 9 | Produce a radio broadcast on local radio |

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the social constructivist approach to reading offers tools and principles for EFL teachers to draw 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.

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