

## Social constructivist learning theory and reciprocal teaching to teach reading comprehension

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### Abstract

English teachers who teach reading comprehension course surely often give their students reading assignments, for example reading articles, popular press books and/or internet publications. Unfortunately, the results were not satisfying and made English teachers disappointed. This lack of good reading comprehension skills is exacerbated by the central role of reading comprehension required for the success in higher education. One solution to overcome this problem of poor reading comprehension skills is the explicit teaching of reading comprehension strategies to students, specifically, reciprocal teaching (RT). The philosophical root of RT itself is social constructivism which explains how students might acquire knowledge and learn; then, this concept is accumulated with the use of RT strategy to teach reading comprehension course at school. All are clearly discussed, so that the RT could be an alternative reading comprehension strategic choice for all English teachers to teach reading comprehension course at Polytechnic.

Keywords: Social constructivism, reciprocal teaching, learning evaluation.

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## 1. Introduction

English lecturers in Indonesia must understand that changes in students' outcomes must be supported by parallel changes in curriculum and instruction. However, it is apparent that many of today's teachers are not prepared to change their ways of teaching. They are used to utilise traditional ways in teaching students. Seemingly, they are not ready to face a new paradigm in teaching. The roles of the students are to memorise information and then to be tested based on their ability to remember specific facts. If such a thing keeps happening, the gaps between high and low knowledgeable students are getting wider.

Reading literacy, according to Smagorinsky (2001) is a complex cognitive activity that involves the composing of meaning and monitoring of understanding. OECD (2013) believes that nowadays students are required to understand the meaning of text. Being able to read is conceived as the ability to understand written texts in order to achieve goals, to develop knowledge and potential and to participate in society.

To achieve comprehension, a reader must invent a model or explanation organising the information selected from text in a way that makes sense to them and fits their world knowledge. A reader, to comprehend a text, must be able to construct meaning through the integration of existing and new knowledge, and the flexible use of strategies to foster, monitor and maintain comprehension. Thus, Dole et al. (1991) say that comprehension instruction is geared towards developing students' sense of control over a set of strategies they can apply and adapt while reading or listening to text.

Several studies done by Farrell and Elkins (2005) show that students having intellectual disability experience severe deficiencies in learning to read, and they require systematic and intentional comprehension instruction. As novice readers, according to Alfassi (2009), they are short of knowledge of reading strategies and it will surely affect their ability to monitor their understanding on reading texts. Such a thought is supported by Erez and Peled (2011), who confirm that the very little use of metacognitive considerations will influence students' awareness of their own knowledge and ability. The failure to use effective memory and rehearsal strategies will happen and they do not spontaneously organise, chunk or elaborate in ways that facilitate learning. In addition, Turner, Dofny and Durka (2004) say that it takes students a long procedure to process information. If such a condition keeps happening, they will fail to establish meaningful relationships among sets of ideas. Banikowski and Mehring (2009); Katims (2001) claim that these findings raise questions about the efficacy of comprehension instruction for individuals with intellectual disabilities. To overcome the above problem, Farrell and Elkins (2005) offer a thought in which a social constructivism strategy can be adopted to teaching and instruction of students with intellectual disabilities. The social constructivism strategies are believed to be able to facilitate important things during the teaching and learning process in the class room, in order to improve the students' achievement and the teaching and learning quality itself. In the process, teachers act as a facilitator to facilitate students in order to construct the knowledge of students that will lead to skill mastery. All learning processes taking place in the classroom are student-centred activities. To make it come true, Vygotsky (1978) cites that through an interactive social setting, it will enable all students to negotiate each other to gain meaning. In their learning, students cooperating with friends in a group negotiate for meaning with peers and more knowledgeable others. Good teachers always strive to serve their students of intellectual disabilities, so that establishing the applicability of new learning paradigms to practice while demonstrating positive outcomes for students is necessary. Based on a research conducted by Royse (2001), found that every student knows how to read but many of them have never learnt good reading skills. Their lack of learning good reading skills will be their academic barriers to succeed in education. It is in line with what Hodge, Palmer and Scott (1992) say that the college-aged students, who are ineffective readers often are not able to monitor the comprehension of their reading, and rarely instigated any strategies to adjust to deficiencies in reading comprehension. Such a thing could be solved by introducing students an explicit instruction. Meyer, Young and Bartlett (2009) in their

writing clearly say that explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies can be an effective means for improving college students' reading comprehension. Unfortunately, English teachers seldom teach their students explicit instruction in reading comprehension at the higher education level.

The explicit instruction that is suitable to students of intellectual disabilities is reciprocal teaching (RT). The RT, according to Palincsar and Brown (1984); Palincsar, Brown and Campion (1989), that is based upon social constructivism emphasises the strengths and knowledge that the students with intellectual disabilities bring to the classroom. RT is one of the most prominent strategy—instructions to develop students' reading comprehension in the last decade. In addition, Dole et al. (2011) claim that RT is designed to enhance the acquisition of reading comprehension through repeated and shared social dialogues about printed texts.

From a social constructivist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting people. People are in language means that the focus is not towards the individual person but rather on the social interaction in which language is generated. People socially construct their own realities by their use of agreed and shared meaning communicated through language. Social constructivism gives an emphasis on collective-learning, where the teachers together with peers play their roles to help learners becomes prominent. Social constructivist's emphasise that learning is active, contextual and social; therefore, the best method is 'group-learning' where a teacher acts as a facilitator and guide in the process of teaching and learning.

This paper explores philosophical foundations of RT, constructivism in the present day classroom, constructivist view of learning and teaching. After reading the three discussions, readers will get a full comprehension that social constructivism reflected into RT strategy develops the cognitive and the meta-cognitive processes for the students. It also grows social values among high—and low-knowledgeable students. It then explores the perspectives of social constructivist towards learner and teacher during the teaching and learning process. The two discussions will be about active socialisation, wherein the knowledge constructed from the text is negotiated within discourse communities through student-student interactions and the new role a teacher should play in the learning process. Finally, it presents RT, the stages of and procedures for applying RT and learning evaluation.

## **2. Literature review**

### *2.1. Philosophical foundations of reciprocal teaching*

RT derives from social constructivism described by Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) in Kozulin (2006) combines between dialogue and metacognition in explaining how individuals develop their understanding of concepts. Furthermore, Vygotsky (1978) proposed a phenomenological idea of zone of proximal development (ZPD) in which, to construct knowledge, there are dialogues among learners. Through dialogue they are expected to be able to shape schemas, so that constructing new ideas and understanding are taking place. To actualise it, there must be a process that must be passed through. The process, according to Kozulin (2006), is called scaffolds. Scaffolds themselves provide needs-based support across ZPD.

The bridged dialogues in RT happen in small groups. Students take turns at leading the discussion. Teacher acts as a facilitator to make sure that learning process in the classroom could run well as planned. During the learning, each learner in each group constructs the understanding of the text through discussion. In this with step, Palincsar and Brown (1984) cite that each learner learn thinking strategies for deeper levels of comprehension at their own rate in the presence of experts and more able peers.

## 2.2. Constructivist view of learning

There are many different perspectives on constructivism in terms of the knowledge construction. Each expert has his own thought about what the perspective on constructivism is. To make it much clearer, Hoover (2009) in Dole et al. (2011) introduces two important notions encompassing the ideas of constructed knowledge. They are (1) the role of prior knowledge towards the new knowledge construction, and (2) learning is active.

The first notion means that learners are not able to construct new knowledge about a certain area of knowledge without the prior knowledge. Indirectly, it can be said that the prior knowledge the learners have will positively contribute to the shape of their new knowledge. The learners' schemata influences their new knowledge. The second notion is that learning is an active process. This statement indicates that in learning, learners negotiate their understanding in the light of what they experience in the new learning situation. If learning is passive, learners cannot change in order to accommodate new experience. The different idea of knowledge construction is offered by Bruner (1973). He says that a social process is the primary factor to construct new concepts and knowledge based on their current knowledge. To construct new concepts and knowledge, students must be able to select information, construct hypotheses, make decisions, and then integrate new experiences into his existing knowledge and experience. A learning, according to Twomey (1989), could be categorised as constructivism learning if it fulfills four conditions: (1) learners have previous knowledge on the learning materials, (2) new ideas replace old ideas, (3) learning that is taking place involves inventing ideas, and (4) meaningful learning takes place through rethinking old ideas and coming to new conclusions about new ideas which conflict with our old ideas.

In short, it could be said that constructivism learning knowledge is actively constructed from the experience and modified through experiences in which experience has an important role in understanding and grasping the meaning.

## 2.3. Constructivism in the present day classroom

As known that Indonesia is an archipelago, in which there are many people who come from different regions. Diversities among us must be appreciated as a blessing from our creator, God. Diversities are not only on culture factors but also on language matters. The diversity in our country must be well managed, or else frictions even a chaos will destruct all aspects in our lives. The diversity in our country is our strength that makes all of us to stand high in the globalisation era. To keep united and appreciate one another, there must be an effort that teachers should make in their teaching. Teachers may start using learning strategies whose roots derive from social constructivism. The old teaching paradigm that focused on traditional way must be abandoned right away.

The reading strategy of social constructivism could grow the social values among students. It is good to improve students' empathy, among them especially between high-knowledgeable and low-knowledgeable students. High-knowledgeable students give their hand to improve the low-knowledgeable students' achievement in learning, so that they will not be left behind in the academic matters. The nurturant effects growing among them will minimise some frictions and differences, so that the school life will be in harmony.

Knowledge in the constructivist classroom is built based on students' prior experiences collaboratively. Students work in a group of four or five and share responsibility. Decision making is negotiated together among students in a group. In the classroom, teacher facilitates, guides and stimulates students to get active in learning process.

#### 2.4. Constructivist view of teaching

Constructivist theory puts students as a centre of learning (Prawat, 2002). The students are the agent of learning not the object of learning. To understand and make the learning process more meaningful, students must actively involve themselves in constructing meaning and knowledge. Constructivist teaching promotes learners' motivation and high critical thinking order, and encourages them to be independent learners (Gray, 2007).

Teaching in the constructivist view is not about the transmission of knowledge, but making students know about lessons. Rather constructivist teachers in teaching and learning process not only guide students but also give their students a space with opportunities to test the adequacy of their current understandings. It is in line with what Gamoran, Secada, and Marrett (2000) says that teaching cannot be viewed as the transmission of knowledge from enlightened or known to unenlightened or unknown. Constructivist teachers are not monologue teachers who just teach completely new lessons. Gamoran Secada, and Marrett (2000) also claims that in teaching, teachers must consider the students' prior knowledge and provide learning environments that are able to improve the qualities of knowledge that students had before. As known, sometimes there are many inconsistencies between students' current knowledge and new experience.

To construct new knowledge, teachers must be able to manage the classroom well and engage all students to participate in the learning process and bring the students' current understanding to the forefront. During this time, there will be such a kind of reflection in students' mind to relate the new experiences to the previous ones. They will know by themselves whether their previous knowledge is correct or not in terms of the improved view of the world.

#### 2.5. Social constructivist view of learner

Social constructivism requires all students in a classroom to be active and confident in themselves and their abilities. In a classroom, all students have to admit that there are gaps in their knowledge or understanding, and to take the risk of learning new ways of thinking. Social constructivism also gives an emphasis that it is important for students to have social interactions with knowledgeable students of the class. Wadsworth (2006) says that interacting socially with other more knowledgeable students will develop students' thinking abilities.

#### 2.6. Social constructivist view of teacher

There is a good statement said by Rogoff (2008) that in social constructivism, teachers and peers support one another and contribute to learning through the concepts of scaffolding, cognitive apprenticeship, tutoring, and cooperative learning and learning communities. It means that everyone in the classroom is in charge of making all students understand the lesson they learnt. Furthermore, Bauersfeld (2005) says that in social constructivist approach, teachers act as facilitators not as teachers who teach what to do. Facilitators only act when there are some problems to solve, while teachers give some instructions what students must do. The students will play a passive role when the teacher just teaches; however, the students will play an active role when the teachers facilitates the learning process and give the students a hand to learn. To compare the role of teacher with that of facilitator in the teaching and learning process, Rhodes and Belly (1999) say that a teacher tells, a facilitator asks; a teacher lectures from the front, a facilitator supports from the back; a teacher gives answers according to a predetermined curriculum, a facilitator provides guidelines and creates the appropriate environment for the learner to arrive at his or her own answer and conclusions; a teacher mostly gives a monologue, a facilitator is in continuous and interactive dialogue with the learners. This

significant change of the role, according to Brownstein (2001), indicates that an instructor as facilitator needs to display a completely different set of skills than that of an instructor as a teacher.

In conclusion, the shift from a teacher-centred approach to a student-centred approach is a central component of the RT process and encourages self-regulation on the part of the students.

## *2.7. Reciprocal teaching*

RT, according to Palincsar and Brown (1984), is a metacognitive strategy instruction based on modelling and guided practice, in which the facilitator first plays his role to model a set of reading comprehension strategies and then gradually places responsibility for these strategies to the students. Each student plays his own role in a group of four or five students as predictor, questioner, summariser and clarifier.

In RT, students take possession of their role in RT as they feel relaxed expressing their facts and opinions in open conversation. Reciprocal peer tutoring is an involvement, in which one more knowledgeable student provides teaching support to other students in a group. Peer tutoring ranges from the familiar encounter of play to the most difficult activities of collaboration, in which persons help one another and study by doing so. Palincsar and Brown (1984) say that students become teachers and work as a group to contribute meaning to a text in reciprocal education as a strategy of cooperative groups. Palincsar and Brown (1984) recommend teaching four activities to students in order to improve their comprehension: (a) summarising the main points and monitoring the understanding of the text; (b) predicting what might come next; (c) clarifying unclear or ambiguous words, phrases or sentences; and (d) generating questions and answering them.

### *2.7.1. Predicting*

Predicting is an activity that involves finding comprehensive clues by using a reader's own background knowledge and personal experiences. Its main purpose is to link what the reader has already known about the topic, with the knowledge the reader is about to acquire through reading text. In short, predicting keeps the readers actively thinking on the text while reading.

### *2.7.2. Clarifying*

Clarifying is an activity that readers use while monitoring their own comprehension. It takes place when the readers are confused and when they attempt to restore meaning, for example, the terms in the reading text are unclear and the vocabulary is difficult to comprehend. Readers monitor their reading comprehension when they try to clarify what they have read. Clarifying enables readers to identify and question any unfamiliar, unnecessary or ambiguous information in the reading text. The questioning, discussion and reflection that take place both during and after reading is an opportunity for clarifying. Therefore, clarifying is an important part of monitoring comprehension.

### *2.7.3. Questioning*

Questioning requires readers to be able to identify information existing in the text they are reading. Questions could be constructed to ask both the main idea and important information. Making questions is to test whether the readers have comprehended the reading text and to help him to identify important information in the reading text too. Besides, it will encourage the readers to generate questions related to the content of a text and also have a positive effect on the development of their reading comprehension on the topic they are reading.

#### 2.7.4. Summarising

Summarising means that readers are required to identify the main idea of each paragraph. A good summary does not include details that are not important. Readers are encouraged to make use of headings, sub-headings and main ideas in each paragraph to summarise the text which they are reading. The readers should think of what a paragraph or a text is mostly about, find a topic sentence, and construct a sentence reflecting the most important information in the paragraph. Summarising the main idea in each paragraph of a text will help readers to connect what they already know to the present piece of reading, and to predict what may happen in the next paragraph to check the accuracy of their prediction. Additionally, summarisation is used to help readers grasp the main idea of a text, in order to comprehend the whole picture and to guide them through further reading. It improves reading skills by focusing the awareness on the important information in a text and ignoring the unimportant information.

#### 2.7.5. The stages of and procedures for applying reciprocal teaching

Christie (2005) proposes five stages for applying RT strategy. In the step one, the teacher explains the RT strategy by making a dialogue to students; in the step two, the teacher models the RT strategy to all students. It is important to emphasise activities that may promote these processes; in the step three, the teacher passes out the hand-out paper to each student; and in the step five, the teacher divides students heterogeneously into groups of 4–5 students.

#### 2.7.6. Learning evaluation

Evaluation is conducted at the end of teaching and learning process. Evaluation is required to measure how far a teacher succeeded at teaching students in one meeting of teaching. In social constructivism, the evaluation instrument is not only a test, but non-test which is called classroom-based evaluation. A kind of test that could be performed by a teacher is formative test of giving students a small test consisting of few questions and taking short time at the end of teaching hour. The type of non-test called classroom-based evaluation could be in the forms of individual checklist and group checklist informing the aspects of students' activities in teaching and learning processes. Its assessment scale could be divided into three forms; category, numeric and graphic. These three forms are then carried out into qualitative forms such as: always, sometimes and never.

### 3. Conclusion

Constructivism requires a teacher to act as a facilitator whose main function is to help students become active participants in their learning and make meaningful connections between prior knowledge, new knowledge, and the processes involved in learning. Hence, from a constructivist perspective, the primary responsibility of the teacher is to create and maintain a collaborative problem-solving environment, where students are allowed to construct their own knowledge, and the teacher acts as a facilitator and guide.

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