

Constructivist Pedagogy and ESL Learning in Nepal

Niraj Chaudhary (bnplchaudhary@gmail.com)

Ph. D. Research Scholar, University of Delhi, India



Copyright: © 2024 by the authors. Licensee JRSP-ELT (2456-8104). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the **Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License**. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). **Crossref/DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.54850/jrspelt.8.43.001>

Abstract: *This article explores the integration of Vygotsky's social constructivist theory into English as a Second Language (ESL) classroom in Nepal. The paper discusses key constructs of Vygotsky's theory and illustrates how its application transforms ESL classrooms, promoting learner-centeredness by providing social and linguistic opportunity. By emphasizing collaborative learning, scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), this pedagogical framework contributes to a more inclusive and effective language learning environment.*

Keywords: Constructivist Pedagogy, Critical Thinking, ESL, Language Skills, Vygotsky, ZPD

Article History: Received: 21 April -2024; Accepted: 10 May- 2024; Published/Available Online: 30 May- 2024

Introduction

Social constructivism refers to the construction of knowledge through interactions within a social and cultural context, where language plays a pivotal role. Textbooks, materials, and designed modules also contribute significantly to creating an environment conducive to social constructivist learning. It is one type of constructivism among the four other types. The theory is characterized by three major themes: a genetic approach, the social origins of mental functions, and the role of tools and signs in mediating learning. The genetic approach emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals' cognitive processes within the context of their personal and cultural backgrounds. It underscores the need to delve into an individual's origins and history to comprehend their cognitive development fully. The second theme highlights that mental functions are not developed in isolation but are deeply rooted in social interactions. It emphasizes that cognitive development is intricately intertwined with social life and the interactions individuals have within their social environment. The third theme underscores the role of tools and signs, particularly language, in mediating cognitive processes. It suggests that these elements serve as mediators or facilitators of cognitive development, playing a crucial role in shaping how individuals construct knowledge and understand the world around them.

Theoretical Constructs of Social Constructivism

Mediation: Mediation is a fundamental concept in social constructivism, referring to the use of tools by learners to solve problems and enhance higher mental functions. It involves employing culturally constructed auxiliary means, with language being one of the most significant tools in this process. Other tools may include symbols, numbers, and more. Mediation is crucial for learning as it proposes that as individuals engage in higher mental processes, they increasingly rely on internal and symbolic means.

According to Vygotsky's social constructivism, language is central and drives human development. Vygotsky argued that through language human development and psychological processes become semantically mediated, distinguishing human cognition from that of animals. Language plays a vital role in providing the necessary social setting and interactions for learning and human development. Vygotsky emphasized that without language, learning becomes challenging. He identified two major roles of language in learning and cognitive development: (a) transmitting information to learners and (b) serving as a powerful tool of intellectual adaptation. Vygotsky proposed three types of language: (a) social speech, involving external communication; (b) private speech, directed to oneself and serving an intellectual function; and (c) silent inner speech, representing self-regulation of behavior. Private speech emerges from an individual's social environment and serves as a bridge between social and inner speech.

According to Vygotsky, thought and language are initially separate systems, becoming interdependent around age two, with speech becoming representational and thought verbal. Private speech is seen as the earliest manifestation of inner speech.

Vygotsky also differentiated between scientific and everyday concepts. Scientific concepts develop through systematic mediation, analysis, critical thinking, and guidance from knowledgeable individuals, as seen in formal education. Everyday concepts, however, are spontaneously constructed from immediate experiences in daily life. Both types contribute to forming higher mental functions and constructing knowledge, which are facilitated by active and continuous mediation. Elementary functions, or primary functions, encompass basic activities learners engage in for survival, contributing to the development of higher mental functions.

Internalization: Internalization is a fundamental concept in social constructivism, particularly associated with the work of Vygotsky. According to this concept, every function in a child's cultural development undergoes a two-stage process: first at the social level and later at the individual level. This process involves the transition from inter-psychological (between people) to intra-psychological (inside the child). In simpler terms, internalization refers to the process of learning that initially occurs in a social context and later becomes an individual psychological process. Vygotsky's notion suggests that higher mental functions, such as voluntary attention, logical memory, and the formation of concepts, originate from actual relations between human individuals. The initial stage of internalization involves interactions and shared experiences between individuals in a social context. These interactions shape the child's understanding and learning. Subsequently, what is learned socially is internalized by the individual, becoming part of their psychological processes. Internalization underscores the progression of learning from the social level, where interactions with others are crucial, to the individual level, where the acquired knowledge and skills become integrated into the learner's internal cognitive processes.

Zone of Proximal Development

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is the gap between a learner's actual developmental level, determined by independent problem-solving, and their potential development level, which is reached through problem-solving under knowledgeable guidance. This guidance can come from collaboration with more capable individuals and well-designed educational materials like modules or textbooks. Essentially, the ZPD highlights what learners are capable of achieving with proper support from knowledgeable peers, facilitators, or educational resources.

The ZPD provides a dynamic indicator of cognitive development, showing what learners are in the process of learning rather than just measuring what they can accomplish independently, which reflects what has already been learned. In essence, the ZPD gives insight into what children are on the path to understanding.

Learning within the ZPD involves practicing tasks that learners cannot yet handle alone but can successfully learn and perform with the assistance of facilitators, peers, and educational materials. This learning process involves social interactions, cooperative dialogue, and collaborative learning facilitated by language and educational resources. Various internal developmental processes occur during learning within the ZPD, and ultimately, collaborative performance helps learners to achieve independence in their learning and problem-solving abilities.

Scaffolding: Scaffolding is another crucial concept in Vygotsky's social constructivism, highlighting the support provided to learners to help them reach their potential development. It involves a collaborative process where the learner actively participates in increasing their knowledge with the guidance of an expert or peer. In simple terms, scaffolding describes the progression from relying on expert assistance to

achieving independence in learning. This support is tailored to match the learner's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), ensuring that it is challenging yet attainable.

The relationship between the ideas of ZPD and scaffolding is closely intertwined. Both concepts guide educators to take on the role of facilitators rather than being viewed as the sole source of knowledge. The process of scaffolding emphasizes the dynamic and mutual interaction between the teacher or expert and the learner. Importantly, scaffolding involves simplifying the learner's role rather than reducing the complexity of the task itself.

Indeed, scaffolding provides a supportive framework that assists learners in advancing their knowledge and skills, fostering a transition from dependence on external support to independent learning. It highlights the significance of maintaining a balance in instructional support to optimize the learning experience for the student.

Pedagogical Application of Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory

English language entered Nepal in mid 17th century for political interest rather than a colonial language. Some Nepalese scholars have seen English Language as a foreign language and some Nepalese scholars have seen it as a second language in Nepal. It has been a controversial issue among the educators whether English is a second or foreign language in Nepal (Shrestha, 2008; Karn, 2009; Malla, 1977, Kansakar, 1977 as cited in Bista 2011). English in today's Nepal is undoubtedly undeniable and incontestable. Its place in the Nepalese life is indispensable, so much so that the stakeholders, especially the providers, students, teachers and parents, go to any length and invest any amount of money in order to master the language (Giri, p.3, 2015). Perhaps it was fairly enough in a context when the use of English was limited to a foreign language but now the scenario (local as well as global) has completely changed and the status of English at present is gradually moving towards that of becoming a second language (Bhattari, & Gautam, 2005). I have located English as second language learning in Nepal in this paper.

Social constructivist theory suggests that learning is not an individual activity but rather a social one. Students internalize new concepts and language structures through meaningful interactions with teachers, peers, and learning resources. The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) delineates the range of tasks a learner can perform with the assistance of a more knowledgeable person. Scaffolding, provided by teachers or peers, enables learners to accomplish tasks that would otherwise be too challenging to tackle independently.

Active involvement of teachers, knowledgeable individuals, textbooks, and learning materials is crucial in creating a supportive learning environment. This environment not only facilitates language development but also nurtures reflective and critical thinking skills. Furthermore, these interactions are aligned with the demands of 21st-century life skills, making social constructivist theory highly relevant in contemporary education.

As a result, social constructivist theory has garnered significant attention from educators, policymakers, and educational practitioners. Its implications are broad and profound, particularly in ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms. By acknowledging the social nature of learning, educators can leverage this theory to enhance language acquisition and promote the development of essential cognitive and interpersonal skills in language learners.

- *Language skills development through social interaction and mediation:* Social constructivist principles play a crucial role in guiding the development of various language skills, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, grammar, and vocabulary. These principles emphasize the importance of social interactions and mediation in language learning. In an ESL classroom, educators often utilize collaborative activities such as pair work, group work, discussions, question-answer sessions, and project work to facilitate language development. For instance, a

teacher may divide learners into groups and assign them a task of describing a picture. The teacher guides them to carefully observe the task, share their observations with group members, engage in discussions, and finally present their views to other groups. Throughout this process, learners actively participate in meaningful interactions, allowing them to practice and refine their language skills.

- *ZPD is helpful in developing the potential of learners and their cognitive skills:* The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) aids teachers and more knowledgeable peers in providing suitable guidance to learners. For example, if weaker learners are uncertain whether a picture depicts a mountainous region, the teacher may offer a clue. They might suggest looking for features such as white snow, tall hills against clear skies, and a feeling of coldness. If these elements are present, the picture is identified as representing a mountainous area. Consequently, learners can describe the picture using sentences like, "The picture belongs to a mountain region," "It is very beautiful," "I can see snow, clear skies, and high hills," and "People are enjoying the beautiful scenery of the mountains." Although linguistically adept learners may describe the mountain picture independently, the teacher may still ask if they need assistance. This approach ensures that all learners receive the necessary support and guidance within their ZPD, fostering their language development and comprehension of the task at hand.
- *Through scaffolding learners develop their learner autonomy:* Social constructivism promotes learner autonomy by allowing learners to advance at their own pace, make choices, and take on responsibilities, supported by activities such as pair work and group discussions. Gradually withdrawing support empowers learners to independently confront challenges and solve problems. For instance, in an ESL classroom, if learners encounter difficulties while reading a paragraph, the teacher can prompt them to deduce the meaning by considering other words and their implications within the context. Alternatively, learners can consult a dictionary for clarification if needed. Moreover, learners can utilize additional resources such as mobile devices, computers, and reading materials to expand their vocabulary at home. Through these methods, learners develop their autonomy as self-directed learners.
- *Development of Collaborative Learning through pair work, group work and discussion:* In the ESL classroom, learners engage in pair work and group work to solve problems and develop language skills. For instance, learners may participate in a conversation on the topic "The Importance of Learning English." During the conversation, learners share their ideas with each other, engage in deep discussions, and ultimately draw conclusions on the significance of the English language in their daily lives. Through such collaborative activities, learners not only enhance their language proficiency but also deepen their understanding of the topic and develop critical thinking skills.
- *Development of reflective learning and critical thinking:* The theory offers learners opportunities to link previous learning with current lessons, reflect on experiences, identify and resolve issues and engage in critical thinking. For instance, seventh-grade learners in an ESL classroom may draw upon their knowledge from sixth grade while composing a paragraph on Nepalese culture and diversity, having already studied Nepal's major festivals. As a result, learners can articulate both the joys and challenges of experiencing Nepalese culture and diversity in their writing. This process enables learners to synthesize their understanding across different topics and apply critical thinking skills to express their insights effectively.

Conclusion

Social Constructivism has become a prominent and influential learning theory in contemporary ESL (English as a Second Language) classrooms. Educators, teachers, educational practitioners, and policymakers worldwide have increasingly embraced this theory due to its learner-centered and collaborative nature, as well as its foundational principles of learning. The impact of Social Constructivism on language development, critical thinking, and reflective learning has been remarkable.

At the heart of Social Constructivism is the belief that learning is a social and collaborative process. It emphasizes the importance of interaction among learners, who actively construct knowledge through dialogue, shared experiences, and collaboration. In the ESL context, this approach has proven effective in fostering language skills as students engage in meaningful conversations, negotiate meaning, and create an environment conducive to language acquisition.

Moreover, the learner-centered nature of Social Constructivism places the student at the forefront of the learning process. This shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach empowers students to take an active role in their learning journey. Consequently, students are more motivated and engaged, leading to a deeper understanding of language concepts and more effective language acquisition.

The principles of Social Constructivism also align with the development of critical thinking skills. Through collaborative activities and discussions, students are encouraged to analyze information, question assumptions, and develop a nuanced understanding of language and its cultural context. This not only enhances language proficiency but also equips students with the ability to think critically and apply their knowledge in real-world situations.

Furthermore, reflective learning is a key aspect of Social Constructivism. Learners are prompted to reflect on their thinking processes, learning experiences, and language development. This metacognitive aspect of learning contributes to a deeper understanding of language structures and usage, fostering a more holistic language learning experience.

The theory's widespread support in the ESL classroom, due to its emphasis on collaboration, learner-centeredness, and the development of critical thinking and reflective learning, enables learners to meet the demands of the 21st century successfully. As a result, educators and policymakers continue to advocate for effective language instruction, and the principles of Social Constructivism are likely to remain a cornerstone in shaping the landscape of ESL education.

References

- Bhatrai, G. & Gautam, G.R. (2005) . *English Language Teachers at the Cross Roads*. Journal of NELTA (10).1-2
- Bist, K. (2011) *Teaching English as a Foreign / Second Language in Nepal: Past and present*. English for specific Purposes World (32) 11
- Daniels, H. (2001). *Vygotsky and Pedagogy*. Psychology Press
- Driscoll, M. (2001). *Psychology for learning for instruction*. Allyn and Bacon.
- Giri, R.A. (2015). *The many faces of English in Nepal*. Asian Englishes. (17) 2, Routledge Tayler & Francis group.
- Kozulin, A. (2003). *Vygotsky's Educational Theory in cultural context*. Cambridge University Press.
- Lantolf, P. J., Poehner, M.E., & Swain, M. (Eds.). (2018). *The Routledge handbook of Socio-cultural theory and second language development*. (pp.23-55). Routledge Taylor and Francis group.
- Lightbown, P. & Spada, N. (2006). *How languages are learned*. Oxford University Press.
- Littlewood, W. (1994). *Foreign and Second language learning*. Cambridge University Press.

-
- Macrath, I. (2006). *Materials Evaluation and Design for Language Teaching*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Nunan, D. 1996. *The learner centred Curriculum*. Cambridge University Press.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1962) *Thought and Language*, E. Hanfmann and G.Vakar (eds and trans.). MIT Press.
- Vygotsky, L.S. (1978) *Mind in Society: the Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, M.Cole, V.John-Steiner, S.Scribner and E.Souberman (eds and trans.). Harvard University Press.

AUTHOR'S BIO-NOTE

Niraj Chaudhary is a Ph. D. Research Scholar at CIE, University of Delhi. He holds M.A. in Linguistics from University of Delhi and M.Ed. in English from Tribhuvan University Nepal. His research interests include ESL, Materials development, Constructivist pedagogy and Social Constructivist theory. He has about 17 years of experience in teaching English in Nepal both in school and college.