Statement of Teaching Philosophy based on the Web: a blended dialogic socio-constructivist pedagogy in language learning

By

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Abstract

The article presents a blended dialogic socio-constructivist pedagogy for language learning, emphasizing the importance of both individual and social aspects of learning. It argues that technology alone does not transform pedagogy; rather, it is the approach to technology that matters. The pedagogy combines personal freedom for reflection and individual assignments with social interactions like pair work and group discussions for collaborative knowledge construction. The progression from controlled, face-to-face activities to freer, online ones aids in consolidating new ideas and mastering language skills. The article supports its approach with literature on socio-constructivism, highlighting the synergy between individual constructivism and socio-culturalism. It draws on theories by Vygotsky and Piaget, advocating for a dialogic approach that extends learning beyond the classroom through web-mediated environments. This approach is particularly beneficial for English Language Learners (ELL), moving language learning from isolated mental functioning to real-world communication and fostering a participatory metaphor for language learning. The article concludes that blended learning, which combines web technologies with traditional pedagogies, is crucial for engaging learners in meaningful dialogue and practice.

*Keywords***:** blended learning, blended socio-constructivist pedagogy, dialogic education, socio-constructivist learning, teaching philosophy, web-based learning.

My adopted learning theory or approach that I usually employ in teaching is ***a blended dialogic socio-constructivist pedagogy*** (Abdallah, 2011). Palloff and Pratt (2005), and Vrasidas and Zembylas (2004) contend that technology itself does not teach or transform pedagogy; rather, it is the way we approach or employ it that makes the difference. Thus, if mediated by ways consistent with

meaningful learning and interactions, using the Web might contribute to learning and professional development. Further, learning/teaching approaches that highlight memorisation and rote learning at the expense of knowledge construction and social interaction should not be employed. A Web-mediated learning environment needs socio-constructivist/collaborative approaches that highlight learners' active roles and open new horizons/spaces for dialogue (Wegerif, 2009).

Thus, a focus should be on both personal and social aspects of learning. Learners need both the personal freedom that facilitates reflection on learning, personal construction of knowledge, and doing assignments individually at home, and the social interactions with other classmates through pair work and group discussions that facilitate collaborative knowledge construction. Learning and studying language individually with little cooperation with other colleagues, is the dominant practice in formal learning settings. Throughout my blended approach, the socio-cultural activities are useful when students start to "learn from each other". Further, combining both individual/reflective and socio-cultural/collaborative activities is a great advantage; this practice enables both shy and bold learners to learn since both physical and virtual spaces are employed so that all participants can express themselves in the ways they like.

In particular, the progression of the lessons from the controlled, face-to-face activities to the freer, independent ones online is expected to help learners to consolidate new ideas and master new literacy and language skills. Similarly, using scaffolding would help many learners to move flexibly from social learning to independent, self-paced learning. The online spaces in this regard should help with extending the learning experience outside the classroom by opening more dialogues that fostered language practice.

In this regard, some literature indicates the usefulness of utilising both constructivist and socio-cultural learning simultaneously within the same learning

situation/design. For example, Squires and Preece (1999) argue that when taken together, the central notions of constructivism and socio-culturalism can be described as 'socio-constructivism'. Also, perceiving the existence of two metaphors for learning: 'acquisition' (i.e. individual constructivism), and 'participation' (i.e. socio-culturalism), Sfard (1998) argues for an appropriate combination of both to underpin the advantages of each, while keeping their respective drawbacks at bay. Similarly, Salomon and Perkins (1998) posit that 'acquisition' and 'participation' can interrelate and interact in synergistic ways so that both individual and social learning aspects can interact over time to strengthen one another in a 'reciprocal spiral relationship'.

A dialogic, socio-constructivist learning pedagogy is useful because: (1) learners would feel satisfied with a pedagogy that caters for both their individual and social learning needs; (2) the online spaces open and extend dialogue among learners where each had an equal opportunity to participate, and thereby a more democratic environment, in MacDonald's (2002) terms, is created; (3) when communicative practices are fostered in English through both face-to-face interactions and online spaces, learners would feel that their English language is improving.

This pedagogy draws also on several useful accounts including the following: Squires and Preece's (1999) view of learning, Schneider et al's (2002) Web-based socio-constructivist learning scenarios, Wegerif's (2007) argument for the multi-dimensional learning space of the Web that facilitates meaningful learning, and Woo and Reeve's (2007) argument for a meaningful interaction that should be created within a Web-based learning environment based on a socio-constructivist framework.

Generally, constructivism draws on the premise that learning is an active process where students construct new ideas and concepts based on their current knowledge (Bruner, 1986; Piaget, 1959). Active construction of meaning should

be encouraged inside classrooms to generate understandings and powerful ideas rather than facts (Wilhelm & Friedemann, 1998: p30) out of social experience and realistic contexts (Honebein, 1996). Rather than relying on the teacher to guide their thinking, learners make their own discoveries through active learning opportunities that allow them to create their personal meanings and associations (Eagleton & Dobler, 2007: p9). Thus, knowledge is constructed collaboratively in real contexts through social negotiation (Jonassen, 1994).

On the other hand, Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory of mind (Vygotsky, 1978; 1981) connects together both the human internal cognitive aspects and the external socio-cultural factors. Highlighting the social, collaborative nature of learning, the theory posits that the individual is inseparable from his/her social context, and consequently, cognitive development is viewed as a socio-cultural activity where cognition is seen as a social product achieved through interaction. Hence, it becomes a theory of education (Bruner, 1985) and language development (Bronckart, 1995).

Cobb (1994) argues that rather than perceiving them as two opposing perspectives, both constructivism and socio-culturalism can be merged to reinforce and complement each other when used concurrently within the same learning context. An inevitable interaction exists between both the internal and the external worlds of learners that Butterworth (1982) refers to as the intertwined social and individual aspects of development that were acknowledged by both Piaget and Vygotsky. However, while Piaget attributed the primacy to the individual (Piaget, 1959), Vygotsky attributed the primacy to the social environment and the role of the socio-cultural context in mediating human learning. That is why, as I believe, Vygotsky's theory is known as social constructivism to be distinguished from Piaget's cognitive constructivism since both theories are constructivist in a sense.

Garrison et al (2000) state that recent educational literature has focused upon the premise that a worthwhile learning experience must consider the learner's personal world that is characterised by being reflective and meaning-focused, as well as the shared world that is characterised by being collaborative, knowledge-focused, and associated with a purposeful and structured educational environment. In this regard, Wegerif (2007) argues that both constructivism and socio-culturalism are important for learning, but need to be taken further by a complementary dialogic approach.

In a nutshell, my approach is represented in 'blended learning' as an umbrella approach involving a dialogic, socio-constructivist pedagogy that draws on both Vygotskyian socio-culturalism, especially his ZPD concept (see also Squires & Preece, 1999), and Piagetian constructivism (Piaget, 1959). Under this pedagogy, the Web should mediate language learning by opening more dialogic spaces for ELL and communicative practice (Wegerif, 2007). These online spaces (e.g., Wikis, Blogs, and Facebook) can extend and foster socio-constructivist learning by enabling more opportunities for language practice that utilise both the individual and social aspects of learning, but while extending a learning dialogue fostered by some Web-based facilities that host learners' contributions (Wegerif, 2007). Thus, a dialogic approach takes learning further to more spaces, perspectives, and options that extend beyond any restrictions imposed by the context and extend the Vygotskian ZPD concept to include a series of open dialogues. From this dialogic approach, blended learning represented in combining the use of Web technologies with face-to-face pedagogies becomes important for engaging learners in dialogue across difference (Wegerif, 2009).

This pedagogy has specific implications for ELL. For example, it marks a shift in language learning theory and practice by moving language learning out of the abstract, isolated internal mental functioning into the real world of human communication (Wertsch, 1991: p28) through suggesting a participation

metaphor of language learning as an alternative to, and an expansion of, the dominant input-output (computation) model (Lantolf, 2000). Also, it highlights the role of mediation that was validated by many studies as having a powerful effect on second/foreign language learning (e.g., studies by Roy, 1988 on the mediational effects of L2 writing and Warschauer, 1998, on computer-mediated L2 interaction).

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