

Social Constructivism and the Zone of Proximal Development in Reading Comprehension Strategies

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intersection of social constructivist theory and reading comprehension strategies, with a particular focus on Lev Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Social constructivism posits that learning is inherently social and contextual, emphasising the role of interaction, culture, and collaboration in the construction of knowledge. Within this framework, reading comprehension is not merely a cognitive skill but a socially mediated process that evolves through guided participation and scaffolded learning. The article examines how reading strategies align with the principles of ZPD, enabling learners to move beyond their current capabilities. The paper concludes by advocating for instructional practices that balance independence with guided support, ensuring that reading comprehension remains a dynamic, socially enriched experience.

Keywords: Social constructivism, proximal development, reading comprehension, strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Social constructivism was developed by Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) who rejected the assumption that learning can be separated from its social and cultural context. The social constructivism theory posits that knowledge is constructed through the learners' interaction with the social context which underscores the fact that meaning is not found but made according to the social interpretation of things. According to Vygotsky (1978), social interaction is the main source of cognition and behaviour. The most significant basis for social constructivism was laid by Vygotsky when he proposed the concept of social interaction through which he introduced the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky (1978:78) defined the ZPD as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". This is a critical zone of sensitivity that connects learning and cognitive development. The ZPD is Vygotsky's most widely used educational idea in spite of a debate on its precise meaning because he died before he completed work on the theory (Murphy et.al., 2015). It was Yamagata-Lynch (2010:23) who described ZPD as "a metaphorical tool for elaborating how interactions between individuals and their environments, including objects and social others, take place."

The ZPD of every learner moves as the learner improves in skills and knowledge, therefore learning activities should provide the learners with appropriate challenges based on their present knowledge. The tasks children cannot perform on their own, but which they can achieve with help from others, invoke mental functions that are currently in the process of developing, rather than those that already have matured (Marginson and Dang, 2017). Therefore, if one gives a child an assignment the child can do alone without help that method of teaching has failed to invoke the principle of the Zone of Proximal Development (Bigge and Sherims, 2004). However, the present level of technology has made learners to be more independent in their learning as the internet has the capacity to give the learners education that is devoid of any physical contact with their teachers.

The space between the present and potential performance of the learners can only be filled when there is fruitful interaction between the learners and a more knowledgeable person. This stresses the importance of teachers, parents or advanced peers in making the child achieve his/her potential. Vygotsky's social constructivist idea becomes a strong alternative to Piaget's; while Piaget conceived children's cognitive development as an individual effort, Vygotsky stressed the social and environmental forces (Murphy, et.al, 2015).

Teaching of the child must be structured to underscore ZPD as a critical period when children can explore between that which they know and that which they are capable of learning (Dangi, 2017). Thus, the prior knowledge of the child becomes a critical factor in learning because constructivism lays emphasis on student-centred learning through which the teacher becomes a facilitator. The teacher's major duty according to the theory of social constructivism is to create an enabling environment that will stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning. Constructivism sees traditional methods of teaching (lecture, rote memorisation) to be deficient because of their concentration on the teacher instead of the students while student-centred instruction based on constructivism provides real scenarios and builds a conducive learning situation which enhances learners' knowledge. Teachers and learners should create their own learning through active collaboration with each other; when teaching is based on transmission only, it makes the teacher a mere knowledge distributor (Garcia et.al, 2011).

For Vygotsky, the cognitive tool needed for development is culture and the types and quality of the tools largely determine the pattern and rate of development. Social constructivism is aimed at a teacher that will create a conducive environment that will engage the students in activities that will facilitate learning (Guo, 2018). This involves the teacher guiding the students as they approach a problem, making them work through a group to *think out* the problem and the solution.

Therefore, in a reading class, for example, for effective comprehension, teachers need to create strategies and techniques that will make learning a social and collaborative activity. The teacher should design a reading strategy that has the potential for taking the child through the ZPD, and school learning should not be isolated from the contemporary issues that the child can understand and construct meanings from. Constructivism believes that children learn by connecting new knowledge to previously learned knowledge; learners derive meaning from what they learn. This, according to Guo (2018), negated the popular learning by rote memorisation and regurgitation which makes the learner passive. This also conflicts with the observation of Thorne (2013) that when learners are active in the learning room, they bring into the room their experiences and others learn more from them. Contextualised activities are used to confront learners with opportunities that will enable them to collaborate with others in the classroom to discover and construct meaningful meanings from texts.

Reading Comprehension as Socially Constructed Process

Reading comprehension is a complex interaction between the reader's vocabulary, text, and application of reading strategies (National Reading Panel 2000). Reading comprehension does not simply mean decoding meaning of words; rather it is about a reader's ability to bring prior knowledge into the interpretation of meaning and use that knowledge to process new information. It is not speed that makes a fluent reader but his/her ability to make adequate inferences from what is read, thereby constructing meanings out of a text. Reading, according to Karasakaloglu (2012), is a dynamic process of meaning-making which requires an active and effective communication between the writer and reader. This implies that reading is an interaction with the representation of another person. Reading comprehension strategies are the activities which allow students to control their own learning. In this case it is imperative for teachers to choose appropriate reading strategies that will make comprehension attainable for learners. Reading is both interactive and intra-active in the sense that it involves the learners using their own abilities and perception as well as interacting with others to get clear meaning of texts. Thus, the learners need potent strategies to be able to get the best out of reading. Reading strategies are intentional but planned processes that are aimed at making the learner construct meaning out of a text.

The fact that reading is taught at the level of direct instruction in most schools makes the theory of constructivism very useful. Critics of direct instruction, according to Petrova (2013), who are disconcerted with the low level of student activity in the classroom, may find Vygotsky's theory useful in focusing attention on the importance of problem-solving tasks and on the role of teacher as facilitator. The essence of constructivism is to see how

the relationship between teachers and students has helped to make the students better readers. The International Reading Association (2000) reported that the knowledge the teacher brings into the classroom and how s/he uses this knowledge to promote learning among the students is what determines the difference in students' performance.

Successful reading comprehension depends on the construction of a coherent meaning-based mental representation of the situation described in a text. Constructivism provides a model through which the cognition of learners could be stimulated to construct coherent mental representations and explanations of situations described in texts. When learners encounter texts that are difficult or technical, they require strategies that can enable them to reconnect to the meanings, thereby the experiences of the individuals that make up the class become relevant; this clearly focuses on the ZPD that requires the support of the advanced person.

It has been observed that some teachers have not advanced beyond the traditional teaching comprehension by just concentrating on asking children questions about text content after reading with little attention on construction of their own meaning out of texts (Yang, 2016). Although, strategies are being used to teach reading in schools, those strategies have not been seen to encourage readers to understand text contents. A reader is said to be proficient if he/she can adequately understand the situation described in texts, suggesting that application of the appropriate strategies is necessary for adequate understanding of the situation described in a text (Okkinga et.al, 2018). The focus of social constructivism is to initiate cognitive growth through interaction which influences the cognitive behaviour of individuals.

The principles of learning from the social constructivists' view are that learning is an active process and not a passive acceptance of knowledge and that it consists of both the meaning constructed and the process of constructing meaning (Erickson, 2012). Therefore, to social constructivists, learning happens in the mind, it is influenced by language and happens within a social context. In the process of reciprocal teaching, all the things that students do from the beginning to the end are activity-based that involve application and re-application which constructivism is based on (Truelove, 2014). The greatest legacy constructivism bestowed on education is on the structure of schooling which shifts emphasis on learning as a product to learning as a process.

Importance of Reading Skills

Reading is the most important activity learners embark on during their schooling. Yang (2016:588) stated that "reading is by far one of the most important means of learning a second language". Reading is an interactive process by which readers interact and construct meaning from text using both real-world and linguistic knowledge. It can be inferred that there cannot be *schooling* without reading. Therefore, reading is described by Abiodun (2012, p 58) as a "compelling activity that determines the direction of learning" and has been taken for granted as a natural skill of any learner. This unguarded assumption has wreaked havoc on students' learning because reading as a gateway to learning has been compromised. Some teachers assume that students can develop reading comprehension naturally without any direct teaching of comprehension.

These teachers according to Carreker (2004) place reading in the same developmental progression as oral language development where children were able to acquire speech without formal instruction if given enough exposure to it. This line of argument that reading can be acquired just as speaking is acquired has been refuted (Ojikutu, 2011). In the years before 1970, reading instruction was anchored on the teaching of decoding skills and restating the text but today it is known that skilful readers do not just decode or restate the text, but use their prior knowledge to create meanings out of the texts. The misconception that reading is a natural ability acquired by the child as he/she grows up arose because of wrong meaning attached to reading.

Reading according to (Ojikutu, 2011) is a mental activity that involves the combination of the activities of the eyes and the mind to perceive and explore written symbols. It comprises three segments which are the text, reading the text and interpreting the text. Reading is a complex process that involves many factors like prior knowledge, reading habits, reading context, teachers' teaching methods and others. that affect comprehension. The message of the writer is to be interpreted by the mind and when the mind can do this then comprehension has taken place. Reading comprehension is the crucial link to effective reading, a strong factor in every learning situation. Reading can become a mere decoding of words if meanings are not derived from them.

Therefore, reading comprehension is a direct by-product of reading fluency (Ness, 2016). Expected levels of reading comprehension are not the same for different levels of education. A child first learns how to read with the emphasis on understanding the meaning of words and how they become sentences to form basic ideas. As the child becomes adult, his/her reading comprehension level advances to include semantic and inferential understanding of the text. According to researchers, the most basic part of comprehension is word identification (Cunningham et al, 2004). This involves students' ability to decode words initially and application of rules to the formation of sound and words.

Reading Strategies Aligned with Social Constructivism

Reading strategy is often confused with reading skills some researchers and language scholars often use them interchangeably. There is however a remarkable difference between them. Definitions given by various scholars add to the confusion as the terms are used formally and informally to describe features of teachers' reading development as well as features of teachers' reading instruction. Garner (1987:50) defines reading strategies as "generally deliberate, planned activities, undertaken by active learners, many times to remedy perceived cognitive failure". Brantmeier (2002:1) described reading strategies as "the comprehension processes that readers use in order to make sense of what they read".

Park (2010:4) defined reading strategies as, "techniques, actions and procedures that readers deliberately employ to enhance their comprehension in reading a text". Harris and Hodges (1995:244) defined strategy as "a systematic plan, consciously adapted and monitored to improve one's performance in learning". Reading strategies according to Afflerbach et al (2008:368) "are deliberate, goal directed attempts to control and modify the readers' efforts to decode text. Reading skills are automatic actions that result in decoding and comprehension with speed, efficiency and fluency and usually occur without awareness of the components or control involved". According to Gutierrez-Braojos and Salmeron-Perez (2012) reading strategies are deliberate, and flexible psychological tools use by learners to efficiently guide, control, supervise and evaluate the construction of meaning out of a text. The key difference between skills and strategies lies in whether the reader's actions are under automatic or deliberate control. Sheorey and Mokhtari (2001:440) defined reading strategy as "deliberate and conscious procedures used by readers to enhance text comprehension".

Therefore, for the purpose of this study, the researcher shall stick to the use of strategy in agreement with Alexander, Graham and Harris (1998) as intentional use of reading procedure to produce comprehension during learning. A strategic reader intentionally chooses and uses a strategy to work towards a goal of being able to construct meaning out of a text. It is good to be a strategic reader because strategic readers get motivated by control and their self-confidence is built because they can monitor and improve their own reading, so they have both knowledge and motivation to be successful readers (Okkinga et al, 2018). Since the purpose of reading comprehension is to construct the meaning of a text that makes the reader respond to different tasks, it is necessary for a set of reading strategies to be activated to bring about the representational construction of a passage.

The essence of a strategy is to ensure that students take responsibility for their learning and can attribute their success or otherwise in reading to the strategy employed. Therefore, the teacher can explain the strategy to be used to the student and make the student assess if the strategy is working or not (Afflerbach et al, 2008). The most widely recommended solution to poor performance in reading comprehension is explicit instruction in reading strategy (NRP, 2000). The NRP in further justification for the purpose of explicit teaching of strategies, proposed the following eight reading comprehension strategies: comprehension monitoring, cooperative learning, graphic and semantic organisers, story structure, question answering, question generation, summarisation and multiple strategy instruction.

Despite ample evidence in support of the great values of reading strategies in improving reading comprehension, Ness (2016) argues that teachers often fail to directly teach students how to use student-centred instructional strategies because of reasons ranging from lack of skills in the use of strategies, pressure to cover content, large number of students in the classroom, to the lack of instructional time. Felding and Pearson (1994:5) noted that one of the biggest achievements of the research of the 1980s is that "this research showed over and over again that comprehension can in fact be taught" and "comprehension strategy instruction was found to be especially

effective for students who began the study as poor *comprehenders* – probably because they are less likely to invent effective strategies on their own” (p 6). Students’ performance in reading is improved when teachers model strategies and supervise the use in the class.

Comprehension strategy is a specific procedure that is used by students while they are reading to assist them in understanding the text better, while reading instructional strategy involves the explanation of what a particular strategy is and why the strategy is chosen for a particular text and how they can generalise the strategy for other texts. In support of the need to explicitly teach reading strategies in schools, The National Reading Panel Report (2000; 4 - 40) recommended that explicit comprehension be used to teach reading because “formal instruction of these strategies is believed to lead to improvement in text understanding and information use. Instruction is carried out by a classroom teacher who demonstrates models or guides the readers on their acquisition and use. When these procedures have been acquired, the reader becomes independent of the teacher”. The knowledge of strategy and actual use of it differentiate an effective reader from an ineffective reader.

The core issue in comprehension instruction is direct teaching of instruction, and this involves why, how and when the strategies are to be used. It is important for teachers to make declarative statement about the strategy they wish to use, the characteristics of the strategy and what the strategy will help the readers to achieve. Duffy (2003) cautioned against teachers over declaration of the strategy at the detriment of correct procedural steps that will make the readers active users of the strategy. He therefore suggested that teachers should not just declare the strategies and its characteristics; they must be active players who model the use of the strategy while the learners are allowed to actively engage with the task.

Comprehension is a cognitive process of which the teacher must model the strategy to the students for promotion of knowledge. This is because at the start, the comprehension process seems to be hidden from the students but when the teacher thinks aloud through verbalisation of the thought process the teacher makes it open and clear to the students. When strategy is taught directly, the teacher becomes confident that the students can apply the strategy. This agrees with Blade’s (2013) assertion that strategy teaching is collaborative, and the teachers and the students share the responsibility of how and when to employ the strategy.

In designing comprehension instructional strategies, the duration and number of times the instruction will take place must be considered. These are called instructional spacing and timing which determine the extent to which the strategies can be effective. Teacher needs to take into consideration factors that will enhance direct teaching of strategy. According to Oni (2014), many teachers have failed in their responsibility to effectively use a strategy for learners because of insensitivity to little factors like space, duration, frequency and number of students in the group. Researchers have revealed that some parts of the reading comprehension require more time than the other.

The dilemma teachers’ face is in deciding whether to reduce the quality of skills expected from students because of their poor reading background or to continue with the expectation of high-quality skills irrespective of their background. Kong and Pearson (2003:96) in reaction to this stated that “studies revealed that offering a reductionist curriculum focusing primarily on skills and drill does students a disservice because little time is typically spent on comprehension and especially meaning construction and authentic communication... through complex thinking and critical response”. The study by Olson and Land (2007) presented a counterpoint to reductionist approaches by relying on classroom practices as enunciated by the Educational Alliance at Brown University, which stated emphatically that employing a variety of strategies will help students to overcome challenges that are associated with comprehending texts (Kong and Pearson, p 86, cited in Olson and Land, 273). Teachers are expected to provide systematic and clear instruction in strategies to help students develop good knowledge of these cognitive strategies, through which students’ metacognitive control of specific strategies will be built.

It has been observed that reading comprehension is often tested but is seldom taught. The National Reading Panel (NRP, 2000:46), suggested five specific practices that teachers should be using in their classrooms to help children become better readers: “(a) phonemic awareness instruction, (b) explicit systematic phonics instruction, (c) repeated oral reading practice with feedback and guidance, (d) direct and (e) indirect vocabulary instruction comprehension strategies instruction”. A critical study of the reading pattern and progress of children reveals

that reading is not such a natural skill as being touted by some researchers; reading is a process that involves knowledge, experience, thinking and teaching and therefore requires strategies that will enhance it (Izadi and Nowrouzi, 2016).

Ajudua (2011) and Tikodo (2012), in their studies of the effects of reading strategies among students in Nigeria, indicated a positive effect of strategies on reading comprehension. Adegoke (2012) found out that Nigerian Secondary school students who used reading strategies performed better in comprehension. Also, Akinmusire (2014) found a positive correlation between strategies used by pre-service teachers and their performance in reading comprehension. In this sense, various researchers have concluded in their studies that the best way to teach students to construct meanings out of a text is through explicit instruction in comprehension strategies (Castek, 2013; Bush and Williams, 2013; Goodluck and Archibong, 2017). Thus, reading strategies must be taught deliberately if we must improve the reading comprehension performance of students.

This therefore supports the assertion that the use of reading strategies is a major factor that differentiates between competent readers from an incompetent reader. Therefore, reading comprehension strategies are taught in schools for the reader to be able to internalise what is read and be able to construct meanings from them (Vygotsky, 1978). If the teacher carries out direct teaching of strategies, s/he will be able to facilitate students' internalisation of reading comprehension strategies that will make the readers improve their reading competence. The teacher, to make readers to self-regulate and improve on their reading should know how to systematically transfer responsibility to the readers by employing guided instruction technique that will help the readers to master the strategy in use. This makes the readers to start predicting, questioning, summarising and reflecting on the text so that they may get the best meanings out of the text.

There have been many reasons adduced for the lack of popularity of comprehension instruction in schools. Studies reveal that some teachers find it difficult to comprehend the active reading ingredients that are fundamental to reading comprehension (Omokaro, 2015). Also, teachers find it difficult to change the status quo which promotes teacher dominance as against the comprehension instruction that promotes child centeredness instruction (Goodluck and Archibong, 2017). The teachers are used to the controlling role that confers unquestionable authority on them and any attempt to usurp this authority in the name of a strategy is being resisted. According to Pressley and El-Dinary (1997), it takes about one year for a teacher to be able to become proficient in teaching reading comprehension with new strategies.

This was explicitly explained by Pearson (2009:59) when he declared that "the Achilles heel for strategy instruction... is finding a way to make it a part of daily life in the classroom". Therefore, it takes hard work, greater commitment and learning facilities for teachers to be comfortable to change the status quo in favour of new strategies. The disadvantages of not teaching reading strategies to students are costly to students in that most students who are not taught reading strategies are unlikely to learn, develop or use words spontaneously, thereby inadequately preparing them for rigorous academic demands.

Implications For Educators and Curriculum Designers

The application of social constructivist principles to reading comprehension demands a fundamental shift in how educators and curriculum designers approach literacy instruction. Rather than viewing reading as just a cognitive task, this perspective emphasizes the social, interactive, and developmental nature of comprehension. Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) offers a powerful framework for designing instruction that is both responsive and transformative. Effective reading instruction begins with recognizing the learner's current level of development and identifying the next achievable step with appropriate support. Educators must assess students' independent reading abilities and then craft tasks that stretch their understanding just beyond that level. Also, the autonomy of the child is a key goal in education, social constructivism cautions against prematurely removing support structures.

Reading comprehension strategies must be designed to gradually release responsibility to the learner. Educators should cultivate environments where students are encouraged to reflect on their reading, question texts, and engage in dialogue with others. Curriculum designers must entrench opportunities for social interaction and

scaffold learning into reading programs. This includes selecting texts that are culturally relevant and open to multiple interpretations, designing activities that require collaboration, and integrating formative assessments that guide instructional decisions. To make these strategies effective, educators need ongoing professional development in constructivist pedagogy. Training should focus on understanding the ZPD, mastering scaffolding techniques, and creating inclusive learning environment.

CONCLUSION

The integration of social constructivist principles into reading comprehension strategies offers a transformative approach to literacy education. By recognizing that meaning is constructed through interaction and that cognitive development thrives within the Zone of Proximal Development, educators can design reading tasks that challenge learners just beyond their current abilities while providing the necessary scaffolding for success. As digital technologies reshape the educational landscape, the essence of Vygotsky's theory remains relevant: learning is most effective when it is socially mediated, culturally grounded, and responsive to the learner's developmental trajectory. To cultivate deep comprehension and critical thinking, educators must continue to foster environments where learners engage collaboratively, reflect meaningfully, and grow through guided exploration.

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