IF THE LEY 115, IS "CONSTRUCTIVIST" WHAT DOES THAT IMPLY FOR THE ENGLISH CURRICULUM? -NEO-VYGOTSKYAN PERSPECTIVES

William D. Cousin

Universidad del Tolima

ABSTRACT

The concept of "Constructivism" is often mentioned in connection with the recent educational legislation in Colombia. The historical development is traced to emphasize the idea of negotiating social outcomes which lends itself to group work. Examples of the way in which groups can function to foster such social construction are examined. Language teachers have to make room for such socio-cultural negotiations in their classrooms and a suggestion for some role plays designed to facilitate such work is presented.

In earlier papers (Cousin, 1996, 1997) I commented on the long history of "constructivism" or, as it is sometimes called, "constructionism", based on a review of Candy (1988). Candy was particularly concerned with the support that the theory lends to autonomy in adult learning, but I have already suggested that as an educational principle it underlies much of the recent legislation in Colombia. In this paper I want to trace back the history of the theory to the work of Vygotsky in the 30s, and look at some recent interpretations and their implications for language pedagogy in the contemporary classroom.

The underlying commitments of constructivism are well indentified by Jaeger& Lauritzen, (1992). The abstract of their paper says:

" Constructivists view thinking and learning differently from other learning theorists: they believe that learners do not acquire knowledge that is transmitted to them; rather, learners construct knowledge through intellectual activity. Sharp contrasts exist between a "transmission" model of instruction and the constructivist perspective. The transmission model is teacher directed, ignores prior knowledge, depends on external motivation, and involves isolated skill teaching. The constructivist perspective offers student directed learning, uses prior knowledge of students, generates knowledge, offers students intrinsic motivation, and capitalizes on context".

For language teachers these commitments may be seen as identified in the sort of changes in Roles of Teachers and Learners that are approached in Wright (1987) but the theoretical bases are perhaps less familiar and worth exploring further.

Vygotsky, (1962, 1978) is often credited with the observation that the development of intellectual qualities in the child is closely related to the development of social interaction mediated by speech. The work was done in the 20s and 30s and so we find experiments that make comparisons between the development of children's mental capacities and the experiments of the "thinking" of apes carried out by Kohler e.g. (Vygotsky 1978 p25).

"Observation of children in an experimental situation similar to that of Kohler's apes shows that children not only act in attempting to achieve a goal but also speak. As a rule this speech arises spontaneously and continues almost without interruption throughout the experiment..."

In experiments of R. E. Levina, Vygotsky's collaborator, "a four-and-a-half-year-old girl was asked to get candy from a cupboard with a stool and a stick as possible tools. Levina's description reads as follows:

"(Stands on stool, quietly looking, feeling along a shelf with stick.) "On the stool." (Glances at the experimenter. Puts stick in the other hand) " Is that really the candy? (Hesitates)

"I can get it from that other stool, stand and get it." (Gets second stool). "No, that doesn't get it. I could use the stick". (Takes stick, knocks at the candy). "It will move now" (Knocks candy).

"It moved, I couldn't get it with the stool, but the stick worked".

Readers of Piaget will not find anything too novel about this observation of thinking as "internalization" of the spontaneous speech of children in play and so on, but Vygotsky continues:

"Our experiments demonstrate two important facts:

1) A child's speech is as important as the role of action in attaining the goal...their speech and action are part of one and the same complex psychological function directed toward the solution of the problem at hand.

2) The more complex the action demanded by the situation and the less direct its solution, the greater the importance played by speech in the operation as a whole...." (p.27) " The greatest change in children's capacity to use language as a problem-solving tool takes place somewhat later in their development, when socialized speech (which has previously been used to address an adult) is turned inward....language thus takes on an intrapersonal function in addition to its interpersonal use. ....The history of the process of the internalization of social speech is also the history of the socialization of children's practical intellect."

H O W

Two aspects of these observations need to be highlighted. One is the nature of the task set and Vygotsky's observation that the more difficult the task the more language has to play a part. This observation he developed into the theory of the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD)- the task that would be in a conceptual area just beyond the child's present capacities and in which, it seems clear, Vygotosky thought that the child would turn to an adult for help. The second observation that is considered by most to be particularly "Vygotskyan" is that the origin of this internal speech lies in social interaction, with all the aspects of motivation and complex roles that that implies.

It is interesting that it is Bruner, who was largely instrumental in presenting Vygotsky's work to the western world, who comments in his Actual Minds, Possible Worlds (1986) on the connection with the development of language. He says (p.76)

"Vygotsky himself remarks that the acquisition of language provides the paradigm case for what he is talking about, for it is in the nature of things that the aspirant speaker must "borrow" the knowledge and consciousness of the tutor to enter a language". And he gives an example from work he carried out at Oxford which I will transcribe as e.g.
"Mother: O Look Richard What's that?
Child (Unintelligible)
Mother: It's a fishy. That's right

Bruner comments: "This sequence provides a scaffold for "teaching" reference. At the start, the infant may understand little. His response to the query may then develop and start, then develop and take the form of a babble. And once that occurs, the mother will thereafter insist on some response in that slot of the scaffold....Eventually, when the name of a referent is mastered, she will shift to a game in which the given and the new are to be separated. Whereas before, "What's that? was spoken with a rising terminal stress, now it receives a falling terminal stress, as if to indicate that she knows that the child knows the answer. ... And shortly after, she raises the ante again: What's the fishy doing? With rising terminal stress anew as she takes him into the ZPD again, this time to master predication. She remains forever on the growing edge of the child's competence".

"In my own work I concluded that any innate Language Acquisition Device, LAD, that helps members of our species to penetrate language could not possibly succeed but for the presence of a Language Acquisition Support System, LASS, provided by the social world....It is LASS that helps the child navigate across the Zone of Proximal Development to full and conscious control of language use".

In my earlier paper (Cousin 1997) I looked at the way in which Young

(1992) emphasizes the role of social relations in supporting this development of language as contemplated by Bruner. Young based his observations on the work of Halliday and Hasan (1985) on Genre Analysis but importantly observes that even simple exchanges on which role plays can be modelled such as what Halliday & Hasan refer to as a "Service Encounter" can (or perhaps need to) have serious social consequences. Young bases his observations on a dialogue in which a customer is buying some fruit and the analysis of the way in which the vendor negotiates the sale to maximize profits, with all the implied decisions about honesty and so on and concludes:

"The realisation of the elements in a genre structure is not simply a linguistic event but social, political and economic event. The validity questions involved are not mere abstractions. They have real consequences". I construe this as being a call for the inclusion of "Valores" within the very stuff of the language class and Young goes on to examine the sort of classroom relations which will support such a "Language Acquisition Suppport System".

An interesting illustration of the way in which these classroom relations can be realised can be found in a video made to support a teacher training course labelled "Language in the National Curriculum"(Carter et al 1989-92) Unfortunately, the course did not find favour with ministers of the then government and has not been given the publication it deserves. Two extracts from the video related to a chapter of the materials called "Children talking" seem particularly worth mentioning in the argument I am constructing. Unfortunately the quality of the "school video" is not particularly good so I take the opportunity to include parts of the transcript (Carter et al 1989-92 pp 197-8)

In the second of the extracts, which I will discuss first because it is more clearly related to the role of the teacher, an interesting aspect of the interaction is the role that the teacher assumes, crouching besides the children so as to, in a sense, "enter their discussion". As in the extracts from Young discussed in my earlier paper, the teacher goes out of her way to reduce the "social distance" between her and the pupils. However, her opening is eminently "teacherish".

(The students have been given a task of constructing a weather vane using simple materials available in the classroom) T=Teacher DF=David FS= Sean DP= David P
T Now, if you were going to make it again and make it better, how would you improve on that? (Pause) How could you improve on that?
DF: 'Cause what Sean doesn't like on it is how it's slanting.
S: There – it slants
DP: I know – Mrs Wood....er....

DF: He wants it up straight like that, but...

DP: We might be able to sellotape it round the wood so that it sticks straight.

DF: Yeah but then it would stop wouldn't it, wouldn't go round.

S: It would – this

DF: Oh Yeah.

S The cotton reel's what makes it go round. It only slants 'cause them arrows slant.

T: Now if you hold that up straight does that...it makes the arrow go straight. So there's nothing wrong with the arrow..It's this.

Here we can see the teacher respecting the principle enunciated by David Wood (1986 p 207): "the extent to which a child reveals his or her own ideas and seeks information is thus inversely proportional to the frequency of teacher questions – and this finding embraces studies of pre-school children through to 16 year olds, deaf children and children acquiring English as a second language" She limits her questions and gives the pupils plenty of "space" to develop their thinking (and this, Vygotsky would point out, by means of their language). Later, as the discussion develops, she emphasises her role as a participant in the discussion, supporting and validating the pupils'points:

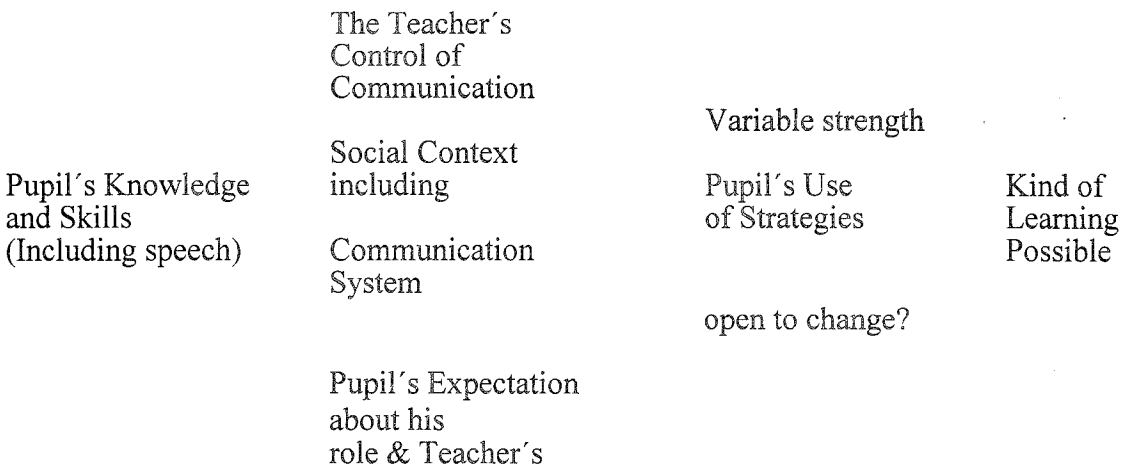DF: (Continuing) Is it the sand inside at that point

S: No... That sand's alright 'cause' it's full up to the top.

DF: (continuing=..It's all...pushing that – that way instead of pushing it up as well?
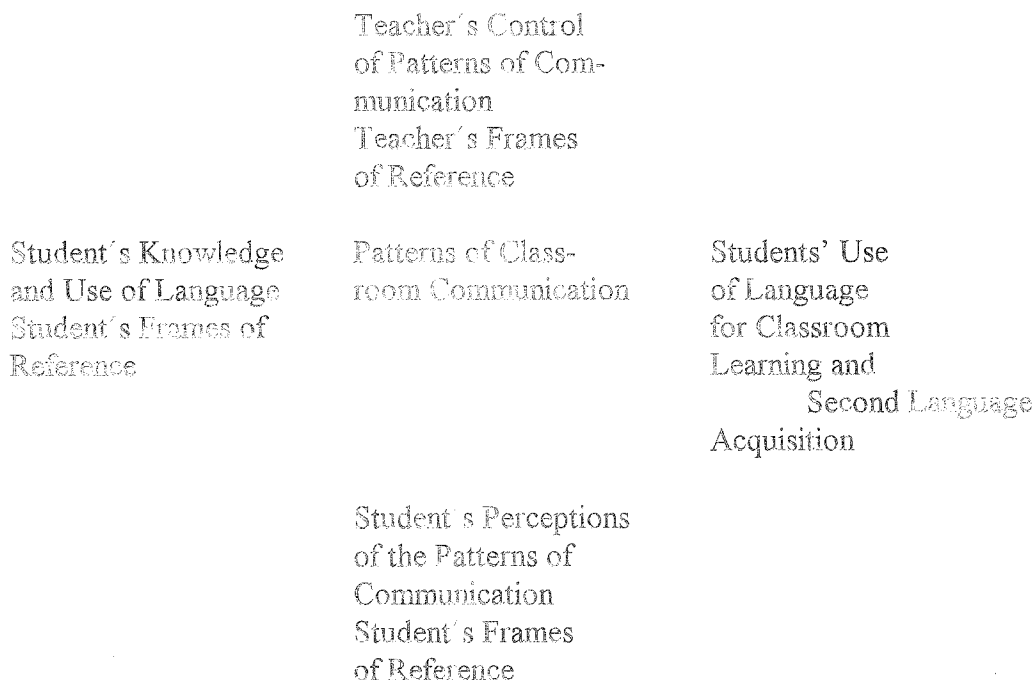
T: That's a good point

This way in which the teacher's role can influence the opportunities for language learning is illustrated by the following diagram in Karen Johnson's book (1995, p. 9) where interestlingly she acknowledges the influence of Douglas Barnes to whom I have had occasion to refer in earlier work.

Barnes D (1975 From Communication to Curriculum London U.K. Penguin)

	The Teacher's Control of Communication	Variable strength	
Pupil's Knowledge and Skills (Including speech)	Social Context including	Pupil's Use of Strategies	Kind of Learning Possible
	Communication System		
		open to change?	
	Pupil's Expectation about his role & Teacher's		

Johnson, Karen E (1995) Understanding Communication in Second Language Classrooms. Cambridge U.K. and New York Cambridge Univ. Press.

	Teacher´s Control of Patterns of Communication Teacher´s Frames of Reference	
Student´s Knowledge and Use of Language Student´s Frames of Reference	Patterns of Classroom Communication	Students' Use of Language for Classroom Learning and Second Language Acquisition
	Student´s Perceptions of the Patterns of Communication Student´s Frames of Reference	

However, I mentioned that there was another extract from the video of the LINC materials which I think is important for the way in which it shows that the teacher does not have to be present for constructive learning, including language learning, to take place. A recent debate within work on constructivism has taken place in the context of group work, and has concerned the extent to which experts can communicate their expertise to their peers. Azmitia et al (1991) say:
"There is wide agreement that the contribution of children´s collaborative problem solving to cognitive development is maximized in situations where there is a mismatch between partners´ skills"

Their work is not, of course, focused on language learning but they claim that their experiments suggest that in general "novices" can be trained to take a more active role in negotiating learning outcomes. The principle of the expert learner helping a group of peers to develop control of language seems worthy of further exploration. The extract from the LINC materials can perhaps show how such discussion might promote language acquisition. The children are discussing how to explain how they constructed their weathervane:

S=Sean DP=David P DF=David F K=Kerry

DP: ....we got...
S: Now, we got...a thin piece of wood...
DF: Start with the container. Go on, start with the container.
DP: Go on, start with the container.

K: A container with food...a container with food.

S: Yeah I've just mentioned the container...and then we got-a piece of wood, didn't we, a thin piece of wood...

DF: What was it called?

K: Erm....

S: What was that wood called now?

DP: Erm....What was it called?

DF: Wooden summat wasn't it...wooden strip?

S: No..can't remember

DF: Oh, needle!

S: No, 'tisn't a wooden...wooden knitting needle

DF: Wooden needle-yeah! It was

S: 'Tain't a wooden needle

DF: Wooden knitting needle!

S: No, that's what we went to get at first but Mr Ball hadn't got it...um...

DP: Mm

DF: So, what do we need? What was it we started with?

K: Do we know what this is called?

S: Well, we started with the container...

It is interesting that this group of learners are so concerned with language though this may be because they have arrived at (or been given?) a task of making up instructions to construct the weather vane. But what we can see in this group is the different participants sharing their knowledge and gradually "constructing" the form of discourse that they require.

Another example of such groupwork which makes overt reference to Bruner's work appears in Durán & Szymansky (1995). They laid emphasis on the "whole language" aspect of what it is that students in the language classroom are constructing and argue that students in their "cooperative learning classes" can be seen to be arriving at an understanding that involves constructing concepts of the cultural background to the target language. They say (p 151)

"Bruner (1986)...maintains that both a culture and the social identities of its participants are continually recreated through moment by moment interpretations of activity:

> Once one takes the view that a culture itself comprises an ambiguous text that is constantly in need of interpretations by those who participate in it, then the constitutive role of language in creating social reality becomes a topic of practical concern...The most general implication is that culture is constantly in process of being recreated as it is interpreted and renegotiated by its members.

And on p.152 they give an example:

"To make concrete many of the points raised in other constructionist studies of learning, our own research (Durán & Szymansky 1992) analyzed the moment-to-moment construction of activiy through interaction by language minority children in a cooperative learning language arts lesson...

> 17 L: for me/mi, for (.) my family, (.) hah I could
> 18 G: She's goin to [be RIch.]
> 19 L:[wo:rk] (in) a policema:n

20 V: poli:cegirl [((laughs))]
21 L: (police girl) a: :nd (.I) maybe
a TEAcher, o :r another thi:ng=
22 V: =I want [to be] a teacher=
23 L: [o :r]
24?: =no (.)
25 G: I don't want to be a cop.
They'll fight you
26 V: I KNOW they could kill
you. Eh, eh. (.) eh, (.) Leti. (.)
27 Leti (.) Leti. (.2) if I was you I
wouldn't be a cop, you know
28 Why, 'cuz they could sho-shoot
you, you would be dead
29 L: if I would/what?
30 V: if you be a cop, [um] they-
they shoot you
31 L: [heh]
32 G: you can /could be dead

Durán and Szymansky comment

"...This episode shows the students as creators of their own culture as they negotiate what the police profession means to them. In the extended discussion about being a policeman, the students challenge stereotypic notions of the profession in light of their own exposure and experiences with the police".

To sum up the argument so far, it has been suggested that language acquisition is incomplete if students do not acquire some idea of the values of the culture that is represented by the target language. It is not enough to learn the forms of a dialogue, even the discourse form. Students have to become aware of the values inherent in such forms, the significance of the words used for the community of language speakers and their cultural implications. This is a complex process but one which is very individual, essentially a process where each individual has to "construct" his own understanding of how to use words appropriately. In helping students with this process, teachers have to beware of too interventionist a role and have to give students "space" to try out and develop their own understanding. Indeed, it can be seen that in the typical language classroom the teacher can in no way be looked on as the sole source of all knowledge. Students vary in their control of and expertise in the target language, of course, but the more expert can help the less expert and there can even be, as was sugested by the pupil discussion of the LINC materials and of the cooperative class of Durán and Szymansky, a degree of cooperative "construction" of understanding of meaning and the use of words within a group.

With this model in mind, I have been trying out, with groups of students from the English courses of the University of Tolima, the aspect of group negotiation of inherent values. The students are provided with a body of role-plays that have been conceived of as "progressing" from very simple situations (the loss of a borrowed pen, reminding someone about a loan) to something much more

like full blown simulations. Some examples from the simpler end appear in an Appendix. The idea is that, in developing the realisation of their role-play, they have to take into account and be prepared to justify decisions about the "values" that are inherent in the expressions that they choose. To organise the work, each group has a leader, usually one of the better students who has to organise this discussion and rehearse and "produce" the resulting role-play.

Though it is still perhaps a little early to say, as the role-plays in their present form have only been realised with one course, there has been evidence of a positive attitude to the practice with the role-plays and serious discussions of the implications of the choices made by the groups. For example, one group had decided to express anger with the students (in Role-play2) who had taken the course of spoken English that they were now in danger of failing, on the grounds that they had been rude in complaining. However, it was apparent from the realisation of the role play that in the situation that the students had constructed the personnel responsible for the course had changed. There followed a considerable discussion about to what extent it was appropriate for the students who had recommended the course to feel offended in the circumstances, with some of the students

defending, from the point of view of Colombian culture, that it was never appropriate to complain in the aggressive way employed by the aggrieved parties whose realisation had, indeed, been very aggressive. At the very least this gave an opportunity for looking at the variations in expression open to the students and for an exploration of to what extent it was appropriate to be "diplomatic" when all the facts were not yet known. Should there not have been greater expressions of surprise on the part of those who had recommended the course which might have alerted the complainers to a possible need to tone down their complaints? What were the realities of the situation at any point in the development of the role play and what options were open to those playing the roles? What cultural norms were being expressed in this case, those of the native speaking community or those of the target culture?

Here it was reasonably pointed out by the students that it was really quite difficult for them to access the norms of the culture of the target community or perhaps one should say cultures in view of the range of different communities who employ English. It was decided that the best way of tackling this problem was through a wide programme of reading, not least of literature, as this was probably where the values of a

culture were most easily encountered. The institution of this simple activity of role-plays thus seems to have brought some fairly major considerations of adaptations to the curriculum.

In this paper, the foundations of Constructivism have been examined to look for the implications for the work of English teachers in the realisations of activities within the classroom. It has been argued that the roles of teachers and learners have to be adapted to allow for greater student autonomy, and that the activities of the language course have to be adapted to allow for the exploration of the effects of culture on the interpretation of language. A way of introducing the consideration of these aspects of "valores" into the language classroom by means of role plays has been proposed and the evaluation of these should provide further illumination on the "contructivist" approach in the future.

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Appendix-Role Plays
1. A fellow student has given you some homework to copy for which you have got a very bad mark. You may now fail the course.
Roles: 2 students, friends.
Language: Copier: How could you...? Didn´t you know that....?
Copied: Well, how could I know....? It isn´t my fault if....
Values: Should one lend work to be copied? Whose fault is it? Should the friends take sides (i.e. for or against the copying)

2. A friend has persuaded you to take a course in spoken English but you

have found it boring and now risk failing.

Roles: 2 students, friends

Language: You: That's a real waste of time....What did you get me to take....for? How would you like it if....

Friend: Well, I thought....Well I can't help it if....

Values: Is it really the friend's fault? How far should people be responsible for their own actions? Who should take responsibility for bad advice?

3. You lent a friend $1.000 to buy his lunch, but you have been off sick. The friend now says he remembers nothing about it.

Roles: 2 students, friends.

Language: Borrower: When do you think you...? I don't know what you are talking about...Do you remember...

Lender: Surely you remember....It was when....The fact is you owe me ..

Values: How can you establish the facts? Would friends cheat?

HOW