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Contextual Vocabulary Teaching From a Constructivist View: As Seen By the Students

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Abstract: *The current study is a qualitative research that aims to throw light on the place of students' views on contextual vocabulary teaching in conformity with Constructivism (CVTC from now on) in the field of foreign language teaching. Hence, the study is based on the views of the fourth-year students of the English Language and Literature Department of a state university (n=40). The results juxtaposed with the previous findings in the literature indicate that CVTC would serve new benefits for the interests of foreign language teaching.*

Keywords: *Contextual vocabulary teaching, Constructivism, language teaching.*

Öğrencilerin Gözünden: Yapılandırmacı Bir Bakışla Bağlamsal Sözcük Öğretimi

Öz: *Mevcut çalışma yabancı dil eğitimi alanında Yapılandırmacılık Bilgi Felsefesi'ne uygun olarak bağlamsal sözcük öğretimi hakkındaki öğrenci görüşlerine ışık tutmayı amaçlayan nicel bir çalışmadır. Böylelikle, çalışma bir devlet üniversitesinin İngiliz Dili ve Edebiyatı Bölümü'nün dördüncü sınıf öğrencilerinin görüşleri (n=40) üzerine temellendirilmiştir. Sonuçlar alan- yazındaki önceki bulgularla karşılaştırıldığında, Yapılandırmacılık Bilgi Felsefesi'ne uygun olarak bağlamsal sözcük öğretiminin yabancı dil eğitimi açısından yeni faydalar sağlayacağını işaret etmektedir.*

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Bağlamsal sözcük öğretimi, Yapılandırmacılık, dil eğitimi.*

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I.Introduction

Constructivism, which may be enunciated as the second cognitive revolution following the first one in 1950s, moved us from our cozy pedagogical confinements to a more flexible and productive but a more challenging and risky horizon for teaching. With its simple aspect of learning how to learn (Hausfather, 2001), Constructivism regards knowledge to be constructed in view of the past experiences of the individuals who take part in the process of learning (Steffe, 1995). To be more precise, knowledge is redefined in this way imparting the learners the role of active participants of the learning process instead of passive receivers (Fosnot, 2005). Thus, the process of learning cannot be maintained exclusively from one channel any more (Canestrary & Marlowe, 2010) since knowledge intended to be learnt in this sense would exceed the limits of any book and

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any teacher alike (Eley, 2006). Now, students are supposed to come in the field as their own educators to make the learning process more permanent and contemporary (Nikitina, 2009). To this end, it is their new task to decide what to learn and its true nature before learning it.

On the other hand, another issue as one of the fundamentals of language teaching, vocabulary teaching, still appears to be a hard task to reconcile with Constructivism. While vocabulary teaching is acknowledged to be realized as a teacher-centered process in teaching circles, using academic vocabulary teaching makes it harder also. Context in this sense, providing confinement for the use of a new word towards its targeted meaning (Scott, Nagy, & Flinspah, 2008), enables the interlocutors grasp its meaning more easily and makes it prominent for retention in mind. Its changing feature makes it applicable for any type or content of the course to be instructed (Barton, 2001; Gu, 2003) making constructivism and contextual vocabulary teaching converge on the same plane. However, to what extent Constructivism and contextual vocabulary teaching can be negotiated and in which courses this technique could be applied still appear to be a subject that should be projected empirically.

Ultimately, in compliance with the theoretical perception resting on the research literature, the current study seeks to determine the students' views on a new technique which negotiates contextual vocabulary teaching and Constructivism making both applicable in a random course. The students taking part in the application of the technique both as the executers and the audience for a period of 14 weeks were asked to respond to three questions that constitute the research questions of the current study.

1. What are the positive sides of CVTC?

2. What are the negative sides of CVTC?

3. What would be the additional suggestions of students for the improvement of CVTC?

II.Materials and Methods

The current study is a descriptive research that aims to explore the students' attitudes towards CVTC in an ordinary undergraduate course at a foreign language department. Thus, the ELT Studies course of the English Language and Literature Department of a state university was selected as a model. Discrete from a classical ELT Studies course, in the first week of the course, participants were notified that a kind of academic vocabulary would most frequently take place in the course interfering with the comprehension of the academic texts. To solve this problem, a supplementary guide book, was recommended to the students for additional self-study. The book covers the most frequently employed basic and advanced levels of academic vocabulary that were selected in terms of their frequency of occurrence in the field. What is more, the students were also informed that they would be due to use both thesaurus and English to English dictionaries during the course.

Following a 14-week ELT Studies course the students were distributed three-item open ended questions. While the first two questions were investigating the positive and the negative sides of the technique applied in the course the third one focused on the students' additional suggestions which would serve for its improvement. The entire qualitative data were analyzed quantitatively. As an initial step, all of the sentences were read and then transformed into categories. Each category was determined attentively to correspond to one single decision or statement precisely. Eventually, a total amount of 14 categories appeared for question 1, 3 categories appeared for question 2, and 2 categories appeared for question 3, which made it possible to submit the data in a frequency distribution to scrutinize them numerically. In the end, the data analytical procedure was checked by an expert in the field to make sure that each category possesses accurate frequency. The highest frequencies were explained in words while all the categories are given in frequency distribution.

III.Results

A.Research Question 1. What are the positive sides of CVTC?

The results of the research question 1 are submitted in Table 1. The frequency levels are shown with the abbreviation of (f). The results signify that the majority of the participants (28) evaluate the most effective side of CVTC as its connecting side of it that associates vocabulary knowledge with text analysis. The second highest frequency is 24 which highlights the practicality and the certainty that the technique provides during teaching when compared to classical vocabulary teaching techniques. As for the third highest frequency, it is 21 that reflects both the effectiveness and the compatibility of the technique with text analysis while the closest frequency (20) in the fourth place shows that the students find the technique amusing. Another high frequency (18) shows that the students find the technique as encouraging and useful for developing self-confidence. The students interestingly evaluate the technique in terms of two different categorical items at the same level of frequency (13), the first one of which shows that the technique facilitates learning vocabulary while the second one of which signifies that the students learn how to construct knowledge through the present technique. Other 7 frequencies that seem relatively not so important are listed on the table 1.

B.Research Question 2. What are the negative sides of CVTC?

Table 2 represents the results of the research question 2. As it is overtly noticed in table 2, in terms of item 1 (Since the technique concentrates more on text analyses, the students are provided with limited number of samples.) the students evaluate the most problematic side of CVTC (f=3) as the limited number of samples analyzed during the application of the technique. In succession, item 2 and item 3 stand out to be the second highest problematic sides of the technique with their arguments that the technique

provides inadequate number of technological artifacts such as PowerPoint, internet or mass media communication, and it takes too much time (f=2).

Table 1. The students' views on positive sides of CVTC

Categories	f
1. Relates vocabulary knowledge to text analysis.	28
2. More practical and provides certainty when compared to classical vocabulary teaching techniques.	24
3. Helps us understand the components of the text better while making it easy to analyze even long and complex paragraphs through simple vocabulary applications.	21
4. Amusing.	20
5. Encouraging and develops self-confidence	18
6. Facilitates learning vocabulary.	13
7. Enables to learn how to construct knowledge with student participation.	13
8. Makes it hard to forget vocabulary.	8
9. Enables us to make contextual inference where it is necessary consistent with the hermeneutic aspects of the text.	8
10. Makes us concentrate on the lesson more readily.	5
11. Since it develops productive skills, it may contribute to my speaking skill as well as my writing skill.	4
12. Increases curiosity.	4
13. Ads to creativity.	3
14. Creates consciousness about both the proximity and the distance of the two languages via juxtaposing cognates.	3

Table 2. The students' views on negative sides of CVTC

Categories	f
1. Since the technique concentrates more on text analyses, the students are provided with limited number of samples.	3
2. Inadequacy of technological artifacts such as PowerPoint, Internet, etc., or mass media communication.	2
3. Takes too much time.	2

C.Research Question 3. What are the students' suggestions for improving CVTC?

All of the students (f=40) evaluate CVTC beneficial for ELT Studies courses. However, the majority of the common suggestions (f=6) denote that visuals should be incorporated into the presentation of the texts in order to draw the students' attention to the vocabulary taught and make the contexts possess relatively a more reminding characteristic. By the same token, during the presentation of the texts, some additional tools or materials such as projector or smart board are suggested to be utilized (f=2).

In the light of the data gathered from the fourth year English Language and Literature Department students denote that all the students highlight the importance of the technique of CVTC. Among these, are relatively the most striking evaluations representing the rest of the respondents given below.

The students unanimously point to the transformational power of CVTC in that the technique both transforms the boring aspect of vocabulary teaching process into an entertaining role play by means of substituting the complex or arduous words with their more casual synonyms and providing encouragement and self-esteem by letting the students deconstruct the texts on the board on a discussion platform under lecturer guidance: "Some words used to appear to me so difficult to understand and remember. However, with this technique under lecturer guidance, I am not scared anymore to analyze the text before my friends."(Kübra)

Apparently, the students, who are used to customary teaching techniques, willingly welcome such practical techniques providing opportunity for self-realization and empowering vision as regards vocabulary learning while enabling them to achieve permanent learning through entertainment:

"If I am to compare the present technique with the old lessons, first of all I find it quite a lot practical. It facilitates vocabulary learning process with basic information that provides vision as to where to start and where to pay attention during text analysis. It is now so easy to adapt to the text with replacing the words with their synonyms on the board with a given vocabulary chunk. Therefore, it is more enjoyable and relaxing." (Ceyda)

Another substantial issue highlighted by the students is the limited number of samples. Although the students are content with the use of this technique in any course relevant to foreign language or foreign language teaching, the majority of them criticize the limited quantity of the texts utilized in the course. "The way we learn vocabulary in the lesson is more amusing so it contributes to our understanding and interpretation ability of the text. Yet, in classical teaching ways we could receive more samples when compared to this new one." (Fatma)

Since it is their first experience in a new kind of text analysis with vocabulary substitution on the board on a discussion platform, it is not surprising they have a demand for a vocabulary list given beforehand: "It would be easier for us to adapt to this new technique if the vocabulary to be taught could be given before the course." (Sezin)

III.Discussion

A.Research Question 1. What are the positive sides of CVTC?

The quantitative analysis of the qualitative findings signified that the students are interested in a total amount of 7 positive sides of CVTC that may be listed as: its connecting function regarding vocabulary and text analysis, its practicality, its effectiveness and compatibility with text analysis, its amusing property, its encouraging and self-confidence developing property, its function as vocabulary learning facilitator, and finally its constructivist function respectively. The first positive side of the technique exhibits its strength in providing the students with entailed amount of contextual information that is indispensable for Word recognition (Koda, 1996), which simultaneously contributes to both receptive and productive vocabulary learning processes (Mondria & Wiersma, 2004) while the second positive side of the technique is a property that furnishes the students and the teachers alike with flexibility and diversity required for dealing with various context applications necessary for vocabulary development (Folse, 2011). It also creates simple solutions for connotation applications that add to creativity. Similarly, the third positive side of the technique is important in dealing with context variations. Although it roughly sounds to be the same with the first one, it is a more complex and a different issue in that while the first one enables the students to well understand the meaning of the vocabulary in a context and to deconstruct the text, the third one enables them to re-construct the text with a profound understanding of the meaning of the vocabulary in various new contexts, thereby assisting more than teacher do in "high evaluation" (Folse, 2006, p. 287). Thus, it enhances active vocabulary knowledge (Fan, 2000), endorsing also retention (Folse, 2010). The fourth positive side of the technique is one strong side of CVTC that associates it with Constructivism. Piaget (2001) and Vygotsky (1978) as the two forefathers of Constructivism attach great importance to children's cognitive and social evaluation of reality loading great sense to their way of observation and interaction. In this sense, as far as CVTC is concerned with the subject, its amusing property plays a substantial role in relating student observation and sociality to the process of language teaching. Correspondingly, the fifth positive side of the technique is vital for language learning (Rubio, 2007; De Andrés, 2007; Ávila, 2007) especially when taking affective factors into consideration (Krashen, 1982) on the grounds that affective factors that refer to emotional aspects of student attitudes would possess either "facilitating" or "inhibiting" role on their sides (Arnold, 2007). As for the sixth positive side of the technique, it is concerned with time saving aspect of CVTC. Webb (2009) report that receptive and productive vocabulary tasks display different effectiveness subject to time restriction since building productive vocabulary would need more time than does building receptive vocabulary. Yet, he continues that productive tasks prove to be more effective on condition that the time restriction is overcome. CVTC, in this sense, assumes the role of a facilitator contributing to the repetition of words in different and copious contexts swiftly providing much time for more context applications (Webb, 2007). On the other hand, another paradoxical predicament facing the students which research should resolve is that learning process of new vocabulary relies on exposure to reading (Horst, 2005; Hunt, & Beglar, 2005; Horst, & Meara, 1999;

Horst, Cobb., & Meara, 1998) whereas retention of new vocabulary is attained via explicit instruction (Pigada & Schmitt, 2006). The seventh and the last positive side of the technique, at this point, consolidates teacher centered explicit vocabulary instruction which is necessary for word learning (Coyne, McCoach, Loftus, Zipoli Jr., & Kapp, 2009) with student participation and text analysis enabling access of these three discrete elements to each other in congruous with Constructivism. While assisting the students in navigation with direct source for vocabulary building, teacher also encourages student participation with interactive synonym and antonym game implicating these two in the context and allowing the students create various new contexts utilizing them simultaneously. During this process, the students also possess the opportunity to fulfill self-determination, realization and correction.

B.Research Question 2. What are the negative sides of CVTC?

Following the quantitative assessment of the qualitative findings, three negative sides of the technique were determined with minor frequencies which amount to f=3, f=2, f=2, respectively. While the first group (f=3) of the students complain from limited number of texts analyzed on the board, the next two groups with same amount of frequencies (f=2) criticize not using enough technology in the classroom, and the time allocated for text analysis. Although the first group seems to be right on their sides as various applications of different words in different texts affect the probability that the students learn a word through context (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987), the focal point here should be the different contexts whereby a word is scrutinized instead of copious texts applied in front of the students. As for the second group demanding technology in class environment, there is enough research (Lai, Zhao, & Wang, 2011; Goertler, 2009; Levy, 2009) in the field of language teaching supporting their demand and suggesting the advantages of using especially computer technology including smart boards in class environment. However, incorporating technology except for smartphones which may be employed for online dictionaries into CVTC is presumed to impede interaction and creativity that is especially necessary for Constructivism. Finally, the last group complains about the long period of time allocated for the process of contextual analysis since the procedure of the technique may consume the time needed for the actual course. Indeed, this may be the most important negative side of the technique. Therefore, during the application of CVTC it is necessary that the teacher calculate the time allocated for the vocabulary teaching and the course content separately and more attentively. Otherwise, instead of providing support, the technique would lead to a technical failure and make the two targeted aims mutually exclusive.

C.Research Question 3. What are the students' suggestions for improving CVTC?

The quantitative assessment of the qualitative findings assert that the entire students (f=40) are in favor of the technique and its benefits unanimously. Nevertheless, the

majority of the common suggestions (f=6) with an interesting evaluation focus on the lack of visuals in the content of the course-books and the supplementary book. Indeed, research (Tomlinson, 2011; Helgesen, 2004; Arnold, 1999) supports the students' suggestions in that visualization is one of the essentials of language learning for the students as they utilize it in the course of reading as a new skill. Nevertheless, this suggestion of the students is beyond the scope of our study since CVTC is not concerned with materials development. Finally, again the students (f=2) appear to be insistent on using technological support during the application of CVTC as the same with their aforementioned evaluation concerning the negative sides of CVTC. Anyhow, an additional pre-emptive proposition against this suggestion of the students would be that technological support during the application of CVTC may be hazardous for the flexibility of the technique in terms of its application to any random course in addition to the aforementioned presumption.

IV.Conclusion

In view of the data obtained from the respondents the current study denotes students without any doubt appreciate the application of CVTC during ELT Studies courses. Judging from this result, it is possible to assert the proposition that CVTC may be employed in content-based teaching also. However, while the technique is welcome by all the respondents, there are some minor negative sides underlined such as the time and sample limitation and the lack of technological devices applied in the course. Although the students have right on their sides with their criticisms, in fact, it is the criticized aspect of the technique that makes it strong, flexible and applicable to any kind of lesson. Finally, it is overtly necessary that further studies be implemented to vindicate the present and other various aspects of the technique in addition to the suggestions put forward by the students.

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