

Metodički obzori 6(2011)3

Scientific conference presentation

UDK: 371.3:81'243]:373.3

Received: 17. 7. 2010.

INSINUATED REALITY: CONSTRUCTIVIST METHODS TEACHING AND LEARNING

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Abstract

New constructivist concepts in the field of didactics of foreign languages have been based on the fundamental postulations of modern psychology of knowledge. The starting point is the fact that knowledge is constructed according to prior knowledge, perceptions, context, and individual affects. Acquiring of knowledge is based on the situation, it is socially conditioned, and it must have a particular sense and meaning. When it comes to productive knowledge mediation, it must be taken into consideration that teaching does not mean learning as well. Knowledge gained by mere learning by heart is left 'inert' and inapplicable. Accordingly, teaching and learning of a foreign language should be placed in as realistic situation as possible, in order to jointly try to find a solution (for a particular problem) through cooperation and on the basis of specific individual experiences. The didactic presumptions concerning the knowledge construction have been carried out on the basis of two methodical forms of a procedure in the elementary school, where there was discussed their effectiveness.

Key words: *constructivism, insinuated reality, situation learning, foreign language teaching methods*

Introduction

Foreign language didactics has long been characterized by accentuation of communicative and pragmatic, and later intercultural competencies as well. At the moment, in foreign language didactics, there is widely recognized methods pluralism. In that way, a whole range of assumptions and methods could be established and consolidated (independent learning, learning through teaching, project teaching) that, often unknowingly, correspond precisely to the constructivist treatment method, which is focused on knowledge of modern knowledge psychology (Mandl, Reinmann-Rotheimer 2000).

Acquiring and imparting knowledge

Basic hypothesis of modern knowledge psychology

Constructivist didactics of foreign language refers to the following hypothesis of knowledge psychology:

- Acquisition of knowledge is carried out constructively depending on previous knowledge, perception, context and affects condition;
- Acquisition of knowledge cannot be determined; it can only be directed;
- Knowledge is, in the ideal case, mutually networked and it can be productively, flexibly transferred, even out of the given subject;
- Knowledge is situated and it is socially contracted;
- Knowledge arises in situations when a problem is solved and such situations are ideal for encouraging general creative ability for solving the problems; by knowledge acquisition, we are able to create strategies for routine resolution of problems;
- The ability of perceiving and remembering is anthropologically based and it cannot be equated with computer metaphor of cognitivity or „programmed learning“;
- Knowledge has a specific meaning and significance in its essence.

We will now present the aspects that are significant for productive knowledge transfer in the field of foreign language teaching.

Prerequisites for productive knowledge transfer

- Teaching does not always mean learning. Metaphor about knowledge transfer is false.

- Learning occurs independently as a constructive effect of the subject, and progress in learning is achieved only when new knowledge *meaningfully* expands the previous knowledge.

- Newly acquired knowledge is subjectively sufficient, when it enables successful operation. „Perfection“ or „completeness“ are not subjectively valid criteria, and externally observed incomplete knowledge can be subjectively enabled for successful operation.

- Pointless „repeating“ or „learning by heart“ do not lead to „meaningful“ knowledge deepening. Mechanically acquired knowledge is not applicable nor is it transferable.

- Knowledge is not the copy of reality, but it is human creation – construction.

From these premises, we can draw the following *didactic consequences*:

- Learning process should be placed in the highest possible realistic situations and space in which significant authentic problems are solved.

- Teaching should not be reduced to imparting (transferring) factual knowledge, but it should encourage the competence of active action (procedural knowledge).

- Through cooperative learning and work, those who learn can become true members of experts' culture. Cooperativity leads to that the students work together in developing, comparing and testing solutions to the problem, i.e. the drafts of reality specific to the given situation. At the same time, they learn about various attitudes and views.

In recent years, several constructivist concepts for various teaching fields were developed. Some of those can nicely be applied to foreign language teaching as well.

These include those starting points that belong to the paradigm of *situated cognition*. With the term *pragmatic constructivism* (Meixner-Müller 2001) there are attempts to develop teaching models, which demonstrate that in normal school day the instruction and construction are not exclusive options to one another, but that they can complement each other in certain cases.

In this paper, we will demonstrate how these concepts function in foreign language teaching in elementary school, how effective they are, and in order to see whether they are applicable to other classes as well, we will highlight methodical procedures of *productive semantics* in the field of deepening the vocabulary, as well as drama-pedagogical concept of *relational dramaturgy*.

Knowledge construction in foreign language learning

Two examples from primary school curriculum

Vocabulary deepening: „Productive semantics“

Teaching and learning the language is always related to the adoption of new words and their meanings. We would like to present a special form of learning and teaching vocabulary, by which foreign language is learnt in primary school.

Foreign language teaching

Foreign language teaching fails less because of cognitive problems of those who learn, and more because of inability to accept the information from students' real world as well as the foreign language world, i.e. it is about whether those who learn will create a mixed picture of their own and foreign language (mixed culture), double reality (biculturalism) or some "third" version of the world.

Vocabulary is mostly dealt with abstractly and cognitively. A new word is explained monolingually. Pictures or non-verbal forms of behaviour (from the part of the teacher) are unilaterally based on cognitive-visual preferences of learning. However, procedural components are missing, which would implement declarative knowledge into behaviour that is related to affects and impressions in order to gain in importance and so that they could be implemented. This lack is attempted to be solved in teaching by the process of meaning building.

Tags of the procedural processes of meaning building

What are the tags of such meaning concept, which is the basis of this semantization?

By their essence, meanings of the words that denote everyday concepts are:

- subjective;
- connotative;
- meaningfully linked (multimodal);
- affective;
- learned through action and relevant to the action;
- situated.

So, the words become real-constitutive terms only through the classification of subjective memories, affects, sensory impressions, contexts, situations. We will demonstrate these on two examples from practice (3rd and 4th grade).

Examples:

The students should:

- freely verbalize the cartoon without sound („Monkeys can climb better“) (3rd grade),
- retell orally and in written the presented text (fable: „The raven and the fox“) (4th grade).

After global verification of understanding and free verbalization of the versions that the students understood, the unknown words

- Third grade: earthworm, snail
- Fourth grade: consume (spend)

are semantized as follows:

Stage 1: Collective semantization

Teacher: The teacher will write the unknown words on cards in colour – thus offering (declaratively) the meaning through the picture (snail, earthworm) or the translation (in Serbian).

Stage 2: Subjective semantization

Through already known or imagined sensory and affective features – with closed eyes.

I Visually/imaginatively

Teacher commands:

- Please, imagine a picture of a film related to the word „earthworm“ („snail“, „consume“)

Write that word in colour below the picture!

Compare this (imagined) written with what is written on the card!

If necessary, correct what you have written!

II *Auditory/imaginative*

Teacher commands:

- Imagine a sound that is related to your picture or film „earthworm“ („snail“ or „consume“)!

III *Affectively/ sensory*

Teacher commands:

- What do you feel, what can you smell or touch when you hear or see the word „earthworm“ („snail“, „consume“)?

Stage 3: Communication stage

Student – student – teacher

Exchanging the descriptions of mental activities.

Addition/Fragment:

A) Third grade: „Earthworm“, „Snail“ – Students' comments

Nikola (N), Snežana (S); Emil (E), other students (U)

Earthworm

N: I watched a film. It was raining, there was a lot of earthworms. Then I, um, came. I also wanted to go in the barn for rabbits. There was a lot of ... I was afraid. Then I have written below in red. Then I felt that, um, um, it is wet and that it is raining...

S: It occurred to me that there is a man fishing. He collects earthworms. Collects them and throws them to water. The rain ... one of the fish bites and earthworm is, um, dead, and the man did not, um, catch the fish, and it was like that. Then, then it rained. He went to the worms, which were slimy. So, I have written earthworm in brown, since it lives, um, in the ground and then...

Snail

E: In case of the snail, it occurred to me that it does like this... I have written it in yellow. When a man catches it with a stick, it is all sticky. I hate snails. And some people collect snails and of them they make..., um, they make...

S: Butter.

E: Yes, yes, butter, yes, butter of snails.

B) Fourth grade: *consume*

Teacher (Ns); students (U); Milan (M); Vanja (Va); Mirjana (Mi); Nikola (N); Vladimir (V); Tijana (T);

Ns: Consume, children. Just a second, to look it up in the dictionary, „consume“ in a foreign language means – *says that word in a foreign language (German, English)*. So, see here: consume!

Close your eyes and imagine a picture or a film! Write the word correctly in colour below your picture. Don't forget to check. What do you hear in case of "consume"? What do you feel in case of "consume"? Very well, now you, Milan!

M: I have imagined a rabbit. He has + and ++ eaten carrots...

Ns: Yes.

M: He ate carrots like this (demonstrates with his arms and mouth).

Ns: Okay.

M: And I think that his carrot ++ is very hard. His + here (pointing to his teeth) his teeth are strong.

Ns: Yes, okay.

M: And he can eat carrot with them just fine.

Na: Yes. What did you feel?

Mi: Oh, his ears.

Na: Okay, it is good. Nikola!

N: I have... I have eaten spaghetti.

Ns: (laughing)

N: And my sister ++ has stolen from me...

Ns: Yeah, what did you feel?

N: I felt that my sister likes spaghetti and I like spaghetti, too. Later, I have taken from her.

Ns: And what did you hear?

N: I have, when I took spaghetti from my sister... Then I cried.

Ns: Yes.

N: ... and then I write ++ "consume" in yellow.

Ns: Ok, bravo. Vanja!

Va: When a raven closes its mouth, then it does this (mouth movement).

U: Yes.

V: Then (it) ate.

Na: Yes, okay.

V: Then (crunches) like this.

Na: Yes. Very nice. Mirjana!

Mi: I have imagined an ice bird. There was a lake also. I caught a fish and took it to a tall tree. It ate it like this, he did like this (demonstrates with mouth and hands).

Ns: Nice.

Mi: And I wrote "consume" in black.

Ns: And what did you feel then?

Mi: I felt it, the ice bird. It has such feathers.

Ns: Yes...

Mi: Slippery, wet...

Ns: Super...

The result and progress in learning

The results of vocabulary deepening by this learning concept are – which can be seen from the fragments – independently produced, individually, sensory-affectively based word meanings that have declarative participation and contain communicatively expressed aspects.

This leads up to "deep" etching of words' meaning on mind and towards active use. Enhancement of procedural knowledge, meta-reflexive behaviour and general competence to solve problems better prepare the students for the real world than the pure cognitive-visual semantic methods. Empirical research on the comparison of various lexical processes of semantics demonstrates the advantage of procedural knowledge constructions as compared to the single cognitive-visual forms of learning and teaching. What was procedurally-productively adopted, it can more easily be activated and applied in other similar situations. In one test, held four weeks later (the task was to write a sentence related to the learned word), it was demonstrated that the group with procedural knowledge construction in the field of creative-productive speech competence had by 11.69% better results than the control group, which has applied the usual cognitive-productive process for vocabulary deepening. (Meixner 1997).

Insinuated reality through situation learning: „Relational dramaturgy“

The concept of „relational dramaturgy“ can be attributed to a wide range of „drama pedagogy“. Drama education in this sense involves the attempt to provide the students with resources by which they will be able to reflect the existing realities and to replace them with other versions, if necessary. The connection with situation should be established and certain situations should be simulated in a natural way. In this special sense, drama is not theatre, but it still uses theatre elements. In addition, it is not the drama in literary sense, although dramaturgy and acting structures are important constituents. The relations (hence the name relational – oriented to relations) between the people, between people and ideas as well as between people and their environment. By contemplative immersion in events, by imagination and fiction, free experimental treatment of language and body and active language use, we will be able to adopt communicative ability, in form of procedural knowledge, in authentic situations, in a completely natural way.

Of many methodical treatments, when it comes to „relational drama“, the techniques of *lively journalistic theatre* (Feldhender 1991) and *psycho-dramaturgy* (Dufeu 1992) can be primarily highlighted. Both methodical concepts are tested and evaluated in various age groups (children from elementary schools, youth and adults; see Meixner 2001).

We will now briefly present „*lively journalistic theatre*“ and highlight important criteria, which are determined in the attempt of foreign language teaching in elementary school.

In the focus of the process, there is stage and dialogical implementation of written information, which are taken from daily and weekly newspapers. However, informative texts, pictures, drawings or caricatures can also be used as reasons for acting. In stage implementation, the associative, dramaturgical forms of improvisation prevail. When choosing the text, the issues of relevance to the group that learns, emotional connection and the appropriate dramaturgical character for acting are crucial.

The aim of teaching unit is not primarily the linguistic work on the text, but the complete experience, i.e. dealing with information that is complex in relation to the content. In that way, we can discuss the nature of multiculturalism and attitudes towards foreigners. We wanted to discover whether spontaneous drama insinuation in case of a (heterogeneous) language group will achieve the desired effect of changing the perspectives, so that everyday themes, especially prejudices, stereotypes etc, could be observed from various standpoints in order for cognitive flexible activity to be facilitated and trained in that way.

Course of teaching

For the medium of stage display, a linguistically less complicated and comprehensive newspaper article can be selected, in which it is reported on journalistic survey (investigation) about what the young people from Novi sad, aged from 10-15, think about foreigners. The tolerant and intolerant opinions were set one against the others, so that pro and contra role could easily be implemented.

Stage 1: Sensitizing (communicative, narrative, associative)

After reading the text, students have spontaneously said their first impressions. While doing that, they freely moved around the classroom. Those who were passed the ball, they had to respond non-verbally (by mime, gestures):

Part of the conversation: Snežana (S); Milan (M); Nikola (N)

S: That is not true. Sometimes they (foreigners) are good.

M: Foreigners are hospitable, since some tourists go to the foreign language and cannot find the right way. They ask passers-by, call them, two, three days. I think that the 13-year-old student is wrong.

N: Some foreigners, they borrow money, help the other. They are not different from us, they are not messy, do not steal, do not lie ... They even do good jobs for those who are bad.

Stage 2: Deepening (total)

Here, the teacher encourages the students to targetedly turn to other group members and to say the key words:

Part of the conversation: Mirko (M); Emil (E); Mirjana (Mi); Tijana (T); Snežana (S); Bogdan (B):

M: The 13-year-old boy is wrong. I am angry at him!

E: I am also angry (looking at the floor, with the mouth tight and pressing his hands on hips).

Mi: That is impossible (upper part of the body bent forwards, disapproving nod).

T: That is not fair.

M: You are wrong (low voice)

E: They are stupid people.

T: We like foreigners and tourists...

Mi: If we are kind to them, they also need to be kind to us.

S: That is shameful.

Mi: In the year 1918, um ... was the First World War. We were friends and now we are enemies.

B: Why are we enemies?

Here, as it turned out, some students felt personally affected. They have cited lengthy explanations and expressed the views of why the foreigners are not so bad, as some have said so in the article. It could be seen that the students were very upset.

Stage 3: Visualization of posture

In this stage, it is necessary to compare various forms of interpretation through particular posture and to check their validity. Posture should stabilize what is said, explain and illustrate the statements.

The students have got the task to demonstrate typical posture for particular national groups and to find the appropriate internal monologues that can follow it, for example: „I am the strongest man in the world“. As the stereotypes, the parameters such as „arrogance“, „use of the power“ and „overestimation of themselves“. It was followed by the so-called principle of „complementary image“, „frozen image“ regarding the above-mentioned postures: typical representative of one nation stands next to a typical foreign woman. The viewers comment the given interpretations in form of frozen image with the following statements: „The foreigner and „the host“ have fallen in love.“

Stage 4: Stage processing

Free stage processing had gender-specific differences as a result, having in mind the extracurricular experiences. The boys favoured robber scenes (intrusion of foreigners, their arrest by the police), while the girls favoured the activities that were focused on cultural and social relations („in the school yard“).

Stage 5: Reflection

Stage views are commented by the public (other students). The actors confirmed or denied the descriptions. In this phase, the teacher has now the possibility to explain

the existing prejudices and stereotypes, as well as to talk about them. This process of acquiring the awareness of what is experienced in the game leads to the sensitizing and stabilization, i.e. the change in perception of oneself and the others. In our example, an act of self-correcting and correcting the others could be observed. In our case, the students in the school yard – „foreigners“ and „hosts“ – have „too quickly“ become friends, without the necessary linguistic act, such as „can I be your friend?“. This „wrong scene“ was „properly“ repeated in the following correction.

Conclusion and discussion

Associations that depend on students only, (which are not influenced by the teachers), affect and enable the following:

- Associations and artistic activities reveal the hidden, facilitate the emergence of empathy and emotions;

- In specificities, in particularities, the prototype elements are revealed and localized;

- In the fiction, it is demonstrated what the student (not only linguistically) knows about the subject, how flexibly he can be in some situation;

- The information given (*lively journalistic theatre*) and impulses (*productive semantization*) are only the starting points in subjective and affective students' attitudes. The reference is made to the subjective pictures from life and drafts of reality;

- Free creative treatment of linguistic structures allows each student to self-responsibly acts with his linguistic and non-linguistic means, which are available at the given moment, and to acquire the process experiences;

- Discussion in a group (and with the teacher) enables the integration of newly-acquired experiences and previous students' image of the world. Self-correction is accepted as normal, cooperative behaviour is considered as necessity;

- Immersion in acting (game), implication of emotional distress cause the student to forget to speak the foreign language;

- The teacher observes the students and helps them, when necessary. He provides the necessary additional tools and prepares the necessary exercises to improve the language. During students' activity, he refrains himself from correcting the mistakes;

- The use of the mentioned constructivists procedures is also advocated by the fact that they can, independently from the curriculum and textbook, also be used in regular school teaching and also in different grades. An ideal homogeneous group for teaching is not a precondition. Foreign language can be learned and exercised, almost as in the real life!

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Metodički obzori 6(2011)3

Izlaganje sa znanstvenog skupa

UDK: 371.3:81'243]:373.3

Primitljeno: 17. 7. 2010.

INSCENIRANJE STVARNOSTI: KONSTRUKTIVISTIČKI NAČINI POUČAVANJA I UČENJA

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Rezi me

Nove konstruktivističke koncepcije na području didaktike stranog jezika zasnivaju se na osnovnim pretpostavkama moderne psihologije znanja. Pri tome se polazi od činjenice da se znanje konstruiše u zavisnosti od predznanja, opažanja, konteksta i afekata pojedinca. Sticanje znanja se odvija situativno, socijalno je uslovljeno i mora imati određeni smisao i značenje. Kada je reč o produktivnom posredovanju znanja, moramo biti svesni da poučavanje ne znači i učenje. Znanje, koje je stečeno pukim učenjem napamet, ostaje „tromo“ i neprimenljivo. Iz toga sledi da bi poučavanje i učenje stranog jezika, trebalo postaviti u što realniju situaciju, da bi se time kroz saradnju na osnovu specifičnih pojedinačnih iskustava, zajednički moglo naći

rešenje (za određeni problem). Ove didaktičke pretpostavke u vezi konstrukcije znanja spovedene su na osnovu dva metodička načina postupka u osnovnoj školi i diskutovana je njihova uspešnost.

Ključne reči: *konstruktivizam, inscenirana stvarnost, situativno učenje, metodika učenja stranog jezika*