

Worlds in the Making:
Constructivism and Postmodern Knowledge
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Constructivist Character of the Technique of Role-Playing Games and its Autonomizing Values in the Glottodidactic Process

1. Constructivism vs. constructionism

The terms constructivism and constructionism are very often used interchangeably, yet, though connected and close to each other they are not completely identical. Both terms are quite broad-ranging, and the theories they refer to are applied in many scientific disciplines such as: social sciences (though even here there appears both social constructivism and constructionism), theory of literature, pedagogy, psychology (especially social psychology), psychotherapeutics (systemic psychotherapy), philosophy, and even cybernetics, robotics and many others, including culture and the arts. In the educational context, or strictly speaking in glottodidactics, constructivism will refer to assumptions rooted in cognitive theories of learning by Jean Piaget. The term constructionism will refer to tendencies, approach and method in learning/teaching (although formally it is neither of them) based on the constructivist

theory of learning and having their beginning in Lev Vygotsky's works concerning social constructionism. In the Polish language both constructivism and constructionism are often translated as *konstruktywizm*, and adjectives constructivist and constructionist find frequently one equivalent – *konstruktywistyczny*, which may cause confusion among researchers. However, as Joan and Dawn Wink explain, English speaking scholars understand the term 'constructivist' with reference to Piaget's theories of cognitive constructions, and 'constructionist' with Vygotskian social constructions. 'Constructivist' will be connected with interaction while 'constructionist' with cooperation and intra-mental processes. 'Constructivist' will indicate facilitation, while 'constructionist' – mediation. Finally 'constructivist' will be connected with 'cognitive' and 'constructionist' with critical reflection and social construction. In many researchers' perspectives (eg. Bruner¹) both directions are put through synthesis, which can justify the fact that Polish literature on the subject very often contains only one term – *konstruktywizm*. One can therefore have an impression that both directions, though originally distinct, through the use of elements of both theories in subsequent works have been 'married.' Despite this, a section of researchers, especially English speaking, maintain the distinction. Bonk and Cunningham (33 – 34), for example, present a headword comparison of their main assumptions in a tabular form (see chart, point 4. Conclusions).

Mark Guzdial also describes the characteristics of these trends but puts it in a slightly different way:

Constructivism, the cognitive theory, was invented by Jean Piaget. His idea was that knowledge is constructed by the user. There was a prevalent idea at the time (and perhaps today as well) that knowledge is transmitted, that the student was copying the ideas read or heard in lecture directly into his or her mind. Piaget theorized that that's not true. Instead, learning is the compilation of complex knowledge structures. The student must consciously think about trying to derive meaning, and through that effort, meaning is constructed through the knowledge structures. Piaget liked to emphasize learning through play, but the basic cognitive theory of constructivism certainly supports learning through lecture, as long as that basic construction of meaning takes place (Guzdial).

Guzdial also draws attention to constructivism, the educational philosophy. Its idea, he says, is that each student constructs his own, unique meaning for everything that is learnt, although:

¹ In the paper introducing to a conference 'The Growing Mind: Vygotsky – Piaget' (Geneva 1996) taking up the phenomenon of socio-cultural researches he makes a comparison and synthesis of Piaget's and Vygotsky's thoughts in the context of constructivist theorems (Dylak 2000).

This isn't the same as what Piaget said. Piaget's theory does not rule out the possibility that you and I may construct exactly the same meaning (i.e., exactly the same knowledge constructions) for some concept or domain. The philosophy of constructivism say that students will construct their own unique meanings for concepts, so evaluations that contrast students to norms make no sense. (Radical constructivists go so far as to say that curriculum makes no sense since we cannot teach anyone anything – students will always simply create their own meaning, regardless of what teachers do.) Philosophical constructivists emphasize having students take control of their own learning, and they de-emphasize lecture and other transmissive forms of instruction (Guzdial).

In Guzdial's opinion constructionism reminds him more of an educational method based on the constructivist learning theory. Yet, Guzdial points at Seymour Papert, not Vygotsky as its inventor.

Constructionism, invented by Seymour Papert who was a student of Piaget's, says that learning occurs "most felicitously" when constructing a public artifact "whether a sand castle on the beach or a theory of the universe." (Quotes from his chapter "Situating Constructionism" in the book *Constructionism* edited by Papert and Idit Harel.) Seymour does lean toward the constructivist learning philosophy in his writings, where he talks about the difficulty of conveying a complex concept when the reader is going to construct their own meaning. In general, though, his claim is more about method. He believes that students will be more deeply involved in their learning if they are constructing something that others will see, critique, and perhaps use. Through that construction, students will face complex issues, and they will make the effort to problem-solve and learn because they are motivated by the construction (Guzdial).

The confusion surrounding this terminology stems from the similarity of the words and common perception of the word 'construct'. This is summarised in a condensed form after Guzdial:

Piaget was talking about how mental constructions get formed, philosophical constructivists talk about how these constructions are unique (noun construction), and Papert is simply saying that constructing is a good way to get mental constructions built. Levels here are shifting from the physical (constructionism) to the mental (constructivism), from theory to philosophy to method, from science to approach to practice (Guzdial).

2. Constructivism, constructionism and autonomisation in glottodidactics

A number of constructivist and constructionist ideas seem to be reflected in the autonomising approach (Wilczyńska, *Uczyć się, Autonomizacja*), though, the very term autonomy appears only in reference to Piaget (see chart, point 4, row No. 3). Many of them are depicted in didactic cooperation (Pl.: *współpraca dydaktyczna*; Aleksandrak, Gajewska-Głodek, Nowicka, Surdyk), one of the foundations of autonomisation, together with the subjectivisation of the

learning person (Wilczyńska, *Podmiotowość*, Gajewska-Głodek). The basic assumption of work in the conditions of semi-autonomy (Pl.: *pólautonomia*; Wilczyńska, *Uczyć się, Autonomizacja*) is the student accepting part of the responsibility for the progress made in shaping personal communicative/linguistic competence – PCC/PLgC (Pl.: *osobista kompetencja komunikacyjna/jezykowa* – OKK/OKJ), whilst simultaneously developing personal learning competence – PLC (Pl.: *osobista kompetencja uczeniowa* – OKU; Wilczyńska, *Osobista kompetencja*). The learning persons (LP) and the teaching person (TP) cooperate in a multi-subject didactic relation on the basis of didactic contract (established in an oral or written form) which has an organisational dimension and is based on negotiations. The contract in a miniature version should be refreshable during every meeting to specify its aim, content and method. Thanks to its cyclical character the didactic contract takes a progressive, 'stepping' (Pl.: *krocząca*) form (Aleksandrzak et. al. 103). From selected key phenomena of the autonomisation of foreign language didactics it is necessary to introduce other terms compatible with constructivist/constructionist theory:

SUBJECTIVITY (Pl.: *podmiotowość*) – The attitude of a person to him/herself and to the surroundings expressed in their active shaping, in accordance with aims and norms determined by the person. Also style of regulation of relations of the man with the surrounding based on activity initiated and developed by the unit according to his/her personal standards and values. [...]

AUTHENTICITY (Pl.: *autentyczność*) – Features the typical behaviours of a unit, which reflects his/her current attitudes, needs and aspirations. The higher the level of authenticity the more effective perfecting oneself. [...]

LINGUISTIC / COMMUNICATIVE SENSITIVITY (Pl.: *wrażliwość jezykowa/komunikacyjna*) – A general intention, though not necessarily conscious aimed at observing and controlling communicative correctness and effectiveness across a wide range of language uses. It is especially significant with reference to dynamic and complex objects so demanding special divisibility of attention, without disrupting fluency and pace of the continuous communicative activities (productive and/or receptive). Hence, it can be also defined as a particularly active element of personal communicative competence, aimed at the monitoring of current activities and development of competence. [...]

PERSONAL COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE (PCC) (Pl.: *osobista kompetencja komunikacyjna* – OKK) – Knowledge and communicative skills (including linguistic ones) which enables a learning person to function in foreign language situations in an authentic way i.e. in accordance with his/her (non-communicational) aspirations, personality and life style (including communicative style). [...]

BILINGUAL IDENTITY – (Pl.: *tożsamość bilingwalna*) – Complex of features determining a given FL user on the personal and social plane, which s/he acknowledges to be typical of him/herself. Bilingual Identity must be considered indispensable to the learner. On this subjective attitude to FL the learner will build his/her personal communicative and learning competence (PCC/PLC).”... (Wilczyńska, *Autonomizacja* 317–335)

In the autonomising approach a special emphasis is put on subjectivisation of the LP, thereby underlining the individual, personal dimension of learning

– in the case of glottodidactics linguistic perfecting – as well as all processes and mechanisms accompanying it. First and foremost in this respect the idea of autonomisation has a lot in common with constructivism and/or constructionism, which the example of selected aspects of the Technique of Role-Playing Games attends to show.

3. The Technique of Role-Playing Games in FL Didactics

A practical example of application of the assumptions of autonomisation in foreign language didactics can be an innovative, communicative Technique of Role-Playing Games (Surdyk, „Technika”, *Gry fabularne na lektoracie*, „Gry fabularne”). The idea of the TRPG has been borrowed by the author from popular parlour games – *Role-playing games (RPG)* called in Poland ‘fable games’ (Pl.: *gry fabularne*² or ‘games of imagination’ (Pl.: *gry wyobraźni*) and adapted to the conditions and needs of academic didactics. The elements of games, play and simulations incorporated in it allow it to be rated among ludic techniques (Surdyk, *Gry fabularne na lektoracie*). In FL didactics it is closest to the technique of Role-Play (Ger.: *Rollenspiele*; e.g. Goethals, Ladousse, Livingstone, Hadfield, Littlewood, Siek-Piskozub, *Gry, Uczyć się bawiąc*) which is known and described in the literature of the subject. So in summary TRPG can be considered a variety of Role-Play developed to a narrative form. Although, it has to be mentioned that there are some significant elements differentiating the TRPG from Role-play, which have been described in detail in other works (Surdyk, „Technika”, *Gry fabularne na lektoracie*):

– **timing of the tasks** during a TRPG session is much longer than in popular communicative situations rated as Role-play and limited only by the assumptions of the scenario and/or time frames of the class;

– **number of participants** is increased in case of TRPG, while in Role-play usually only two people are involved, very often including the teaching person;

– **form of the tasks** in TRPG is of a higher complexity than in Role-plays. In the plot of the game long sequences of communicative situations naturally appearing one after another can be distinguished, unlike Role-play which focuses only on one. This gives the game a more dynamic adventurous character. Even in more static scenarios, the form of discussion, argumentation or negotiation in TRPG allows topics of greater complexity to be taken up;

² Szeja (2004) proposes the term Narrative Role-playing Games (Pl.: *narracyjne gry fabularne* – NGF) to draw a distinction between the classic RPGs (so called table RPGs) from other varieties of this genre, like Computer Role-Playing Games (CRPG).

– **time and place of action** are frequently not static and time of the action does not always run in congruity with the real time;

– **content of the tasks** in TRPG allows the LP to display a greater degree of creativity — the scenario of a Role-Playing Game is set in any reality, does not exclusively concern situations taken from the real world as in Role-play and does not have a linear structure (which allows for numerous solutions). Owing to this fact it does not limit the actions of participants, their invention, imagination, spontaneity or creativity. This results in a variety of developments and endings by different groups of players from the same original scenario. This is a crucial difference, in comparison with other, more theatrical techniques that use scenarios in a literal sense, Play acting — for instance;

– **preparation and realisation** of the scenario in TRPG session are left entirely in the hands of the LP, though, consultations with the TP before the session are possible;

– **types of interactions** — in TRPG interactions take place among all the LP participating in the session, including the leading person — ‘game master’ (GM) and participants — ‘players’ (P) and among the players themselves through the characters they play. The TP does not take part in interactions; LP speak on their own initiative when they want to influence the course of action, express their opinions, or take a stand in the subject of the session or its current fragment. This contributes to a reduction of stress levels and has a positive influence on the authenticity of the speech;

– **style and register of interactions conditioned by the type of discourse** are imposed by the scenario and situations anticipated in it. The context of interactions and type of roles in the scenario demand from the players the application of different styles of speech from a casual conversation to academic discourse.

A unique function of TRPG, not present in other techniques known so far, is the role of the leading person (GM), who is not only the creator of the outline scenario, a narrator, an arbiter and the coordinator of all action but is also responsible for the roles of a number of Non-player characters — (NPC), who are met by the characters of the players (P). Therefore, his function is extremely significant, much more complicated than those of the players and burdened with a greater responsibility throughout the session.

3.1. The Technique of Role-Playing Games and constructivist/constructionist theories

In The Technique of Role-Playing Games one deals with constructions from the literal to the constructivist/constructionist meaning of the word. It begins with the outline scenario designed by the LP playing the role of the game master. The plot of the ‘adventure’ is constructed during the course of its realisation through active cooperation of the game master and the players. For the sake of communicative needs and to enhance authenticity of the scenario, or the separate episodes of an adventure, the game master through narration, and with cooperation with players through interactions, builds a kind of specific micro-reality in which their characters exist and act. Therefore, one can talk about constructing worlds to meet the needs of each session, even if the scenario is set in every day reality. Each time it is yet only a fragment of some reality which, though may resemble and reflect the complexity of the real world (see chart, point 4, row No. 2), will always remain only a virtual fiction functioning on the basis of an agreement in the consciousness of the participants and can undergo unlimited transformations due to the participants’ invention. The technique itself is still mainly a tool aimed at shaping the skills of PCC/PLgC, whilst maximising personal involvement of the LP in this complex process of constructing his/her own knowledge.

3.2. Autonomising values of the Technique of Role-Playing Games

Since the frames of this paper do not allow for a detailed discussion of all points of similarities between constructivist/constructionist theories and the idea of the autonomising approach selected phenomena, in the example of the TRPG, will be concentrated on, while the others will be only highlighted in a tabular juxtaposition in point 4.

3.2.1. The didactic cooperation and the didactic contract

The idea of didactic cooperation and the didactic contract incorporated in it, is depicted in Vygotskian constructionism, and is especially close to its postulate of cooperation and negotiation (see chart, point 4, row No. 8). Since, apart from the subjectivisation of the LP and his/her responsibility for shaping PCC, it

propounds a multilevel negotiation of meanings, including negotiation of "aims, forms and contents of the didactic activities" (Aleksandrzak et al.) at many levels and stages of the process of self-didactics, beginning with the subject of learning, selection of sources, through the methods and forms of working during classes, forms of homework, forms of progress control, (Glinka/Prokop/Puppel) and finishing with criteria and methods of evaluation and self-assessment. Yet, these negotiations take place within the limits of the frame syllabus of a given subject. In case of the TRPG the creation of the plot of the 'adventure' by the participants is itself an outcome of specific negotiations that occur among them in an atmosphere of cooperation or competition during the game.

3.2.2. The mechanisms of self-control and self-correction

The procedure of working with TRPG assumes the autonomisation of the LP, which, among other things, encourages in the student the interrelated mechanisms of self-control and self-correction (Glinka/Surdyk, Surdyk, „Gry fabularne”), whilst in the process of mastering the skills of PCC. The definitions of both terms are assumed in the forms as follows:

SELF-CONTROL (Pl.: *autokontrola*) – A mechanism of human internal linguistic-mental activity, regulating his/her linguistic actions in terms of compliance of these actions with the linguistic-communicative norms of a given society ~ it supervises the course of linguistic actions, anticipates and/or diagnoses current difficulties and activates appropriate precautions. Hence ~ is significant for assuring correctness and efficiency of utterances and is a crucial aspect of linguistic sensitivity.[...]

SELF-CORRECTION (Pl.: *autokorekta*) – An external manifestation of functioning of the mechanism of self-control in a form of one's independent adjusting ("correcting") of the element recognised as incompliant with the norms of language use (Wilczyńska, *Autonomizacja*: 318).

Through recording the sessions of RPG and their rehearsals in the conditions of a language laboratory the LP carry out self-correction. This is followed by the correction and discussion of mistakes by the TP in class and the preparation of corrective materials for individual work in order to eliminate them. The development of the mechanisms of self-control and self-correction at the same time help raise the level of self-assessment and linguistic/communicative sensitivity, which seems to be correlated with the postulate of "prior knowledge and misconceptions" in Piaget's constructivism (see chart, point 4, row No. 6).

4. Conclusion

Taking advantage of the juxtaposition by *Bonk and Cunningham* one can present in a similar, brief tabular form, the similarities of perceiving the main phenomena of constructivism/constructionism in comparison to the assumptions of autonomisation in the example of TRPG. Repetitions in selected rows concerning autonomisation are the result of complexity and mutual connections between separate terms and their compatibility with other, closely related phenomena of constructivism/constructionism. Repeatedly different elements of TRPG also refer to the same phenomena and mechanisms that play a significant role in the autonomisation of the student.

No.	Cognitive constructivism Guru: Jean Piaget	Social constructionism Guru: Lev Vygotsky	Autonomisation in glottodidactics in the example of TRPG
1	The MIND is in the head; focus on "cognitive reorganization"	The MIND is in social transactions and emerges from acculturation into a community of practice	The MIND and its cognitive structures play a significant role in transformation of knowledge for own use of the LP and perfecting the skills of PCC, together with self-awareness imparts a personal dimension to all communicative and learning activities. BILINGUAL IDEBTITY, AUTONOMOUS ATTITUDE, LINGUISTIC SENSITIVITY
2	RAW MATERIALS; primary data, "manipulatives," or other interactive	AUTHENTIC PROBLEMS; learning environments reflect real-world complexities	AUTHENTICITY OF COMMUNICATIVE AND LEARNING ACTIVITIES constructing micro-realities for the sake of communicative needs, scenarios designed by the LP are set in the real world of fictitious realities, the LP play real or fictitious characters
3	STUDENT AUTONOMY; thinking and learning responsibility in students' hands to foster ownership	TEAM CHOICE AND COMMON INTERESTS; builds on common interests and experiences within a learning group, and gives some choice to that group; learning activities are "relevant,	AUTONOMISATION AND SUBJECTIVISATION, the frame construction of a scenario and roles are designed according to the ideas of the LP and their interests, their realisation is an effect of co-creation of the plot by the game master (GM) and players (P)

4	MEANINGFULNESS AND PERSONAL MOTIVATION; learning related to personal ideas and experiences	SOCIAL DIALOGUE AND ELABORATION; uses activities with multiple solutions, uncertainty, novelty, etc. demanding dialogue, idea sharing, etc.; encourages student elaboration/justification for their responses through discussion, questioning, group presentations	AUTHENTICITY, INTERNAL SPEECH, PERSONAL AIM, SELF-REFLECTION, the subject matter and contents of the scenario, characters are designed by the LP, the GM leaves the choice of characters to the P, which is in favour of realisation of their personal aims and increasing the level of involvement, activity, spontaneity and authenticity of production
5	CONCEPTUAL ORGANIZATION/ COGNITIVE FRAMING; information organized around concepts, problems, questions themes, interrelationships; activities framed within thinking-related terminology	GROUP PROCESSING AND REFLECTION; encourages group processing of experiences	PROJECT WORK, ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION AFTER THE SESSION, each TRPG session is a separate project prepared and realised by the LP with possible consultation of the TP; after the session the subject of the discussion is evaluation of the attractiveness of the scenario, the way of playing the roles, realisation of the session, and the language used; the scenario assumes a communicative aim which is a collaborative solving a particular problem
6	PRIOR KNOWLEDGE AND MISCONCEPTIONS; builds on prior knowledge and addresses misconceptions	TEACHER EXPLANATIONS, SUPPORT, AND DEMONSTRATIONS; demonstrates problem's steps and provides hints, prompts, cues, and clarifications where requested.	SELF-CONTROL, SELF-CORRECTION, SELFASSESSMENT, audio / video recording of the session enables its participants to carry out self-correction, correction is then made by the TP who discusses mistakes and provides LP with corrective materials for individual work
7	QUESTIONING; promotes individual inquiry with open-ended questions; encourages question-asking behavior	MULTIPLE VIEWPOINTS; fosters multiple ways of understanding a problem; builds in audiences beyond the instructor	AUTONOMOUS ATTITUDE SELFDIDACTICS, LP's independent preparation and realisation of the scenarios, nonlinear structure of the scenario allows different possible solutions
8	INDIVIDUAL EXPLORATION AND GENERATING CONNECTIONS; promotes individual discovery of	COLLABORATION AND NEGOTIATION; encourages students' collaboration, negotiation of meaning, consensus	DIDACTIC COOPERATION DIDACTIC CONTRACT, NEGOTIATION, INTERACTION, interaction can be examined on an individual/intrapersonal and

	information, ideas, and relationships, and knowledge connections metaphors, insights, projects	building, general social interaction	interpersonal level, INTERNAL SPEECH is a kind of interaction taking place in the consciousness of a given subject, interactions can have a character of cooperation or competition depending on the communicative aim incorporated in the assumptions of the scenario in the TRPG and roles assigned to players
9	SELF-REGULATED LEARNING; identifies and fosters skills needed to manage learning; collaborative learning is important insofar as it supports increase of individual metacognitive skill	LEARNING COMMUNITIES; creates an atmosphere of joint responsibility for learning, where "participation structures are understood and ritualized." Technology can be a valuable element uniting the community	SELF-REALISATION, 'WALKING' DIDACTICS, DIDACTIC COOPERATION, DIDACTIC CONTRACT reconstructing the didactic relation towards the TWO/MULTIPLE-SUBJECT RELATION, shaping of self-awareness and PLC, LP accepting a part of the responsibility for the effects of the didactic process
10	ASSESSMENT; focuses on individual cognitive development via portfolio, performance-based measures	ASSESSMENT; focuses on team as well as individual in "socially organized practices", "educational standards are socially negotiated"; "assessment is continual, less formal, subjective, collaborative, and cumulative."	ASSESSMENT, SELF-ASSESSMENT, context of assessment and directions of the development of PCC are determined by the perspective of SELF-REALISATION, self-assessment criteria can be subordinate to negotiations within the limits of the arrangements of the didactic contract, similarly the subject, aim, form and contents of the didactic activities

Chart: Juxtaposition of key phenomena of constructivism, constructionism and autonomisation of FL didactics in the example of the TRPG (based on Bonk/Cunningham 33-34)

As it results from the above juxtaposition, the phenomenon merging and binding many aspects of FL autonomisation in its numerous scopes, at the same time close to the assumptions of constructivism and/or constructionism, is the phenomenon of the didactic cooperation and the terms related to it. The precondition for a successful didactic cooperation in the conditions of semi-autonomy is subjectivisation of the LP, which is connected with enabling him/her to realise his/her personal aims through the authenticity of his/her communicative as well as learning activities. As has been shown in other works

(Surdyk *Gry fabularne na lektoracie*, „Gry fabularne”) TRPG enables the establishment and development of didactic cooperation, and in all aspects of the process of mastering PCC meets the requirements of an autonomising technique.

Yet, it should be admitted that the above juxtaposition, due to a very general treatment of the terms compared, is quite superficial. Therefore, it is possible that a more comprehensive confrontative analysis of all three theories might reveal some divergences among them, due in part to the purely cognitive foundations of constructivism and holistic perspective of the LP in the autonomising approach. Consequently the problem raised in this paper should be treated as only an introduction to further discussion on the subject. However, in the author's opinion, it can be stated that in the context of the use of the Technique of Role-Playing Games a number of constructivist/constructionist assumptions in separate aspects of practical FL didactics remain in accordance with ones of autonomisation.

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