

DISCUSSING CONSTRUCTIVISM ON THE BASIS OF TEACHING ESP TO STUDENTS OF PHILOSOPHY

Abstract: The article discusses the ideas of *Constructivism* while teaching ESP to students of philosophy. One of the main proponents of the constructivist approach – J. Dewey considered education to be an active process, in which the student follows their own path of thinking. *Constructivism*, which has become influential in the methodology of teaching since the middle of the 20th century, plays a significant role in the interaction between the student and the teacher. The former becomes an active inquirer, rather than a passive recipient of knowledge, whilst the role of the latter is facilitating the learning process. In the article, the constructivist theory has been juxtaposed with the experience of teaching ESP to students of philosophy, who prove their theses by providing coherent and logical argumentation. Dialogue and discussion become the key learning techniques while discussing philosophical dilemmas, and as such they are close to the ancient method of dialectics as practiced by philosophers such as Socrates, or Plato. The latter has been accused by J. Dewey of favouring the passive knowledge of a *spectator* – an allegation which the author of the article finds objectionable. Whilst it is true that each student is a unique individual, in the case of philosophy forming argumentation and drawing conclusions occur through a debate. They cannot stem merely from the student's private opinion, but have to be primarily grounded in logic. Dialogue is crucial for both the students and the teacher – a fact emphasized by another philosopher of the 20th century – Martin Buber, for whom the presence of another person – *Thou* meant the beginning of an important and valuable relation.

Keywords: constructivism, philosophy, English for Specific Purposes, student, reason, dialogue

TEORIA KONSTRUKTYWIZMU W NAUCZANIU JĘZYKA SPECJALISTYCZNEGO NA ZAJĘCIACH ZE STUDENTAMI FILOZOFII

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest ukazanie praktycznych konsekwencji zastosowania idei konstrukttywizmu w nauczaniu języka specjalistycznego na zajęciach ze studentami filozofii. Jeden z czołowych twórców teorii konstruktywistycznej – J. Dewey uważał, że uczenie się jest procesem aktywnym, w którym student samodzielnie konstruuje swoje umiejętności poznawcze. Konstrukttywizm, który od połowy XX wieku wywarł znaczący wpływ na metodykę nauczania, odgrywa także ważną rolę w relacji między studentem i nauczycielem. Osoba ucząca się nie jest jedynie biernym odbiorcą przekazywanej autorytarnie wiedzy, lecz bierze aktywny udział w procesie nauczania poprzez zadawanie pytań, formułowanie hipotez i wniosków oraz praktyczne rozwiązywanie problemów. Rola nauczyciela sprowadza się do stworzenia atmosfery

sprzyjającej nauce oraz do ułatwiania procesu edukacji. Artykuł jest zapisem doświadczenia w nauczaniu ESP na zajęciach ze studentami filozofii i stanowi krytyczną analizę teorii konstruktywistycznej zastosowanej w praktyce. J. Dewey był krytykiem epistemologii platońskiej, która zgodnie z jego przekonaniem zakładała zdobywanie wiedzy w sposób bierny i abstrakcyjny, z pominięciem aspektu empirycznego i pragmatycznego. Krytyka J. Deweya nie jest w pełni uzasadniona, zważywszy na dialektyczny charakter *Dialogów* Platona, w których Sokrates umożliwia swoim adwersarzom dotarcie do prawdy poprzez wymianę argumentów i dyskusję, a więc w sposób aktywny. Jest to aspekt nauczania szczególnie istotny na zajęciach ze studentami filozofii. Każdy student stanowi niepowtarzalną indywidualność i każdy – jako osoba – samodzielnie rozwija swoje umiejętności poznawcze zgodnie z ideą konstruktywizmu. Niemniej jednak filozofia jest dziedziną wiedzy, w której kwestią zasadniczą pozostaje logiczne formułowanie przesłanek i konkluzji, a zatem indywidualne opinie są akceptowane o tyle, o ile mają racjonalne uzasadnienie. Technika dialogu, debaty czy dyskusji ma w tym wypadku niebagatelne znaczenie, ponieważ wspomaga rozwój osoby nie tylko w jej aspekcie indywidualnym, ale także we współpracy z innymi osobami.

Słowa kluczowe: konstruktywizm, filozofia, ESP, student, racjonalność, dialog

1. Introduction

1.1. Philosophical background of *Constructivism*

It is a truism to state that the Allegory of the Cave described by Plato in his *Republic* about two and a half thousand years ago, is of crucial importance to western civilisation. Curiously enough, it affects also the philosophy of education, or the epistemology of learning – issues still hotly debated among academics, who strive to find an optimal method of efficient educational processes. Plato, a proponent of the *a priori* method, and a dedicated supporter of an epistemological approach guided by reason, believed that most people, like the prisoners chained inside the cave, cannot perceive the real light of knowledge, but are limited to a mere observation of the shadows on the wall. The very concept of knowledge understood as the *light of ideas* that shall be known to the chosen few (presumably philosophers), who have managed to shake off their chains of bondage, has been widely criticised throughout the centuries, by philosophers with a more empirical, *a posteriori* approach to acquiring knowledge.

John Dewey (1859-1952), was one of those philosophers who believed that Plato was wrong, as the Parable of the Cave talks about a merely passive, that is reasoning-based perception of the truth, whilst not considering active *vel* pragmatic approach to knowledge. Additionally, Plato – claimed J. Dewey – did not appreciate each individual's unique potential and their personal abilities to learn. Following William James' pragmatism, Dewey held that knowledge is connected with practical problem-solving within a given situational context, rather than a passive acquisition of knowledge. As Phillips and Siegel claim, Dewey stood in opposition to Plato, claiming that the ancient philosopher favoured "the spectator theory

of knowledge”, thereby stressing its passive rather than active quality (Phillips & Siegel, 2015).

It is debatable whether J. Dewey was justified in his belief regarding Plato’s epistemology. Whilst it is true that acquiring knowledge is not a passive process, one might wonder, following a careful analysis of Plato’s oeuvre, if the Greek philosopher deserves the criticism of constructivists. After all, in his *Dialogues*, masked as Socrates, Plato considers many dilemmas by referring to real-life situations, which means that he considers them from a pragmatic and not exclusively theoretical, reason-based point of view.

1.2. Main assumptions of *Constructivism*

Proponents of constructivism believe that each student is an individual being, who, on entering the classroom, is already equipped with his, or her own knowledge, rooted in their social background. While learning, each person constructs their own model of understanding and acquiring knowledge, incomparable with any others. The knowledge is, however, progressively verified by new experience, which challenges and modifies previous views and conceptions. Rather than being passive recipients of knowledge, students become actively involved in the learning process by following their individual motivation and personal interests. The role of the teacher is to assist each individual in stimulating those interests and to facilitate the process of seeking knowledge, rather than deliver it in an authoritative manner. The main presumption of constructivism is learning through individual reflection, which comes from a series of practical tasks and challenges provided by the teacher. Constructivism stresses pragmatism and individuality in learning processes.

In this work, I intend to demonstrate how constructivism, as a theory which emphasizes each student’s independent search for knowledge, can be practically verified by teaching ESP to students of philosophy. One has to bear in mind that by the very nature of their discipline, students of philosophy acquire knowledge primarily by reasoning and through debate. In their case, approaching the truth (the basic task of philosophers) is a collective challenge, in which what comes to the fore is not an individual inspiration, but a dialogue within the group. The teacher’s role, quite like in constructivist theory, is merely that of a moderator, who occasionally poses challenging questions, but hardly ever delivers ready-made answers. In constructivism, each human being is unique, also in their ways of understanding. However, for young philosophers, seeking the truth occurs primarily through a dialogue, which means cooperating with other individuals. The truth, unlike an opinion, is not usually relative, or personal, but can be approached through a reasoning capacity common to all human beings – a fact which helps transcend the individual’s isolation within a group.

2. Critical thinking skills

2.1. Fluency in speaking

Critical thinking skills are indispensable for the students of philosophy and bearing this in mind, the teacher has to pay special attention to the truthfulness of the premises made and conclusions drawn by the students.

Constructivism is not a method but a theory. Nonetheless, it is useful to juxtapose its main assumptions with a practical example of a class prepared for students of philosophy. The class in question concerned students, whose knowledge of English was fairly fluent (they represented B2+/C1 levels), hence the decision to introduce two types of sources, namely a filmed interview with a philosopher – Abraham Joshua Heschel, found on the Internet (Available: <https://archive.org/details/AbrahamJoshuaHeschelRemembered> [accessed 17 March 2017]) as well as an original philosophical text titled *Who Is Man?* that helped students expand their knowledge of Heschel's anthropology (see: Heschel, 1965). The highlight of the class was critical analysis of the philosopher's ideas as it helped each student contribute their own argumentation to the overall understanding of Heschel's reasoning. Individual progress in the process of improving critical thinking skills was to a large extent conditioned by counter-arguments put forward by other members of the group. In constructivism, it is an individual path of learning that comes to the fore, whereas teaching ESP to students of philosophy means that individuals learn primarily from each other. What is personal, independent, or individual does not occur through isolation, but is created and shaped in contact with others.

It has to be remembered, however, that critical thinking skills can fully manifest themselves only when the knowledge of a foreign language is fairly fluent, or when it reaches the stage called by Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, *self-regulation*. At this stage students are rather willing to express their own views and opinions, however over-self-regulation often means fluent speech at the cost of grammar mistakes, or “conversational conventions” (see: Di Pietro, 1990).

Fluency in speaking was a *sine qua non* condition of meeting the class target and was obviously connected with the level of English represented by the students of philosophy. Dialogue, or debate, were in fact the focal point of the class, with the students actively participating in the critical analysis of the concept of man. Three exercises were particularly useful in stimulating the students' response to the subject discussed; a pre-reading exercise, which involved search for the term *Human* on the Internet, a speaking exercise, in which students were asked to compare their web results with the idea of *Human* as presented by A.J. Heschel (following reading comprehension), and finally – an open class discussion, during which students compared the attitude of the philosopher with that of the Irish playwright – G.B. Shaw, who believed in the utilitarian approach to human beings (deliberate killing of those who, as he claimed “could not justify their existence”). The final

question, due to its dismaying nature, caused the most active response on the part of the students.

2.2. Drawing logical conclusions from premises

The difference between G.B. Shaw's "utilitarian" approach to man, and A.J. Heschel's idea of *who man is*, is startling, the former calling *humane* a gas that is to kill quickly and efficiently those who are useless to society, and the latter appealing to man as a child of God, possessing dignity and the ability to transcend his animality. The gas Shaw talked about in 1934, was an idea which came true during WWII, the obvious association being the one with cyclone B – a pesticide used to kill humans in concentration camps. Heschel – a Holocaust survivor, by stark contrast, talks about man in almost mystical terms.

The above conclusion needed to be based on students' critical thinking skills, following what they had learnt about a *human being* during the class. In the case of philosophy, not every interpretation of facts is acceptable; a student has to justify their beliefs by quoting reasonable argumentation (compare: Maley & Duff, 1994). Reasoning does not mean *the spectator theory of knowledge*, which was heavily criticised by J. Dewey alluding to Plato's epistemology, but it means active thinking processes and applying critical skills which allow students to distinguish between the true and false concepts of what being *human* means. The inference has practical consequences since, while discussing Heschel's idea of man as contrasted with that of Shaw, students in fact define themselves. They learn about the essence of the *humane*.

Constructivist theory assumes that, as Phillips and Siegel claim, each individual student within a group has their own understanding and interpretation of the studied issue (see: Phillips & Siegel, 2015). In a sense, each individual student is a monad contained in their own world, which means that the process of learning involves a solipsistic element. At this point, philosophy stands in opposition to constructivism since the truth sought by philosophers is not a question of an individual approach, but a question of a reasonably justified conclusion that is clear, objective and comprehensible to all. Seeking the truth is the core of critical analysis. For students of philosophy, the truth is sought not merely on an individual basis, but first and foremost in a debate within a group.

3. The role of the teacher

3.1. Dewey versus Plato

According to constructivism, the teacher, quite like each of their students, creates his, or her own conception of the knowledge gained. Consequently, there are as many interpretations of knowledge within a class as there are students. Such an

approach to the educational process is valuable in so far as it focuses on individual needs and learning processes, but it excludes a dialogue, also that between the teacher and their students. As Phillips & Siegel assert: *The final important difference with Plato is that, for Dewey, each student is an individual who blazes his or her unique trail of growth; the teacher has the task of guiding and facilitating this growth, without imposing a fixed end upon the process* (see: Phillips & Siegel, 2015).

The authoritarian approach of the teacher to the student is certainly a fallacy and one cannot but agree with J. Dewey that the role of the teacher is to assist the student in developing their individual talents and skills. This is, however, exactly what Socrates does in Plato's *Dialogues*. By applying the methods of *elenchus* as well as *maieutics*, the philosopher helps his interlocutors come as close to the truth as possible. Like a professional midwife, he assists in giving birth to the truth. Hence, J. Dewey's criticism of Plato (the author of *Dialogues*) seems to require some further revision. Additionally, if constructivism assumes that the teacher's conception of knowledge is unique and individual (as is the case with each of their students), then cooperation in search for the truth is threatened by a number of random views. Such an approach cannot be practiced while teaching ESP to students of philosophy, for whom the truth is a common denominator, uniting, rather than isolating individuals within a group.

3.2. The teacher's assistance

The role of the teacher during classes with students of philosophy is to facilitate the process of learning without imposing their views and opinions on the students. As such, it remains consistent with the assumptions of constructivist theory, which emphasises the moderating role of the teacher. As the primary goal is linguistic correctness in both the oral and written forms of the foreign language taught, the teacher focuses mainly on the students' proper usage of language. However, teaching ESP to students of philosophy additionally involves appropriate application of philosophical terms, as well as constructing logically coherent argumentation. Both tasks mean that the student – teacher interaction is necessary, but by using appropriate techniques, it does not need to turn into the teacher's subordinating of the student's reasoning process. During the class on A.J. Heschel's anthropology, students formed their arguments while working in pairs, as well as in groups. If challenged by opposing views, they at times lost their line of argumentation and it was then that the teacher's assistance became necessary, but it usually assumed the form of a slight suggestion, rather than an authoritative opinion. The teacher's role involved careful listening, occasional linguistic support, or asking questions to help students express their views. The teacher's interference was thus limited as far as possible so that the students had a chance to present their speaking and critical thinking skills.

The main role of the teacher involved creating the right learning atmosphere, in which each student could feel free to express their opinion. The personal point

of view, however, had to be supported by reasonable argumentation, presented in comprehensible English. In practice, the theory of constructivism with regard to the teacher's role, proved to be considerably useful. While teaching ESP to students of philosophy, the teacher remains, as it were, in the background, guiding rather than dominating the discussion taking place.

4. The purpose of the class

4.1. Improving listening and reading skills

The class on Heschel's anthropology (mentioned in point 2.1. of the article), included both watching an interview with the philosopher in question on the Internet and reading an extract from his book *Who Is Man?* (see: sources in point 2.1.). The *blended method* learning (see: Żylińska, 2013) that applies both the Internet website and a traditional written text, diversified the tasks involved, as well as drew students' attention to both the philosopher's personality (through the interview) and to his work (through the text). The ultimate purpose of the two sources was to develop students' listening skills (by following an interview with A.J. Heschel) and to improve their close reading skills (by focusing on an extract from A.J. Heschel's *Who Is Man?*). Apart from the purely linguistic aims, the class, taking into account the students' interests in philosophy, was adapted in such a way as to stimulate their interests in a particular philosopher and his concept of man. In this sense, it remained in accordance with the main assumptions of constructivism, which puts emphasis on student's individual needs and personal motivation.

Both listening and reading comprehension tasks were additionally accompanied by exercises meant to revise vocabulary in context. In the pre-watching exercise, students were asked to match words to their definitions, whereas in the reading-comprehension exercise they were to infer the meaning of new lexis through the context of the text (see: Grellet, 1985). Both types of exercises were done in pairs, which ensured mutual cooperation and communication with each other. Apart from acquaintance with Heschel's a views on man, students learnt new vocabulary, which expanded their knowledge of English as well as philosophy. As it is usually the case, the pre-watching and pre-reading exercises became a necessary and helpful step towards an advanced discussion on the philosopher's idea of man. The second part of the class, which included philosophical discussion, was crucial in the sense that it allowed each student to express their own understanding of the concept of man. If constructivism focuses on personal growth in the process of learning, then philosophical debate becomes a meeting point of different individuals, each of whom contributes to the search for the truth. Thus, the solipsistic, or anthropocentric element attributed to constructivism by Phillips and Siegel (see: Phillips & Siegel, 2015), disappears in teaching ESP to students of philosophy, whose learning process is essentially that of cooperation.

4.2. The importance of dialogue

It is thus necessary to emphasize the importance of dialogue and discussion which took place prior to the watching/listening task and following the reading comprehension exercises. As mentioned before, debate, or to put it philosophically, dialectics, is crucial for students of philosophy, who should be capable of presenting their conclusions in a logical and coherent way. In the context of constructivist theory, each student *constructs* their own path of acquiring knowledge, but classes with students of philosophy embrace more than the uniqueness of each individual. Whilst the teacher's role is to help each individual talent grow, it is of vital importance that all the students should be active within the group. What matters here is a genuine discussion, the aim of which is to reach the most reasonable and truthful conclusion concerning the philosophical dilemma in question. The group thus creates a kind of community, in which each person, whilst not resigning from their individuality, contributes to the overall success of the group, measured by the logical quality of the final conclusion. This is a collaborative work, which gives every student an opportunity to present their individual thinking skills, as well as to learn from others.

During the class on Heschel's anthropology, prior to reading the philosophical text, students were asked to discuss the first three entries of the word *Human* which appeared in *google* search on the Internet. Those included the Rag'n'Bone Man song, the Wikipedia definition of *human* as "any member of the genus *Homo* (since ca. 2.5 million years)", and finally *human* as "an activity & calorie tracker". The teacher did not reflect on those conceptions, but asked the students to think whether, or not they found those entries to be true and adequate descriptions of themselves as human beings. The idea of who *human* is was hotly debated open-class before concluding that none of those entries could possibly embrace the essence of a human being.

As agreed by constructivism, the teacher never imposed her personal inference on the students, but helped them merely by asking questions and correcting linguistic mistakes. Students' final assertion was thus their own common achievement, rather than an authoritative claim imposed by the teacher. Similarly, the interpretation of Heschel's text took place within the group, with the teacher monitoring and guiding each student only when absolutely necessary and fundamentally, to correct pronunciation, or grammar mistakes in English. Students discussed in pairs the ideas of man as presented in the history of philosophy by thinkers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Darwin and Benjamin Franklin. They next focused on Heschel's idea of *human* as contrasted with that of G.B. Shaw, who was a proponent of eugenics.

Essentially, the class proved the truthfulness of constructivist theory with regard to the minimal interference of the teacher, who should guide their students, rather than provide them with a ready-made body of knowledge. However, constructivists' belief in individual growth of each learner, irrespective of the group, is highly debatable when confronted with teaching ESP to students of philosophy.

Their process of learning is grounded in constant mediation between each other as dialectics (or dialogue) is the core of philosophical thinking.

5. Conclusion

Constructivist theory has had a significant impact on the philosophy of education. Based on J. Locke's empiricism and W. James' pragmatism, it has undoubtedly contributed to the practical aspect of acquiring knowledge, in which the student follows their own path of learning. Nonetheless, tackling complicated dilemmas and problem-solving can take place not merely on an individual basis, but first of all within a group. Dialogue is the means to mutual cooperation as people usually learn from each other by confronting arguments and drawing the most logical conclusions. This process, based on justified beliefs, was also of utmost importance to Plato, who does not deserve J. Dewey's criticism as his approach to learning was certainly not *the spectator theory of knowledge*, but active participation in discussion. Additionally, philosophy is a field of knowledge, in which an individual opinion is not purely a question of will, but has to be well grounded and pass a reasoning test regardless of the student's acquired opinion, or their social background. Logical argumentation is thus a unifying element within the group, which hinders the atomisation and dispersal of random views. The individual learning process continues but it is stimulated by the knowledge and reasoning capabilities of other group members. Only within the group and through dialogue can student's individuality come to the fore.

Dialogue is no less significant in the relation between the teacher and the student, where the former creates the atmosphere of mutual understanding and cooperation. Following J. Dewey's view of the teacher's role, their task is primarily to facilitate the process of learning, rather than dominate it by imposing their own knowledge and opinion. The teacher's ability to embrace their student's motivation, interests and language skills means that successful educational process is possible and realistic. This might involve what M. Buber called *inclusion*, and which Yaron describes as 'experiencing oneself and simultaneously perceiving the "other" in its singularity' (Smith, 2009. See also: Buber, 1992).

Bibliography

- Buber, M. (1992). *Ja i Ty*, przeł. J. Doktor. Warszawa: Instytut Wydawniczy Pax.
- Di Pietro, R.J. (1990). *Strategic Interaction. Learning Languages Through Scenarios* (pp. 1-15). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Grellet, F. (1985). *Developing Reading Skills* (pp. 28-53). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Heschel, A.J. (1965). *Who Is Man?* (pp. 18-25). Stanford: Stanford University Press.

- Maley, A. & Duff, A. (1994). *The Inward Ear: Poetry in the Language Classroom* (pp. 6-16). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Phillips, D.C. & Siegel, H. (2015). 'Philosophy of Education'. *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2015/entries/education-philosophy/>, accessed 15 May 2017.
- Smith, M.K. (2009). 'Martin Buber on Education'. *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*, <http://infed.org/mobi/martin-buber-on-education/>, accessed 15 May 2017.
- Żylińska, M. (2013). *Między podręcznikiem a internetem. Nowa dydaktyka języków obcych* (s. 143-145). Warszawa: Fraszka Edukacyjna.