



Constructivism in Teaching the Mother Tongue or How to Teach the Czech Language Better to Czech-Speaking Children

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Abstract: *The article deals with the opportunities presented by pedagogical constructivism in teaching the Czech language. The author briefly outlines the implicit links between traditions in Czech pedagogy and the rationality of pedagogic constructivism. The benefits of a professional approach to children's pre-concepts are documented through two specific topics: the curriculum on sentences and the curriculum on verb tenses. In the conclusion she defines the conditions which are a necessary prerequisite for the professional work of a constructivist-oriented pedagogue teaching the Czech language.*

Keywords: *constructivism, language teaching methodology, Czech language, pre-concept, sentence, message, verb tense.*

WHY (AGAIN) DIFFERENTLY?

In recent decades Czech teachers have come across more than one reform current of thought claiming that a change in the approach to teaching would ensure that the teaching was more efficient and both children and teachers would thus be more satisfied.

We used the term “approach to teaching”, by which we understand the process of teaching and the content of the curriculum.

In our text, we are going to consider the latest innovation that has occupied not only the professional educational community, but also enlightened prac-

titioners in schools – the topic of pedagogical constructivism, in particular its usability for teaching the Czech language as a mother tongue. Should the ideas of constructivism be applied, it would lead again to the renewal of the qualities of the two main components of teaching approaches, which indeed are “communicating vessels”. This time we will focus on the changes in content, which, if explained clearly, will bring about the changes in the teaching process automatically. The innovations will not excel in imaginativeness, revolutionary, or flashiness, and therefore they will be more difficult – they will deal both with a change in the teacher’s thinking about children’s speech (linguistic)



competence and a change in his or her own, i.e. the teacher's, speech behaviour.

The essence of pedagogical constructivism is certainly known to the readers of the journal (*Pedagogika*); its bases, leaning upon Piaget's, Vygotsky's, and Bruner's theories, draw attention through the rationality of their assumptions and objectives. They were well accepted on Czech territory. The implicitly present tradition of domestic pedagogy cannot be ignored, in particular Comenius' timeless and solid framework of ideas, elaborated for the current conditions throughout the 20th century. The other strong influence which Czech pedagogy has dealt with in recent decades and which has enriched the area has been the modern currents of thought that emerged as a response to the revolutionary development of non-human scientific disciplines. They left a significant trace on Czech pedagogy in the form of principles for programme teaching. The above-described "frameworks" (corresponding with Piaget's strict rationality, as well as Vygotsky's social empathy), along with current impulses, provide sufficient support for both research and the creation of innovations that are applicable in the Czech educational environment.

The researchers of the present project, which deals with the possible application of constructivism in teaching the mother tongue,¹ introduced themselves at the beginning of their work (2012) with a publication subtitled *Approaches – Topics – Re-*

sources (A Critical Analysis). They provided an overview of several dozen monographs, studies, and articles by researchers from Europe and overseas, addressing some pedagogical problems from the standpoint of constructivism (the publication further explains the content of the most important publishing achievements). A special place in this material is reserved for the works of Czech educational researchers in the sphere of the natural sciences, whose approach to a change in the concept of the curriculum was an inspiration for Czech researchers.

The basis of a constructivist approach in education is applicable in any "subject", in any area of education. A child entering school, i.e. an environment of "controlled education", has a set of experiences, knowledge, and awareness of the phenomena of the world. Typically, the set is disorganised; its extent and the hierarchy of its components have been verified randomly in ordinary life situations. The six-year-old child, however, is not able to name most components of this knowledge and experiential complex; such an element cannot therefore become an instrument of thinking. The child understands situations comprehensively but is not able to distinguish mutually interacting particularities (or those acting against each other) in them. The task of a teacher applying constructivism is to recognise as soon as possible this state of children's pre-knowledge and pre-understanding, i.e. the pre-

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concept, initially as a whole, then in its components and particularities. This is in order to be able to penetrate as accurately as possible into a child's thinking with the curriculum, which is supposed to take on the pre-concept so that the process of the elaboration and inference² of new knowledge (whether from a written or spoken text) can proceed at a reasonable pace and in a reasonable volume. Thus the discovered, verified, and named component of a pupil's thinking can become a means of active conscious cognitive activity. It is delimited (by a teacher) in the child's thinking, but it is not taken out of it and transferred into a "theory" of school interpretation, which is always wrong if it is standing "outside" the pupil's thinking. In language teaching, as a key means of understanding, as well as in teaching communication as one of the most important competencies of the pupil, it is vital in order for the findings to become a sought-after and actively used means for the self-development of an educated individual.

SPECIFIC FEATURES OF A CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO TEACHING THE MOTHER TONGUE

Our thoughts on the need to carefully examine the pupil's pre-concept and sensitively convert it into a concept have been explained in such detail because compared to teaching natural science subjects,

for example, teaching the mother tongue has one significant specific feature:

the curriculum content is knowledge about a language, the language that the child regularly uses for communication. The pre-concepts of linguistic phenomena are of a different nature from the pre-concepts of phenomena related to the curricula of the natural sciences or social phenomena. The pre-concepts of linguistic phenomena are already being verified by practising communication long before starting school attendance; they do not wait for verification in teaching. If this were not the case, the child would not be able to communicate "with the world", and its socialisation at the pre-school age could not take place.

Using metalanguage, pupils learn to name the linguistic phenomena of which they handle the realisation, and the effect of which in communication they already know. By means of metalanguage concepts they gradually (re)discover the language system. They learn to unveil and name the components of "complex phenomena" such as a reply in conversation. They can distinguish sentences, words, their meanings and correlation, word forms, and their consonant construction. The task of the school is to create consciousness (composed of organised and terminologised phenomena) of the individual components of the language system. Communicative competence (in writing as well as speaking) should be fos-

² When constructivist processes in teaching the mother tongue were being considered, significant inspiration came from pedagogy and linguodidactics in Slovakia. The terms "elaboration" and "inference" are used in accordance with P. Gavory's theory from the now-classic publication *Žiak a text* [*The pupil and the text*], 1992.



tered via this terminologised knowledge, literally built of “components”, which are named and delimited – i.e. from the flexible “building blocks” of a message.

GRAMMATICAL PHENOMENA – A FIELD FOR THE APPLICATION OF THE CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

We have already mentioned the necessity to understand the difference between the qualities of the language curriculum and the qualities of other subjects’ curricula.

The child gradually learns to handle the means that it uses to communicate with its environment – prosodic phenomena, the properties of consonants, the meanings and forms of words, and the communicative significances (functions) of messages, but also the impact of phenomena that are typical of speech (moving the core of a message to the beginning of the message and the importance of performative verbs, just to name a couple) – from the toddler stage. These “means” are realisations of linguistic phenomena described by linguistics and elaborated by linguodidactics. They are pre-concepts of linguistic phenomena. On the other hand, pre-concepts of non-linguistic terms (in particular from the area of natural sciences, but also from the social sciences) can remain for quite a long time in a “non-scientific form” – until a child comes into contact with the scientific field that is professionally devoted to the phenomenon in question. Initially, it occurs in the elemen-

tary science lessons, and later in subjects based on the knowledge of mathematics, physics, chemistry, biology, history, etc. The pre-concepts of linguistic phenomena (the pre-concept of grammatical gender, number, verb tense, mode, etc.) have already been confirmed since the child was a toddler through daily communication practice. The language forms are therefore already in line with their linguistic description from the early school years: a child usually uses the correct gender form of common names (nouns and adjectives, as well as pronouns and numerals), it distinguishes and correctly uses forms for non-symptomatic singular and plural, and by using a verb form it can distinguish the time zones in which the action of the message is taking place. It is not able, however, to perceive the boundaries in the language system and it cannot make use of the fact that the linguistic phenomenon has certain properties which can be transmitted into other situations and used for the conscious creation of other messages.

The language curriculum is difficult because it is abstract by its nature. However, the extensive experience of communication may overcome the discrepancy between the child’s concrete thinking and the abstract nature of the language curriculum.

WHAT IS BEING “DONE” BY SENTENCES?

Children’s understanding of the world (hence also their understanding of speech) was outlined above; it is an understanding characterised by complexity. Even the



child's first expressions are manifestations of complex messages with a clear communicative goal: *I want to drink, Take me out, Don't go away, I don't like it, Show it again*, etc. Individual communicative goals are initially realised through acoustic means, gradually covered in layers by the character set of the mother tongue – consonants, words, and their links.

The semantic perspective on acquiring a language is emphasised explicitly in the didactics of the Czech language; the emphasis is placed on the fundamental factor, on the expressive function (oral and written), and only then is it necessary to ask a question about the form and content of the message.

The interesting fact is that the principle “from function to form” is almost denied in the case of the curriculum as regards the basic organised unit of communication, i.e. the sentence.

What is the pre-concept of a sentence/message in the case of children just entering school? Since preschool age children have already been communicating naturally, not only with “sentences”, i.e. with an acoustically closed form of a message with conventional lexical and grammati-

cal features, but also with other types of messages – elliptical messages, sentence equivalents (both cases can be represented by the “one-word reply” so often criticised in schools), or a combination of verbal and non-verbal means. Having contact with texts, children attending the first class at school acquire knowledge (a pre-concept) of the fact that the sentence is a sequence beginning with a capital letter and ending with a full stop or another punctuation mark. They know that the sentence is changed by the tone of the voice, by the dynamics of a message. Using models, they gradually learn that besides a full stop a sentence can also be ended by a question mark or an exclamation mark. Prior to learning the definitions of declarative, imperative, interrogative, and optative³ sentences, the child can safely distinguish an ordinary message from a question, and it knows that a sentence pronounced with emphasis (“shouting or crying”) has a different function than a message or a question. A pupil starting school is well prepared to understand the communicative function of a message⁴ (it understands the terms *announcement, consent, admoni-*

³ The inclusion of optative sentences is non-systematic, in our opinion. While sentences traditionally regarded as declarative, interrogative, and imperative point with their content to the addressee and participate in the transition of the activity in which they are used (consent, disagreement, question, objection, instruction, advice, etc.), wishing is not always intended as a communicative interaction in the activity. If expressed towards a specific addressee, it fulfils the role of an appeal (*Kéž bych měla takovou kyticí!* – *I wish I had such a bouquet of flowers!*), but the message is often about experiencing the current situation (*Ať už konečně zazvoní.* – *I wish the bell would finally ring.*).

⁴ The communicative function of a message (CF) is a linguistic term which forms one of the pillars of the modern perception of syntax. It allows deeper penetration into the meaning of the contents being communicated. The non-linguistic disciplines dealing with communication work with some types of CF – but intuitively and unsystematically; the curriculum on CF is part of the curriculum at universities, while it is omitted in elementary and secondary schools.



tion, command, question, promise, advice, congratulation, etc.) and it is prepared to end sentences with three different marks – a full stop, question mark (when a speaker is asking a question), or exclamation mark (when a speaker is emphasising something or shouting, etc.). This well-built (and logically-built) pre-concept is also reflected in the latest codification of punctuation marks (Dokulil, 1958). According to this, only the question mark has a unique place – in a question. All other sentences can be ended either by a full stop or an exclamation mark, in accordance with the intention of the author. Several investigations have been carried out to find out whether children (without previous knowledge of sentence types) use marks at the end of a sentence correctly, in accordance with the codification, and whether they understand the terms referring to the communicative functions of messages as described above by lexical expressions. All the investigations provided results which exceeded expectations. The pupils knew that they could use a full stop or exclamation mark⁵ at the end of the short sentence *Don't cry*, while the sentence *Don't you wish to wake her up* is usually ended by a question mark (78% of the children decided to use a question mark, 12% of the pupils used a full stop, and 10% used an exclamation mark. Even other resolutions than those

with a question mark can easily be regarded as correct in various types of texts).

Let us see how this natural communication experience (an almost perfectly built pre-concept) gets complicated by the curriculum on declarative, imperative, and interrogative sentences. These types of sentences are, however, extended with models: imperative sentences with a verb in imperative mode, declarative sentences with a verb in declarative mode, and interrogative sentences with a question mark, accompanied by optative sentences (with the necessary conditional) and exclamatory sentences in various modes. The fact that the imperative can also be expressed by the declarative mode (*You won't go there! You won't go there.*) and that the conditional mode (curriculum of the fourth class) used in a sentence with a question mark can co-create the function of an appeal (*Would you please pass me the salt?*) will not be revealed by textbooks to a pupil attending the first level of elementary school.⁶ Further investigations to probe the results continue; however, an important partial conclusion has been drawn: in order to learn grammar (using full stops, question marks, and exclamation marks at the end of a sentence), children do not need the terminology and models so far applied. It is more natural and closer to pupils' pre-concept to define a question

⁵ The test was undergone by pupils at the beginning of their second year at school; therefore they had no knowledge about types of sentences and verbal modes. Their decision making on whether or not to use a full stop or exclamation mark at the end of a sentence was influenced by their experience of communication – verification of the pre-concept of the imperative mode in the light of the communicative reality that surrounds them.

⁶ We believe this is true because of the amazement that students show when they are presented with such or similar combinations of marks at the end of a sentence and the verbal mode used.



only as a clear-cut communicative function, which is signalled in a written text by a question mark, while in speech (interrogative question), it is distinguished with a specific intonation.⁷ As for other messages, pupils will decide on the basis of the importance of the message that they wish to attribute to it: emphatic instruction, moderate instruction, exclamation, strong or mild reproach, etc. The investigations to verify the legitimacy of optimising didactic recommendations still continue; the researchers are, however, aware that an alternative approach, though correct in terms of logic, pedagogy, and language, is hard to implement.

VERB TENSE AND THE REAL TIME

From the perspective of constructivism, the curriculum on verb tenses in the Czech language is one of the most interesting subjects. Understanding the time category is a “bridge” between abstract and concrete thinking. According to Piaget and Inhelderová (1997, p. 97), capturing the time category occurs gradually – it begins with understanding the sequence of actions, i.e. the time sequence, followed by understanding the duration of time periods (their beginning and end), and further to realising that real time flows equally – without any relation to the significance and features of the action, which are happening in the past, in the present,

and in the future. The complexity of the process of cognitive coping with time categories is caused again by the extent of the children’s holistic perception of phenomena; however, the difficulty of the curriculum on verb tenses is also influenced by the set of linguistic means which are used by the modern Czech language: the composite verb form of the imperfective and the perfective for past tenses (*dělal jsem, udělal jsem*), the present imperfective for the present (*dělám*), the composite form of imperfective for the future (*budu dělat*). The perfective then use the present form-making formants for expressing the future (*udělám*). As shown, the system of verb forms is influenced by grammatical and semantic mode categories. After their stabilisation, the Czech language ceased using, for example, simple verb forms for past tenses, which became obsolete for communication.

Being aware of the complexity of the situation, we concentrated the investigations on those components of presumed pre-concepts whose understanding would be instrumental to teachers applying a didactic approach in mastering the knowledge of verb tenses. The investigations brought some surprising results as early as in the first stage. One of the first tests was prepared in such a way as to help find out whether pupils are able at all to identify the zone of action in a simple sentence. They were supposed to orientate them-

⁷ Adhering to simplified models of interpretations of types of sentences then leads to unnatural intonation on the part of a teacher when dictating and wrong intonation of supplementary questions when reading instructions for oral tasks. Supplementary questions – usually beginning with the question words “how much/many” – require a falling final intonation, not rising, as we can often hear in maths lessons.



selves by means of the auxiliary expressions *stalo se, děje se, stane se* – *it happened, it happens, it will happen*, in order to rule out the suggestive (and confusing in the case of the future) influence of the words *bylo, je, bude* – *it was, it is, it will be*. A detailed description of the entire investigation, including a description of aids and the sequence of steps, can be found in Hájková et al. (2013, p. 68). Let us pay close attention to only two findings from many which supported our conviction about the necessity of examining the pre-concept of time categories in the case of pupils attending the first stage of elementary school and the usefulness of the constructivist approach in teaching the Czech language:

- a) orientation in the complicated system of Czech verb forms;
- b) perception of the intersections between time zones.

From our experience we know that teachers are concerned about explaining the future tense of verbs. As described above, two forms of expression are applied in this field – perfect verbs use a composite form with a grammatical morph expressed by the verb to be (*budu zpívat* – *I will be singing*), while imperfect verbs use a simple verb form, i.e. the present form for the future (*zazpívám* – *I will sing*). Teachers' concerns arise from the fact that the form-making formant of the perfect verb for the future (*-ám*) has an identical form to the formant of the imperfect verb expressing the present tense (*zpívám*). Tests (repeated in different variants with pupils before

explaining the curriculum on the verb tense) proved that pupils create the pre-concept of the verb form precisely; most pupils determined the simple verb form in sentences (*přečte, skončí, získá...* – *he will read, finish, gain, etc.*) correctly. Children perceive a message as a whole. It has to do with a holistic perception of phenomena; what was, however, surprising for the researchers was the fact that one of these fundamental findings about the psychological development of a child would impact on the details of the work with the linguistic material. Modern Czech language textbooks for the third class, but also oral expressions by teachers and parents who want to participate with home preparation in their children's education, often use (some textbooks even recommend using) "auxiliary words" for the past tense such as *yesterday, the other day, then*, etc., or alternatively *now, at present* etc. for the present. We found out that especially for initial explanation of the verb tense it is totally inappropriate to "specify" the inclusion of the verb into a time zone by using similar expressions. The same "auxiliary" verbal unit can in fact be used in all (or at least in two) time zones (*ted' snídál, ted' snídá, ted' bude snídat; dnes snídál, dnes snídá, dnes bude snídal* – *he now breakfasted, he is now breakfasting, he will now breakfast; he breakfasted today, he breakfasts today, he will breakfast today*). The adverbial expression gives the sentence a rather different meaning – and a pupil who has not been taught about the specifics of expressing the "pre-present" and



“pre-future” will reveal him-/herself as a sensitive and knowledgeable user of complex messages.

For example: the sentence *Eva stumbled* (*Eva zakopla*) was solved correctly in 81% of cases (the children placed the content of the sentence into the “happened” zone, i.e. belonging to the “past” zone). The same children were tested two days later with a new test – a modified one. The quoted sentence was now enhanced by an adverbial: *Eva just stumbled*. (*Eva právě zakopla*). Only 15% of the pupils placed it into the zone of past actions.

The investigations continue, showing that perception of the pre-present is solid even in cases where concretisation (visualisation) of the action expressed by the content of the text is used. The action in the sentence *The boys have really brought a lot of wood* (*Kluci přinesli opravdu hodně dřeva*) is regarded as an action in the present. The interesting fact is sensibility towards another “penetrating” zone – actions on the edge of the present and the future (pupils obviously do not know about the pre-present tense in some languages). Evaluating the sentence *I am going to treat the wound myself* (*Ošetřím ti tu ránu sám*) 45% of the respondents voted for “the present”. They understood the action as starting in the present and stretching into the future. It is apparent that “making mistakes” when placing the action into time zones is in fact a demonstration of the ability to understand and use the linguistic phenomena not

only on the basis of their formal approach, but also on the basis of recognised semantics. Messages describing actions in time and thoughts on the time framework are one of the ideal ways to thoroughly identify the components of children’s non-conceptual approach and subsequently link them with a scientific approach, i.e. conceptualise them.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND THE TEACHER

A teacher willing to apply the constructivist approach in teaching has to master his or her own communication skills to an extent that is sufficient for profound diagnosis of children’s pre-concepts. He or she must be experienced in linguistics in order to evaluate the risks of simplification in presenting the curriculum (being able to see the boundaries between simplification and agrammatism) and should possess pedagogical competencies; the processes of cognitive stimulation are a necessary condition for a successful procedure.

Will teachers be able and willing to change the terminology used over almost a century? Will they be willing to think professionally when explaining partial linguistic phenomena from a position higher above the limits of school textbooks? Will they be willing to master professionally this supplementary field of the perception of linguistic phenomena just to facilitate pupils’ approximation to the basis of the phenomenon and accepting the new term? We incline to believe so.



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