Language Teachers' Roles in the Constructivist Mode[1]

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According to the dictionary, the word 'role' means "a socially expected behavior pattern, usually determined by an individual's status in a particular society" (Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary, 1977). But, while in our western culture there are jobs that may clearly determine univocal roles, that is not the case with the job of the teacher, particularly with that of the foreign language teacher. Several authors, such as Oxford et al. (1998), Nunan and Lamb, (1996) and Richards and Lockhart (1994) have studied and analyzed the roles of classroom teachers in general and language teachers in particular. They found that there are new roles that teachers are performing, and they seem to coincide about the need to make explicit what these new roles imply in order to increase tolerance and understanding in the classroom.

We believe that what is expected from the foreign language teacher greatly depends on the kind of institution she/he works at and how it is structured. The philosophy behind the institution is also of utmost importance. But, perhaps for the most part, the roles of the foreign language teacher depend on the didactic strategy that the teacher advocates.

In this paper we look at the different roles performed by an EFL teacher teaching reading comprehension at high school level. For the study, we observed the actions of the teacher when using the bilingual reading manual *Reading Together. The Joint Action of Teacher and Student on the Text* (Longhini and Martinez, 1997), designed on a constructivist basis.

Constructivism is a burgeoning, important movement in education in general, and EFL in specific. As a theory of knowledge, Constructivism dates from the 1700s,

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but it was probably not until the contributions of J. Piaget in this century that it started influencing educational practice.[3] The constructivist theory asserts that knowledge is the result of a construction process in which the individual has an active participation. Studies done at the Center for the Study of Reading, University of Illinois at Urbana, IL, USA, in the 1970s, 80s and 90s and other researches in the field of reading looked at the participation of the learner when developing the reading skill.[4] Several of these studies applied constructivist ideas to reading and reading-related tasks.

Our observations took place in a public secondary school (students' ages 12 to 17), in Argentina, where English is taught a s a foreign language. It should be pointed out at this point that the lack of interest that students show for English as a school subject is remarkable in public schools. It was seeking an explanation for this problem that we resorted to constructivist theory.

One of the necessary conditions for a learner to be able to construe meaning is that the content itself should be "psychologically and logically meaningful" (Ausubel *et al.,* 1983). That is, it should be assimilated and related to previous knowledge; it should be inserted in the network of meanings already construed by the learner. Our observations seemed to show that the constructivist methodology that the teacher was applying to the teaching of reading, when following guidelines from *Reading Together,* provided the psychological and logical meaningfulness that secondary students would need in order to be motivated to learn the language. This methodology was operationalized in a process-oriented, interactive way. The learners were not just assessed for comprehension after reading, but rather, they were accompanied and assisted during the process of reading. This joint action of teacher and students on the text seemed to foster the construction of meaning. (We illustrate below, with excerpts from the reading manual used in the experience, *Reading Together*).

The implications of these insights determine the roles that the educator teaching this kind of course performs. First and foremost, a teacher working on constructivist lines can be said to do the jobs of a needs analyst and a materials developer, because she develops -or at least adapts- her own materials taking into consideration students' needs, interests and motivations. Designing -or adapting- her own materials allows the teacher to apply the principle of "task-control", whereby language is regulated not by input but by intake (Widdowson, 1990). Input is the language to which the learners are exposed, but, generally, only part of that language becomes intake, that is, becomes language that they can understand, process and react to. But, when the prin-

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[3] See Oxford, 1997, for a thorough discussion on Constructivism, its origin and development.
[4] See, for example, Baker and Brown (1984) and Campione and Armbruster (1984).

ciple of task-control is applied to language in its natural state, the context becomes authentic and logically meaningful. If rather than "tailoring" the language of texts, tasks are designed to control it, for specific purposes and with particular learners in mind then the conditions should be given for the construction of meaning.

Another role of the teacher in a constructivist, process-oriented, interactive reading course -and probably the most important one- is that of an interventionist and facilitator. The teacher encourages the learners to draw on their own experiences as language users. They are then required to employ the same procedures in English as in their own native language as they search for meaning. In order for the students to see what strategies may help them develop their reading skills, the teacher, following instructions from *Reading Together*, verbalizes her own cognitive processes, opportunely modeling the application of strategies. The example below illustrates how *Reading Together* suggests modeling the lower level skill strategy of "chunking" or "identifying sense units":

(The following excerpts have been translated into English. To view the original in Spanish, see the Appendix)

Excerpt A
"As we've been doing in previous lessons, we're going to keep reflecting about the **process of reading,** about what we do when we read. The same as when we read in our mother tongue, when we read in a foreign language, we **do not** decipher **word by word** but we rather understand the meaning of groups of words taken together.

In order to illustrate, let's attempt different reading paces (differences in the length of the segments).

Learning / to / read /in / English / is / not / so / hard / because / though / we / do / not / know / much / English / we / do / know / a lot / about / how / to / read. / And,

how can we / not know / if / we've been reading / in Spanish / for about / 10 years? The

thing is / that / besides trying to learn / some more English every day / when we read / we should apply / appropriate reading strategies/ -they can be / the ones we use in Spanish, / and some others / which we'll learn / with our teacher of English.

As we can see, we find it quite simple reading this text in Spanish, because we have a very good command of the language, and we do not need to chunk the text in

sense units. If we were reading a more complicated text however, we'd very likely need to chunk it. But we'd only try to identify **sense units** in those parts of the text that we found difficult to understand. Sense units can be very short or quite long, and even contain other sense units. It'll all depends on how fluent we are in the language or how far we are from understanding the text."

<div align="right">(Lesson 3, p.27)</div>

All this is done at the proper time and in the simplest possible way, if necessary, using the students' native language.

The following is an example of how *Reading Together* suggests applying the teaching technique of "verbalizing the application of strategies to foster comprehension".

Excerpt B
(teacher to students)

"Let's observe the text that we're going to read: the number of pages it has ... if there are any pictures ... let's look at the different types ... if there are titles and subtitles.

(teacher verbalizing her/his thoughts)

Do I know what this text is about? ... Can I anticipate the topic? ... Have I read about this before? ... Am I interested in this topic? ... Can I anticipate any information that this article may provide? ... Is there anything in particular, related to the topic, that I'd like to find here?"

<div align="right">(Lesson 8, p.65)</div>

According to Ausubel *et al.* (1983), for learning to be meaningful it also has to be functional, that is, it has to be potentially useful to learn new meanings. It has to provide the means to learn more. When applied to EFL reading courses, this principle means that the functionality of the content to be taught has to be clear in the mind of the teacher from the very moment that she sets the aims of the course. Aims were defined by Widdowson (1984) as "the purposes to which learning will be put *after* the end of the course" (emphasis ours). The implication of this is that the constructivist teacher should also be a good curriculum planner, who should keep in mind not only students' immediate needs for reading in English, but also their history and future.

An important point that has to be taken into consideration is the definition of the kind of instruction that a reading comprehension course in EFL involves, since the role the teacher performs greatly depends on her/his idea of a reading course. The question is, what do we teach when we teach reading comprehension? What do learners learn? Do they learn the language? Do they learn the content? Do they learn functions and the organization of the text? Do they learn the process?

When teaching reading, the secondary school EFL teacher may be inclined to focus on the content, or the text, or the process, and even on all of them. Her/his decision is ultimately determined by the theoretical ideas supporting her/his pedagogic practice. But the question she/he will not even ask herself/himself is whether to develop the lower level skills.[3] She/he will simply have to do it. The secondary school EFL reading teacher -at least in Argentine public schools-cannot assume that there will be a threshold of linguistic competence on which to count. And she/he knows that the groups will be, for the most part, difficult to motivate and heterogeneous. She/he also knows that, in general, the students' knowledge of English will be inadequate for doing any reasonably fluent reading.

When teaching a reading comprehension course, the secondary school EFL teacher will have to train the learners simultaneously in higher level skills and lower level skills. She will have to teach the language as the reading lesson progresses. And this is precisely what renders secondary school EFL courses different from ESL courses[4]. In EFL, teaching the basics of the language while training the students in reading comprehensively is a very significant challenge. This implies that the teacher also has to be a skillful lesson planner, carefully balancing the development of reading strategies as well as the development of basic language skills in an interactive way.

Below we illustrate how the teacher, following the instructions from Reading Together, models the development of reading strategies simultaneously focusing on a lower-level skill such as "chunking".

Excerpt C
(teacher verbalizing her/his thoughts)
" I'd like to know what this brochure is about. What am I supposed to do first? ... I'll look at the pictures. Can I understand them? ... I'll try to relate them to two words that call my attention in the heading: " alcohol" and "drug". I'll look at the whole text. I know that brochures constitute a special genre (kind of text). They are supposed to be easy reading. That's why sense units are generally well delimited and highlighted, in different types, different colors etc. All this makes reading easier, of course. .... I'll read the heading: "Alcohol is a dangerous drug". Do I understand? ... I think I do. This line is in a different color and different types. What if I chunk this into sense units, to make reading easier...? How can I do it?
"Alcohol / is / a dangerous drug"

Now I'll look at the nominal phrase "a dangerous drug". It constitutes a **sense unit**. Nominal phrases **always** constitute sense units, the same with verbal phrases, adverbial phrases and prepositional phrases.

(Lesson 3, p. 28)

After having carefully planned the lesson aiming at a balance in the development of lower and higher level skills, the teacher becomes another learner in the class, a partner, but not any partner, a knowledgeable learning partner. This collaborative strategy is essential since her/his goal is the construction of meaning and meaning is achieved, to a great extent, by interactivity. We believe that it is what learners actually do, interacting with the teacher and the text, which results in meaning. And we agree with Widdowson's claim (1990) that "we need to consider how the roles of teacher and learner can be made more effectively complementary so that effective learning comes about as a consequence of their interaction" (page 125).

The following is an instance of how *Reading Together* suggests prompting the application of monitoring strategies for the students to check if they are really interacting with the text:

Excerpt D
"Self-questions will help me check my comprehension:

- **Do I understand** in relation to what are Great Britain and Australia mentioned in this text?
  - **Do I realize** why the words quoted are Steve Whyland and not somebody else's?
  - **Did I note** what the relation is between Coca Cola and this sport?
  - **Can I anticipate** the answer to: "Will this sport become as popular as sea-surfing"?"

(Lesson 13, p. 98)

In this way, at moments, teacher and student behave like partners, interacting with the text in a joint action, while at other times the teacher intervenes to explain, clarify and correct. The decision about what to do and when to do it is with the teacher, because her/his role at this time is that of a manager.

Summing up, the main theoretical, pedagogical and didactic principles of a constructivist EFL reading course for secondary school are operationalized as the gradual construction of meaning achieved as a result of the interactivity between teacher, learner and text through the application of a constructivist didactic strategy. In order to accomplish this, the teacher acts as a curriculum planner, as a lesson planner, as a manager and as a knowledgeable learning partner.

A constructivist didactic strategy can be accomplished by different methodologies. The one fostered by the *Reading Together* and which was being observed "in motion" is "the progressive transfer of responsibility and control" (Coll, 1990). That is, the controlled assistance that the teacher offers the learners in order to accompany them during the process of learning. This assistance acts as "scaffolding" (Brüner, 1985).

When setting up the scaffolding, the teacher becomes a facilitator, assisting the learners to accomplish tasks that they would not have been able to do by themselves.

When looking at what happens in a real constructivist teaching situation, as it was the case here, we could see that the role of the scaffolder in fact fuses together with the role of a model to imitate. The teacher relinquishes control of the learning situation by a) modeling the strategy use, b) posing questions to elicit the verbalization of the strategy use, c) observing the learner's own verbalization of the application of the strategy.

When applying a constructivist didactic strategy, the teacher plays different roles at the different stages of the lesson. In the following example, the teacher tries to raise the students' grammatical and discourse awareness building upon the knowledge that students -as users of their own native language- already have, and stimulates students for more autonomous learning.

Excerpt E

"Let's read the first sentence: <<**This is how you do it**>>.

a-- What's the meaning of <<**this**>>, in this context? Let's reread the previous paragraph before taking a decision. Now, let's choose the correct answer:

1 – Esto (This) 2 – Así (In this way) 3 – Este(This one)

b – Let's remember the meaning of <<**how**>>...If we don't know it, haw can we solve the problem? ... So, this first sentence means ... and this helps us predict ...Let's see ... What can come next, after this sentence?

(Lesson 13, p.95)

(It should be mentioned that students use, as reference material for helping them solve these activities, an ad-hoc *"Glossary of Grammar Terms for Skillful Moves in Reading Comprehension"*(Longhini et al, 1997) that they can consult, in addition to the bilingual dictionary)

And we may find the teacher in a constructivist mode has a different role, probably, for each micro-teaching situation. It all depends on how detailed one wants to be.

Though it may seem a paradox, it is in learner-centered classrooms[5] where teachers have a wider variety and more active roles to play. As Oxford (1999) has claimed "the focus on the learner necessitated a change in the role of the language teacher:

from the fount of all wisdom and director of classroom activity to facilitator of learning and guide toward greater autonomy for the learner" (Ampersand, March 1999, 3:7)

Some of the roles that a constructivist didactic strategy imposes on the teacher are more demanding than others. But all should be equally important to create a teaching/learning atmosphere, and all of them should emanate from the teacher being "authoritative", in Widdowson's terms (1990), that is having a thorough knowledge of what and how to teach (p. 188).

We think that it is important for teachers, teacher educators and trainee teachers to be aware that these different roles require the development of new skills on the part of the teacher, which, of course, implies more effort. But we also think that a more democratic class, which works together in the construction of knowledge, is worth the effort.

Acknowledgements

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[5] The paradox vanishes if, with Prabhu (1985), we see these classrooms as "learning-centered" rather than learner-centered.

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Appendix

A

"Como hemos hecho ya en las clases anteriores, vamos a continuar reflexionando sobre **el proceso de lectura**, sobre qué es lo que hacemos cuando leemos. Tanto cuando leemos en nuestra propia lengua como cuando leemos en una lengua extranjera, **no** desciframos palabra por palabra sino que vamos entendiendo grupos de palabras.

Para ejemplificar, intentemos distintos ritmos (diferencias en la longitud del segmento) de lectura:

Aprender / a / leer / en / inglés / no / es / tan / complicado, / porque / de / inglés / sabemos / poco, / pero / de / leer / sabemos / mucho. Y /

cómo no / vamos a / saber? si / hace 10 / años que / leemos en / español ¿verdad? La /

cuestión es / que / además de tratar de aprender / un poco más de inglés cada día,

en el momento de leer / apliquemos

estrategias de lectura / -pueden ser / las que utilizamos en español, / y otras / que la profesora de inglés nos enseñe."

Como vemos, leer en español este texto es tan fácil para nosotros que no necesitamos separarlo en **unidades de sentido**. Si leyéramos algo más difícil, seguramente sí sería necesario hacerlo. Pero sólo trataríamos de identificar la **unidad de sentido** en la parte del texto que nos causara problemas de comprensión. Esa **unidad de sentido** podría ser muy cortita, o bastante larga –incluso contener otras **unidades de sentido**- dependerá de cuánto dominemos el idioma y cuán grande sea nuestra falta de comprensión"

(Lesson3, p.27)

B

"Observemos el texto que vamos a leer: miremos cuántas páginas tiene... si hay fotografías... observemos los distintos tipos de letras... si hay títulos y subtítulos..."

¿Me doy cuenta de qué se trata este texto?... ¿Puedo anticipar el tema?... ¿He leído sobre el tema?... ¿Me interesa?... ¿Puedo anticipar alguna información que seguramente el artículo me brindará?... ¿Hay alguna información sobre este tema que me gustaría encontrar aquí?"

(Lesson 8, p.65)

C

"Quiero saber de qué se trata este folleto. ¿Qué hago primero?... Miro las ilustraciones. ¿Las entiendo?... Veo si las puedo relacionar con dos palabras que saltan a la vista en el encabezamiento:<alcohol> -<drug>.

Observo todo el texto. Sé que los folletos, (<<brochures>>, en inglés) son un tipo de texto especial, que pretende ser de fácil lectura, por eso, precisamente, las unidades de sentido suelen presentarse bien delimitadas y resaltadas, con distinta tipografía, distintos colores de letras, etc.

Eso hace más fácil la lectura, claro. Leo el encabezamiento: Alcohol is a dangerous drug! ¿Entiendo lo que dice?... Creo que sí. Tiene distinto color y distinto tamaño de letra. Si para facilitarme la tarea separo esta oración en unidades de sentido, ¿cómo lo hago?...

*Ahora observo la frase nominal "a dangerous drug". Constituye una **unidad de sentido**. Las frases nominales **siempre** constituyen unidades de sentido, al igual que las frases verbales, las frases adverbiales y las frases preposicionales."*

(Lesson 3, p. 28)

D

Me hago y me respondo preguntas que me ayuden a saber si estoy entendiendo:

- ¿**Entiendo** en relación a qué se mencionan Gran Bretaña y Australia en el texto?
- ¿**Me doy cuenta** porqué se citan las palabras de Steve Whyland, y no de cualquier otra persona?
- ¿**Noté** cuál es la relación de Coca Cola con este deporte?
- ¿**Puedo** anticipar cuál será la respuesta a " Will this sport become as popular as seasurfing"?"

(Lesson 13, p. 98)

E

Leamos la primera oración: <<**This is how you do it**>>.

a- ¿Qué significa <<**this**>> en este contexto? Releamos el párrafo anterior antes de decidir. Elijamos la opción correcta.

1- esto   2- así   3- éste

b- Recordemos qué significa <<**how**>>... Si no lo sabemos, ¿cómo lo resolvemos?... Entonces, esta primera oración quiere decir ... y nos ayuda a hacer predicciones... Pensemos... ¿Qué vendrá después de esta oración?"

(Lesson 13, p. 95)