



CONSTRUCTIVIST LEARNING THEORY IN ENGLISH LITERATURE AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL): PRINCIPLES AND CLASSROOM PRACTICES

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Abstract

This article examines the application of constructivist learning theory to the teaching of English literature in foreign language (EFL) classrooms. Constructivism, rooted in the cognitive work of Jean Piaget, the sociocultural theory of Lev Vygotsky, and the radical constructivism of Ernst von Glasersfeld, reframes knowledge as something learners actively build through experience, interaction, and reflection rather than passively receive from an authoritative source. When applied to literature instruction in EFL settings, this reframing carries particular significance: literary texts are inherently open to multiple interpretations, and language learners bring diverse linguistic repertoires, cultural schemata, and affective responses to the reading experience. The article surveys the theoretical foundations of constructivism, traces their extension into reader-response theory and communicative language pedagogy, and articulates a set of core principles for constructivist literature teaching, including learner-centeredness, activation of prior knowledge, social negotiation of meaning, scaffolding within the zone of proximal development, and authentic, task-based engagement with texts. It then translates these principles into concrete classroom practices, among them reader-response journals, literature circles, process drama, project-based and task-based literary units, and technology-mediated collaborative reading. Assessment approaches consistent with constructivist premises, such as portfolios, dialogic assessment, and performance tasks, are also discussed. The article considers the benefits of constructivist approaches for language and literary competence, motivation, and critical thinking, alongside the practical and institutional challenges that arise when these approaches are implemented in EFL contexts characterized by large classes, examination pressure, and varying learner proficiency. A sample constructivist lesson sequence built around a short literary text illustrates how the principles can be operationalized. The article concludes with implications for teacher education, arguing that preparing EFL teachers to facilitate constructivist literature classrooms requires sustained attention to questioning technique, task design, and tolerance for interpretive diversity.

Keywords: Constructivism, EFL, English literature, scaffolding, learner-Centered pedagogy,



Introduction

Interest in constructivist approaches to language and literature pedagogy has grown alongside a broader shift across education systems toward learner-centered curricula, competency-based assessment, and twenty-first-century skills frameworks that emphasize critical thinking, collaboration, and communication over rote retention of content. English literature occupies a curious middle ground within this shift: included in many national EFL curricula partly for its linguistic value and partly for its cultural and humanistic value, it is nonetheless frequently taught using methods that predate, and sit in tension with, these broader pedagogical reforms. The persistence of transmission-oriented literature teaching, even in systems that have otherwise embraced communicative and learner-centered principles for general language instruction, suggests that literature is sometimes perceived, mistakenly, as a body of content to be covered and tested rather than an activity of interpretation to be practiced. This article treats that perception as a pedagogical problem constructivist theory is well equipped to address.

The teaching of English literature within foreign language curricula occupies an unusual position. On one hand, Probst (2004) noted that literature has long been treated as one of the earliest and most traditional vehicles for language instruction, employed to model correct grammar, to expose learners to elevated diction, and to transmit cultural knowledge about English-speaking societies. On the other hand, the methodologies historically associated with literature teaching lecture-based explication, teacher-centered analysis, and the transmission of a single sanctioned interpretation sit uneasily alongside contemporary understandings of how language and meaning are learned. Where communicative and task-based approaches to language teaching have pushed the field toward learner-centered, meaning-focused, and socially situated instruction, literature classrooms in many EFL contexts have been slower to change. Students are frequently asked to memorize a teacher's or a textbook's reading of a poem or short story, to reproduce that reading on an examination, and to treat the text as a repository of a fixed, retrievable meaning (Maley & Duff, 2022). .

Constructivist learning theory offers a coherent alternative. Constructivism holds that learners do not receive knowledge ready-made from an external source but build, or construct, understanding through the interaction of new experience with existing cognitive structures, and, in its social variants, through dialogue and collaboration with others. Applied to any domain, constructivism shifts the teacher's role from transmitter of information to facilitator of experiences through which learners construct their own understanding. Applied specifically to literature, and more specifically still to literature encountered through a foreign language, constructivism aligns naturally with the nature of literary reading itself. Literary texts are characteristically ambiguous, layered, and open to more than one defensible reading; the process of reading literature has been described, in reader-response theory, as a transaction between reader and text in which meaning is produced rather than discovered. Foreign language learners bring an additional layer of complexity and richness to this transaction: their linguistic proficiency shapes what they can access in the text, their first-language and cultural schemata shape how they interpret what they access, and their



motivation to persist with a demanding text is closely tied to whether the classroom validates their emerging, sometimes partial, interpretations.

This article has three aims. First, it reviews the theoretical foundations of constructivism as they bear on literature instruction, drawing on cognitive constructivism, social constructivism, and radical constructivism, and connecting these traditions to reader-response theory as the literary-critical analogue of constructivist epistemology. Second, it distills from this theoretical base a set of principles that can guide the design of EFL literature instruction. Third, it translates these principles into classroom practices that have been documented in the language teaching literature, including reader-response journals, literature circles, process drama, task-based and project-based literary units, and technology-mediated collaborative reading, together with assessment practices consistent with constructivist premises. The article closes by considering the benefits and the practical challenges of constructivist literature teaching in EFL contexts, offers an illustrative lesson sequence, and discusses implications for teacher preparation.

Theoretical Foundations of Constructivist Learning Theory

Cognitive Constructivism: Piaget

Constructivism as an epistemological and psychological position is most closely associated with the developmental psychology of Jean Piaget, who argued that children do not absorb knowledge passively but construct it through their own actions on the environment (Piaget, 1970). Central to Piaget's account are the twin processes of assimilation, whereby new information is incorporated into existing cognitive structures or schemata, and accommodation, whereby those structures are themselves revised when new information cannot be reconciled with them (Piaget, 1970). Learning, in this account, is driven by disequilibrium: an encounter with information that does not fit existing schemata creates a state of cognitive tension that the learner is motivated to resolve by reorganizing understanding. Piaget's constructivism is often described as individual or cognitive constructivism because it locates the engine of learning within the individual learner's cognitive activity, even though social interaction may supply the experiences that trigger disequilibrium (Fosnot, 2005).

For literature teaching, Piagetian constructivism suggests that learners approach a text with existing schemata expectations about narrative structure, genre conventions, character behavior, and thematic content built from prior reading experiences in both the first and target languages. A literary text that confirms these schemata is processed with relative ease; a text that violates them, through an unfamiliar narrative structure, an unreliable narrator, or content that conflicts with the learner's cultural assumptions, creates productive disequilibrium. The pedagogical implication is that literature teachers should neither avoid texts that challenge learners' expectations nor present such texts as puzzles with a single correct solution, but should design instruction that helps learners notice the mismatch between their expectations and the text, and that supports them in revising their interpretive frameworks accordingly.

**Social Constructivism: Vygotsky**

Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory extends and complicates the individual-cognitive account by insisting that higher mental functions, including the capacities involved in comprehending and interpreting text, originate in social interaction before they are internalized by the individual (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky proposed that learning occurs first on the interpsychological plane, between people, and only subsequently on the intrapsychological plane, within the individual mind (Vygotsky, 1978). Two Vygotskian constructs are especially influential in language and literature pedagogy. The first is the zone of proximal development, defined as the distance between what a learner can accomplish independently and what the same learner can accomplish with the assistance of a more capable peer or adult (Vygotsky, 1978). The second is scaffolding, a term coined by later researchers working in the Vygotskian tradition to describe the temporary, adjustable support that a more knowledgeable other provides within the zone of proximal development, support that is gradually withdrawn as the learner internalizes the target skill or understanding (Wood et al., 1976).

Applied to EFL literature instruction, social constructivism suggests that meaning-making around a literary text is most productively treated as a collaborative activity. A learner working alone with a demanding literary text in a foreign language may be unable to construct a coherent interpretation; the same learner, supported by a teacher's guiding questions, a peer's alternative reading, or collaboratively negotiated glosses of difficult vocabulary, may be able to reach an interpretation well beyond independent reach (Donato, 1994; Gibbons, 2002). This has direct implications for classroom organization: pair and small-group discussion, whole-class dialogic exchange, and teacher-mediated scaffolding become not peripheral activities but central mechanisms through which literary understanding, and the language competence bound up with it, is built (Van de Pol et al., 2010).

Radical Constructivism

Ernst von Glasersfeld's radical constructivism pushes the epistemological claims of constructivism further, arguing that knowledge is not a representation of an objective, mind-independent reality that learners come to match with increasing accuracy, but a construction that is viable insofar as it allows the learner to function effectively within experience (von Glasersfeld, 1995). Radical constructivism is deliberately agnostic about whether constructed knowledge corresponds to an external reality; its criterion for successful learning is viability rather than correspondence to a fixed truth (von Glasersfeld, 1995). While radical constructivism has been most influential in mathematics and science education, its implications for literature teaching are considerable, because literary interpretation has never been governed by a straightforward correspondence criterion in the way that, for instance, a factual claim about the world might be. A radical constructivist stance toward literature teaching supports the now-familiar position in literary studies that there is no single, retrievable, author-intended meaning that a reading either matches or fails to match, but rather a range of more or less viable interpretations, viability being assessed against the text's internal evidence, the norms of the interpretive community, and the coherence of the reader's argument.



Reader-Response Theory as the Literary Analogue

Constructivism's implications for literature teaching are given explicit form in reader-response theory, particularly in the transactional model developed by Louise Rosenblatt (1999). Rosenblatt argued that a literary work does not exist as a fixed object prior to and independent of a reading; rather, the poem or story comes into being in the transaction between a particular reader, with a particular history and set of purposes, and the text (Rosenblatt, 1999). Rosenblatt further distinguished between efferent reading, oriented toward extracting and retaining information, and aesthetic reading, oriented toward the lived experience of the reading itself, and argued that literature instruction has often erred by treating literary texts efferently, as if they existed to be mined for facts and morals rather than experienced (Rosenblatt, 1999). The parallel with constructivist learning theory is direct: just as the constructivist learner builds knowledge through the interaction of existing schemata with new experience, the reader in Rosenblatt's model builds a literary work through the transaction between personal history and textual cues. For EFL contexts, this convergence between constructivist epistemology and reader-response literary theory provides a coherent theoretical warrant for treating literature instruction as an occasion for learners to build, articulate, and revise their own readings, in dialogue with peers and teacher, rather than to recover an externally authorized interpretation (Hirvela, 1996).

Comparing the Three Constructivist Traditions

Although Piagetian, Vygotskian, and radical constructivism share the foundational premise that knowledge is built rather than transmitted, they differ in emphasis in ways that matter for classroom design. Piagetian constructivism foregrounds the individual learner's cognitive reorganization in response to disequilibrium and directs attention to the sequencing and pacing of textual challenge: a text, or a task built around a text, should be pitched so that it creates productive rather than overwhelming disequilibrium. Vygotskian social constructivism foregrounds the social origin of higher mental functions and directs attention to the structure of classroom interaction: who talks, in what configuration, with what kind of support, and how responsibility for a task is gradually transferred from teacher or peer to individual learner. Radical constructivism foregrounds the epistemological status of the knowledge constructed and directs attention to the criteria by which an interpretation is judged successful, replacing a correspondence criterion, whereby an interpretation is correct because it matches an externally fixed meaning, with a viability criterion, whereby an interpretation is judged by its coherence, its grounding in textual evidence, and its capacity to withstand challenge within the interpretive community of the classroom. A comprehensive constructivist pedagogy for EFL literature teaching draws on all three emphases simultaneously: it sequences textual and task difficulty with attention to individual disequilibrium, it structures interaction to provide social scaffolding, and it adopts viability rather than correspondence as the standard against which learner interpretations are evaluated (Fosnot, 2005).



Constructivism within Second Language Acquisition Theory

Constructivist principles also intersect with mainstream theories of second language acquisition in ways that reinforce their applicability to EFL literature teaching. Interactionist accounts of acquisition hold that negotiation of meaning during interaction, including the clarification requests, confirmation checks, and reformulations that occur when interlocutors work to understand each other, drives the acquisition of new linguistic forms, a mechanism closely aligned with the Vygotskian emphasis on socially situated meaning-making (Long, 1996). Sociocultural approaches to second language development, extending Vygotsky's framework directly into applied linguistics, treat collaborative dialogue as a site of joint language construction in which learners co-construct utterances neither could produce alone, a phenomenon documented in studies of collective scaffolding among language learners working together on tasks (Donato, 1994; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Literature, with its dense, ambiguous, and discussion-generating content, provides particularly rich material for this kind of negotiated, collaboratively constructed language use, arguably richer than the more constrained information-gap tasks often used in communicative language teaching, because literary ambiguity generates a wider range of legitimate things for learners to disagree about and negotiate (Hanauer, 2001).

Constructivism and the Distinctive Demands of EFL Literature Teaching

Before turning to these distinguishing features, it is worth noting that literature has occupied a fluctuating position within EFL methodology more broadly. Grammar-translation approaches relied heavily on literary texts as vehicles for translation exercises and grammatical analysis, with little attention to literary or aesthetic response. The audiolingual and early communicative movements, by contrast, largely displaced literature from mainstream language teaching on the grounds that literary language was too complex, too culturally specific, or too remote from everyday communicative needs to serve as efficient input for language acquisition. Literature's return to prominence in EFL curricula from the 1980s onward has been closely tied to exactly the reconceptualization that constructivist and reader-response theory make possible: once literary reading is understood not as the decoding of a fixed, examinable meaning but as a communicative, meaning-negotiating activity in its own right, literature ceases to be a special case requiring justification within a communicative curriculum and becomes, instead, an unusually rich instance of the same meaning-focused, learner-centered engagement that communicative and task-based methodology already values (Carter & Long, 1991; Collie & Slater, 1987). This historical trajectory helps explain why constructivist principles, though not originally formulated with literature teaching in mind, have found such a natural home there (Hall, 2015).

Literature teaching in a foreign language classroom differs from literature teaching in a first-language context in ways that make constructivist principles especially pertinent, though not without complication. Four distinguishing features are worth foregrounding.



First, EFL learners typically approach a literary text with incomplete linguistic resources relative to a native-speaker reader, which means that a significant portion of classroom time and cognitive effort is necessarily devoted to comprehension at the level of vocabulary, syntax, and cohesion, before or alongside higher-order interpretation. A constructivist stance does not treat this linguistic work as separate from meaning construction but as continuous with it: learners construct understanding of unfamiliar words and structures through the same processes of hypothesis, feedback, and revision that they apply to constructing interpretations of theme and character.

Second, EFL learners bring first-language and home-culture schemata that may diverge substantially from the cultural assumptions embedded in an English-language text (Kramsch, 1993). This divergence can be treated, consistent with Piagetian constructivism, as a source of productive disequilibrium rather than an obstacle to be minimized. A short story that assumes familiarity with a particular Western social convention, for instance, invites learners to notice the gap between their own schema and the text's assumptions, and to construct new cultural as well as literary understanding in response (Kramsch, 1993).

Third, the affective dimension of language learning, including anxiety about performing in a foreign language and the risk of publicly offering an interpretation that might be judged linguistically or intellectually inadequate, bears directly on whether learners are willing to engage in the social negotiation of meaning that Vygotskian constructivism identifies as central to learning. Constructivist classroom practice in EFL literature teaching must therefore attend deliberately to establishing a low-anxiety, high-support environment in which tentative, partial, or linguistically imperfect interpretations are welcomed as legitimate contributions to collective meaning-making.

Fourth, institutional and assessment pressures in many EFL contexts favor convergent, easily gradable answers, including comprehension questions with single correct responses and standardized examinations that reward the reproduction of an authorized reading. These pressures can pull literature instruction back toward transmission-oriented pedagogy even where teachers are sympathetic to constructivist principles, and they represent one of the central practical challenges discussed later in this article.

Core Principles of Constructivist EFL Literature Teaching

The principles set out in this section are best understood not as a checklist to be applied mechanically but as mutually reinforcing commitments that together constitute a coherent pedagogical stance. A lesson that activates prior knowledge but then reverts to teacher-delivered explication has only partially adopted constructivist practice; a lesson that maximizes learner talk without any scaffolding may produce social interaction without productive construction of new understanding. The five principles are



therefore presented as an interlocking set, with the classroom practices described in Section 5 illustrating how they can be combined in an integrated lesson design.

Drawing on the theoretical foundations reviewed above, five interlocking principles can be identified as central to constructivist literature teaching in EFL contexts.

Learner-Centeredness

Constructivist instruction repositions the learner, rather than the teacher or the text, as the primary agent of meaning-making (Freire, 1999). This does not imply that the teacher's expertise is irrelevant; rather, the teacher's role shifts from delivering an authoritative reading to designing tasks, posing questions, and structuring interaction so that learners construct their own understanding (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). In practice, learner-centeredness means that class time is organized around learner talk, learner-generated questions, and learner-produced written and oral responses to a greater degree than around teacher lecture or teacher-scripted explication.

Activation and Extension of Prior Knowledge

As new understanding is built on existing schemata, constructivist literature teaching devotes deliberate attention to activating learners' relevant prior knowledge, linguistic, literary, and cultural, before and during engagement with a text (Vaughn & Estes, 2018). Pre-reading activities that elicit what learners already know or believe about a text's setting, genre, or thematic territory serve two functions: they make existing schemata available for the assimilation of new textual information, and they surface points of potential disequilibrium that the teacher can anticipate and scaffold (Vaughn & Estes, 2018).

Social Negotiation of Meaning

Consistent with Vygotskian social constructivism, meaning-making is treated as an inherently social process best conducted through structured interaction: pair work, small-group discussion, whole-class dialogic exchange, and collaborative writing (Vygotsky, 1978; Bakhtin, 1981). The teacher's questions are designed to be genuinely open, admitting more than one defensible answer, rather than display questions seeking a predetermined response, and classroom talk is organized to allow learners to hear, evaluate, and build on one another's interpretations (Fecho & Botzakis, 2017).

4.4 Scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development

Constructivist instruction is not laissez-faire; it requires the teacher to diagnose what learners can currently do independently and to provide calibrated support, whether through guiding questions, graphic organizers, partial glosses, or modeling of interpretive strategies, that allows learners to accomplish more than they could unaided, with that support gradually withdrawn as competence develops (Wood et al., 2019; Van de Pol et al., 2010). Effective scaffolding in the literature classroom requires the teacher to have a clear sense of the specific comprehension or interpretive demand a given text places on learners at a given proficiency level (Van de Pol et al., 2010).

**Authentic, Task-Based Engagement**

Constructivist principles favor tasks that require learners to use language and literary understanding for genuine communicative or interpretive purposes, such as producing a response to be shared with peers, comparing interpretations, or extending a text creatively, over tasks whose sole purpose is to check comprehension (Lazar, 1993). Authentic engagement is closely related to Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance: learners are invited to experience and respond to the text as literature, rather than to mine it efferently for extractable facts (Rosenblatt, 1999).

Tolerance for Ambiguity and Interpretive Diversity

A principle that follows directly from the radical constructivist and reader-response foundations discussed in Section 2 deserves separate statement because it is so often the point at which practice reverts to transmission despite good intentions: the constructivist literature classroom must build, explicitly and repeatedly, a tolerance for ambiguity and a willingness to sustain more than one interpretation without resolving the class toward a single sanctioned reading. This is difficult for many teachers, who may feel that leaving an interpretive question genuinely open constitutes a pedagogical failure, particularly under institutional pressure to prepare learners for examinations with fixed answers. Building this tolerance requires the teacher to develop and model explicit criteria for evaluating an interpretation, namely its grounding in specific textual evidence and its internal coherence (Probst, 2024), so that learners understand that not all interpretations are equally defensible even though more than one may be defensible (von Glasersfeld, 1995), avoiding the opposite danger of a relativism in which any response is treated as equally valid regardless of its relationship to the text.

Classroom Practices for Constructivist EFL Literature Teaching

The principles articulated above translate into a range of documented classroom practices. This section surveys six such practices, none of which is exclusive to constructivist pedagogy in isolation but which together constitute a recognizable constructivist repertoire for the EFL literature classroom.

Reader-Response Journals and Dialogue Journals

Reader-response journals ask learners to record their personal reactions, questions, predictions, and evolving interpretations as they read a text, typically in ungraded or lightly graded, low-stakes writing (Probst, 2004). Because the journal privileges the learner's own response over a search for a predetermined correct answer, it operationalizes both Rosenblatt's aesthetic stance and the constructivist emphasis on learner-generated meaning (Rosenblatt, 1999; Hirvela, 1996). Dialogue journals extend this practice by having the teacher or a peer respond in writing to the learner's journal entries, creating a written analogue of Vygotskian scaffolded dialogue in which the more capable other's comments can extend, question, or gently complicate the learner's initial response (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007).

**Literature Circles**

Literature circles organize learners into small, relatively autonomous discussion groups, often with rotating roles such as discussion leader, vocabulary finder, or connector, who together read and discuss a text over a series of sessions (Daniels, 2002). The structure distributes interpretive authority among learners rather than concentrating it in the teacher, and the rotating roles provide a form of scaffolding that helps learners with varying proficiency levels contribute meaningfully to group meaning-making (Daniels, 2002). Because groups working on the same text can arrive at different foci and interpretations, literature circles also make interpretive diversity visible and normal within the classroom, reinforcing the constructivist premise that more than one viable reading can coexist.

Process Drama and Role Play

Process drama techniques, including hot-seating, in which a learner responds to questions in the persona of a character, and forum theatre, in which scenes are enacted and then reworked collaboratively, embody constructivist principles by requiring learners to construct a character's perspective actively rather than receive a description of that perspective from the teacher (Heathcote & Bolton, 2025; Maley & Duff, 2014). Embodied, socially enacted engagement with a text of this kind draws directly on Vygotsky's account of play as a zone of proximal development in which learners operate beyond their ordinary capacities, and it lowers the affective barriers to language production by embedding language use within a fictional frame (Maley & Duff, 2014).

Task-Based and Project-Based Literary Units

Task-based approaches organize instruction around a culminating task with a genuine communicative outcome, such as producing an alternative ending, staging a scene, or compiling a class anthology of responses to a set of poems, with the reading and analysis of the literary text serving as input to that task rather than as an end in itself (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Project-based units extend this logic across a longer time frame, often integrating research, presentation, and peer feedback, and provide sustained opportunities for learners to revise their understanding of a text as the project develops, consistent with the constructivist view of learning as an iterative, recursive process rather than a single encounter with fixed content (Hall, 2015).

Technology-Mediated Collaborative Reading

Digital tools, including shared annotation platforms that allow learners to comment on a common digital text, discussion forums, and collaborative writing documents, extend the social negotiation of meaning beyond the physical classroom and beyond synchronous class time (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Asynchronous digital annotation in particular allows learners to read one another's marginal comments and questions before or after class discussion, effectively distributing the scaffolding function across the whole



class rather than concentrating it in the teacher, and giving learners who are reluctant to speak in class an additional channel through which to contribute to collective meaning-making (Gibbons, 2002).

Assessment Consistent with Constructivist Premises

Constructivist literature teaching requires assessment practices that are compatible with the recognition of multiple viable interpretations. Portfolios that collect a learner's reading journals, drafts, and revisions over a unit or term allow assessment to track the development of a learner's interpretive and linguistic competence over time rather than measuring a single fixed outcome (Fernsten & Reda, 2011). Dialogic or conference-based assessment, in which the teacher discusses a learner's interpretation with the learner directly, allows the teacher to probe the learner's reasoning and to distinguish a well-supported but unconventional reading from a superficial or textually unsupported one, a distinction that a single-answer comprehension test cannot make (Probst, 2004). Performance tasks, including staged scenes, oral presentations of an interpretation with textual evidence, and peer-reviewed creative extensions of a text, allow assessment to be embedded within authentic, socially situated activity rather than separated from it.

Differentiating Constructivist Practice across Proficiency Levels

A recurring concern raised by teachers encountering constructivist literature pedagogy for the first time is whether open-ended, discussion-heavy tasks are viable with lower-proficiency learners who may lack the linguistic resources to articulate a nuanced interpretation in English. Constructivist principles do not require that all classroom talk occur in extended, grammatically complex English from the outset; rather, they require that the cognitive and social work of meaning construction be genuinely undertaken by the learner, with scaffolding calibrated to current proficiency. With lower-proficiency learners, this can mean permitting first-language discussion during small-group meaning negotiation before requiring an English-language report to the class, providing sentence frames and key vocabulary in advance of discussion rather than expecting spontaneous production, using simplified or graded literary texts, including graded readers with genuine literary merit, rather than abandoning literature altogether, and relying more heavily on non-verbal and visual response tasks, such as sequencing story events or sketching a character, as an entry point into verbal interpretation (Gibbons, 2002). With higher-proficiency learners, scaffolding can be reduced and tasks can demand more extended written and spoken argumentation, direct textual citation, and engagement with secondary interpretive material such as published reviews or critical commentary. In both cases, the underlying constructivist commitment, that learners construct rather than receive interpretation, and that this construction proceeds through social negotiation appropriately scaffolded, remains constant even as its surface implementation varies with proficiency.

Benefits of Constructivist Approaches to EFL Literature Instruction

The case for constructivist literature teaching in EFL settings rests not only on its theoretical coherence but on a convergence of benefits across linguistic, cognitive, affective, and cultural domains, each of which is examined below.



Several benefits of constructivist literature pedagogy are consistently identified in the language teaching literature. Motivation and engagement tend to increase when learners are positioned as legitimate meaning-makers rather than as recipients of a predetermined reading, because the learner's own response is treated as valuable classroom content rather than as a deviation to be corrected (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007). Language development is supported because constructivist tasks, particularly those involving discussion, negotiation, and collaborative writing, generate substantial comprehensible input and pushed output around content that learners are genuinely motivated to communicate about, consistent with interactionist accounts of second language acquisition (Long, 1996). Critical thinking is fostered because learners are regularly asked to justify an interpretation with textual evidence, to compare their reading against a peer's alternative reading, and to revise their thinking in light of new evidence or argument, practices that extend beyond the literature classroom to broader academic literacy (Probst, 2004). Cultural competence develops as learners are supported in noticing and interrogating the gap between their own cultural schemata and those embedded in the text, rather than having that gap glossed over or resolved for them by the teacher (Kramsch, 1993). Finally, learner autonomy is cultivated because constructivist practices, particularly literature circles and project-based units, gradually transfer responsibility for organizing and directing reading and discussion from the teacher to the learners themselves (Daniels, 2002).

Beyond these general benefits, constructivist approaches carry particular advantages for specific dimensions of EFL learning that merit separate attention. With respect to vocabulary development, constructivist tasks that require learners to negotiate the meaning of unfamiliar words collaboratively, rather than simply consulting a glossary, have been associated with deeper and more durable lexical retention, on the reasoning that the effortful, socially mediated construction of a word's meaning within context produces a richer memory trace than the passive receipt of a translation or definition (Hanauer, 2001). With respect to reading strategy development, constructivist practices that make interpretive reasoning visible, for instance by requiring learners to justify a prediction or an inference with reference to specific textual evidence during paired or group discussion, model strategic reading behavior for learners who might not otherwise develop it independently, functioning as a form of cognitive apprenticeship in which strategies ordinarily invisible inside an expert reader's mind are externalized and made available for observation and appropriation by less experienced readers (Vaughn & Estes, 1986). With respect to willingness to communicate, the low-stakes, response-oriented framing of constructivist tasks, in which a tentative or partial interpretation is treated as a valid contribution rather than a deficient answer, has been credited with reducing the foreign language anxiety that otherwise suppresses learner participation, particularly among learners who are linguistically capable but reluctant to speak for fear of error (Fecho & Botzakis, 2007).

Challenges and Constraints in Implementation

Despite these benefits, constructivist literature teaching faces substantial practical challenges in many EFL contexts. Large class sizes, common in secondary and tertiary EFL settings in many parts of the world, make sustained small-group discussion and individualized scaffolding difficult to manage, and can



push teachers back toward whole-class, teacher-fronted formats that are easier to control. Examination systems that reward the reproduction of a single authorized interpretation create a structural incentive for teachers and learners alike to prioritize convergent, test-aligned reading over open interpretive exploration, regardless of a teacher's pedagogical convictions. Learners' limited linguistic proficiency can constrain the range of texts and tasks available, and constructivist tasks that assume a baseline of language production ability, such as extended discussion or written interpretation, may be difficult to implement with lower-proficiency groups without careful scaffolding, which is itself time-intensive to design. Teacher preparation is a further constraint: constructivist facilitation, including the skill of posing genuinely open questions, tolerating interpretive uncertainty, and managing student-led discussion, differs substantially from the explicative, teacher-centered skill set that many EFL literature teachers were themselves trained in and continue to see modeled in textbooks and institutional norms (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Finally, cultural expectations about the teacher's authority and role can create friction: in educational cultures where the teacher is expected to be the primary source of knowledge, both students and administrators may initially resist a shift toward student-generated interpretation, perceiving it as a dereliction of the teacher's responsibility to transmit correct knowledge.

A further, more subtle challenge concerns the risk of superficial adoption, in which the visible forms of constructivist practice, such as small-group seating arrangements or the label "literature circle," are introduced without the underlying shift in teacher questioning and evaluative stance that gives those forms their pedagogical substance. Group discussion conducted around a worksheet of closed comprehension questions, for instance, retains a constructivist appearance while functioning, in effect, as an individually completed comprehension exercise performed in a social setting, since the interpretive work has already been predetermined by the question design. Guarding against this risk requires attention not only to classroom organization but to the deeper features discussed in Section 4, particularly the openness of the questions posed and the criteria used to evaluate learner responses.

Addressing these challenges does not require abandoning constructivist principles but does require adapting them to local constraints: scaffolded small-group work can be designed for large classes through carefully structured roles and time limits; assessment can be partially reformed even within examination-driven systems by incorporating portfolio or conference-based components alongside required standardized measures; and teacher education can explicitly address the facilitation skills that constructivist practice demands, a point developed further:

Illustrative Lesson Sequence: A Constructivist Approach to a Short Story

The sequence outlined below is intended as an illustrative template rather than a fixed script; teachers adapting it to a specific text, class size, or proficiency level should expect to adjust the pacing, the proportion of first-language and target-language use, and the degree of scaffolding provided at each stage, consistent with the principle of differentiation discussed in Section 5.7.



To illustrate how the principles and practices discussed above might be integrated, this section outlines a constructivist lesson sequence built around a short literary text, such as a brief modern short story with a clear but not heavy-handed central conflict, suitable for an upper-intermediate EFL class.

The sequence begins with a pre-reading phase designed to activate prior knowledge and generate anticipatory engagement. Learners are asked, in small groups, to discuss a question related to the story's central theme drawn from their own experience, before any information about the text itself is provided, and each group shares a brief summary of its discussion with the class. This phase surfaces the schemata learners will bring to the text and creates a shared, low-stakes basis for later comparison with the text's treatment of the theme.

During reading, learners work through the text in stages, pausing at two or three points identified in advance as points of interpretive significance, such as a moment of ambiguous character motivation. At each pause, learners record a brief written prediction or reaction in a reading journal before discussing it in pairs, a structure that combines individual construction of meaning with immediate social negotiation. The teacher circulates during pair discussion, listening for emerging interpretations and preparing follow-up questions rather than supplying answers.

Following completion of the text, learners move into literature-circle-style small groups with assigned roles, one of which is specifically tasked with identifying textual evidence for and against competing interpretations of the story's ending, since endings of this kind are frequently a locus of legitimate interpretive disagreement. Groups then present their range of interpretations to the class, and the teacher facilitates a whole-class discussion designed to surface points of consensus and genuine disagreement, explicitly validating the coexistence of more than one well-supported reading rather than steering the class toward a single sanctioned interpretation.

Implications for Teacher Education

The gap between constructivist theory and constructivist practice in EFL literature classrooms is, in large part, a gap in teacher preparation. Three implications for teacher education follow from the discussion above.

1. First, pre-service and in-service training should give explicit, practiced attention to questioning technique, since the difference between a display question with a single expected answer and a genuinely open question that admits multiple defensible responses is often subtle in surface form but consequential in its effect on classroom discourse.
2. Second, teacher education should build EFL literature teachers' tolerance for interpretive uncertainty and their skill in distinguishing a well-supported unconventional reading from an unsupported one, a discrimination that is more demanding than checking an answer against an



answer key and that requires teachers to have their own strong command of the text and of textual-evidence-based reasoning.

3. Third, teacher education programs should provide structured practice in designing scaffolded tasks calibrated to learners' current proficiency, since effective scaffolding depends on an accurate, ongoing diagnosis of what learners can and cannot yet do independently, a skill that develops through guided practice and feedback rather than through exposure to theory alone (Van de Pol et al., 2010). Programs that combine theoretical grounding in constructivist and reader-response principles with sustained, supervised practice in facilitating student-centered literature discussion are better positioned to produce teachers capable of implementing the classroom practices described in this article, even within the institutional constraints discussed in Section 7.

Recommendations

Building on the theoretical and practical discussion above, five recommendations are offered for EFL practitioners, curriculum designers, and teacher educators seeking to implement constructivist literature instruction.

1. Redesign pre- and during-reading tasks to activate and surface prior knowledge. Teachers should routinely open a literary unit with structured pre-reading discussion or writing that elicits learners' existing linguistic, literary, and cultural schemata, and should build in explicit pause points during reading where learners record predictions or reactions before discussing them, so that the disequilibrium a text generates is anticipated and scaffolded rather than left to chance
2. Restructure classroom interaction around small-group and paired negotiation of meaning before whole-class synthesis. Rather than opening discussion of a text at the whole-class level, teachers should route initial interpretation through pair or small-group talk, using structures such as literature circles with rotating roles, so that every learner is required to articulate and defend a reading before the class converges on a shared understanding
3. Teachers should communicate to learners, and apply consistently, criteria such as grounding in specific textual evidence and internal coherence of argument, so that interpretive diversity is welcomed without collapsing into an anything-goes relativism, and so that learners understand what distinguishes a strong reading from a weak one even where more than one reading is defensible
4. Diversify assessment to include portfolios, conferencing, and performance tasks alongside any required standardized measures. Where institutional testing requirements cannot be removed, teachers and curriculum designers should supplement them with portfolio review, dialogic conferencing, and performance-based tasks that can register growth in interpretive and linguistic



- competence over time, and, where a written test is unavoidable, should design items that ask learners to defend an interpretation with evidence rather than select a single predetermined answer.
5. Teacher preparation programs and school-based professional development should move beyond a single workshop on constructivist theory and provide repeated, supervised practice in formulating genuinely open questions, calibrating scaffolding to learners' current proficiency, and facilitating student-led discussion, since these facilitation skills, rather than the theory alone, determine whether constructivist principles are realized in the literature classroom

Conclusion

The argument developed across this article can be summarized in a single claim: literature and constructivism are natural allies in the EFL classroom, because the open, interpretively rich character of literary texts is precisely the kind of material on which constructivist principles of learner-centered, socially negotiated, scaffolded meaning construction can operate most productively, provided that classroom practice, assessment, and teacher preparation are aligned to support rather than undercut that potential.

Constructivist learning theory, drawing on the cognitive constructivism of Piaget, the social constructivism of Vygotsky, and the radical constructivism of von Glasersfeld, offers a well-grounded theoretical basis for reforming the teaching of English literature in EFL classrooms away from transmission-oriented explication and toward learner-centered, socially negotiated, scaffolded engagement with texts. This theoretical basis converges naturally with reader-response theory's account of literary meaning as a transaction between reader and text, providing EFL literature pedagogy with a coherent rationale for treating learners' own interpretations, however linguistically imperfect or interpretively unconventional, as legitimate and valuable classroom content.

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