THE CONSTRUCTIVIST VALUES OF COMPREHENSION IN TEXT DIDACTICS

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Abstract: *The article explores the idea that constructivist education implies the building of relationships, the prevalence of the logic of liberty and plurality, the offering of cognitivist and constructivist models, which thus produce learning through research and construction. By stating the role of the real-life environment, knowledge is being created, based on the exploration of possibilities, skills, and attitudes. Therefore, the issue of pupils' participation in this construction, comprehension, and interpretation, through dynamic interactive relationships, while appealing to research or solving problematic situations, is as relevant as ever. By adapting the constructivist methodology for pedagogical use we are able to objectify knowledge by confronting it with other solutions and interpretations.*

When they are approached in the education space, texts become manifestations of norms with various degrees of power, since every text contains a "packed" meaning. Therefore, text interpretation is an activity situated within the relation between the text taken as reference, a real situation and a course of action that is being deliberated on. The degree to which a text that is being interpreted by a student may help in the understanding of a real situation, in order to help choose a specific course of action, constitutes the main methodological problem of text didactics. Thus there are several distinct taxonomies of comprehension we denote in the context of text comprehension: meaning-generating comprehension, cognitive comprehension, and significant comprehension.

The study illustrates the fact that denotative texts may have different functions in the educational process, but their main attributions are still two: informing and forming. The educational consequences of the denotative text materialise in the building of students' capacity for observation. It is through such texts that the student will better access the realities of life. And therefore text didactics, as a dimension of general education, is concerned with educating the student through the application of various types of texts in educational practice. When used in education these texts have the mission of supporting the students' search for answers to the challenges of today, their self-assessment and self-formation as readers that had been both informed and formed based on this type of text.

Keywords: *constructivist methodology; learning through construction; comprehension; pro-text; denotative text; text network.*

Education is the *power instrument* that configures in multiple senses the engagements, conceptions, and convictions of fresh school graduates. Education *creates the image* of what the world means, what are knowledge, truth, principles, the limits of existence, at both praxeological and theoretical levels. This is why education ought to cultivate an implicative attitude vs its own explicit and especially tacit engagements.

Currently the methodology of text exploration finds itself relegated to a somewhat superficial domain, concerning reading, establishing, and synthesising information. However, the new structure of the world reclaims a new approach to the text. The current methodology of text exploration may be represented as a multidimensional structure with relational values and parameters, which can be approached through text exploration from various perspectives: on the surface as well as in depth, contextually as well as constructively. Only in working with the text in this manner does the student become aware of its power and significance, and thus operate in a **pro-textual** manner, that is *for, in favour of, in support of, in the interest of, in defence of, relating to, connected to*, and *concerning* — the text.

The changes in the paradigm of learning bring forth its following essential features, such as *durability, flexibility, functionality, rationality, power of generalisation, orientation towards application*, and generates new models of teaching. It is important that these new processes are being learnt through constructivism, in a cumulative, active, reflection-filled, contextual, internally motivated manner. The activation of learning occurs due to the differentiated construction of comprehension. The student is being formed predominantly from the perspective of efficient integration in the socio-professional, cultural, and spiritual reality, in the huge diversity of contexts and complex situations (Korsin, 2003).

In this way the constructivist orientation in education brings forth the student's autonomy, the focus on the construction of comprehension, the diversity of the problematic situations to be solved, the exercise of cognitive capacities, and alternative verification. These conceptual changes fuse in various ways with methodology in the classroom. Therefore, the student is expected to perform independent searches of adaptation according to affirmed interests, preferences or contexts; to formulate hypotheses on improving the way of learning certain topics, information, within certain opportunities; to attempt transforming known information and experience into elements of new creation; to verify access to new texts, situations, authentic projects taken from real life; to assume certain responsibilities, initiatives inside and outside the classroom etc.

Constructivist education involves developing competences, answering complex questions, creating relationships, the domination of the logic of freedom and plurality, and offering cognitivist and constructivist models. It is mainly oriented towards processes, although the goals remain important. This is how *learning through research*

and construction occurs: by affirming the role of the real environment, knowledge is being constructed and created based on an exploration of possibilities, abilities, and attitudes. These learning experiences form the basis of students' participation in construction, comprehension, and interpretation, through dynamic interactive relationships, appealing to research or solutions for problematic situations. Obviously, school learning is based on the following *dimensions of learning*: real life, lifelong education, and profound learning (Joiţa, 2010).

Undoubtedly, learning through *construction of comprehension* implies essentially a research methodology that would respect its rigours in order to formulate and verify hypotheses: logic, objectivism, argumentation, identification and interpretation of data/information and meanings, mental and practical processing, confrontation in various contexts, communication, and collaboration. The **constructivist methodology** *demonstrates how one gets to build the comprehension of meanings, significances*, general and specific scientific truths. It also indicates applicable procedures and means. Through the pedagogical adaptation of constructivist methodology one identifies information via individual search, understands essences and meanings through mental processing, and objectifies knowledge through recourse to confrontation with other solutions and interpretations.

Poststructuralism, with its basic doctrines of decentralisation, multiplicity, polilogue, and intertextuality, has an important place in the constructivist approach. Poststructuralists examine the world through the prism of its perception and understand it as an "infinity open in infinity, as an infinite text". The text is perceived as an epistemological model of reality (Tschirova, Goncharova, 2007). Poststructuralism holds a *pantextual position*, through which conscience is reduced to the written text, since human existence cannot be conceived outside the text. This leads to a negation of the subjective individuality of the person. In poststructuralism the place of the author is occupied by the "scriptor", born at the same time with the text and, unlike the author, free of feelings or impressions, having only cognitive orientation.

We must mention here the ideas of Roland Barthes, who presents a developed explanation for the differences between **text** and **creation** (as cited in Tschirova, Goncharova, 2007):
- The text is not an indivisible entity, but a field of methodological operation; creation is a material element one can "hold in hand", whereas the text may be "held" on one's tongue and is only perceived during the making process;
- The text cannot be included in any genre category, which makes classification difficult;
- The text is detachable, it works through the sphere of significance;
- What is fulfilled in the text is not merely one permissible meaning, but a multitude of meanings. The reading of a text is a unique act through which quotations, references, echoes and languages pass, thus creating a powerful stereophony. It is due to this multilayered texture that the text, unlike creation, may be read in an unexpected way:

• Creation is determined by reality, its "father" and "master" is the author. ***The text has no paternal "registration", its metaphor is the network***. The text spreads as a result of the combination and systematic organisation of elements, this is why it may be read regardless of "paternal will";

• Creation is an object of use. The text "purifies" this object, "extracting" from it the play, the work, the process and the practical activity. It requires us to tend to a substantial reduction of distance between writing and reading. Reading is playing with the text. The reader effectively collaborates with the text, while creation is being examined by the critic in the same way a verdict is contemplated by an "executioner";

• Creation cannot be rewritten. This determines its refraction from the reader, who is thus deprived of pleasure. The text, on the other hand, is connected to satisfaction, i.e. to pleasure without a feeling of rejection.

We can see therefore that the evolving character of text significance in the process of research development is determined by a slow switching from monologism to dialogism, from the "dictatorship of the author" to the *triumph of the exegete*. As we have discovered above, through exegesis one discovers the construction of a new meaning, a synthesis of a new significance, a *re-symbolisation*.

In constructivism a relationship is established between two dimensions of knowledge — the mental and the material one. The mental dimension ensures the understanding of the problem or of the situation, while the material one specifies a representation of the model that had been constructed internally, abstractly — into a product, an artefact, which gives a relative image or a description over the mental construction. It is important to note that this stage of knowledge enhances understanding, verifies it and completes it through interpretation, reflection, and evaluation, thus leading to a development of self-knowledge as well as the exercise of certain capacities, abilities, attitudes, and competences. One's own construction as learning reflects comprehension (Joiţa, 2010).

The Romanian term for "comprehension", *înţelegere*, is etymologically linked to the Latin preposition *inter* ("between") and the verb *lego,-are,-avi,-atum* ("to tie"), thus meaning *to connect something to something else*. The words *intellect* and *intelligence* have the same origins. Comprehension is spontaneous when connection is easily established between current and past information (should such connections not be too numerous and varied). This is what usually happens when we perceive an object — we understand at once what it is, what its use is etc. However, comprehension may also be discursive, when it occurs over a lengthy time interval, sometimes even extending through years, should relationships be too numerous, requiring incursions in various directions. Unidirectional knowledge either distorts or stops comprehension.

This is how comprehension is constituted as a way of being *next to the entity*, *at the entity* and even *of the entity*. The meanings that exist in the text belong to the existence of the entity that understands them and understands itself through them. The semantic activity will thus become linked to reflexive activity as a *cogitant* one,

although no longer will this be a *cogito* of the subject that interprets himself through interpretation, but instead an *existent* one that discovers that he may exist as himself in the understanding of his own existence. The text is the screen through which the reading student penetrates the world and thus rediscovers himself in a different dimension, while the distance is abolished by the very closeness of the student to the text and to himself. To understand means to place oneself in the situation of a privileged text reference: the text communicates at me and communicates *me*. My reading is actually my existence in the world of text: it means exposing oneself to the text and receiving from it a vaster self that would be the existence proposal which responds in the most adequate way to the offer of the world. If the text is offering me a world, then reading is the answer I give to this offer. My vaster self is the result of this increase in horizon, created within me by the works of the text (Ştefănescu, 2010).

In this reference framework the structural analysis of a text is meant to lead from superficial semantics to a profound one, this being a necessary stage between superficial and in-depth interpretation or between pre-comprehension and comprehension itself. The reading student understands what the text says, not what the author had meant to say, i.e. he understands the textual world uncovered through in-depth semantics. ***He does not understand something hidden behind the text, but something exposed in front of it instead, which the text offers as a possible world.*** To understand a text means to follow its movements from meaning to reference, from what it says to that what it speaks about. To understand means to be situated in this dynamics or itinerary of the text, which means nothing else but a relationship with whatever it is talking about. Comprehension is the very move between meaning and its own reference: it departs from an explanation of the text (superficial semantics) in order to reach its opening into a whole world (in-depth semantics). The personal involvement of the interpreting student represents the involvement of his comprehension in the creation of this world, which belongs ***to him, too***.

When examining the issue of comprehension from the positions of psychological hermeneutics, A. Brudnyi (cited in Tschirova, Goncharova, 2007) believes that the comprehension of a text includes three parallel processes: (a) montage; (b) trans/centring: (c) forming the text concept. In this case, *montage* means movement "along the text": from a relatively finalised element (such as a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter etc.) towards another one, which is placed just after it. *Trans/centring* is connected to the restructuring (in the reader's conscience) of the situation that is reflected in the text, namely to the switching of the reflexive centre from one element to another. This switching may sometimes have an intermittent character, despite depending on the montage of elements. The *forming of the text concept* is treated as the formation of a general textual meaning, and it depends on the reader's activism. A. Brudnyi suggests that we should change from hermeneutics, as the science about comprehension, to posthermeneutics, the science of comprehension. The tendency to facilitate the understanding of the complex text phenomenon by dividing it into simple components, such as levels, aspects, structures, stages of

development/reception/comprehension, narrative and interpretative strategies and tactics, narrative instances etc. is reflected in the activity of the exegete.

We find that there is no uniform acceptance of the concept of comprehension, since the complexity of establishing an area of reference for this category is connected to its relegation to the domain of the intuitive-figurative rather than to that of the logical-abstract and rational. Comprehension is "hard to catch" and does not manifest itself in any special way when occurring without difficulty. We only remember comprehension when we cannot comprehend something. That is, the very fact of not understanding makes us reflect upon understanding.

As I. Pânzaru has discovered, by understanding narration we understand the meaning of people's deeds and thus understand the people themselves (Pânzaru, 2012). By being proclaimed in public space, the texts become manifestations of various norms of different power, since every text has meaning "packed" in it. Text interpretation is therefore *an activity situated within the relationship between the text taken as a reference, a real-life situation and a course of action that is being deliberated upon*. The measure to which a text debated by someone may assist in the understanding of a real-life situation, in order to help choosing a course of action, constitutes the main methodological issue of text didactics.

In this way, text comprehension involves a process of conclusion at all levels: word meaning, phrases, semantic and constructive structures. The thought moves "along the text", but also from the centre of thinking towards other levels, thus creating an effect of "inclusion in superior structures", which proves the existence of meaning as a potential for development. Therefore, the movement of thought during the comprehension process occurs in a *horizontal*, *linear* direction, from one textual unit to another, as well as *vertically*, passing from specific units to those of a different order — metaunits, metameaning, metaconnections, towards their gradual increase. Our thought aims continually towards deeper and deeper levels, turns back in order to correct the hypotheses that had been formed, then proceeds forward once more, establishing connections both within every semantic level and the elements of different levels. In the case of vertical thinking what occurs is a phenomenon that L. Murzin has called the *law of incorporation*: the influence of each subsequent meaning over the previous one eventually forms an *incorporated complex*, as result of the augmentation of textual units (cited in Ulanovich, 2001). The subsequent components do not merely join up, but "merge" with the preceding ones, thus influencing each other at the same time.

The horizontal movement of thought presents itself as *nonreflexive understanding* at the text's semantic level (Ulanovich, 2001). The *vertical movement of thought* appears as the joining of several consecutive semantic units into hierarchically organised microsentences, thus exercising the complex function of putting into order a huge number of semantic data. This process is based on the actualisation of the recipient's cognitive base. One after another, it includes into

comprehension large quantities of background information. The vertical movement of thought implies *reflexive understanding* (the understanding of previous understanding). Seen as an activity, reflexive understanding has the following levels: semantic, cognitive, and phenomenological (de/objectified). Semantic comprehension occurs when reflection is oriented towards that domain of the individual's experience which connects to memories concerning the shape and semantics of linguistic signs. In the case of cognitive comprehension reflection is oriented towards the area that deals with the experience of knowledge and cognitive activity. Therefore, the phenomenon of comprehension possesses polivalent types of existence.

In the opinion of G. Bogin (2001), text comprehension means relating the student's experience to the text in order to have its contents assimilated. The experience being related to the text is as much individual as it is collective: an individual's understanding may develop through another's activity, while the achievements of this other may be obtained by the former, too. Comprehension can be perceived as a process of seizing the internal connections in a text's contents; as seizing the meaning of a text; of assimilating certain alien emotions, thoughts, decisions, which had been objectified in the text; of reproducing the situation enacted by the author etc. To understand a text, to assimilate its contents means to direct one's whole experience towards the text; to accept its contents so that it becomes part of one's subjectivity; to divide its contents as a reflection of alien experience in consensus with one's own experience; to pick from this division whatever one needs for one's own activity.

In the context of text comprehension there are several distinct taxonomies:
1. *Semantising comprehension*, i.e. decoding the text units that manifest themselves in the function of significance;
2. *Cognitive comprehension*, i.e. assimilating the contents of cognitive information, which is represented in the form of certain units of the text, with which semantising comprehension has a connection;
3. *Significant* (phenomenological, de/objectifying) *comprehension*, which is constructed on the de/objectification of ideal realities, which are presented outside the means of direct nominalisation, but become objectified in nothing else but the text's means (Bogin, 2001).

The final purpose of text comprehension is helping the human being to communicate, overcoming the lack of understanding of individual by individual. It is specifically in the text, rather than in the linguistic system, that human subjectivity is objectified.

Schools tend to accentuate prevalently cognitive comprehension, which is universalised. Comprehension is usually defined based on this type of understanding (to understand, to have a correct representation; to establish relationships between phenomena based on existent knowledge etc.). Through comprehension reflection over the whole experience is organised — the experience of memorising, the experience of

learning, the experience of sensation and perception. These experiences cooperate with comprehension.

Wittgenstein (cited in Petrovici, 2010) suggests that comprehension is obtained through extra presence: thus words can be understood, if they are accompanied by ideas. **We would like to go further and state** *that ideas can be understood, if they are accompanied by text.* However, when understanding fails to occur, there begins an authentic dialogue between the reader and the text itself. Not only is this possible, but it is actually necessary, because the text is not an object, but a monument to the phenomenon of comprehension (Râmbu, 1998).

The text can be seen as a whole world, and therefore *it is never alone, bearing the syntagm of existential, epistemic and actional paradigms*. The criterion of correct understanding is represented by the agreement of parts in a whole (Petrovici, 2010). Understanding occurs while interpretation is being assumed; every type of interpretation constitutes a development of understanding.

The issue of comprehension, as A. Sasu (1985) finds, is not an issue of knowledge, but rather of the *way of being*. We can state therefore that the relationship between text comprehension and the *development of a student's personality* is essential. Since no text exists by itself, being always destined to generate or to accelerate a development, a change, it is important to identify the knots, hubs, connections, ideas and consequences that are being configured in such a way as to fit the student's expectations. Therefore, forming a student's protextual position will lead to:
  •Developing an initiative of learning, making information an instrument of learning and searching;
  •The possibility to perceive reality through the intelligible text;
  •Making more dynamic the concept of textuality, which makes the text be a text;
  •The student learns how to "look" at a text, how to search in it and how to find what he is looking for;
  •In interpreting texts the student acts spontaneously, standing on a superior step of meaning formation;
  •A new type of consumer, who takes active part in the conception and "making" of the product he is going to consume/use;
  •A professional consumer, who gets to possess the knowledge, skill and exigency of a professional concerning the produce he is consuming/using, which implies forming the student as a *prosumer* (producer + consumer).
  •Manifesting the state of *text brio*, when the student may state he loves the text as a rare species of language.

In this context, the didactic exploration of the text under the aspect of *network-type learning* offers certain educational advantages through the structuring of a cognitive network as a pertinent pedagogical product, which is theoretically and

praxeologically founded on the principles of cognitive veridicity, processuality and utility with relation to the student that is going to benefit from it, who accedes through the text to the realities of life and wishes for a successful social inclusion.

If we speak of the ***denotative text***, we must mention that not only should it "catch" the reading student and keep his attention, but also there must be no mistakes or hesitation concerning its attribution, i.e. of the message it is sending. Generally, a text is an identity, and the identity of a denotative text is the message, which is obviously stressed upon, being always "on top" of the text.

The phenomenon of a denotative text that has a powerful impact but no specific message corresponds to the situation of a highly competitive market. If a whole category of texts becomes a "commodity", then one will no longer be able to obtain in such a category a text with an identity, except by inventing a way to re-involve the reader through some pertinent added value or by creating a new message that will pull out part of the category from the commodity status. If the denotative text expects a strong involvement of the reader and if all messages invest in information, then from an educational point of view it would be a good strategy to examine the reading student's "tiredness" with reading and its comprehension.

A denotative text's author's ideas are the result of a multiphase process, where every phase is fundamental, since they oblige the author to have specific ideas before proceeding to creation. It is due to these ideas that the obtained message will or will not be efficient. Therefore, both the author of a denotative text and its readers must be creators before reaching the phase of creation itself. This is a thing that can be learnt.

Denotative texts have various functions, but their main functions are two: *information* and *formation*. A huge volume of information is being diffused through a denotative text, which in the educational context should correspond to certain criteria: it must contain new information; be pertinent, i.e. hold information related to problems that had already been tackled in other texts; take into account the possible social impact; involve a piece of rare information.

Text didactics, as a dimension of general education, is concerned with educating the student through the application of various types of texts in educational practice. When used in education, these texts have the mission of supporting the students' search for answers to the challenges of today, their self-assessment and self-formation as readers that had been both informed and formed based on this type of text.

The text has a pluri- and interdisciplinary dimension, exploring contributions from various areas of knowledge — anthropology, ethics, philosophy, informatics, neurobiology etc. Involving the text in the educational process is a challenge, which focuses attention on the approach, understanding, and exploration of "unsubstantial" information, in some specialists' opinion. However, others believe that it leads to

problem-solving and finding solutions to real complex situations taken from the students' own daily lives.

Seen from an educational perspective, the analysis of a denotative text should be approached as a product of the reflexive attitude of relating its contents to the real world around us. The educational consequences of the denotative text materialise in the building of the students' *observation skills*. With the help of such texts the student will access life realities easier.

The denotative text, like any other text, may be read in the two ways specified by Roland Barthes: the first moves quickly, ignoring language games, it goes quickly to avoid being bored; the second one passes over nothing, weighs, sticks to the text, reads with application and uplift, surprising the *feuilletage of meanings*. This type of reading suits modernist texts and also denotative texts, which ought to be read not in "gulping", but in "rediscovering" in them one's own life. And in order to avoid getting lost in nonsense, the readers of the denotative text should be "aristocratic readers", perhaps to a larger extent than when reading a designative text (Barthes, 2006).

It is well known that for a text to be considered successful it is not enough that it should contain merely interesting ideas, according to A. Şerbănescu (2001). Its reception by the student depends largely on the author's ability of organising ideas in order to make them clear. Even very interesting, good, original, unusual ideas get lost in a muddled text the reader is unable to follow through the author's fault. What the author sees as clear and perfect, the reading student might find "tangled". The true value of a text transpires in the comparison the reading student makes between his own mental scheme and the one presented by the author. *The reading student expects to find in the denotative text his own daily experience and one of the models that shape his existence.* Therefore, through networking interpretation the student may try to use his knowledge and *make a connection between the world of the text and the real world*.

The problems that may arise concerning the reception of the denotative text may be caused by a failure to seize the *central knots* of the text. This is why it is desirable that the students be used to find the deposits of meanings created by text knots. Understanding means finding similitude between the knowledge sedimented in the student's mind and the knowledge offered by the author, in the text. The more a sentence in a text is important for its argumentative decoupage, the more chances it has to be retained by the reading student. The quality of text comprehension depends largely on the student's ability to seize text knots, to sense the importance of certain ideas as related to the discussed subject.

Organising a text involves ordering the ideas in such a way that they may become easily integrated by the readers in their system of knowledge. The text contents may be organised in a natural order, as imposed from within (temporal, spatial), or in an external order that had been reclaimed by the human mind. The author's attention needs to concentrate on "finding" a place for each element of the text in order for it to

enter an optimal relation with other text elements, while the student's task is to "see the architecture" of the text, from within as well as from outside.

Speaking from a constructivist perspective, ***through the text, from the text, towards the text*** we mean installing a learning community which makes the value option *in favour of the text*. For in the paradigm of postmodern education the student's person is placed in a direct and complete relation with reality. The student thus becomes an exegete of the world, accepting the reality, finding solutions, being convinced of the need for a thing, a deed, and attitude to express. In this chain of logic, the denotative text ought to be accepted as a desirable, feasible and opportune offer.

Since reading precedes all the analytical discourses for the installation and negotiation of meaning, the students will go through the text with the means of a reading process with double processing value. First, through ***zero-level reading***, the text will be read in a basic manner and an idea, image, topos, symbol or any other distinctive textual sign will be memorised. The student decides individually upon his choice, without having to explain publicly the ration of his actions. This information will be uncovered at a later stage, already with an argumentative support generated by the convictions of an initiated reader.

Conclusion

Thus we have found that the constructivist values of comprehension in text didactics are generated by a methodological architecture that brings forth the denotative text, which has a direct or indirect relation with the student's real existence, his surrounding reality. In this case the student perceives the text not as a piece of didactic content, but as a fragment of life, which "shows" him how to act in certain life situations.

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