

Employing constructivist-based principles in an *Applied Language Studies in English* course with a focus on ideology and the media

A B S T R A C T In line with outcomes-based education (OBE), language practitioners in South Africa have shifted their focus from a predominantly transmission-based, instructionist approach to language teaching to a more cognitive approach, which no longer treats learners as passive recipients of knowledge. In keeping with this shift, several linguists and applied linguists in the field of language teaching have focused on constructivist approaches to learning (e.g. Blyth, 1997; Collentine, 2000; Kaufman, 2004). This article reports on how a constructivist model of learning, combined with a discourse-based approach to analysing newspaper language, was employed in an "Applied Language Studies in English" module currently offered at third-year level at a South African tertiary institution. The constructivist principles underlying the course are identified, the aim being to show how a discourse-based, constructivist approach may be used to (i) heighten learners' awareness of how global metaphors establish ideology in newspaper editorials and (ii) guide learners in the writing of their own editorials in which they generate metaphors that reflect specific ideological perspectives. At the same time, a common misconception that constructivist learning does not involve direct instruction from the teacher is countered. In this regard, the notion of pedagogical scaffolding is considered.

Keywords: cognitive approach, constructivist approach, discourse-based approach, direct instruction, pedagogical scaffolding

1. Introduction

Given the global shift in emphasis from transmission models of instruction towards learner-centred models, language practitioners are under increasing pressure to ensure that "[knowledge]

construction takes place when learners actively construct knowledge through intellectual engagement and investment in personally meaningful tasks" (Conceição-Runlee & Daley, 1998: 1; cf. Collentine, 2000: 45). This is an obvious departure from the objectivist perspective according to which knowledge construction is subordinated to reproduction (cf. Lueddeke, 1999: 246; Jones, 2002: 3). Social constructivist applications in particular have become dominant paradigms in education (cf. Jones, 2002: 2). Within the social constructivist paradigm, "knowledge is...socially and culturally constructed...Individuals create meaning through their interactions with each other and with the environment they live in" (Kim, 2001: 1; cf. Savery & Duffy, 1995: 31; Green & Gredler, 2002: 57).

However, constructivist educational practices have come under fire in recent years. If we look at the criticisms levelled against constructivism from an educator's perspective, then four issues in particular come to the fore. One criticism is that the definitions of constructivism in educational contexts vary and may therefore be confusing to teachers: it is perplexing to come up against terms such as personal constructivism, (Piaget, 1967) social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), radical constructivism (Von Glaserfeld, 1995), or pragmatic social constructivism (Garrison, 1998). Given the bewildering array of definitions of constructivism, teachers may find it difficult to implement constructivist techniques in their classrooms: "...[A]pplying the constructivist learning theory is...a challenge for instructors as it requires making a radical shift in their thinking in order to translate the philosophy of constructivism into practice" (Hadjerrouit, 2005: 115; cf. Alesandri & Larson, 2002: 121). An additional criticism revolves around the fact that employing constructivist techniques in the classroom is more time-consuming than implementing traditional teaching practices (Perkins, 1999: 8; cf. Hadjerrouit, 2005: 115). Finally, using constructivist techniques in the classroom may place unrealistically high demands on learners in terms of their cognitive abilities (Perkins, 1999: 8).

In light of the above drawbacks, and since "[constructivism] is a recent educational movement with widespread intuitive appeal but no strong empirical basis" (Green & Gredler, 2002: 66), it is essential to provide teachers with specific pedagogical principles that will enable them to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

In this research article, these pedagogical principles are discussed against the background of a third-year *Applied Language Studies in English* course offered at a university in South Africa. To be specific, this article reports on how a constructivist model of learning, coupled with a discourse-based approach to analysing newspaper language, was employed in the course. The aim of the article is to answer the following questions: In what ways can the use of a constructivist methodology enhance the development of skills in (critical) discourse analysis? Does constructivist learning involve any direct instruction from the teacher? With regard to the last question, the notion of pedagogical scaffolding is considered.

2. Methodological orientation

2.1 The course – EAL312

At the beginning of 2005, a total of 45 students (the majority of whom were Media Studies students) registered for one of the researcher's third-year Applied Language Studies in English modules offered at a South African university. The 8-credit module, referred to as EAL312,

extends over a semester and aims to heighten students' awareness of how the construction of metaphors in newspaper editorials succeeds in compelling readers to adopt specific 'realities'. The following article is used as a framework for analysis:

Kitis, E. & Milapides, M. 1997. Read it and believe it: How metaphor constructs ideology in news discourse. A case study. In *Journal of Pragmatics* 28: 557-590.

2.2 Critical Discourse Analysis

In their discourse-based study, Kitis and Milapides (1997: 562) take a closer look at how "some aspects of language use...help mediate and construct a particular type of universe" in an editorial – *Greece's defense seems just silly* – published in *Time* magazine (12 October, 1992). Specifically, these researchers argue that the use of certain aspects of language helps to construct both dominant and partial metaphors that transform "the style of the text from overtly descriptive or narrative to covertly argumentative, generating a particular ideological stance to the issue reported" (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 262-263).

The analytical framework proposed by Kitis and Milapides (1997) is employed as a research tool for EAL312 students since it falls within the realm of Critical Discourse Analysis or CDA. That is, these researchers do not study language in isolation, but acknowledge the social and ideological dimensions of language:

...we maintain that language is embedded in societal, political, and ideological structures and processes. Meanings are not frozen entities, but are generated and regenerated as they are immersed in the processes and structures constituting them, on the one hand, but also being constituted by them, on the other. Taking these factors into account involves...an analysis of language as discourse (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 558).

One of the greatest benefits of CDA for learners is that it "[provides] them with a critical analytical framework to help them reflect on their own language...practices and on the language practices of others...in the wider society within which they live" (Clark & Ivanić, 1997: 217). Moreover, CDA reveals the hidden links between language structure and the construction of ideologies (cf. Candlin, 1990: 461-462; Blommaert, 2005: 2) and therefore "assists in increasing critical language awareness" (Popova, 2004: 14) among learners.

A legitimate objection to CDA as pointed out by Wallace (1999: 99) "is that it tends to end up being expert exegesis...in the hands of the single interpreter, the lone armchair critic". Wallace (1999: 99) goes on to state that, for this reason, educators "need...to establish the extent to which CDA might move out of the hands of experts to become an activity...with the potential to empower people both in educational settings and in everyday life". This article shows how a constructivist model of learning, combined with the analytical framework proposed by Kitis and Milapides (1997), may enable learners to exploit the advantages of CDA for themselves in an Applied Linguistics course that focuses on ideology and the media.

2.3 The Analytical Framework

Kitis and Milapides (1997) analyse the editorial of their choice (Strobe Talbott's *Greece's defense seems just silly*, published in *Time* magazine on 12 October, 1992) at multi-levels, namely at the semantic, syntactic, pragmatic, intertextual and iconosemiotic levels. Each level is briefly

summarised in the tables below. Before taking a look at these tables, and for the sake of clarity, readers should take note of the background to *Greece's defense seems just silly* as the editorial is not reproduced here. In the editorial, Strobe Talbott heavily criticises the Greek government for what he regards as their ludicrous attempts to lay claim to the name 'Macedonia'. Greece strongly objects to the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia's use of the name 'Macedonia', arguing that the name belongs to Greece because it is intrinsically a Greek name. Apart from this irredentism, Greece's opposition also lies therein that their northern province is called 'Macedonia'. Talbott's view of the dispute over the adoption of the name 'Macedonia' surfaces at each of the levels outlined below.

The Semantic Level

Propositions

Writers often use propositions to reflect their ideological positions. Minimally, a proposition consists of an argument and a predicate. The title of the editorial – *Greece's defense seems just silly* – consists of an argument ('Greece's defense') and a predicate ('seems just silly'). Such a proposition "expresses the author's thesis, which is embodied in a non-truth functional value [judgement]..." (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 564).

Factivity Guises

Writers may disguise their value-judgements as facts. *Greece's defense seems just silly* has a so-called "factivity guise" (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 265). First, this title is in the form of a declarative sentence, which can dupe readers into believing that it is an assertion of truth. Second, the modifier 'seems' disguises the author's value judgement as it has "the desired effect of [legitimising] his subjective evaluation..." (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 577).

Lexical Choice and the Construction of Dominant and Partial Metaphors

Writers may make use of emotionally charged lexis and figures of speech to develop dominant and partial metaphors. In the editorial, *Greece's defense seems just silly*, metaphors help to depict "Greece...as the powerful, violent adversary, while...[Macedonia] is represented as a defenseless victim of an aggression, orchestrated by Greece..." (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 582).

The Syntactic Level

Transitive Structures

Writers may make use of **transitive structures** to reflect their ideologies. An example of a transitive structure in *Greece's defense seems just silly* is "Greece is blockading fuel shipments to Macedonia". Here, Greece occupies the subject position in the transitive structure. In most of the transitive structures in the editorial, Greece occupies the subject position. Kitis and Milapides (1997) contend that these transitive structures intensify the image of Greece as a suppressor of Macedonia.

Transactive Structures

Writers may also employ **transactive structures** to convey specific ideologies. In order to be transactive, a sentence must contain (1) an active agent, (2) an affected participant and (3) an event that impacts on the affected participant (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 570-571). In *Greece's defense seems just silly*, 'Greece is reminding the world that it too is a Balkan country' is an example of a transactive structure. It consists of an agent ('Greece') and an affected party ('the world'). The type of act committed by Greece is one of enforcement. That is, Greece "imposes of its own accord a certain action ('is reminding') on the world" (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 572). The transactive structure therefore functions to place Greece in a negative light.

Passive Structures

In addition to the above structures, writers can exploit **passive structures** to develop their ideological positions. It is no coincidence that in the editorial, *Greece's defense seems just silly*, only Macedonia and nominals related to it are subjects in passive structures. These passive structures "contribute to intensifying the connotations of helplessness and passivity the author wants to attach to his representation of [Macedonia's] reality" (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 576).

The Pragmatic Level

Modality

Writers often employ **modality** to reinforce their ideological perspectives. Kitis and Milapides (1997: 577) define modality as "the degree or kind of truth that is attached to the proposition". Modal markers (such as 'seems', 'may' and 'appear to be') are sometimes used by writers to create the appearance of "an unbiased representation of the facts" (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 577). For instance, some modal markers (such as 'alleges' and 'appears') have a **distancing effect** – they mask writers' value-judgments and, in this way, allow writers to try to control or manipulate readers' perceptions. It should also be noted that **tenses are not modally neutral**. For example, Kitis and Milapides (1997: 578) show how the present continuous tense may be used to highlight the continuity of specific actions.

The level of Intertextual Rhetoric

Devices of Interpersonal Rhetoric

Writers may make use of **devices of interpersonal rhetoric** (such as **irony**, **quotation marks** and **rhetorical questions**) to "[convey] an argument at the level of the 'unsaid', the level of the underlying coherence of the text. Such devices aid in transforming the discourse into a seductive crypto-argumentation, thus contributing to the overall construction of the text's ideology" (Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 579).

The Iconosemiotic Level

Iconic Features

Writers' texts may be accompanied by **pictorial representations** or **icons** that serve to reinforce their ideological perspectives. The editorial *Greece's defense seems just silly* is accompanied by a map of Macedonia and its neighbouring countries. The typeface used in the map reflects the author's negative view of Greece, since Greece's northern province, 'Macedonia', appears in light typeface, while Macedonia (i.e., the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia) appears in bold typeface.

At this stage, it should be noted that this article has a descriptive focus: Students' samples of writing were analysed to determine whether or not the discursive constructions in them replicated the patterns identified by Kitis and Milapides (1997).

3. Classroom Procedure

The framework summarised above served as the point of departure for EAL312 students in the first semester of 2005. The EAL312 module was presented over a 14-week period and was structured in the following way:

Step 1 – Weeks 1-7:

Students initially attended seven lectures during which they were introduced to the analytical framework of Kitis and Milapides (1997).

Step 2 – Weeks 8-11:

Students were then given four weeks to work on two assignments. The first assignment, which had a meta-communicative focus, required students to select their own editorials and to conduct a discourse analysis of these editorials in terms of the framework outlined by Kitis and Milapides (1997). Students had to record their findings in a response of eight to ten pages long. The second assignment, which displayed a communicative dimension, required each student to write an editorial not exceeding two pages in which he or she had to generate a metaphor reflecting a specific ideological position on a controversial topic. Over the 4-week period, the researcher / presenter of the course was available during the usual EAL312 lecture times as well as during consultation hours to guide students in the writing of the two assignments. At the end of Week 11, both assignments were submitted for evaluation.

Step 3 – Week 12:

In week 12, the researcher / presenter led the class in a discussion of the two assignments and also provided students with feedback on their performance.

Step 4 – Weeks 13-14:

A semester test and an aegrotat test were scheduled for the remaining two weeks of the course.

In the section that follows, the four steps outlined above are discussed in more detail. At the same time, the constructivist principles behind these steps are clarified. Some of the principles are discussed together as there are overlaps between them. Authentic samples of EAL312 students' written responses reflect each of the principles identified.

4. Constructivist-based principles

Synthesising research by Jonassen, (1994), Savery and Duffy (1995), Bonk and Cunningham (1998), and Brooks and Brooks (1999), the tenets that are adhered to in the constructivist classroom can be summarised as follows:

Principle 1: Taking on the role of a facilitator or guide, rather than that of a transmitter of knowledge, the teacher aims to develop critical-reflective thinking amongst learners.

Principle 2: Learning is facilitated through collaboration / social negotiation with others.

In the first seven weeks of the semester, and in gradual stages, EAL312 learners were introduced to the discourse model outlined by Kitis and Milapides (1997). At the beginning of each of the seven 50-minute classes, the researcher / facilitator presented a 15-minute lecture during which students were introduced to a particular aspect of the given discourse model. In the next 15-minute session, students were encouraged to apply that aspect of the model to two **Mail & Guardian** Online editorials – *Cheating the poor* (25 October, 2002) and *Fat cat mentality* (22 February, 2003). The researcher / facilitator then prompted students to share their findings with her as well as with one another during the remaining 20 minutes of class. As Maor (2005: 130) points out, the sharing of ideas is a typical feature of a social constructivist approach to teaching that helps students to "own their learning and feel a sense of responsibility towards their own and the learning of others". Moreover, collaboration promotes, among other things intellectual development (Watson, 2001: 143-144) and meta-cognitive awareness or "knowing about knowing and thinking about thinking" (Jacobs, 2004: 17).

However, research conducted by Hendriks and Maor (2001) suggests that, in classrooms where social interaction is encouraged, learners often end up sharing and comparing information rather than also "applying newly constructed knowledge which [requires] reflection" (Maor, 2005: 128).

To ensure that critical reflection did take place in the EAL312 classroom, students were required to complete a meta-communicative assignment in which they had to apply the model of Kitis and Milapides (1997) to an editorial of their choice. Below are two samples of the kinds of responses produced by students. Note that any spelling and / or grammatical errors that occur in the extracts have been retained.

Sample 1

(Article analysed: Rabinowitz, J. Arnold's lies: enough to make you lose your lunch. In **People's Weekly News Newspaper**, 21 April, 2005. Published on the World Wide Web: <http://www.pww.org/article/articleview/6870/1/265/>)

...The title takes the form of a non-truth value judgement. The title is not based on fact, but instead, reflects the author's repulsed view of Arnold Schwarzenegger. The author insinuates that whatever Arnold has lied about, is so repulsive that it would make someone ill to their stomach, and this strategy lures the reader into wanting to read on and to discover what is in fact "on the menu".

The rather amusing food frame conjures up an expectation by the reader, anticipating some juicy inside information relating to the "lunch" menu. This unusual title activates

our knowledge and memory of personal experiences associated with (i) lies and (ii) being ill to the stomach, and needing to vomit. The author uses the colon to draw attention to the association of these two ideas...and leaves no room to doubt his suggestive stance...

Sample 2

(Article analysed: Imagined country, 7 October, 2004. In **Mail & Guardian Online**. Published on the World Wide Web: <http://www.mg.co.za>)

...In addition to transitive structures, the author also makes use of transactive structures to reinforce the negative image of Thabo Mbeki. These structures control our perception of the president, portraying him in a negative light. Consider, for instance, the following sentence: "Mbeki comes down hard on all his opponents..." (Paragraph 14). This sentence is transactive because it contains (1) an agent (Mbeki), (2) an action (comes down hard) and (3) an affected party (his opponents / people he governs)...

Sample 1 above reflects the fact that the student is aware that the headline of an editorial may be in the form of a **non-truth value judgement** which reveals the writer's ideological position on a particular issue (cf. Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 564). In this case, the student observes that the headline – *Arnold's lies: enough to make you lose your lunch* – points to the writer's disgust with Arnold Schwarzenegger's falsehoods. The student then goes on to comment on how the writer's **deliberate choice of lexical items** enables him to impose his negative view of Schwarzenegger on readers (cf. Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 567). Specifically, the student remarks that, by placing the lexical item 'lies' structurally close to the words 'enough to make you lose your lunch', the writer suggests that Schwarzenegger's lies are nauseating. The student is also conscious of the fact that **the colon used in the headline has semantic value** as it draws attention to the words that follow 'lies'.

Sample 2 provides an example of an analysis at the syntactic level. Here, the student shows awareness of **transactive structures** as vehicles for reinforcing ideological beliefs (cf. Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 570-571). As pointed out by the student, the sentence 'Mbeki comes down hard on his opponents...' fulfils the minimum requirements for a transactive sentence. That is, it contains an agent ('Mbeki'), an affected party ('opponents') and an event (which, in this case, revolves around the president heavily slating his opponents). The student observes that the writer deliberately makes use of such a transactive structure to influence the reader's perception of the president. The intentional use of transactive structures is a commonly used syntactic device among journalists.

Principle 3: Learning takes place in an authentic learning environment.

Proponents of constructivist educational practices contend that learning should take place in an authentic learning environment (cf. Brown & King, 2000: 245; Watson, 2001: 141; cf. Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005: 20), one which will help learners "to develop relevant competencies...that simulate their real life or future professional practice" (Gulikers, Bastiens & Martens, 2005: 510).

However, the question arises as to what an authentic learning environment is. In this research article, the definition of an authentic learning environment as used by Gulikers et al. (2005: 509) is employed: "An authentic learning environment provides a context that reflects the way

knowledge and skills will be used in real life" (cf. Zualkernan, 2004: 3). EAL312 is a course that provides such a context as it requires learners to produce the kinds of editorials that journalists produce in the real world of work. Consider, for instance, the extracts below which have been taken from students' own editorials (submitted at the end of Week 11).

Sample 3

In countries like Holland, Russia, Germany, India and England abortions are legal. These people actually have the right to kill unborn babies if they wish to do so. Some people are campaigning to increase access to abortions. Never mind that about one hundred and twenty thousand abortions take place worldwide everyday.

There are no good reasons to support abortion, other than serious health issues of the mother or the baby, or when the mother was raped and she does not want to keep the baby. For this reasons, the option of abortion is understandable. But then why do so many women support abortions for other reasons than these? Is it because they do not want to lose that slim and sexy figure?

How can any woman with a conscience abort her baby?

Sample 4

The concept xenophobia has become an overflogged, almost overused word. It keeps rearing its ugly head and seems to have come to stay with us. It will take ages to disappear from our dictionaries. In fact, it has become a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the very fabric of our society. The list of what it has caused and what it will continue to cause is endless.

It is not a secret that we South Africans would rather welcome with open arms, Americans, Irish or English men than to say a mere "hello!" to a Nigerian, Zambian, Zimbabwean or any African brothers hawking tomatoes or sweets at a roadside. As far as we are concerned these darker brothers and sisters are illegal immigrants who have come to stay, take up our jobs and steal our 'money' and property. Worse still, we baptize them as "Makwerekwere". We brand them drug dealers and barons. It is a clear case of giving a dog a bad name to hang it.

The above samples reflect the discourse features that Kitis and Milapides (1997) identify as being typical of newspaper editorials. At the semantic level, the student's use of the **emotive lexical item** *kill* in Sample 3 helps to construct the **dominant metaphor**, namely, that anyone who is pro-choice is a killer. This metaphor is further developed through modality and intertextuality. In the proposition, 'These people actually have the right to kill unborn babies if they wish to do so', the **modal marker** 'actually' suggests that the student is opposed to anyone having the right to abort unborn babies. In the sentence 'Some people are campaigning to increase access to abortion', the modal phrase 'some people' clearly implies that not all people (i.e., the student and like-minded people) want to increase access to abortion. In the same example, 'are campaigning' is not modally neutral: the use of the present continuous tense highlights the idea that the act of campaigning for abortion is an ongoing act (cf. Kitis & Milapides, 1997: 578). That is, campaigning for abortion is not likely to come to an end any time soon. The continuity of pro-choice campaigns is clearly abhorrent to the student, especially in light of the fact that, as pointed out in the next sentence, over 100 000 abortions take place

daily on a global scale. The student's anti-abortion stance is also evident in the use of **rhetorical questions** at the level of intertextuality. By asking the rhetorical question 'How can any woman with a conscience abort her baby?', for instance, the student compels readers to step into the discourse and to express their incomprehension over any woman's decision to terminate her pregnancy.

In Sample 4, xenophobia is **personified** at the semantic level as it is described as a 'cankerworm' that 'keeps rearing its ugly head'. The **metaphor** that we are a diseased society is evident in the words, '...[xenophobia] has become a cankerworm that has eaten deep into the very fabric of our society'. The deliberate use of the **modifier** 'in fact' at the beginning of this sentence reinforces the notion that xenophobia has become firmly entrenched in South African society. The fact that the student sees xenophobia as a pathology is also evident in the reference to some South Africans' use of 'makwerekwere', a derogatory word which "purportedly depicts the phonetic sound of foreign African languages" (Harris, 2002: 16).

Principle 4: Knowledge construction takes precedence over knowledge reproduction.

In Week 13 of the EAL312 course, a semester test was written which focused partly on assessing students' knowledge of the discourse model proposed by Kitis and Milapides (1997). Thus, a typical question entailed defining a concept such as transitivity, modality or intertextuality. This type of question was asked because, in order to analyse texts in terms of a particular theoretical framework, the concepts outlined in the framework need to be understood.

However, knowledge reproduction is not an end in itself. If knowledge reproduction takes priority over knowledge construction, "[l]earners are, in essence, removed from [the real world] and are taught in what can easily become unauthentic contexts..." (Baccarini, 2004: 1). In order to encourage knowledge construction in the test, learners not only had to define a particular notion (e.g., the transactive model), but also had to find examples of this notion in *Greece's defense seems just silly* and then explain how it reinforced the author's ideology. Below are two extracts in which a student explains the concepts of modality and intertextuality, respectively.

Sample 5

The author of the article "Greece's defense seems just silly", makes ample use of modality to control the reader's perception of what is read...

Two examples of the use of modality are found in the title. By inserting the word 'seems' [in the title] the author appears to be objective. 'Seems' has a distancing effect and the reader might be misled to think that the author is qualifying his value judgement...

Sample 6

...the author makes use of another rhetorical device, namely the rhetorical question. After reporting that the European Community has stiff-armed Macedonia, he asks the rhetorical question: Why? By doing this, he is inviting the reader to join in questioning this senseless act, thereby voicing his / her own lack of understanding and...siding with the author.

Of course, Principle 4 is also reflected in the meta-communicative and communicative tasks already discussed.

Principle 5: Pedagogical scaffolding is provided.

Coined by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), the concept of pedagogical scaffolding "[describes] the temporary supporting structures provided by teachers as they assist learners to develop new understandings and skills" (Love, 2002: 5; cf. Reiser, 2004: 274). The rationale behind pedagogical scaffolding is that, while the learner can perform certain tasks independently in the so-called zone of self-regulation, "there is a range of knowledge and skills which [he or she] can only access with someone's assistance" (Van Lier, 1996: 190). According to Vygotsky (1978: 86), "the distance between the [learner's] actual developmental level...and the level of potential development" is known as the zone of proximal development or ZPD. Van Lier (1996: 194-199) points out that, by means of scaffolding, it is the language facilitator's task to guide the learner through the zone of proximal development until he or she is able to perform specific tasks without any assistance.

In order to help learners progress across the zone of proximal development, different scaffolding techniques were employed in the EAL312 classroom. These techniques are summarised as follows:

Scaffolding Technique 1: The facilitator structures a learning space in which learners share ideas with one another.

As mentioned earlier, in the first seven weeks of the semester, learners were encouraged to analyse two *Mail & Guardian Online* editorials in terms of the discourse framework they were gradually being introduced to, and then to share their findings with one another. Research suggests that this kind of collaboration leads to the construction of new knowledge (cf. Newman, Griffin & Cole, 1989; Gergen, 1995), and results in the development of higher cognitive skills (cf. Nuthall, 2000; McLoughlin & Luca, 2000).

Scaffolding Technique 2: The facilitator provides learners with sample answers to questions or problems posed.

In each of the EAL312 classes extending over a seven-week period, once learners had been introduced to a particular concept, they were required to identify this concept in various editorials, explaining how the concept was employed to generate a specific ideological perspective. Next, the facilitator / researcher placed a sample response on an overhead projector. In one class, for instance, learners were introduced to metaphors and were then asked to identify the metaphor in the headline *Mugabe is now well past his sell-by date* (taken from *The Daily News*, 13 February, 2003). Below is the sample answer that learners were given to peruse.

In the headline, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe is compared to a perishable product. Of course, we know that a perishable product has to be consumed before a given date. The writer's ideological position is clear: Mugabe has reached his sell-by date and his exit from politics is therefore long overdue. We expect this metaphor to be developed at the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic levels of the editorial as well as at the level of intertextuality.

It should be noted that students were given sample answers such as the one above only after they had attempted to generate their own answers. As Watson (2001: 142) rightly observes, "[when] teachers are in the habit of introducing their own ideas and information before pupils have a chance to think out theirs, pupils are unlikely to engage in reflection...".

According to Sullivan (2002: 400), providing learners with sample responses to questions or problems is important because, "[as] teachers we often hear questions from students like "What

do you want?" and "What are you looking for?"...A sample...response can answer those questions quite eloquently".

Scaffolding Technique 3: The facilitator provides learners with embedded support devices.

Embedded support devices (ESDs) are designed to scaffold the learning process (cf. Lo & Shu, 2005: 47) and include, among other things, glossaries, sample learner responses, questions, illustrations and information about test formats. An important ESD that formed an extension of the EAL312 module comprised two chapters from François Nel's (1999) textbook, *Writing for the Media in South Africa* (Oxford University Press). These chapters were included to guide students who did not know a great deal about the steps involved in the news writing process or the style of newspaper writing.

Additional ESDs included analysing the writing tasks (i.e., the meta-communicative and communicative assignments to be completed), providing learners with the assessment rubrics¹ according to which the assignments would be marked, and scheduling consultations to guide students in the writing of their assignments.

5. Conclusion

This research paper set out to answer the following questions: How can a constructivist-based approach to learning promote critical discourse-analytic skills? Does constructivist learning involve direct instruction from the teacher? (In other words, does the learning process involve pedagogical scaffolding?) With regard to the first question, the samples of writing presented in this paper indicate that, by implementing constructivist-based principles in the classroom, the facilitator can help learners to develop knowledge and skills that can be used in the real world of work (cf. Baccharini, 2004: 1). Specifically, the samples reflect a wide range of language as well as critical-reflective skills that are required by journalists when it comes to writing editorials. Indeed, an important requirement of outcomes-based education (OBE) is that learners should be empowered "to function effectively in their occupational...roles" (Spady, 1994: 63; cf. Wessels & Van den Berg, 1998: 2). The samples of writing also indicate that the learning outcomes of the course – to conduct a discourse-based study of newspaper editorials and to generate editorials which reflect specific ideologies – were achieved.² That a constructivist-based approach enhanced learners' ability to become more critical analysers of newspaper editorials was also confirmed by an internal moderator and an independent, external moderator who evaluated the module in terms of students' scripts and the assessment procedures employed.

As far as the second question is concerned, it is clear that a number of embedded support devices have been built into the module. These support devices include sample answers to questions asked in class, clear guidelines on the writing of newspaper editorials and detailed assessment rubrics.

A limitation of the paper is that it focuses solely on the products of the course – the communicative and meta-communicative activities generated by students. It does not specifically deal with which aspects of constructivism enhance the ability of learners to analyse editorials critically. Future research will explore these aspects in more detail. To explore these aspects would entail, amongst other things, analysing the turn-by-turn exchanges of learners during the learning

¹ These assessment rubrics appear in an appendix at the end of the article.

² Of the 45 students registered for the course, 44 students passed, and the class average was 67%. The standard deviation was 7.07.

Principle 5: Pedagogical scaffolding is provided.

Coined by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), the concept of pedagogical scaffolding "[describes] the temporary supporting structures provided by teachers as they assist learners to develop new understandings and skills" (Love, 2002: 5; cf. Reiser, 2004: 274). The rationale behind pedagogical scaffolding is that, while the learner can perform certain tasks independently in the so-called zone of self-regulation, "there is a range of knowledge and skills which [he or she] can only access with someone's assistance" (Van Lier, 1996: 190). According to Vygotsky (1978: 86), "the distance between the [learner's] actual developmental level...and the level of potential development" is known as the zone of proximal development or ZPD. Van Lier (1996: 194-199) points out that, by means of scaffolding, it is the language facilitator's task to guide the learner through the zone of proximal development until he or she is able to perform specific tasks without any assistance.

In order to help learners progress across the zone of proximal development, different scaffolding techniques were employed in the EAL312 classroom. These techniques are summarised as follows:

Scaffolding Technique 1: The facilitator structures a learning space in which learners share ideas with one another.

As mentioned earlier, in the first seven weeks of the semester, learners were "encouraged to analyse two *Mail & Guardian Online* editorials in terms of the discourse framework they were gradually being introduced to, and then to share their findings with one another. Research suggests that this kind of collaboration leads to the construction of new knowledge (cf. Newman, Griffin & Cole, 1989; Gergen, 1995), and results in the development of higher cognitive skills (cf. Nuthall, 2000; McLoughlin & Luca, 2000).

Scaffolding Technique 2: The facilitator provides learners with sample answers to questions or problems posed.

In each of the EAL312 classes extending over a seven-week period, once learners had been introduced to a particular concept, they were required to identify this concept in various editorials, explaining how the concept was employed to generate a specific ideological perspective. Next, the facilitator / researcher placed a sample response on an overhead projector. In one class, for instance, learners were introduced to metaphors and were then asked to identify the metaphor in the headline *Mugabe is now well past his sell-by date* (taken from *The Daily News*, 13 February, 2003). Below is the sample answer that learners were given to peruse.

In the headline, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe is compared to a perishable product. Of course, we know that a perishable product has to be consumed before a given date. The writer's ideological position is clear: Mugabe has reached his sell-by date and his exit from politics is therefore long overdue. We expect this metaphor to be developed at the semantic, syntactic and pragmatic levels of the editorial as well as at the level of intertextuality.

It should be noted that students were given sample answers such as the one above only after they had attempted to generate their own answers. As Watson (2001: 142) rightly observes, "[when] teachers are in the habit of introducing their own ideas and information before pupils have a chance to think out theirs, pupils are unlikely to engage in reflection...".

According to Sullivan (2002: 400), providing learners with sample responses to questions or problems is important because, "[as] teachers we often hear questions from students like "What

do you want?" and "What are you looking for?"...A sample...response can answer those questions quite eloquently".

Scaffolding Technique 3: The facilitator provides learners with embedded support devices.

Embedded support devices (ESDs) are designed to scaffold the learning process (cf. Lo & Shu, 2005: 47) and include, among other things, glossaries, sample learner responses, questions, illustrations and information about test formats. An important ESD that formed an extension of the EAL312 module comprised two chapters from François Nel's (1999) textbook, *Writing for the Media in South Africa* (Oxford University Press). These chapters were included to guide students who did not know a great deal about the steps involved in the news writing process or the style of newspaper writing.

Additional ESDs included analysing the writing tasks (i.e., the meta-communicative and communicative assignments to be completed), providing learners with the assessment rubrics¹ according to which the assignments would be marked, and scheduling consultations to guide students in the writing of their assignments.

5. Conclusion

This research paper set out to answer the following questions: How can a constructivist-based approach to learning promote critical discourse-analytic skills? Does constructivist learning involve direct instruction from the teacher? (In other words, does the learning process involve pedagogical scaffolding?) With regard to the first question, the samples of writing presented in this paper indicate that, by implementing constructivist-based principles in the classroom, the facilitator can help learners to develop knowledge and skills that can be used in the real world of work (cf. Baccarini, 2004: 1). Specifically, the samples reflect a wide range of language as well as critical-reflective skills that are required by journalists when it comes to writing editorials. Indeed, an important requirement of outcomes-based education (OBE) is that learners should be empowered "to function effectively in their occupational...roles" (Spady, 1994: 63; cf. Wessels & Van den Berg, 1998: 2). The samples of writing also indicate that the learning outcomes of the course – to conduct a discourse-based study of newspaper editorials and to generate editorials which reflect specific ideologies – were achieved.² That a constructivist-based approach enhanced learners' ability to become more critical analysers of newspaper editorials was also confirmed by an internal moderator and an independent, external moderator who evaluated the module in terms of students' scripts and the assessment procedures employed.

As far as the second question is concerned, it is clear that a number of embedded support devices have been built into the module. These support devices include sample answers to questions asked in class, clear guidelines on the writing of newspaper editorials and detailed assessment rubrics.

A limitation of the paper is that it focuses solely on the products of the course – the communicative and meta-communicative activities generated by students. It does not specifically deal with which aspects of constructivism enhance the ability of learners to analyse editorials critically. Future research will explore these aspects in more detail. To explore these aspects would entail, amongst other things, analysing the turn-by-turn exchanges of learners during the learning

¹ These assessment rubrics appear in an appendix at the end of the article.

² Of the 45 students registered for the course, 44 students passed, and the class average was 67%. The standard deviation was 7.07.

process, which falls beyond the scope of this paper. Later research will also examine learners' reactions to the constructivist pedagogy employed in the Applied Language Studies course.

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Appendix

The following assessment rubrics were used to assess learners' assignments:

Meta-communicative activity: An Analysis of an Editorial [30 Marks]

Criteria	Mark	Your Mark	Comments
The framework of Kitis and Milapides (1997) is applied to the editorial	/ 5		
The analysis of the editorial is accurate in terms of content	/ 20		
The editorial analyzed is included	/ 1		
The response is accurate in terms of language and spelling	/ 4		
Plagiarism occurs	A mark of 0%		

Communicative activity: Your Editorial [20 Marks]

Criteria	Mark	Your Mark	Comments
Content – A metaphor that constructs a specific ideological perspective is developed	/ 15		
The response is accurate in terms of language and spelling	/ 5		
Plagiarism occurs	A mark of 0%		