The Effect of Short Story Reading through Constructivist Activities on the Language Development of Primary School Students

Yapılandırmacı Etkinlikler Yoluyla Kısa Öykü Okumanın İlköğretim Öğrencilerinin Dil Gelişimlerine Olan Etkisi

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Özet

Öğretmen merkezli ders anlatımı ve öğrenci merkezli yapılandırmacı olarak iki temel eğitim eğilimi yaygındır. Yapılandırmacı öğrenim anlayışı çerçevesinde, öğrenciler bilgiyi yaratma ve oluşturmaya özendirilirler. Bu araştırma bazı öğrenci merkezli etkinlikler yoluyla öğrencilerin ana dili gelişimlerine yönelik olası iyileştirmeleri sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır. Bulgular öğrenci merkezli etkinliklerle kısa öykü okumanın öğrencilerin tümce üretiminde değil ancak sıfat kullanımında gelişim gösterdiklerini ortaya koymaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: yapılandırmacılık, sorun çözme, yaratıcılık, işbirliği, öğrenci merkezli öğrenme, okuma.

Abstract

Two basic educational orientations have become popular: teacher-centered "instructionism", and student-centered "constructivism". Within the framework of constructivist view, learners are encouraged to create and build knowledge. This research aims at providing some possibilities towards improving learners' first language development through presenting some student-centered activities. The findings reveal that short story reading through some student oriented activities improved the amount of adjective usage but not sentence production.

Key Words: constructivism, problem solving, creativity, collaboration, first language, student-centered learning, reading

1. INTRODUCTION

As opposed to teacher-centered, product oriented, non-interactive and prescribed teaching, today, constructivism often refers to student-centered, interactive, process-oriented and meaning based classroom procedures (Honebein 1996; Jonassen 1991). As frequently emphasized on the renovated Primary Education curriculum of the Turkish Ministry of National Education (MEB), the constructivist understanding of teaching and learning has been considered important. In the last couple of years, the Ministry of Education, in Turkey, has been trying to establish the constructivist understanding of education almost in all fields, including Turkish, Mathematics, Science and English teaching. On the official MEB web-site, the emphasis is on the constructivist approach in the recently designed curriculum, especially for 8-year primary education. Additionally, the curriculum designers of MEB clearly put forward that almost all the courses have been redesigned and the course books reprinted according to the socio-constructivist approach.

In her research, Yangın (2005) evaluated the Primary Education Turkish Curriculum, published by Ministry of Education in 2005. Yangın, in her summary of the new curriculum, states that

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constructivism, learner-centered learning, learner participation, individual differences and resolving problems are the concepts that have been considered in the curricula. Yangın also claims that constructivism is one of the innovations in the curriculum that supports individual learning enabling his/her to learn how to learn. Thus, the learner is in the center of the education, but the teacher acts as a guide in designing appropriate settings for learners to learn. Although the theoretical bases of constructivism emerged for more than forty years ago, it has been a recent understanding of learning in educational area.

1.1 Review of Literature

The constructivist theory primarily derived from the work of Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Swiss developmental psychologist Jean Piaget (1985). Constructivism is one of the philosophical theories on how individuals learn, yet there are three understandings in constructivist approach about how knowledge is built. These are: cognitive, social and radical constructivism. Vygotsky stated that culture and language have important effect on learning, and learning occurs via social interactions. The major theme of Vygotsky's theoretical framework is that social interaction plays a fundamental role in the development of cognition. Vygotsky argues that every function in the child's cultural developments appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people and then inside the child. This applies equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All of the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals. Teaching-learning processes which are organized through implications of these three approaches let students construct their own learning permanently by interacting with their environment.

In recent years, though limited, there have been some studies describing and supporting the constructivist learning methods. One of the studies carried out by Guthrie et. al. (2004) was on the comparison of three methods of teaching reading: a traditional method, a strategies instruction and constructivist motivation techniques including student choices, collaboration, and hands-on activities. The subjects performed better in reading especially in reading comprehension, cognitive strategies and motivation through constructivist classroom procedures.

1.1.1 Learning and Constructivism

Vygotsky accepted Piaget's claim that learners respond not to the external stimuli but to their interpretation of those stimuli. However, he argued that cognitivists such as Piaget had overlooked the essentially the social nature of language. As a result, he claimed they had failed to understand that learning is a collaborative process. Vygotsky (1978) distinguished between two developmental levels: the level of actual development which is the level of development that the learner has already reached, and this is the level at which the learner is capable of solving problems independently. The level of potential development (the "zone of proximal development") is the level of development that the learner is capable of reaching under the guidance of teachers or in collaboration with peers. The learner is capable of solving problems and understanding material at this level that they are not capable of solving or understanding at their level of actual development. The level of potential development is the level at which learning takes place. With respect to the processing knowledge and benefiting learning in cognitive level, Yaşar (1998) states that learners do not construct learning as it is presented to them but they do this process in their cognition through the way they construct it. According to von Glasersfeld (1987) the constructivist view of learning involves two basic principles: knowledge is actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment and coming to know is a process of adaptation based on and constantly modified by learner's experience of the world. He maintains that learning is a process of comparing new experience with knowledge constructed from previous experience, resulting in the reinforcing or adaptation of that knowledge, and the social interaction facilitates individual knowledge construction. Similarly, Deryakulu (2002) asserts that constructivist learning approach and meaningful learning are quite similar or overlapping in that both are engaged with the cognitive development of individuals. In describing learning, he maintains that individuals attach meaning to what they get from outside world, compare it with the old ones and place the new knowledge to an appropriate part of their cognition. Gürol (2002) also states that learning is achieved through reinterpreting and reconstructing the old knowledge in the light of new experience. Some research provide evidence that student centered

literature reading lead more learning than student centered classrooms in developing the first language of primary education students (Almasi and Gambrell 1994).

1.1.2 Principles of Constructivism
The following principles are the collection of desired properties from a constructivist view (Özden 2003, Brooks and Brooks 1993; Honebein 1996; Marlowe and Page 1998):
1. Student preferences are taken into account with regard to the common core of research topics and the content.
2. In the process of acquiring new knowledge, the milieu is established in which the student activates any experience.
3. Students are allowed to process and defend their own views.
4. The autonomy and venture of learners are supported.
5. By enriching the material and the learning setting, learners can easily make use of the knowledge.
6. A classroom environment is provided, where learners can easily interact with each other and the teacher.
7. The construction of new knowledge is facilitated based on the current knowledge rather than regenerating it.
8. The teacher not only deals with what the students learn but how they learn as well.
9. As student-centered teaching is carried out, the course content and the teaching methods are flexible enough to make any changes.
10. By bringing forth contradictory ideas, learners are allowed to justify their own ideas.
11. Many learning experiences, supporting different point of views, are attained.
12. Interactive group works are designed.
13. The creativity power of the learner is provoked.
14. The technology is utilized effectively

It can be concluded from the principles given above that students' activity and participation in activities are of great importance in constructivist theory. In constructivism, learning environment should be enriched with teaching materials, technology should be used, group studies and interactive setting should be encouraged. Activities in which students can show their creativity should be organized, only then can students construct their new knowledge by the help of their prior knowledge and experience. Teacher, in the constructivist learning setting, takes the responsibility of helper, facilitator of learning and a friend that can be administered when needed (Brooks and Brooks, 1999). As for the learner, s/he is always active in teaching-learning process, inquires, collects information, constructs the new ones in the cognition level by relating it with the old ones, finds solutions to problems, develops projects, and evaluates him/herself and classmates (Alesandirini and Larson 2002).

1. 3 Purpose of the Study
As has been previously stated, the renovated Primary Education curriculum of the MEB for primary education puts importance upon the constructivist understanding of teaching and learning. For this reason, the new approach has been on the spot of many educators and researchers. There is limited number of studies on the new curriculum and very few teachers in primary education are unaware of the innovative views of constructivist teaching and learning. The interviews done with the classroom teachers at Sinan Alaağaç primary school, the Turkish teacher, the principal and some other teachers revealed the fact that the curriculum designed according to the constructivist understanding has been progressing in a very slow pace. Erçapan et. al. (2008) who investigated the new program of Turkish, in primary education, discovered that there are quite a lot of shortcomings in the curriculum. These are some requirements ranging from teacher in-service training to materials development. One of the findings of their study revealed that Turkish teachers are in urgent need of how to prepare supplementary materials for effective language instruction. Sert (2008), who studied the state of the constructivism in the elementary school curricula in collaboration with 1 Turkish, 4 Mathematics, 3 English and 3 Science and Technology teachers, found out that the program was partially congruent with the principles of constructivism. Sert's findings also reveal that there are some difficulties in the contents, learning and evaluation processes. For this reason, it is worth investigating the state of the issue. Due to the fact that most of the teachers are accustomed to teacher-centered teaching, they may have some difficulties in

adapting themselves to the innovations brought by the new curricula. Yet, there seems to be a shift from teacher instructionism towards student-centered constructivism, thus, researchers, teachers who are actual practitioners, reformers and all the related people in the ministry can jointly dwell upon the constructivist understanding of learning and teaching. This study may also shed light on the state of the new curriculum and the results are thought to be beneficial for researchers Turkey. The effects of constructivist, student-centered, participatory approaches have not been investigated in a broad sense yet. For this reason, this study may be beneficial to language teachers in understanding both the theoretical views and practical procedures of student centered reading within the framework of constructivism. Thus, this study specifically seeks answers to the following questions:

1. Will there be a change in the amount of sentence production of students as a result of constructivist classroom procedures?
2. Will there be a change in the amount of adjective use of students as a result of constructivist classroom procedures?

2. METHOD
In order to be in cooperation with a Primary school and carry out an empirical study throughout 6 weeks, a negotiation period was fulfilled. The MEB representatives in Eskişehir, the school administrators and language teachers were officially informed about the study to carry out a 6-week-empirical study.

2.1 Setting and Subjects
The study was carried out with two groups of 6th year pupils attending Sinan Alaağac Primary School located in an outskirt of Eskişehir. 32 students were in 6-B, the control group, and another 32 students, were in group-D, the experiment group of the study. A total number of 69 students participated in the study, but 5 of them were excluded on account of absenteeism in either the treatment or the post-test. Since 4 activities were used each week during the experimentation period, this study was inserted in the ongoing teaching process. For this reason, the study actively covered totally 4 weeks. 2 weeks of free reading period was carried on prior to the experimentation stage, and in order to make learners ready to read as many as Turkish short stories. During these 2 weeks of free reading period, negotiations on how, when and what to do were carried out with both the Turkish Language teacher and the school principal.

2.2 Data Collection
The testing plan and themes of the writings are given in the following table:

Table 2.1 Pre and Post Test Plan and Themes

Plan and Themes of the **Pre test**		Plan and Themes of the **Post test**
A cartoon story (**Writing a Picture Story**) (see 2.2.1)	Classroom Application Period	A cartoon story (**Writing a Picture Story**) (see 2.2.1)
Kurban Bayrami (**Description of an event**) (see 2.2.2)		April 23 National Independence and Children Festival (**Description of an event**) (see 2.2.2)
"Being Lost" (**Context Completion**) (see 2.2.3)		"Getting Ready for a Picnic"(**Context Completion**) (see 2.2.3)

In order to discover the number of sentences and adjectives produced by students, both for the pre-test and post-test procedures, writing tasks were considered practical to gather data that might reveal language proficiency of students.

Though the themes used as writing tasks were parallel and /or similar, different themes were used to assess the language level of two groups of students. Since this study was a control and experiment group study, different themes were used for pre-test and post-test tasks.

At the very beginning of the study, in order to discover the level of learners' native language use, 3 different writing composition procedures were used as pre-test data collection. Similarly, at the end of the application, 3 different writing composition procedures were used as post-test data collection. Totally 6 writing procedures were used to collect data before and after the treatments of classroom activities.

Due to the fact that descriptive writing requires generating quite a lot of statements together with vocabulary especially adjectives, the pupils attending Sinan Alaağac Primary School, were given different composition writing tasks.

The basic aim of these tasks was to understand the native language use of pupils. Veccio and Guerrero (1995) propose that a pragmatic approach to language testing might require the features of providing visual input, making inferences and reacting towards the content of the story. For this reason, two cartoon stories were used: one for pre-test another post-test. Two descriptions of an event (Kurban Bayram) for pre-test and (April 23 Festival) for the post-test were used. Finally, two context completion composition tasks were used: (Being Lost) for pre-test and (Getting Ready for a Picnic) for the post-test. In the following, writing procedures will be described step by step.

2.2.1 Writing Picture Story
Learners were provided with a short cartoon story, which had empty speaking balloons, and they were asked to write the story told in cartoons, comprised of nine instances in each of the nine boxes. The aim of this writing was to see whether learners were creative and apprehensive in their language use and how effective they were in sentence construction and adjective usage. Two different short cartoon stories, barrowed from "Eppert's (1983) book of Father and Son (Vater und Sohn)", were used for "writing picture story" while one of them was used for the pre-test and the other for the post-test .

2.2.2 Description of an Event
Pupils, in the second phase of the testing, as a pretest, were asked to describe the newly celebrated "Kurban Bayrami" which is one of the religious festivals in Turkey. The instruction was quite simple: they were asked to write what they did during the four-day bayram. Such a writing procedure aimed at understanding both their descriptive writing skills which requires a variety of expressions most of which are rather qualitative and cultural. As a post-test, pupils were asked to describe what they did during the 23rd April National Independence and Children Festival both in and out of the school.

2.2.3 Context Completion
In the third narrative writing process, as a pre-test, this time pupils were given a topic on an unexpected event, "being lost", which almost all children might encounter in their childhood years. (One day, I was wandering in the city center with one of my sincere friends, but suddenly we realized that we got lost…). They were instructed to complete the rest of the story the beginning of which was given as a starting point "When you and a friend were in the city center you got lost and did not know how to come back home…" Then, they completed it either by referring back to their own experience or to their imaginative world. As a post-test, another topic was given: an unexpected event "getting ready to go for a picnic". (Sunday morning, I woke up early and everybody was in haste to gather something for a picnic, then we set off …).

2.3 Data Analysis

In order to calculate the data collected through pre-test and post-test, SPSS computer program was used. Due to the fact that this is an experiment-control group study, the independent sample t-test was used for between group comparisons, and paired sample t-test was used for within group comparisons in calculating the data.

2.4 Classroom Applications – Teaching and Learning Process

This study aims at presenting the effectiveness of student-centered classroom procedures towards the improvement of first language of pupils through some techniques of problem solving and creativity. When the "Principles of Constructivism", mentioned under the subtitle of 1.1., is reviewed, it can be said that the activities used for the experiment group overlap in many ways. For example, the first principle of constructivism (see 1.1) stresses that the student preferences in preparing and selecting a topic are important. For this reason, the stories to be studied by the subjects were selected by the students. According to the third principle, students are allowed to process and defend their own views; therefore, in designing the final activity of this study, "Writing the Ending of a Short Story" students were involved in discussions with their peers about their productions and original endings of the stories in the classroom. Hammond and Gibbons (2001) supporting scaffolding, originally suggested by Vygotsky (1978), claim that teachers need to set up tasks which challenge students to perform beyond their current capacity. In their review of Vygotsky's learning theory and Krashen's (1989) i+1, Dunn and Lantolf (1998) found out some similar grounds in terms of the construction of individual learning. For this reason, the final activity -writing the ending of a story- was quite challenging for students. The seventh principle, which focuses on the fact that the construction of new knowledge is facilitated based on the current knowledge rather than regenerating it, was achieved by presenting them activities beforehand. In other words, when the activities used in this study are taken into account, both the first (week 3) and the following activity (week 4) were designed alike, both require the rearranging of the story in its original flow. Similarly, the fifth and sixth weeks' activities follow the same procedure, in that, both of them are related with the ending of a story. The ninth principle, related to the flexibility of teaching content and methods, can be observed in selection of short stories to be studied.

The theoretical view of constructing knowledge covers and values the student collaboration and participation, their needs, the flexibility of course the material, interactive classroom setting and the like. Fosnot (1996) defines constructivist classroom as a productive setting where students predict, pose questions, research, imagine and invent. He maintains that a productive classroom consists of learner-centered, active instruction and the teacher provides students with experiences and conducts student activities. Similarly, Gray (1997) states that a constructivist teacher and a constructivist classroom are distinguished from a traditional teacher and classroom by a number of identifiable qualities: learners are actively involved; the environment is democratic; the activities are student-centered and interactive and the teacher facilitates learning in which students are encouraged to be responsible and autonomous. In one of his classroom applications of reading literature in a constructivist classroom, Rosenblatt (1978) argues that understanding a work of literature does not mean to accept the teacher's or someone else's interpretations, but constructing their own. Thus, the student is always at the center of teaching-learning process. One of the classroom applications of this study "writing the end of a short story" (see 2.3.4 and 2.3.5) overlaps the idea of Rosenblatt.

Every week and two or three days earlier of the classroom application, firstly, an activity was presented to the teacher of the classroom by the researcher. Then it was negotiated and modified in collaboration with the teacher before putting the activity into practice to accomplish a story reading procedure alongside the ongoing syllabus.

Four different short story reading activities of this study are presented in their instructional order in the following.

2.4.1 Week 1 and 2-Free Reading

At the very beginning of the study, some 50 short stories were read by the students either in the classroom or at home. During this first week, the students got their short stories and read them freely both

at school and at home. They were also instructed that they might exchange and read as many as they wish in the following weeks. The control of free reading of short stories for the first two weeks was carried out by the Turkish language teacher by collecting and discussing the summaries of sort stories.

2.4.2 Week 3 Activity 1 "Problem Solving" Procedure

32 original short stories were cut into pieces paragraph by paragraph by the researcher and students were instructed by their teacher to put the story in its original order. Through such a procedure, first, students were expected to read a short story as many times as they can, then rearrange or reorder the pieces of the story in their meaningful flow. Clay (1985) used 7 different reading activities and cutting the stories into pieces is one the procedures adapted from Clay's research for this study. Luke and Freebody (1990) set forth four different practices: code breaking, meaning making, text using and text analyzing for efficient and student centered reading. As they state, the most effective one is code breaking, which is deciphering text at word and sentence level. Similarly, in the first and the second activities of this study students were allowed to decipher the mixed short story at paragraph level.

1. Stories were cut into pieces meaningfully
2. The key was prepared for the real order of the study (and kept by the teacher)
3. The pieces of stories were placed into envelopes
4. The teacher of the classroom was informed about the material
5. Classroom teacher distributed the stories to pupils
6. Pupils first read and then put the pieces into their original order at home
7. Pupils brought the stories back to school
8. In the classroom, pupils shared their reordered stories with the teacher
9. Pupils checked the true order of the story by studying the key supplied by the teacher
10. After all the students had finished the checking work, they put the pieces of stories in a mixed order and gave them their classmates
11. Pupils exchanged their stories with their peers in the classroom to do the same procedure this time in the classroom
12. Pupils had a chance to read and reorder a new story in the classroom
13. The teacher monitored them and (time to time) helped them in carrying out the reordering
14. At the end of the activity, pupils had a negotiation with their peers to check the order of the short story through the key
15. Finally, pupils got their new stories from one of their classmates to read and put them in their true order at home in the same week.

2.4.3 Week 4 Activity 2 "Problem Solving" Procedure

While the first activity, presented above, was prepared by the researcher and the classroom teacher, this time, in the second week's reading activity, students were responsible for the preparation of the material. 32 new short stories were distributed to students by the classroom teacher. Stories were cut into pieces paragraph by paragraph by the pupils as practiced a week earlier and the following procedure was followed;

1. Stories were cut into pieces meaningfully at home by pupils
2. The key was prepared for the true order of the study (and kept by the student)
3. Stories were placed into envelopes
4. Pupils brought the stories back to the classroom
5. Pupils exchanged their stories with their peers in the classroom
6. Pupils studied the pieces of the new short stories in the classroom
7. Pupils first read and then tried to put them in their original order individually
8. The teacher (time to time) help them in carrying out the procedure
9. Pupils discussed their ordering first with their peers, and then from the key in collaboration with their peers
10. Finally, pupils got other new stories from one of their friends to read and put them in their true order at home in the same week

2.4.4 Week 5 Activity 3 "Writing the End of a Short Story"

The third activity was designed to make learners write the final part of a short story themselves. The third and the fourth activities were adapted from one of the reading procedures of Yang and Wilson (2006), which is constructing a paragraph based on the information in the text.

1. 32 short studies were supplied by the researcher
2. The final parts of stories were removed (by the researcher) and kept by the classroom teacher
3. The classroom teacher gave the pupils an instruction on what to with the new story
4. Pupils took stories and read them at home
5. They wrote their final parts for the story at home
6. Pupils brought the stories back to the classroom
7. First in pairs, students read their stories to each other and negotiate about the ending of the story written by the pupils
8. Finally pupils got the original endings of their stories from their teacher
9. Each student investigated and compared his/her own ending and the writer's ending
10. In pairs, again they discuss their endings and writer's final parts for each of the story

2.4.5 Week 6 Activity 4 "Writing the End of a Short Story"

While in the third activity the researcher removed the endings of all the stories to be studied, in this fourth activity this time students were responsible for removing the endings and preparing the materials for their peers.

1. 32 short stories were supplied to the pupils by the researcher
2. Pupils took their new stories and the classroom teacher gave the pupils an instruction on what to do with the new story
3. Pupils read the story at home
4. The final parts of stories were removed (by students) and kept by them
5. Pupils brought the stories back to the classroom
6. Each story without an ending was exchanged in the classroom
7. First students read new stories
8. Second they tried writing an ending for the short story
9. After writing the ending of stories, students discussed and negotiated the endings with the classmate with whom they exchanged the story
10. At the end of the discussion, students got the original ending of the story and compared it with their ending

2.5 Control Group of the Study

The teacher of both the experiment and the control group student's teacher was the same Turkish teacher. The teacher followed the syllabus determined by MEB. During the experimentation period the syllabus includes short story, poem and essay readings. All reading materials were covered in the course book. The objectives of these readings were; improvement of aloud reading, sympathy to books and gaining reading habit, comprehension of texts, enriching the vocabulary, writing about the plots, characters, the places of the events in stories. For a one-week poem study, students were taught on how to read a poem with stress patterns, comprehend the emotion and plan of the poem and memorize some of which were appreciated. The essays gathered from newspapers and magazines were studied in terms of discussing a topic, expressing opinions about essay topics and comprehending the use of vocabulary according to their meaning characteristics. The grammatical focus was on verbs and sentence structures.

3. RESULTS

The first question "Will there be a change in the amount of sentence production of students as a result of constructivist classroom procedures?" According to the statistical analysis of the data, there were no significant difference between the control and the experiment groups. Neither of the groups outperformed in this task.

In terms of sentence production pre-test results, control and experiment group did not differ from each other at a statistically significant level (t_{62}=-1,283; p=.204). In terms of sentence production post-test results, control and experiment group did not differ from each other at a statistically significant level

either (t_{62}=-1,053; p=.297). However, it was revealed by the paired-sample t-test that the control group's post-test average (22,56, SD:4,39) was significantly higher than their pre-test average (19,72, SD:4,58) (t_{31}=-8,238; p<.001). It was also revealed that the experiment group's post-test average (21,38, SD:5,69) was significantly higher than their pre-test average (21,38, SD:5,08) (t_{31}=-10,271; p<.001).

In contrast to the findings presented about the sentence production, the statistical analysis related to the adjective use revealed significant difference between the performances of the experiment and control groups. In other words, the finding to the question "Will there be a change in the amount of adjective use of students as a result of constructivist classroom procedures?" reveals difference between groups.

In terms of adjective use pre-test results, experiment group (28,59, SD: 4,92) was significantly more successful than the control group (25,69, SD: 4,25)(t_{62}=-2,530; p=.014). In terms of adjective use post-test results, the experiment group (35,47, SD: 5,48) had significantly higher scores than the control group (27,25, SD: 4,30) again (t_{62}=6,679; p<.001). The control group's post-test results in adjective use (27,25, SD: 4,30) were significantly higher than their pre-test results (25,69, SD: 4,25) (t_{62}=-6,705; p<.001). Finally, the experiment group's post-test results in adjective use (35,47, SD: 5,48) were significantly higher than their pre-test results (28,59, SD: 4,92) (t_{62}=-11,717; p<.001).

4. DISCUSSION
On the light of the statistical data, it can be stated that students belonging to both groups have shown language development in writing narratives. In other words, all of the students performed well in sentence production.

The increase in adjective usage can be attributed to the following reasons most of which are supported with the related literature.

First, the classroom activities of this study designed according to the principles requiring creativity and problem solving may have had an effect on the increase of adjective use. The findings of some recent studies support this view in that changing classroom instruction with different activities leads to considerable vocabulary development (Beck et.al., 2002; Cunningham and Stanovich, 1998).

The activities designed for four weeks of treatment were all student-centered, in other words students selected, designed and presented them to their peers. Thus, the way the readings were presented to students might have created enthusiasm in reading. In support to this finding, Clay (1985) who developed and carried out a reading recovery program including one of the activities of this study –cut-up story to be rearranged– found out that students progressed and showed higher achievement in vocabulary usage. Solving problems, performed during the first two weeks of this study, and spending effort to prepare something for themselves, carried out during the last two weeks of this study, might have made them eager to study and analyze and read the text several times. In her research Sert (2008), who investigated the views of teachers, states that constructivist activities all of which are based on problem solving activities have positive effects on reading short stories. According to the study carried out by Eeds and Wells (1989) demonstrated that, in a fifth grade classroom, when the teacher and students worked together in literature discussion groups through some constructivist classroom procedures and negotiating meaning through conversation, they easily built meaning. Similarly, the research performed by Almasi and Gambrell (1994) provides evidence that students learn more in peer-led literature discussion rather than in teacher-led discussions.

Second possible inference on the increase in the number of adjectives can be attributed to the short story reading which were selected by the students. The research carried out by Senechal et. al. (1993) on vocabulary acquisition suggests that short stories may capture students' attention more than other text types, therefore, may enhance vocabulary development. In her research, Selly (2003) supporting the preceding view states that students easily find the right words to express a complicated idea and find the right means of expression when they are allowed to choose what to read. As it is often

mentioned throughout the principles of learning, constructivist understanding of learning always encourages student-centered learning. For this reason, some of the responsibility in the classroom can be shared by students. Guthrie et al. (2004), who compared the traditional and constructivist motivation techniques, support the view that students did better in reading comprehension when learners are active in carrying out activities including student preferences, collaboration and hand-on activities. Thus, choosing what to read can be considered a source of motivation in reading. Sulzby (1985) also supports the above view and asserts that the natural language and format of commercial books are attractive leading improvement in the reading behavior of children than the texts printed in course books. Similarly Cook (1992) asserts that the student involvement in the selection of the literary piece to be read will be of vital reality in a constructivist classroom on their learning.

Thirdly, the four week activities of this study were bearing a modeling in nature. What was done in the first week through the teacher presentation of an activity in the classroom was actually done by the students in the very following week. In other words, students designed the reading activity for the following week relying on the procedure presented by their teacher a week before. Vygotsky (1978) states that the most successful learner is one who co-constructs knowledge from the teacher or role model. Vygotsky believes that the teacher direction leads students gain confidence and then they will later proceed alone. Brooks and Brooks (1993) also support the previous view that constructivism leads to new beliefs about the roles of teachers and students. While teachers are facilitators of learning rather than transmitters of knowledge, students are active participants fostered by teachers to create, investigate and direct their own learning.

5. CONCLUSION

When some ordinary ways of classroom reading activities followed by reading comprehension questions are taken into account, student-centered reading in collaboration with their peers bearing some responsibility helped students improve their language abilities.

Short story reading activities designed according to the principles of constructivist classrooms and requiring creativity and problem solving had an effect on the increase of adjective use. As has been previously mentioned, student-centered classrooms motivate learner participation, trigger learner achieve tasks and bring student-student and student-teacher interaction.

Secondly, the student selection of short stories to be studied in the classroom in collaboration with the teacher also had an effect on the large amount of adjective use in student writings. When the flexibility of student-centered classrooms are taken into account, the selection of course materials, enriching the course with supplementary materials, and the autonomy of learners are supported.

Third, the instruction and presentation of new strategies in terms of designing hands-on activities for reading short stories resulted positively in effective reading and vocabulary development. The classroom setting where learners are quite independent of the teacher and work with peers in carrying out activities promote learning. For example, the study activity, writing the end of the story, encouraged learners in creating their own story endings, which in turn may create enthusiasm on writing and reading. When students are allowed to express their own ideas, as has been pointed out previously, students are able to bring forth contradictory ideas and have a chance to justify and discuss their own ideas.

To conclude, this study, though very limited in terms of time and coverage, might be helpful in understanding both the theoretical and practical features of student-centered classroom activities within the framework of constructivism. Yet, in understanding the current state of constructivism in primary and secondary education, there seems to be an immediate need to research student-centeredness in constructivist classrooms in Turkey.

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