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MAIN FEATURES OF CONSTRUCTIVISM FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

This article is dedicated an important approach in education, particularly in foreign language learning. The traditional methods of teaching English as a second language have drawbacks. In this regard, constructivist ways of teaching may fill the gaps. The literature on constructivism in foreign language education was given in this chapter. After its definition, several major theories and approaches of constructivism were provided.

KEYWORDS: *Communicate, Classroom, Swiftly, Embrace, Heterogeneous Students,*

INTRODUCTION

Central to the tenet of constructivism is that learning is an active process. Information may be imposed, but understanding cannot be, for it must come from within. Constructivism requires a teacher to act as a facilitator whose main function is to help students become active participants in their learning and make meaningful connections between prior knowledge, new knowledge and the processes involved in learning. Brooks and Brooks (1993) summarize a large segment of the literature on descriptions of 'constructivist teachers'. They conceive of a constructive teacher as someone who will:

1. Encourage and accept student autonomy and initiative;

2. Use a variety of materials, including raw data, primary sources and interactive materials and encourage students to use them;

3. Inquire about students' understandings of concepts before sharing his/her own understanding of those concepts;

4. Encourage students to engage in dialogue with the teacher and with one another;

5. Encourage student's enquiry by asking thoughtful, open-ended questions and encourage students to ask questions to each other and seek elaboration of students' initial response;

6. Encourage students in experiences that show contradictions to initial understanding and then encourage discussion;

7. Provide time for students to construct relationships and create metaphors;

8. Assess students' understanding through application and performance of open-structured tasks.

Pritchard and Woolard (2010) proposed some practical strategies that can be applied in the classroom:

Activating Prior Knowledge

The learners are introduced to the use of a KWL grid. Working in pairs, the students identify "what I Know, what I Want to find out, and what I have Learned".

The strategy employed here which is designed to activate prior knowledge in commonly employed by teachers. Often, it is something which is done instinctively, sometimes quite swiftly as a reminder and sometimes at a greater length with more detailed attention paid to ensuring that both individuals and the group as a whole have explored their shared understanding and knowledge of a given topic.

Computer-mediated Collaboration

In practice, the learners communicate through a conventional online chat room. The students are individually subscribed to a private (bounded) chat room where only they and their teacher could read or write comments. The first messages in the chat room are sent by the teacher, as preparation, prior to the lesson. Those initial messages describe the activity and the provided the addresses of the websites to be evaluated. The teacher considers that there is no need for a formal introduction to the lesson since it has been described in detail at the end of the previous lesson and also because the lesson was short and time was at premium. The group enters the classroom and logs on and enters the chat room.

Some students do not immediately understand the problem, but others are able to give support by answering their questions in an informal way. The time soon comes when comments are sent to the chat room concerning the individual websites. In this way, a good evaluative practice is needed.

What is essentially involved in constructivist strategies and activities is a process approach to learning. Applebee (1993) remarks that "rather than emphasizing characteristics of the final products, process-oriented instruction focuses on the language and problem-solving strategies that students need to learn in order to generate those products" (p. 5). And as students interact with their teacher and with each other as part of either whole class activities, small group

activities, or individual activities, they practice using language in a variety of contexts developing and honing many different skills as they do so.

In a process approach, Langer and Applebee (1987) explain, a context is created within which students are able to explore new ideas and experiences. Within this context, a teacher's role in providing information decreases and is replaced by a "strengthened role in eliciting and supporting students' own thinking" (p. 77) and meaning-making abilities. In a process approach to learning, ideas are allowed to develop in the learner's own mind through a series of related, supportive activities; where taking risks and generating hypotheses are encouraged by postponing evaluation; and where new skills are learned in supportive instructional contexts. (Langer and Applebee, 1987, p. 69)

Applebee and Langer argue that in such contexts "students have the best chance to focus on the ideas they are writing about and to develop more complex thinking and reasoning skills as they defend their ideas for themselves" (p. 69).

Constructivist activities in any subject area can range from very simple to sophisticated and complex depending on the teacher's learning objectives. If a teacher were to devise a constructivist activity, the first thing that she or he would have to do is establish an educational objective. The teacher would then need to think of a meaningful activity which would, at the same time, help students to reach the objective and to explore and construct knowledge based on what they're reading and what they already bring to the activity. The teacher would also need to reexamine the mechanics of how to run a class and would have to entrust a lot to the students. This is demonstrated in the following activity involving The Prologue to the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer, which Pat developed to achieve a variety of language arts objectives.

My class and I began by examining the linguistic evolution of the English language including Middle English in which Geoffrey Chaucer writes. I then provided each student with Chaucer's text in Middle English. Next, I gave each a pronunciation guide. Finally, to the whole class, I read the Introduction to the Prologue in Middle English, and as a class, we translated it. I then provided a brief character sketch of each character in the Prologue after which each student elected to join a character group of his or her choice, for example, the squire, the group's task being to become an expert on the particular character which they had selected. Each group was then provided with a chart on which they were to record the various aspects of their character's 'condicioun'. The group's next undertaking was to rehearse a dramatic oral reading of their character's portion of the Prologue. In so doing, each group began, with assistance when required, to come to an understanding of their character. Then each group was expected to thoroughly research their character in order to come to a better understanding of the historical persona on whom Chaucer based his literary rendering and to place that character into a social, historical, and cultural context. The preexisting character groups were then split up, and students were instructed to form new groups of three or four none of which could contain more than one of the same character. Then their task was to complete an activity called Table Talk at the Tabard in which each group was asked to create and script a play let among the three or four characters, the purpose of which was to bring to life each of the characters. By the time the students had seen everybody else's presentation, they had at least a passing knowledge of, and an appreciation of, all of Chaucer's characters along with the language of Chaucer's time.

The possibilities for constructivist activities are limitless. It is important, however, regardless of subject area, to provide enough activities for student choice and to encourage student-generated activities.

Constructivist teaching is an exceptionally interesting and exciting way to teach because students are involved in learning activities they appear to enjoy, and much more student-teacher contact is possible. It extends one's impact as a teacher.

Constructivism and Language Teaching

The foundation of a constructivist approach as:

1. About constructing knowledge, not receiving it

2. About thinking and analyzing, not accumulating memorizing

3. About understanding and applying, not repeating back

4. being active, not passive. (Marlowe & Page, 2005)

Constructivist learning has developed as a substantial approach to teaching. During past decades many researchers and scientists had elaborated on the historical precedents for constructivist learning theory. In this view constructivism represents the shift from education based on behaviorism, to education based on cognitive theory.

Thus, behaviorist epistemology essence is based on intelligence, domains of objectives, levels of knowledge and reinforcement, however in the case of constructivist epistemology it is the learners who construct their knowledge on the basis of interaction with the environment.

The primary message of constructivism is that active learning enables the students to construct their own knowledge and make their own meaning of what is being thought.

Nine Characteristics of a Constructivist Teacher

(1) Teacher serves as one of many resources for students, not necessarily the primary source of information.

(2) The teacher engages students in experiences that challenge previous conceptions of their existing knowledge.

(3) The teacher uses student responses in the planning of next lessons and seeks elaboration of students' initial responses.

(4) The teacher encourages questions and discussion among students by asking open-ended questions.

(5) The teacher assists students to understand their own cognitive processes (metacognition) by using cognitive terminology such as classify, analyze, create, organize, hierarchy, etc. when framing tasks.

(6) The teacher encourages and accepts student autonomy and initiative by being willing to let go of classroom control.

(7) The teacher makes available raw data and primary resources, along with manipulative and interactive physical materials.

(8) The teacher does not separate knowing from the process of finding out nouns and verbs.

(9) The teacher facilitates clear communication from students in writing and verbal responses, from the point of view that communication comes from one's deep structural understanding of the concepts being communicated. When they can communicate clearly and meaningfully, they have truly integrated the new learning.

Some of the influential perspectives of constructivism, especially in the field of education are presented. Education is seen as important to social life as the nutrition and reproduction is critical to physiological life. Further, education is composed of transmission through communication, of which is a process of sharing experience until it turns into a common possession. There is an emphasis on the action and experience in education, in a classroom context and setting, where the learners build their knowledge by manipulating the materials. When the students experience something, they can take action accordingly, and when they do something to the thing, then it does something in return.

The traditional education system for providing only specific prescription and dictation or providing only fixed and ready models is criticized. They do not necessitate the perception and explanation of ends, nor do they allow applying judgment in selecting and adapting means. Therefore, more a participative, creative, and constructive way of education for the students is vital. Gundogdu (2010) conducted a quasi-experimental design study in Turkey. The subjects were 85 prospective teachers' in a public university who were given Human Rights course. The control group was taught in traditional ways whereas the experimental group was taught in constructivist way. Gundogdu found significant differences on constructivist applications. He stated that due to the fact that the real learner-centered activities based on constructivist approach are more effective and have long lasting effect on the attitudes, they can be used as cognitive and effective tools for development of learners (Gundogdu, 2010).

The development of child (cognitive) psychology in education is also important in constructivism. The learners construct their knowledge to know their world. Therefore, teachers should consider the stages and steps of child's mind development in teaching (Piaget, 1973). Piaget claimed that the child must pass through some stages that were formed by the ideas, which will be considered wrong at the beginning but essential later for the final correct solution. Stages should be taken into consideration when providing learning materials and doing activities. Further, the students' motor and/or mental level should be considered, and any kind of requirement that is beyond that level should be avoided, because they may not be able to do some things if they have not reached the relevant stage already. Child's thinking makes a gradual increase in knowledge and intellectual skills towards logical thinking.

Children are active learners, who are always in an interaction with their environment. They should be provided a classroom environment where they are involved with activities and practices of their interest in discovering and exploring relationships and other phenomena of the situations. In order to form the students as being capable of production and creativity, the appropriate conditions should be provided to them (Cambourne, 1988, 1995, 2001; Piaget, 1973). This way these people can have the chance to learn and understand by discovering. Cambourne(1988, 1995, 2001) discussed some conditions of learning that are *immersion, demonstration, engagement, expectations, responsibility, approximations, employment, and response*. In the condition of immersion, the children are surrounded by and immersed with

what is learned. When the children are given the chance of observing some examples of actions and artifacts, the condition of demonstration is applied. The engagement condition refers to the learner's attending and participating in the things in which they are immersed and demonstrated. The expectations are the messages to the learners that learners are able to and expected to do the learning activity. The condition of responsibility provides the children to take some responsibilities and make their own decisions on what they learn. The approximation condition allows the learners to make progress gradually, rather than at once, so that they can approximate to the right level. The condition of employment refers to giving opportunities of application and practice of what is learned to the learners. Finally, the condition of response is about giving feedback or information in order for the children to see their improvement.

Another point in constructivism is that children learn the scientific concepts from tension that exists between their everyday perception and things around them (Vygotsky, 1978). They will possess concepts, which were memorized from an adult, only when they use and link it. While linking the solutions of problems, the speech has a significant effect on the child's activity. The previous conceptions and the introduced scientific notions are not linearly and straightly connected. They are intertwined, and each may influence the other as the child exercises his or her formerly known ideas with the lately introduced ones.

Social interaction and social context are crucial in the cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1978), the functions of children's cultural development happen at the social level first and then at the individual level. Put differently, it functions between people (interpsychological) first and later inside the children (intrapsychological), which relates to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the concept formation. He argued about the zone of proximal development (ZPD or Zo-ped), which is "the distance between the actual developmental level of a child as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). So, the guidance, help, and support can make children understand things better and develop more compared to doing alone. Further, Vygotsky mentioned that language is an important component and tool for the child to create new chances for doing things and for organizing information. Therefore, the more comprehensive and loaded language experience given to the children within the ZPD, the more they learn, because the class activities generate a teaching environment.

From a different perspective, constructivism is more than just a learning theory; it is seeing the world from a broader perspective where various interpretations are present to shed light on the complex and abstract phenomena. Further, constructivism is an unconventional approach where it assumes that knowledge is in the heads of people. Therefore, there is no other way but to construct what they know based on their experiences.

Motivation is also important in constructivism. If the students know why the thing they learn is useful, they would be more motivated to learn it. The traditional schooling system makes the students study for passing exams, rather than becoming more intellectually knowledgeable. In radical constructivism, there is more than just one right way or a fixed teaching procedure. Constructivism "cannot tell teachers new things to do, but it may suggest why certain attitudes and procedures are fruitless or counter-productive; and it may point out opportunities for teachers to use their own spontaneous imagination". So, it can be said that constructivism

provides a theory of knowledge, communication, and the learning process that could help and guide all of the teachers to start using their own imagination and creativity (von Glasersfeld, 1998).

Overall, constructivism is different than positivist approaches in terms of epistemology and ontology (Brooks & Brooks, 1999; Goodman, 2005; Oxford, 1997a). What all of the above-mentioned scholars argue is that the knowledge is not out there independent from the subject, but constructed by the subject, and, it is not something objective. In constructivism, the education is not as simple and linear as claimed but it is a complex issue that should be taken more seriously. Moreover, the students are more important and featured not to be treated based on the experiment results done on rats or pigeons (Goodman, 2005).

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