

TESOL Practices with Constructivism Prospective within Adult and Higher Education with Focus to Iraq and China Models

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ABSTRACT

Philosophical perspectives views are concerned with defining the natural of world, the place in which individuals stand, and the possible relationships between the world and its parts. These perspectives such as behaviourism, cognitivism, liberalism, and humanism provide frameworks to facilitate instructional designers and teachers when they are designing curriculums such as in TESOL classes. This paper aims to explain the proper and teachers' reasonability of implementing constructivism while designing educational activities within TESOL and humanistic curriculum in higher education taking some qualitative classroom observation at English department at College of Basic Education in Duhok University. Moreover, the paper describes the definition of constructivism at first then, to shed on the rationale of choosing constructivism as the guiding theory will be interpreted, based on current practices of learning history as an adult learner in the Kurdistan Region besides presenting materials that necessary to use in TESOL curriculum. Following that assessment of history curriculum will be illustrated afterwards. A conclusion will be sum up in the end to find the key concepts of constructivism in education is that knowledge should not be passively received but contributed by cognizing subject activity by learners. In order to reach this goal, teachers should respect students' prior experience, concepts and beliefs and assist them to understand new knowledge. What the paper found at the end is that students need to be encouraged and engaged to participate into learning activities by teachers especially in TESOL classes, in this process, the role of teachers is no longer as dominators but facilitators in the classroom. However, it demands high quality of teachers to complete the whole curriculum, because student performance on which can be significantly affected by the quality of teachers; teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours are all associated to the success of learners in the constructivist teaching approach.

Keywords: constructivism, curriculum design, education reform, TESOL, teaching practice.

Introduction

Generally, philosophical perspectives views are concerned with defining the natural of world, the place in which individuals stand, and the possible relationships between the world and its parts. These perspectives (behaviourism, cognitivism, liberalism, and humanism) provide frameworks to facilitate instructional designers and teachers when they are designing curriculums (Schuh and Barab, 2008). As pointed out by Sheahan (1979), the curriculum is the heart of education, and the philosophy is relevant to the formulation of educational judgements. It is very necessary to select a comprehensive philosophy of education as a guide to make these judgements. However, there is no one educational theory that can perfectly suit all kinds of courses, it depends on the curriculum designers' and teachers' own choices that select appropriated guiding principles and teaching approaches especially if we consider interactive classes such as in TESOL and humanistic approaches. It is inconceivable that teachers and curriculum designers conduct an activity or a lesson without considering about theories of how learners of this activity or lesson think and study. As the major of my postgraduate degree is TESOL, I will present the constructivism as philosophical perspective that I have chosen in the context of TESOL and humanistic education for adult students in higher education with focus to Kurdistan Region.

This paper aims to explain the proper and teachers' reasonability of implementing constructivism while designing educational activities within TESOL and humanistic curriculum in higher education. In this paper, thus, I will describe the definition of constructivism at first. Then, some vivid examples of teaching practises especially on teaching adults, the rationale of choosing constructivism as the guiding theory will be interpreted, based on my own experience of learning history as an adult learner in the Liaoning Normal University in China. I will, then, present two activities of history education for adult learners in higher education, which design will be guided by the constructivist instructional principles outlined by Lebow (1993). After that, I will present materials that necessary to use in this history curriculum. The assessment of history curriculum will be illustrated afterwards. A conclusion will be sum up in the end.

Constructivism in educational context

The origin of constructivism as a teaching and learning philosophy can retrospect to 18 century, Giambattista Vico stated that human beings can clearly understand what they have constructed (Von Glasersfeld, 1984). Within educational contexts, there are variety of philosophical meanings of constructivism according to different personal perspectives and positions, for example, personal constructive stated by Piaget (1967), social constructivism pointed out by Vygotsky (1978), radical constructivism outlined by Von Glasersfeld (1996), and educational constructivism emphasised by Mathews (1998). The common idea of constructivism that runs across all definitions of these

different perspectives is that ‘development of understanding requires the learner actively engaged in meaning-making (Jones, 2002, pp.2-3). In other words, as a constructivist, I believe that knowledge should not be passively received but contributed by cognizing subject actively.

From the constructivism perspective, according to Jones (2002), teachers mainly concerned with the role of prior knowledge in students’ learning, he recognized that students are not ‘blank slates’ (p.3) that wait to be filled with knowledge, contrarily, they can take along with a plenty of their own prior experiences, knowledge and beliefs used to build up new understandings. Thus, learning is comprehended as a self-regulated process of solving inner conflicts that become obvious through experience, reflection and discussion. The knowledge must be built up by learners themselves, it cannot be simply provided by teachers. The construction of knowledge is a dynamic process that requires learners’ active engagement, it emphasises that the learner take responsible to his or her own learning while teachers merely create an effective studying environment.

In education, in terms of the applying of pedagogy based on constructivism, the job of teachers who apply pedagogy based on constructivism is to guide students to ‘provide experiences that can question or expand upon their previous learning’ (Pourhosein Gilakjani, Mei Leong and Nizam Ismail, 2013, p.50). Furthermore, teachers should also encourage students continuously on different aspects: reassuring students that they are doing things right; emphasising the power of their thinking; encouraging students that their errors are correctable; allowing students to select activities and promoting all students participate in those activities; asking students to explain answers, etc. (Pourhosein Gilakjani, Mei Leong and Nizam Ismail, 2013; Darling-Hammond and Falk, 1997). However, it requires the high quality of teachers, because the teacher quality is the most significant impact of student performance; teachers’ knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours are all associated to the success of learners.

One of key concepts of constructivism is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) formulated by Vygotsky. It is defined as the distance between the children’s ‘actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving’ and his or her ‘potential development as determined through problem solving’ while directed by a more capable individual, such as adult or peer (Vygotsky, 1978, p.86). This ZPD presents a learner-centred teaching and learning model that each learner has a unique starting point, the teacher needs to focus on bridging the gap between the point and the ZPD in a way that meets the learner’s specific needs, it emphasises more on problem-solving than rote learning. Moreover, Bruner’s (1978) ‘scaffolding’ theory is often utilized as a metaphor to describe this process of constructing from a lower starting level to the potential level of the learner by means of the intervention of another. The centrality of this concept requires a process which demands understanding of learners’ existing abilities, and a nurturing relationship with teachers. Comparing with teacher-centred education which stresses the initiative role

of teacher in the classroom (Yuen and Hau, 2006), both of Vygotsky and Bruner noted that teachers' role played in the classroom should not be the dominator but the facilitator, the knowledge that the learner tents to achieve from the class requires the learner's active engagement and understanding on the knowledge, the teacher is in charge with supplying students as learning materials, not simply transmitting knowledge from teachers to students.

Importance of applying Constructivism within history education

According to Ronald Byrnes (1997), who is an assistant professor of educational studies at Guilford College, the main awareness of history teachers is the lack of student interest and willingness to complete assignments. However, he also pointed out that although teachers have known this circumstance, they still do not want to change their pedagogy which is teacher-centred instruction (Byrnes, 1997). Similarly, in Iraq, we also have the same issue while teaching and learning history as an adult. There are three reasons I present to interpret the rationale of choosing constructivism view while designing TESOL and Humanistic curriculum for adults, especially for teaching students in higher education, based on my own learning experience on TESOL and taking some qualitative classroom observations at English department at College of Basic Education in Duhok University.

Firstly, students demand the capability of active thinking and reflective thinking while learning humanistic classes in higher education. In countries such as Iraq and China, the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, which is an academic examination held annually in the mainland of the People's Republic of China, plays a very important role in a majority of students' academic careers because the grade of this exam that the student gain determines whether or not the student is able to gain the permission of entrancing a 'good' university which has high reputations on education (Davey, et al, 2007). Generally, a majority of Iraqi and Chinese students tend to rely on 'rote learning' as an essential studying method in high schools in order to achieve high grades of this exam (Dennehy, 2014). This kind of learning style belongs to 'surface' learning, which means students show a minimal level of interest on the content of this subject, and strongly focus on minimizing efforts to pass the exams through rote learning (Biggs, 1993). It would lead students to think less on the deep of history, and merely memorizing the standard answers. For example, in a humanistic and TESOL class, when TESOLer, as an internship teacher, asked students to analyse the different impacts which the Second World War has influenced the world in both positive and negative ways, the textbook has given the 'correct' answers of these question, students have to memorize the standard answers in order to pass exams without truly analysing impacts that the second World War brought to the world. Due to the boring content of rote learning, students became less interest in humanistic or history and lazy to do reflective thinking actively. Then I realised that if they entrant to the higher education, the first thing that teachers should do is to cultivate their capability of active and reflective thinking instead of continuously

transmitting knowledge from textbooks which cannot attract students, I should ask students to explain answers they have found and how they actually reflecting on these answers. Therefore, I tend to choose teaching approach based on constructivism to educate adult students who have entranced into universities and have been adopting ‘surface’ learning style for many years, because constructivists emphasis that it is students themselves that construct their own knowledge network, it requires learners learning actively and thinking deeply on the content of what they have learned (Von Glasersfeld, 1984 and Jones, 2002).

Secondly, students need to exercise the ability of critical thinking and to be encouraged to study deeply on the subject of TESOL. In the past two decades, educators in Iraq and China similarly higher education area have recognized the importance of cultivating students’ ability of critical thinking in higher education (Jiang, 2013). In terms of teaching history, critical thinking is significant for learners to explore and analyse the reality of events occurring in the past time. Some content of history textbook is still controversial in the academic studies, and sometimes, the curriculum purpose and the content of textbooks may be influenced by different political direction of the Country. For example, according to Xiaoliang and Zhaohui (2013), due to the alternative of relationship between China and America, the description of America in the history textbook has been changed three times in twenty years (5th decade-8th decade) in 20 centuries and similar change happened after the invasion of the USA in Iraq in 2003 and the whole Education system witness an impact and drawback by decades. In 1950s, the image of America was represented as an evil and negative metaphor of capitalism country, subsequently in 1970s, the image of America became a symbol of hegemonism; those textbooks used a large space to interpret how American capitalists exploit the labours and black slaves while discussing the American Civil War. Then, since 1980s, the researchers stated that although in the following textbook were edited to be more objective, the whole judgement of the USA has not been changed apparently, the image of the USA is still more negative than it is, one of important reasons of this circumstance is the political conflicts existing between China and America which has the same story in Iraq after the events of 2003. However, this kind of unfair judgement has deeply influenced on students’ own imagination of America, it would lead students to judge history events subjectively and narrowly without analysing the reality of events objectively and academically by themselves. Nowadays, as mentioned above, teachers in Iraq and Chinese high schools still adopt the teacher-centred teaching approach, which means students accept knowledge passively from teachers and textbooks which are so-called ‘Authority voices’. As argued by Paulo Freire (2000), educators should change their role from dominator to partners with students in the classroom, “people teach each other, mediated by the world, by the cognizable objects which in [objective] education are ‘owned’ by the teacher” (p.80). Indeed, as a constructivist, I should encourage students to think critically and reflectively while exploring and analysing the reality of one event happened in the past time, in order to facilitate adult students to make

objective judgements on history events within the process of building up their own knowledge.

Thirdly, teachers can create various types of teaching activities to stimulate students' interests in order to make students learning actively. Since the curricula of history in higher education inevitably with regard to some unattractive and 'boring' content for students, teachers are required to create more activities to attractive students and stimulate students' active learning in order to teacher students more effectively and efficiently. Pourhosein et al (2013) stated that teaching approach based on constructivism 'seeks opportunities to analyse, investigate, collaborate, share, build and generate based on what they already know, rather than store away facts, skills, and processes they can later parrot' (p.51). Adopting constructivism teaching approaches, such as asking students working in groups, will not only enhance students' learning interests, but also foster adult students' ability of cooperation and collaboration with others.

Principles and approaches of applying constructivism within history curriculum

Lebow (1993) has proposed 'Five Principles toward a New Mindset' based on constructivist values that may affect the instructional design:

Principle 1: Maintain a buffer between the learner and the potentially damaging effects of instructional practices by:

1. Increase emphasis on the affective domain of learning
2. Make instruction personally relevant to the learner
3. Help learners develop skills, attitudes, and beliefs that support self-regulation of the learning process
4. Balance the tendency to control the learning situation with a desire to promote personal autonomy.

Principle 2: Provide a context for learning that supports both autonomy and relatedness.

Principle 3: Embed the reasons for learning into the learning activity itself.

Principle 4: Support self-regulated learning by promoting skills and attitudes that enable the learner to assume increasing responsibility for the developmental restructuring process.

Principle 5: Strengthen the learner's tendency to engage in intentional learning processes, especially by encouraging the strategic exploration of errors.

These principles show many perspectives of constructivism that the content, objects and events in the curriculum have no absolute meanings; it is learners themselves that interpret and construct meanings based on their current conceptions, previous

experience, and beliefs. In history classroom of higher education, therefore, I designed two teaching activities on the basis of these principles. The aim of these two activities is to encourage students to constructive their knowledge actively through engaging students to participant in the classroom. Each activity has its own goal of education. Moreover, Activity 1 suits the small group of students to complete the requirements, and Activity suites the large group of students in learning history. I will explain how these three activities connect to constructivism teaching approach at the end of the description of each activity.

Activity 1: Debate

Step1: The teacher mentions a topic of TESOL based on the curriculum textbook.

Step2: Separate students randomly into two groups as proposition group and opposition group.

Step3: Asking students to collect information of the topic through using different materials (i.e., library, internet, etc.), and prepare statements depending on the position on which students stand with appropriated references.

Step4: Hold a debate.

Through this activity, the teacher as a host plays a role as a ‘scaffold’ stated by Bruner (1978) in the whole process, the main duty of the teacher is merely to provide the topic and control directions of each step. The design of step1 is with respect to the ZPD theory formulated by Vygostky (1978), which stresses that the function of the teacher is to bridging learners’ gap from learners’ own lower starting point to the level which learners can touch by means of studying. In this activity, students are the centre of the debate; they are allowed to actively collect relevant information, claim clear statements to debate with the other group, and search for appropriated reference to support their statement. During this activity, students could not only improve the ability of active learning, but also practice the capability of collaboration and cooperation while working with group members.

Furthermore, it will foster students’ critical thinking skills in the process of determining statements and showing different perspectives to against the other group. Students can achieve distinct perspectives of one topic from two groups in the debate, and each student can be engaged into this event. However, in the reality of implementing this approach, it will be more effective to be utilized in the small group, because the debate could only use two groups, if the number of students in each group is very large, then it will be difficult to provide equal opportunities for each student to participate in group working. In addition, if the teacher selects limited number of students from the whole classroom to inform two groups, the rest students, again, may

not have opportunities to join into the debate actively. For solving this issue, I designed Activity 2 appropriated with large groups.

Activity 2: Situated learning

Step1. Based on the curriculum textbook, teacher mentions the most interesting topic that has been discussed between the teacher and students at first.

Step2. The teacher points out some common perspectives of this topic in the academic area of history, and then provides a series of primary documents as historical evidence of these authority views.

Step3. The teacher shows some relevant films, videos or audios associating with the topic, in order to create the historical situation.

Step4. The teacher encourages students to discuss, analyse, pretend, or experience the historical event within a historical context relating to the topic.

The idea of step1 is formulated from what constructivists stress that teachers should focus on the previous experience and perspectives held by students while discussing new knowledge with students (Pourhosein et al, 2013). On the other hand, the brief communication between the teacher and students on topic of curriculum textbook presents the respect on students' interests from the teacher. Students can choose to learn what they prefer to study through discussing with the teacher. Thus, students in the classroom will tent to actively participate into the activity of learning history. Step2 is according to Vygostky (1978) and Freire (2000), who commonly claimed that the role of teachers in the classroom should be more like a facilitator than teller, in step2, the teacher merely provide common perspectives from academic authorities to the background knowledge and information of the topic, and then, in Step3 and step4, students can discuss and analyse the historical topic depend on their own knowledge and comprehension on the topic within the historical situation created by the teacher. It benefits students to construct their own knowledge network actively through expanding their previous knowledge and experience.

Material

According to Brooks (1993), constructivist teachers are better to use raw data and primary sources along with manipulative, interactive, and physical materials in the classroom. Materials in which curriculum of humanistic and TESOL employ are various and feasible in higher education, from the constructivism perspective, it is unacceptable that teachers only use textbook to complete activities in the whole curriculum. Not only students who are oppressed by me in the process of learning activities may lose their interest in the content, but I may feel boring as well if I simply transmit the knowledge from the textbook to my students. I would rather to ask students to read the textbook previously before they participate in the classroom,

and remind them that they can have their own perspectives and views on one humanistic subject or TESOL topics if they can afford adequate reference to support their ideas. Therefore, in order to make the teaching and learning process effectively and efficiently, I will employ diverse types of materials (i.e., multi-media, internet, library, archives and museum so on) to attract and engage students' focus. In the classroom, the multi-media can be utilized to play films, video, and audio materials relevant to the content of humanistic or TESOL, I can, based on these, create a dialogue situation for students to make the content better to be understood and accepted (Cennamo, 1993). Teachers can also provide students opportunities visiting museums including highly valued and valuable exhibitions (Innocent, 2009) to build up humanistic context as well. In addition, in terms of academic studying, students could search for primary documents and plenty of published books associating with their academic assignment in archives and libraries. Furthermore, since the constructivism learning model identifies learning as an active development of personal meaning by means of the interaction of previous conceptions and on-going experiences, Yakimovicz and Murphyas(1995) argued that employing internet can assist adult students to construct their learning actively and collaboratively through providing adult learners a distance learning framework. Moreover, students and teachers can keep connection with each other through using the internet technology, such as chatting software, e-mail, and social communication software, etc. in after class time (Bevan, 2013).

Assessment

According to Brooks and Brooks (1993), it will be better that do not say 'No' while the answer given by students is not exact and specific. As a constructivist teacher, I will try to understand what students currently thinking about the topic in the curriculum. Through employing open-answered questions and no-linear questions (Willis, 1995), students will be led to construct new understanding and achieve new skills. In addition, from the constructivist view, I advocate that the function of assessment should be as a tool to improve and enhance both students' learning and teachers' understanding of learners' current understanding in the history curriculum, because humanistic subject and TESOL mostly depend on previous occurring and the background of the students and this distinguish students from each other and in which the teachers know the individual differences in his her class, it is very hard to identify the reality of the events in current situation.

Conclusion

One of key concepts of constructivism in education is that knowledge should not be passively received but contributed by cognizing subject activity by learners. In order to reach this goal, teachers should respect students' prior experience, concepts and beliefs and assist them to understand new knowledge. In addition, students need to be encouraged and engaged to participate into learning activities by teachers. In this

process, the role of teachers is no longer as dominators but facilitators in the classroom. There are three reasons that interpreted why I apply the constructivist approach while designing the activities in TESOL curriculum in higher education: 1) students demand the capability of active thinking and reflective thinking while learning history in higher education; 2) students need to exercise the ability of critical thinking and to be encouraged to study deeply on the subject of history; 3) teachers can create various types of teaching activities to stimulate students' interests in order to make students learning actively. Therefore, based on the 5 principles of instructional design, which outlined by Lebow (1993), I will use two types of activities (debate and situated learning) to suit small group range and large group separately in my history class in higher education, in order to create and maintain a collaborative problem-based environment where students are allowed to construct their own knowledge. Materials in the history curriculum are various and feasible, I will use raw data and primary sources along with manipulative, interactive, and physical materials in the classroom. Also, I will encourage students to use materials outside the classroom, such as museums, libraries, archives, and internet to collect information and improve their capability of collaboration and analyse. With regard to the assessment of the whole curriculum, I agree with Brooks (1993) that never say 'no' to students who submit vague answers of the question I asked, since the assignments, such as Activity 1 (debate) I designed in TESOL subject is hard to be simply judged as 'right' or 'wrong' answer. However, it demands high quality of teachers to complete the whole curriculum, because student performance on which can be significantly affected by the quality of teachers; teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and behaviours are all associated to the success of learners in the constructivist teaching approach.

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