Constructivist strategies in undergraduate EFL instruction

David Symonds

University of British Columbia
Constructivist strategies in undergraduate EFL instruction

Introduction

Although there is no such thing as a true international language, English comes close; as the *de facto* language of the Internet and international business, it is easy to see why the goal of reaching fluency in the English language is so common among ambitious students and professionals across the globe. The field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching, however, still churns forward largely on the fuel of rote memorization and written exams, and while many instructors and programs place emphasis on speaking and listening activities, authentic contexts for such practice are not the norm. I argue here that Constructivist principles have much to offer students of EFL, helping to prepare them not only to pass their examinations, but to succeed in the personal and professional pursuits which follow.

Context

The context of my focus is a two-year intensive English program known as the Global Business Language (GBL) department at Seokyeong University in Seoul, South Korea. The primary goal of the students in the program is to raise their English language proficiency to a level which would allow them to gain admittance and achieve academic success at a 4-year university in North America. Language instruction in this program focuses on reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills in order to adequately prepare students for the rigors of university life in North America: completing assigned readings, writing academic essays, attending lecture courses, and engaging in dialogue with instructors and fellow students to further their understanding of concepts being studied.

My belief is that Constructivist teaching approaches will enhance fluency development in EFL instruction in higher education and more fully prepare students with the critical thinking,
collaboration, and discussion skills they will need upon entering the North American university context.

**Constructivism**

The concept of Constructivism was first theorized by Piaget (1967), who suggested that it is the interplay between experiences (in life and in the classroom) and existing ideas which result in knowledge construction, and as additional experiences occur, existing ideas are modified to accommodate the new information. Constructivism and language learning have a natural connection - language develops out of our need to communicate with one another, often as a direct result of our desire to solve a problem being faced, and has a liberating effect on those who are able to speak confidently and knowledgeably. Indeed, “for Vygotsky, language is the most important psychological tool. It frees us from our immediate perceptual experience and allows us to represent the unseen, the past, and the future” (Miller, 2001, p.384). Language may have emerged in part from a need to communicate about experiences beyond the here and now, but it has the secondary effect of profoundly enhancing and illuminating the immediate world around us.

Constructivist approaches have been found to be useful in teaching sciences, but literature on whether or not those advantages translate into productive, meaningful learning in second language acquisition is sparse. For this reason, I will take the approach of first considering the overall benefits of various Constructivist approaches - and then discuss the applicability of those benefits to EFL instruction and learning in the GBL program at Seokyeong University.

**Constructivism and EFL**
The Buck Institute for Education, an early adopter of the Project Based Learning approach to education, defines it as “a systematic teaching method that engages students in learning knowledge and skills through an extended inquiry process structured around complex, authentic questions and carefully designed products and tasks” (2003, p. 4). Ill-defined problems, a need for interdisciplinary content overlap, and a focus on student-led inquiry are elements of Constructivism which have great potential to enhance fluency in EFL learners. Often what is most sorely lacking in English language instruction is the element of applicability to real life situations – EFL is the study of English as a foreign language; by definition it is not a language which will be readily used in the same context as it is studied. This makes the selection of authentic contexts in which to use English through the construction of a project or the pursuit of a solution to a complex problem, that much more important.

Detractors criticize Constructivism as being insufficiently structured, because of its stance on reality as being determined by the experience of the individual, rather than being determined by inarguable facts (Matthews, 1994), but this view fails to give sufficient credit to the careful selection and design of tasks which characterize true Constructivism. The concern voiced by Matthews (1994) is that Constructivism forsakes ‘finding out’ in favour of ‘making sense of,’ of which he complains that “things can make perfect sense without being true, and making still more sense does not imply an increase in truth content” (p. 16). However, others praise this very element of Constructivism as an asset, pointing out that one of the most valuable aspects of Constructivism is its sensitivity to the culture and context in which learning is meant to occur. According to Jean Lave (1991), “Learning is recognized as a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice” (p.64). Both Problem- and Project-Based learning take advantage of the
social nature of learning by leveraging student interaction to make the learning process more meaningful. In a study by Eskrootch & Oskrochi (2010) on the efficacy of Project-Based Learning, they state that “all learning activities such as constructive, self-directed and collaborative learning occur as a result of verbal interactions through the PBL environment” (p. 241), a testament to how indispensable social interaction is to the Constructivist learning process.

But how does one go about motivating students to engage in fruitful, productive Constructivist learning, and what does it look like when they do? In Project-Based Learning, “students are pulled through the curriculum by a meaningful question to explore, an engaging real-world problem to solve, or a design challenge to meet” (BIE, 2009, p. 4). This notion of students being pulled through the curriculum by their own curiosity and desire to resolve an issue or create something tangible and important to their daily lives places Constructivism in stark contrast with traditional EFL instruction, in which language is often thrust upon the students as an end in itself. In such contexts while students are expected to absorb the language being presented to them, they are only rarely given sufficient opportunities to make meaning from it by relating it to their own social or cultural context, or applying it in the pursuit of the resolution to a problem or project.

In an EFL context, Constructivism can be particularly effective as a method of making language learning important to students, a key factor in causing that knowledge to be lasting and meaningful. As Barab and Duffy (2000) remind us, “Learning activities must be anchored in real uses, or it is likely that the result will be knowledge that remains inert” (p. 5). These real uses and real contexts in which meaningful learning take place lead us directly to the theory of Situated Learning.
While traditional theories of learning often treated knowledge as something ‘out there,’ needing to be captured and stored in the mind, the late 1980s and early 1990s saw the emergence of a theory which suggested that knowledge itself is situated in, and inseparable from, lived experience. “The activity in which knowledge is developed and deployed, it is now argued, is not separable from or ancillary to learning and cognition. Nor is it neutral” (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989, p.32). Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) later defined this theory as Situated Learning.

Situated Learning highlights social interaction and usefulness of learning communities for building knowledge. Lave (1991) states that “learning is recognized as a social phenomenon constituted in the experienced, lived-in world, through legitimate peripheral participation in ongoing social practice” (p.64). The concept of legitimate peripheral participation has potential to be quite useful in second language acquisition. Being divided into groups instead of working alone allows students to learn from one another, but not exclusively through direct interaction. Rather, observation of effective speaking behaviour or appropriate responses to auditory cues can help less skilled learners advance. “We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning” (Wenger, 1998 in Driscoll, 2005, p. 164). The learning which occurs in these types of authentic situations is more meaningful and lasting, because it is not disassociated from its application; knowledge is merged with application in a social context. “People process, represent, and remember in relation to each other and while located in a social world” (Lave, 1991, p. 66). Socializing is part of learning, something which is never more true than in the context of language acquisition.

Applications
Constructivism places heavy emphasis on the concept of socially constructed and negotiated meaning. Acknowledging the fluctuating state of information and knowledge in the Internet age is one of the things social Constructivist theories do best, and just as meaning in content education is socially negotiated, so too is meaning in language education, and indeed, language itself. For this reason, there are a number of potential benefits to developing an approach to teaching students in the GBL program using Constructivist strategies.

First, by developing a context in which authentic learning experiences can occur, students will be able to deepen their practical knowledge of applying English to the world around them. The authenticity inherent in the Constructivist model supports the immersion model found to be effective among second-language learners and instructors (Kenny, 2007), and corresponds to the proposition that learning occurs “in a substantive, nonarbitrary, nonverbatim manner” (Novak, 1998, p.53). So while some students may master the art of memorizing word lists and regurgitating information on tests, the root goal of continuously increasing second language proficiency is not being fully addressed without a forum for language application and meaning-making.

Second, research shows that by challenging the role of the instructor as the source of knowledge, students will be empowered to take ownership of their own learning processes, an element which is essential for the Constructivist teaching approach to be effective. “Students must be given and must assume ownership for the dilemma and the development of a resolution. That is, they must see it as a real dilemma worth investing their efforts in, and they must see their efforts as geared toward a solution that makes a difference (not a school solution)” (Barab & Duffy, 2000, p.7).
Third, Constructivism promotes self and peer evaluation, two elements which will help students develop independent learning capabilities, as well as cooperation strategies. A study conducted on the benefits of using reading circles for EFL instruction showed that “discussions incorporate components of task-based learning and cooperative learning, such as group product, negotiated meaning, and learner interdependence” (Praver, Rouault, & Eidswick, 2011, p. 98). The skills learned through discussions and completing open-ended projects through collaborative effort have broad applications for social, professional, and community development.

Finally, Constructivist strategies help to develop critical thinking skills - an essential component of effect application of language. EFL students who fail to differentiate between what is crucial and what is non-essential may be unable to apply their knowledge to successfully navigate a conversation or problem, even if it draws on the same vocabulary and concepts which have been studied. “A part of solving complex problems involves determining what skills or information a learner needs to know. And learners who discover that, to solve a problem at hand, they must acquire some other skill or piece of information will be more motivated to do just that” (Driscoll, 2005, p. 392). Constructivism helps build the critical thinking skills learners need to control and take ownership of their own learning experiences.

Conclusions

Constructivism helps learners to identify what they need to know, as well as establishing a context in which, if constructed correctly by the instructor, the most important concepts and words being studied are also the ones which are most reinforced through application. This reciprocal relationship between value and application is the greatest indicator that Constructivist approaches to learning can produce more effective results in fluency development for learners of English as a Foreign Language.
References


Buck Institute for Education. (2009). PBL starter kit: *To-the-point advice, tools and tips for your first project.*


Teasley (Eds.), *Perspectives on Socially Shared Cognition* (63 - 84). Hyattsville, MD: American Psychological Association.


