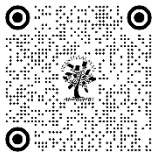


CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH TO THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH FOR TOURISM STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

Constructivism is 'an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner' (Elliott et al. 256). Dewey in his book, *Experience and Education* mentions clearly that learning is a social activity - it is something individuals do together, in interaction with each other, rather than an abstract concept.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Constructivism is 'an approach to learning that holds that people actively construct or make their own knowledge and that reality is determined by the experiences of the learner' (Elliott et al. 256). Dewey in his book, *Experience and Education* mentions clearly that learning is a social activity - it is something individuals do together, in interaction with each other, rather than an abstract concept.

Constructivist learning theory underpins a variety of student-centred teaching methods and techniques which contrast with traditional education, whereby knowledge is simply passively transmitted by teachers to students. The main responsibility of the teacher is to create a collaborative problem-solving environment where students become active participants in their own learning. In this perspective, a teacher acts as a facilitator of learning rather than an instructor. The teacher makes sure he/she understands the students' pre-existing conceptions, and guides the activity to address them and then build on them (Oliver 5 -18).

Learners ought to continuously be challenged with modules and sessions that refer to skills and knowledge beyond their current level of mastery in general English. This will capture their enthusiasm and motivation and builds on previous successes to enhance their confidence. This will definitely develop their independent problem-solving skills in line with Vygotsky's zone of proximal development.

McLeod in his internet article, "What Is the Zone of Proximal Development? Simply Psychology", quotes Copple and Bredekamp to bring out the importance of Scaffolding by Vygotsky. Scaffolding is a key feature of effective teaching, where the adult continually adjusts the level of his or her help in response to the learner's level of performance. In the classroom, scaffolding can include modelling a skill, providing hints or cues, and adapting material or activity (np). Maureen Tam in her article, "Constructivism, Instructional Design, and Technology: Implications for Transforming Distance Learning", lists the following four basic characteristics of constructivist learning environments, which must be considered when implementing constructivist teaching strategies:

- Knowledge will be shared between teachers and students.
- Teachers and students will share authority.
- The teacher's role is one of a facilitator or guide and,
- Learning groups will consist of small numbers of heterogeneous students (50 -60).

In complete contrast to a traditional classroom where strict adherence to a fixed curriculum is very highly valued, the constructivist classroom is more focused on the pursuit of student questions and interests. Learning is not based on repetition but is usually interactive and building on what the student already knows. In contrast to passive learning a constructivist class is more student-centred. Teachers have a dialogue with the students and help them construct their own knowledge. Students work in groups in a constructivist classroom.

Honebeinin his book, *Seven Goals for the Design of Constructivist Learning Environments: Case Studies in Instructional Design* summarizes the seven pedagogical goals of constructivist learning environments:

- To provide experience with the knowledge-construction process
- To provide experience in and appreciation for multiple perspectives
- To embed learning in realistic contexts.
- To encourage ownership and a voice in the learning process.
- To embed learning in social experience
- To encourage the use of multiple modes of representation and
- To encourage awareness of the knowledge construction process

Thus, we can affirm with Brooks and Brooks who summarize in their book, *In Search of Understanding: the Case for Constructivist Classrooms* that student autonomy to a certain extent, use of raw data and interactive sessions, framing tasks with cognitive terminology like 'create, analyze and predict', student and instructor sessions to share and discuss the outcome of their lessons, nurture the student curiosity, and 'engage students in experiences that might engender contradictions to their initial hypotheses and then encourage discussion', are descriptors of constructivist teaching behaviours (103 – 116).

Constructivist learning and teaching shifts the student and learner to a different plane. This will be of great significance when it is applied to teach English for Tourism as English for Specific Purpose. The students who take this course have a basic knowledge of the English language though obtained in their general English classes. Invariably, the students learn more and enjoy the learning environment in a constructivist method of learning. They can concentrate on thinking and understanding the situations in which they will be interacting with people in their real-life situations.

"Learning is transferable" says Steven Olusegun Bada in his article, "Constructivism Learning Theory: A Paradigm for Teaching and Learning". Students can create organizing principles that they can take with them to learn other learning settings. They can make use of wide variety of material including raw data, primary sources and interactive material. It gives them ownership of what they learn, as they design their curriculum with the guidance of the facilitator. This method encourages the students to ask thoughtful and meaningful, open-ended questions and also ask each other (66).

Their learning is grounded in an authentic, real-world context and so the students learn by questioning and applying their natural curiosity to the world. Constructivism promotes social and communication skills by creating a classroom environment that emphasizes collaboration and exchange of ideas. The constructivist theory of learning encourages student learning by exposing learners to a creative environment that directly exposes the learner to the material being studied. Only by experiencing the world directly can the learner derive meaning from them (67).

Constructivism has its roots in philosophy, psychology, sociology and education. Steven goes on to quote Marcy Driscoll, who in his book, *Psychology of Learning for Instruction* goes on to explain that constructivist theory asserts that knowledge can exist only within the human mind, and that it does not have any real-world reality. Constructivism taps into and triggers the student's innate curiosity about the world and how things work. He also states that: constructivism learning theory is a philosophy which enhances students' logical and conceptual growth. (66 - 70).

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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