

The *Constructionist* Theory of Second Language Learning Applied: Some Critical Insights

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Aim

The aim of the following article is to highlight a single theory of second language learning/acquisition, namely *constructionism*, and the contribution it could make to successful language learning and the enhancement of productive classroom environment and teacher-learner interaction and relationship. In particular, I will describe a recent lesson I conducted, whereby I tried to implement and apply this particular approach to second language development in a university classroom type of setting. Accordingly, I will refer to the strengths and weaknesses of this lesson as well as offer some new thoughts and propositions as to why this particular approach to language learning could be an efficient tool in second language development.

Introduction and Definition of the Concept

Constructionism is a theory of learning and, in particular, language learning that was inspired and built upon Jean Piaget's theory of

constructivism. *Constructionism* was developed and is mostly associated with the ideas and work of Seymour Papert (Ackermann, 2001: 4). According to Papert, “knowledge and the world are both constructed and co-constructed through personal experience” (ibid: 7). He asserts that knowledge develops and is formed and transformed within specific contexts; it is shaped and expressed through various media, and processed in different peoples’ minds (ibid: 8). He suggests that learning occurs while individual learners engage with conversation with “their own favourite representations, artifacts, or objects-to- think with” (ibid: 4).

From a *constructionist* or *emergentist* point of view, second language thus develops mainly through usage and associative learning processes. Second language learners extract regularities and patterns from the input while at the same time building and developing their own associations in the brain as extensions to what has been taught and learnt (Mitchell & Myles: 98).

According to this view, knowledge is “context-bound”, which means that learners learn how to use knowledge constructively and apply it to different situational contexts for varying purposes (Kramsch, 1993: 200). Social *constructionist* approaches thus stress the importance of cultural resources as well as other social and contextual factors that might play a significant role in the process of

interpretation of reality and, thus, second language development (Lier, 2000: 254; Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000: 174).

Accordingly, proponents of this view advocate the use of “real-life materials”, such as computer technology or multimedia, which they believe could potentially lead to the build-up of new cultural knowledge that cuts across or transcends across varying learning contexts (Kramsch, 1993: 200). In this regard, Bers (2001: 18-19) adds that new *constructionist* methodologies and, in particular, computers and new on-line technologies can influence how learners think and interpret the reality that surrounds them. She asserts that they are innovative educational tools that would allow users to rethink and redefine issues and concepts of self-awareness, multi-cultural understanding and personal cultivation constructively (ibid.).

Lesson Plan and Execution

Background to the Task

A while ago, I conducted a conversational lesson at King Mongkut’s University of Technology (KMUTT) for one hour as part of a teaching practicum course towards the completion of my Master’s degree in Applied Linguistics (ELT). The purpose of this conversational class usually is to encourage students to talk; yet, my purpose also was to ask and encourage students to think

critically and creatively when using the language. For this particular lesson, I thus paid increased attention to how effective the *constructionist* model of language learning would be throughout this teaching practice and, respectively, how well students would cope with it.

The topic of my lesson was ‘*Culture*’ or later re-phrased ‘*Culture and Its Various Dimensions*’. I am aware that this is quite a broad, multi-dimensional and complicated topic. Yet, I deliberately chose to have it as a broad concept, hoping that students themselves would build their own understanding of the topic, formulate specific questions and generate their own ideas related to the concept of ‘*culture*’.

Stages

1. Building Broader Associations to the Topic and the Concept

As a start-up, I asked students what ‘*culture*’ referred to or what in broad terms students understood by ‘*culture*’. I asked the students to refrain from giving examples yet, but I encouraged them to think what synonyms of the word/concept there could be. Students were allowed to use dictionaries on their mobile phones and discuss their answers in groups.

In order to guide them more into re-constructing or dissolving the concept, I only told them that in the world there were “many cultures, such as American culture, Thai culture, etc.” My intention at that time was to lead them to the thought that one’s ‘*culture*’ might make people *different* and *unique*. The first group of students came up with the term *identity* as a response or rather as a guess to my explanation. When I asked them to define the meaning of ‘identity’, another group instantaneously came up with the idea of ‘representation’.

Hence, it should be noted that I was guided students into understanding ‘*culture*’ as a ‘sense of belonging to something’ by giving examples and asking students what Thai people usually would do at home, in the school or at the temple. However, I never told them what ‘*culture*’ was and what would make a nation or a community different from others.

Students themselves came up with the answers that understanding ‘*culture*’ and the best way to define it was by looking at what people would do within their own communities, nations and societies. Once, we defined that ‘*cultures*’ made us unique, we then could agree that ‘*culture*’ referred to or meant ‘identity’, ‘representation’; ‘belonging to something’ or ‘being different and unique’.

2. Objects, Learning Materials and Further Associations

I then decided to employ the use of pictures and other objects that I hoped would provoke more (further) associations into understanding '*culture*' in the sense of 'belonging to something and/or being unique'. For the purpose of this task, I asked the students to give some examples of how that inter-relationship would be expressed in or through things and objects.

I remember that I looked at a picture/icon of Buddha in class and I asked the students what it referred to. They explained that it referred to Buddha or was an image of Buddha. I invited students to use the Internet and give me more examples of the expression of that inter-relationship through various objects. Some of them searched the Internet and showed me pictures of temples, statues in Thailand, the national flag and others.

I then asked them how they could summarize the meaning of what was found among the statue of Buddha, the Thai temple and the flag, and they arrived at the term 'belief'. Indeed, this was a crucial stage in their understanding of '*culture*'. From its symbolic meaning of '*being different and unique*', students collaboratively arrived at the agreement that '*culture*' had to do with a 'belief' or 'beliefs'; a state, condition and an action of 'believing into something'. Then, we knew already that what '*culture*' referred to

was a set of beliefs or a reflection of one's views and understanding of the world.

3. Culture is 'Unity in Diversity'

Afterwards, we went back and forward, and we re-examined again and again how the concept of '*culture*' could be looked at in broader terms and at the same time in the context of concrete and physical objects. Looking at pictures, icons on the Internet and in the classroom, we constantly re-examined why and how '*culture*' was a 'sense of belief' and how this 'system of beliefs' was expressed in various ways. Then, the key terms of 'religion', 'royalty' were quoted and repeated by the students a number of times.

At this stage, they already knew that '*culture*' manifested itself into bringing people together or closer to one another, but they could not define it under a single term. I then introduced the term 'unity' and explained that '*culture*' also could be associated to "what unifies a nation". I encouraged the students to give their comments on this issue and they all agreed that '*culture*' indeed referred to 'unity'.

4. Culture Is Embedded in People's Behaviour

The last stage of this lesson aimed to encourage students to place their knowledge of '*culture*' in a context relevant to them. My

intention was to encourage students to elaborate on various examples of how ‘*culture*’ would be manifested in their every-day lives so that they would be able to explore and re-define its various dimensions by themselves.

Thus, I asked them to give me any examples of how ‘*culture*’ was manifested and expressed in Thai people’s every-day actions. Almost immediately, everyone quoted the famous ‘Wai’ and the ‘Thai smile’ as typical expressions and modes of behaviour that Thai people usually would conform to.

I then asked students to give me a new definition of ‘*culture*’ or elaborate on how ‘*culture*’ was embedded in people’s actions or what else it might extend to. Through collaborative efforts and discussion, we reached the conclusion that ‘*culture*’ in itself was an act; a practice and, furthermore, a behavioural pattern. The students themselves introduced the terms ‘act’ and ‘practice’ under ‘*culture*’, but I had to help them place it under the broader framework of ‘human behaviour’.

Lessons Learnt and Future Insights

I believe I have gained a lot of insights and new knowledge from this particular lesson as to what factors could play a crucial role in the process of second language learning/acquisition. Thus, I have come to realize that the context in which learning takes place could

play an enormous role in terms of how knowledge is co-constructed and acquired.

Overall, I believe that my lesson met its objective even though this lesson was not planned over a long period of time. In other words, I believe that students engaged critically in the concept of '*culture*' and they themselves dictated the course of the lesson most of the time. I would therefore say that it was a learner-centred type of lesson rather than a lesson dominated by the teacher's persona solely. For example, students were able to reconstruct their pre-existing knowledge of the subject (concept) and apply it to different situational contexts for a number of various purposes. They themselves explored new ideas of the concept and proposed further enquiries related to the notion of '*culture*' and '*cultures*'. Furthermore, some students related the concepts of '*culture*' and '*identity*' to their own lives and experiences abroad, and they revealed to us how their own perceptions of themselves and '*the other(s)*' have changed. I would say knowledge was not purely transmitted, but rather applied to various new contexts and I myself had not expected that the lesson would become so interactive and multi-dimensional, after all.

On the other hand, students learned new vocabulary and I believe now they are more familiar with the concepts of '*culture*', '*identity*', '*belief system*' and '*cultural practices*' amongst others.

They themselves engaged in a conscious and cognitive reconstruction of those words, concepts and ideas; and with my limited help, they managed to reconstruct their meanings and use them appropriately in relevant contexts.

In the future, I believe that I need to be more prepared in terms of learning materials and resources. For example, more pictures, icons and other physical objects might draw a larger number of associations to students and guide them to a better understanding of the concepts/issues. Visual aids and, in general, the use of on-line technology, might also help a lot in navigating students to understand the multiple and various dimensions of the broad concept of '*culture*'.

My lesson employed only a limited set of learning materials. I used the whiteboard and I employed lots of brainstorming in all stages to engage the students critically. I made some use of Internet to show them examples of the various concepts that I had elaborated on. Students themselves used the Internet and their mobile dictionaries to illustrate their ideas. Nevertheless, as I have just mentioned, there are many other ways of how the same lesson or any lesson could be improved so it becomes more learner-centred, learner-driven and, after all, more productive.

To sum up, this article aimed to share some personal reflections of a single teaching practice; yet, more importantly, it aimed to

illustrate the contribution that the *constructionist* approach could make to successful language learning and the enhancement of pleasant classroom atmosphere, environment and interaction. As I have tried to illuminate, the process of language learning largely involves discovery learning, student-centred learning and/or experiential learning, whereby learners constantly co-construct meaning and knowledge, and relate their experiences to new concepts and ideas while functioning in the new language setting. The role of the English language teacher, respectively, is to facilitate such learning atmosphere and environment, and stimulate students constantly throughout their journey of relating their experiences, ideas and thoughts to new concepts, symbols and ideas while using the new language!

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