A Social Constructive Study on Optimizing College English Teaching Strategies

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Abstract

College English teaching plays a significant role in college education, which pays a way for the university students to be more competitive in multinational talent market. Therefore, appropriate and effective college English Teaching strategy applied in the process of college English teaching is considered greatly important. Constructivism which originated and evolved from dissatisfaction of Behaviorist and Cognitivist view of learning and knowledge, posits that learning is a constructive process in which learners build an internal knowledge and a personal interpretation of experience, therefore, knowledge is constructed by individuals or groups as opposed to passively received from the world or authoritative sources. Considering learning process under the perspective of constructivism, college English teachers should adopt some corresponding methods under the guidance of the theory of social constructivism to optimize their teaching strategy. The flexible teaching model, modularized teaching content, perfect teaching assessment system and specialized professional team are advocated to make college English teaching conducted in an effective and positive way.

Key words: Learning theory; College English teaching strategies; Social constructivism

INTRODUCTION

Learning theories describe how learning happens from different perspectives. Therefore, it is undeniably true that learning theories are of pivotal important in guiding effective pedagogical practices. The roles that they play in the aspects of guiding for planning instruction, evaluating current pedagogical problems, diagnosing problems in the classroom, as well as evaluating research on theories are specified by Gredler (2005). On the other hand, one has seen it a proven fact that learning theories have been undergoing evolution, development, and refinement. In the practical College English study, it is the task for university students to learn English and the duty of teachers to give them guidance and instructions, thus more appropriate way of teaching is the main goal of what college English teachers always pursue. Since learning is a constructive process in which the learner builds an internal knowledge and a personal interpretation of experience, teachers should design different tasks to engage students in collaborative problem-solving activities under their proper supervision and coaching. The creativity and initiatives are attached great important in teaching process. What's more, more scientific teaching program and perfect evaluation system should be considered as a whole to optimize college English teaching process.

1. AN OVERVIEW OF CONSTRUCTIVISM

1.1 Underlying Epistemologies

Constructivism can be traced back to several centuries ago. According to Duffy and Cunningham (1996), the embryonic idea of Constructivism should be attributed to the Italian philosopher Vico who asserted that people could know nothing but the cognitive structures they themselves put together. Despite the fact that insufficient amount of attention was paid to Vico's epistemological grounding, several philosophers in the 20th century

advanced and reinforced the Constructivist view that knowledge is constructed by individuals (Yilmaz, 2008).

1.2 Key Assumptions

With such a core notion of individual's imposing meaning on the world rather than vice versa, Constructivism embraces the following notions as its assumptions (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005): a. Learning is an active process; b. Learning is situated in the context in which it occurs; c. Knowledge is not innate but constructed by the learner; d. All knowledge is socially constructed; e. Learning is essentially a process of making sense of the world; d. Experience and prior understanding play a role in learning; f. Social interaction plays a role in learning.

Along the same lines, the basic premises of Constructivism were identified by Marcum-Dietrich (2008): a. Knowledge is constructed, not received; b. Learning is a process, not a product; c. Students' prior knowledge affects learning; d. Learning requires effort and purposeful interaction with the phenomenon.

1.3 Plurality and Multiplicity of Constructivist Perspectives

Despite the set of core assumptions and the shared belief that learners are knowledge constructors, Constructivism, as a theory, embraces plurality and multiplicity of perspectives and it has come to serve as an 'umbrella for a wide diversity of views", as was also commented by Duffy and Cunningham (1996). Different theorists and scholars tend to have different classification of Constructivism. Among the multiple perspectives, Social Constructivism highlights the social aspect in the learning process. Vygotsky's work helped shape the foundation of the social constructivist perspective. According to Vygotsky, the community in which the learner is in and the social interaction by the learner with people around him/her play a pivotal role in learning. Gredler (2005) further elaborated the salient features of Social Constructivism; she asserted that Social Constructivism fundamentally differed from other Constructivist perspectives in its definition of knowledge, definition of learning, as well as the locus of learning. She also maintained that Social Constructivism viewed knowledge as derivation from learning activities and from social construction by co-participants.

2. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

2.1 Application to Ill-Defined Realistic Learning Situations

The legitimate marriage between learning theories and their pedagogical prescriptions has been long recognized by theorists, researchers, as well as practitioners. As Duffy and Jonassen (1991) asserted that a certain theory was always an "integral" part of the instruction that it produced regardless of the awareness or ignorance of the instructional designer.

Social Constructivist learning theory has paved way for the development of Constructivist teaching theory; Constructivist teaching theory, in turn, prescribes a set of principles and premises for educational practices. Jonassen (1999) further pointed out that Social Constructivism was most appropriate for ill-defined learning situations in which real-life tasks were involved, problems and possible solutions were multi-facet in nature. According to the Social Constructivist view of learning, the classroom becomes a micro-society in which learners collaborate in learning activities and teachers facilitate and guide the learning process rather than imparting knowledge (Fosnot, 1996). Therefore, learning occurs when learners form positive interdependence to develop in-depth understanding of the learning content and to construct knowledge (Richardson, 2003).

Social Constructivist theory has been translated into a wide array of Constructivist teaching and learning models among which are experiential learning, self-directed learning, discovery learning, inquiry training, problem-based learning, and reflective practice. Most of them have been documented as well-established and effective teaching and learning approaches.

2.2 Social Constructivist Influence on Practical Teaching

To be specific, the following principles proposed by Jonassen (1994) is to be considered to ensure that knowledge construction by the learner can be facilitated:

a. Provide multiple representations of reality: Exposing course participants with learner profiles, motivation types, self-efficacy differences, learning approach preferences, etc.;

b. Represent the natural complexity of the real world: Presenting to course participants authentic pedagogical scenarios, case studies, as well as interviews for them to analyze and tack with the complexity of factors involved in communicating with people;

c. Focus on knowledge construction, not reproduction: Calling for course participants' prior or existing teaching/learning experience to explain the learning scenario and to form understanding of the target learning point as opposed to imposing the "key" to them;

d. Present authentic tasks (contextualizing rather than abstracting instruction): Analyzing students' profile and conducting classroom observations are both authentic tasks to contextualize learning rather than lecturing on the concepts involved;

e. Foster reflective practice: Requiring course participants to post reflections and share with the e-learning communication via Discussion Board is one of the principle tasks throughout all learning modules;

f. Enable context-and content dependent knowledge construction: Using appropriate technology to develop learning content and to illustrate key concepts of short-term vs. long-term memory and deep vs. surface

learning; participants will be able to come up with strategies to promote deep learning approach in order to store information in long-term memory. This type of knowledge is gradually yet actively constructed by the course participants;

g. Support collaborative construction of knowledge through social negotiation: The course instructor/ designer will closely monitor the progress by each course participants by participating and guiding them in online discussions and through various communication tools if needed.

2.3 Identified Real World Constraints

As has been mentioned at the very beginning of the present paper, the ultimate goal of learning theories is their applications to real world pedagogical settings to help maximize learning effectiveness. On the other hand, instructional designers are also aware that appropriate utilization of theories as guidance to yield effective instructional strategies depends on various factors such as a clear understanding of epistemological underpinnings of instructional design, as well as the strengths and weaknesses embedded in the theory (Mergel, 1998). However, similar to application of many other learning theories, the translation of Social Constructivism into teaching practices is all the more formidable.

Instructional design based on Behaviorism or Cognitivism can be relatively straightforward: Analyzing a set of instructional objectives, breaking tasks down to specific subcomponents, assessing learning outcomes strictly based on learning goals. In comparison, the divergent and subjective nature of Social Constructivism mandates that the instructional product be more facilitative than prescriptive and that the content be constructed by the learner as opposed to prespecified by the instructor. Accordingly, assessment is likely to be more subjective (ibid).

More tangible and potential challenges of a pure constructivist view of learning have been further pointed out by Karagiorgi and Symeou (2005): Little concern for the learner's entry level skills, and the bottom-up design approach which makes constructivist instruction an "oxymoron" (ibid, p. 22). Furthermore, to echo the aforementioned subjective nature when it comes to assessment, Constructivism suggests the impossibility to set the standards to assess the learning outcomes which are individually constructed. Finally, learner control can be a tricky issue in the learning process. Constructivist view of learning provides ample opportunity for learners to manipulate the problem space and leaves unlimited discretion to the learner in terms of selection of learning resources and learning methods. Respect for learners' prior experience which in turn results in the treasure hunting adventure or the "sink or swim" exploration might be far less effective than other instructional approaches which allow for tremendous teacher guidance (ibid). As a result, learners themselves may find the constructivist learning experience " dauntingly complex" and deem learning as " a tortuous path towards an end that looks as though it might be more directly addressed" (Perkins, 1991, p.164).

Challenges are even more overarching and stakes are even higher in terms of implementation of Constructivist view of instructions in the field of teacher education. In order to instill the essence of Constructivism to future teachers, teacher educators need to model the constructivist approach in the aspects of engaging learners in interdisciplinary explorations, promoting collaborative efforts, initiating reflections, etc. All these require the teacher educator to "deconstruct and scrutinize" cultural assumptions that underlie multiple interpretations of constructivism, hence its actual reflection in teaching; without such scrutiny, "… the very constraints on individual development constructivists seek to remove or ameliorate will be reinforced" (ERIC Digests, 1998, p.5).

3. OPTIMIZING COLLEGE ENGLISH TEACHING STRATEGIES UNDER THE PERSPECTIVE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM

According to the learning theory of social constructivism, learners' central place in English classroom is emphasized. English learners are engaged actively in the practical learning process. As for English instructors, they are required to take the distinctive personalities, learning motivation and styles into consideration and adopt some proper teaching strategies to make English learning to be cooperative, experiential, discovery and problem-based.

3.1 Flexible Teaching Model

Contemporarily, the development of communicative competence of English learners are advocated strongly in English education. Therefore, in the process of practical instruction, English lecturers can develop active and flexible teaching model in accordance with different teaching content to motivate creativity and initiatives of both teachers and students. English learners are supposed to be encouraged to participate in different study activities actively to ensure the language leaning conducted in a more individualized way. English learners are always put into priority and English learning are developed positively with the integrated model of "proper guidance of lecturers; task-based learning on class as well as autonomous study after class". Among the integrated model, the fostering of English learners' independent ability are emphasized because with the social constructivist notion, science is not the search for truth, it is a process that help people to make sense of the world. Therefore, teaching is an active, social process of making sense of experience. Students are a group of people who take the initiatives to acquire knowledge positively but not a bunch of flowers that always sit there and wait to be irrigated passively.

With the guidance of Social Constructivism, English instructors are the ones who help and guide English learners develop and elaborate their increasingly specified representation for English and offer students ample opportunities to practice on their own and learn independently according to their purposes and goals. Thus, cooperative learning and autonomous study are combined with each other to promote their interactivity in learning and communication as well as expand learners' competence of analyzing and solving language problem independently. Furthermore, in order to arise students' interests in language learning, contextualized teaching strategy should be conducted to maximize the practical value of English as a tool of communication, which would be explained further in the following section.

3.2 Modularized Teaching Content

English teaching is supposed to be conducted practically. English learners would be more competitively in talent market when grasping practical and professional English skills. The more related professional skills they posses in English learning process, the more quickly they will be adapted to society in the future. In addition to make them develop five basic language skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, English lectures should be designed to meet special need for learners of different major and English instructors should tailor their instruction to satisfy the students' specific requirement. For instance, for the student majoring in business and secretary, they are required to have the English ability of all of the five skills, while for the students with computer and electronics, English skills of reading, writing and translating are necessary inevitably.

In the practical teaching process, teachers could set up different task for English learners and make them practice in variable context to grasp diversified professional skills. In this way the contextualization of language is embodied clearly and the practical attribute of it is also intensified at the same time.

3.3 Proper Teaching Assessment System

In order to monitor and evaluate learning process of English learners systematically and make the cooperative and autonomous study conducted successfully, perfect teaching evaluation system are required to be built effectively. Scientifically speaking, a proper evaluation system should combine process assessment with result assessment to provide a comparatively objective evaluation result to each student. The fresh teaching strategy influenced by Social Constructivism makes the classroom more "learners-centered" and would investigate different ways in which learners can play more active part in acquiring English skills and make its practical value to be applied in real life come true. Therefore, in evaluating leaning result, the performance of each student on class should be considered inevitably and paid more attention

to. Process assessment system includes the evaluation of English learners' voluntary activity of answering questions, task performance on class as well as self-consciousness of autonomous study after class. Students are classified into different groups to conduct task-based study and contextualized language practice, such as role-play performance, English dubbing practice etc. and the performance of each student would make the grade of not only individual but also each team different. In this way, both the cooperative spirit and individual initiatives are embodied, what's more, the formative evaluation system would be more reasonable and objective. In addition to process assessment system, result evaluation system is supposed to be necessary to conduct to provide a systematical evaluation grade to each English learner.

3.4 Specialized Professional Team

As what has been mentioned above, he effectiveness of the Social Constructivism theory together with its guided teaching practice has been proven by empirical studies. Instructors design tasks to engage English learners in problem-solving activities under their supervision and coaching. Compared with traditional teaching model, the dominant role of instructors has already been changed. Instructors should play a role of a conductor and helper but definitely not a dictator or leader. The main task of teachers should make the constructive process of teaching and learning develop smoothly and successfully. Therefore, more specialized professional team is required to keep the pace with the advocated constructive teaching strategy. Equipped with advanced teaching idea and ample constructive teaching method, English teachers could be classified into different project team to render students of varied major foster certain practical English competence. Furthermore, English teachers should be trained periodically with popular and advanced teaching concept around world and apply them in the practical constructive teaching process. More specialized and professional talent team is proven to be necessary in optimizing college English teaching process.

CONCLUSION

The theory of Social Constructivism is of great importance to guide college English teaching practice. A social constructive learner-centered approach requires more reflections and practice by the English instructors to re-consider their teaching belief and adopt appropriate teaching method. The optimized teaching strategy of flexible teaching model, modularized teaching content, proper teaching assessment system and specialized professional team are advocated and suggested by the author to make a constructive teaching process conducted smoothly and successfully.

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