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## Instructivism to Constructivism: Reflections on an Imperative Pedagogical Transition

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### Abstract:

In 2016 ASER, an NGO published surprising facts about education in general, ESL education in specific in India. Talking about general reading ability, till 2009, 60% of standard 8 students were able to read simple English texts. By 2016 the number was surprisingly dropped down to 45.2%. Other agencies such as Pratham and NCERT, India had revealed similar statistics. On the other hand an infant learning application Byju's which had entered the education market in 2015 received immense popularity. 23 lakh paid users with 40,000 crore assets show how powerfully the app influenced the world of Indian education. What's behind its progress? Has it invented any magical learning strategies? Personalised learning is the apps tag line. The idea relates it to the practice of constructivism which of course is a well-known approach to education in Indian public schools. In fact, the general ESL curriculum has been modelled on the very same principles of constructivism. Then how is it that the principles which do not seem to work in schools are able to appeal to lakh of pupils? The present paper tries to answer these questions by looking at the underlying Pedagogical principles of constructivism and their obvious superiority

and effectiveness vis-à-vis the traditional Pedagogical practice.

**Keywords:** Instructivism Constructivism: Reflections Imperative Pedagogical, Transition

### Introduction:

The national curriculum frame work (NCF), India, in 2005 emphasized the need for the change of curriculum in Indian schools. An ideal curriculum should provide opportunities to the learner to become an active constructor of knowledge, instead of a passive receiver of what is taught in schools. In the process of knowledge construction, the NCF says, though the role of teacher as facilitator of knowledge is prominent, the central "who" of constructivism is definitely the learner. Individual differences along with learner's preferences are believed to play a significant role in learning. Hence a constructivist learning starts from what a learner can do.

### What Is Constructivism?

The premise that learners actively construct knowledge for themselves is the main idea of Constructivism. Opportunities are provided to enquire, reflect, investigate

and arrive at a conclusion which involves both critical and creative faculties. The new knowledge gained through meaningful experiences should get assimilated with the cognitive structures already present in brain. So the goal of constructivism is not to memorise or regurgitate the information (Sharma 2006).

### **Evolution of Constructivism as a Theory:**

Constructivism has its origins in Epistemology. Ancient Indian Gurukulas had extensively practiced the approach. Talking about the West, Greek masters Socrates and Plato recognized it a learner centred methodology. For them the teacher is a questioner who initiates the learning process. Later in line, Immanuel Kant also believed, "Knowledge is based on a person's own view point". In modern times, Noam Chomsky opposed the ideas of behaviourism. For him language acquisition is not the performance of habits in isolated incidents. Chomsky's 'Innate creativity' transformed into internal cognitive structures of cognitivism. Jean Piaget, Montessori, John Dewey, Vygotsky, and Stephen Krashen are some of the pioneers in the field. By 1980 the focus had shifted from teacher strategies to learner's thought process. Cognitive and Social Constructivism are two streams in Constructivism. The knowledge built in humans has not been gained through passive accumulation. Interaction between individual and environment will result in cognitive development. Schema or the mental structures already formed are modified by the experiences children derive from environment. Hence Piaget considers the learner an independent, who without

any help from outside could actively construct knowledge for himself. Afterwards, Vygotsky added social dimension to constructivism. Influenced by the Marxist ideas prevalent in the erstwhile Soviet Russia, Vygotsky sees heavy influence of culture as sign system, on the growth of mental structures. For him human thinking is not at all possible without speech. Although children can learn concepts on their own, understanding of purely abstract concepts requires the help of a facilitator. Learner, for Vygotsky is interdependent. Zone of proximal development (ZPD) is his valuable contribution to learning theories. In recent times, with his concepts of comprehensible input, monitor theory, learning-acquisition difference, natural order hypothesis, Stephen Krashen has brought new light to ESL pedagogy.

### **Guiding Principles of Constructivism:**

1. New learning is possible through prior knowledge. Learner's mind is not an empty space. What he already knew helps to reflect on new experiences, so as to assimilate with the existing cognitive structures. The gap between the old and fresh hinders the progress. So the knowledge already gained through one's own culture, linguistic knowledge of native tongue and other social phenomena serve as valuable resources in acquiring new learning, here it is English, the target language. For this very reason Krashen's acquisition theory proposes i+1 model. There is no 1 possible without the presence of i i.e., existing knowledge. Vygotsky's 'Zone of Proximal Development' also

expresses similar views. Bruner's concept of scaffolding was built on the same ideas. Therefore a single, readymade curriculum would not satisfy the learning preferences of different students.

### **2. Active Learner And Hands On Experience:**

Language learning is a skill; and skills are acquired through practice only; and practice is possible through participation alone. Referring to constructivism DR. Montessori asserts, 'hand is the chief teacher; hand is the intellect of mind'. This opinion when he says that the "hand shows interest". The statement hints at the inextricable connection between the body and the mind. The stretch of hand ignites neuro spark in brain which in turn increases the willingness to learn. For this reason, Constructivism considers 'hands on experience 'one of the 'chief resources of learning'.

### **3. Cooperative Learning:**

Activities that promote social togetherness or a direct contribution to ESL acquisition are central here. Pair work, group work, language drills, role play and other team activities provide space to learn from one another. Especially, ESL situation in India offers zero assistance from outside the class room. The progress of learning should be initiated through the participatory activities where the learner is tension-free to generate new forms and patterns of language. Learning by teaching, conduct of surveys, facing interviews, preparation of various projects, making judgments, passing comments over others' work are some of the interesting strategies to inculcate curiosity

among the learners to cooperate with others.

### **4. Individual Differences And Preferences:**

Dieter Wolff, a German Educational psychologist, proclaims learning can only be influenced in a very restricted way. Each individual is an island himself. His abilities and preferences could vary with others. The freedom to make choice fosters learner autonomy. Learner should be allowed to choose bits and fragments from the learning material offered to him which suits his learning style. Situations set in learners' social environment and culture have natural appeal to him or her. Familiar background provides easy scaffolding to process the content.

### **5. Collaboration And Not Competition:**

The most humane aspect of Constructivism is that it cares for learner's self-esteem. The goal is to learn from each other and not to defeat the other. Learning is majorly initiated through interaction, sharing and helping one another. ESL acquisition should require a carefree, light hearted classroom environment.

### **6. Discovery Or Problem Solving Learning:**

Content that is too easy will suffer from a lack of motivation. Too difficult content is likely to discourage the learner. Students must struggle appropriately with the content for the formation of new cognitive structures. Curriculum must have space to incorporate student's contributions which ultimately inculcate a sense of ownership

and personal investment of the learner in the process.

### **Local EsL Classroom: Theory In Practice**

However good the equipment may be and however capable the coach may be, It is the player who should perform in the middle of the ground. Similarly knowledge construction takes place in the brain of the learner. So any instruction that involves active participation is putting the theory into practice. In a language classroom, language acquisition should be given first priority. The content of the text should excite the curiosity of the reader to the extent that he could not stop in the middle. A reader moves forward when he comprehends. School going children definitely prefer entertaining texts to message oriented lessons. If we observe AP state standard 10 English text, units are divided under certain themes. For instance, "Film and Theatre" is one of the themes. 'Mayabazar' is prescribed in this category. It might be a classic movie once. But it may not have that much appeal to the present generation. To be practical, a suspense story in simple English would enhance the learner's curiosity more than a text based on biodiversity. While preparing the curriculum, if the authors think from the point of view of the learner, the choice of content should be such that it suits the attitudes, feelings and interests of a teenager. Passive comprehension of the text may contribute to the linguistic intelligence but it fails to create fluent speakers. For instance Gabriel Okara's lovely simple poem 'Once Upon A Time' is appended with purely thematic comprehension questions. Constructivism

in operation would try it another way. The projects such as (1) Ask your grandparents or elderly people to narrate their childhood days and how those days differ with modern way of living. (2) Enquire a friend or close relative who lives in a city what problems he faces when guests arrive at home. Mere thematic comprehension of the poem will make us to be satirical over contemporary lifestyle but knowledge gained through field study will increase empathetic understanding of the real life problems. It would be more useful to write a brief biography of the man whose statue is installed in or near to your locality than to work upon the life story of an entirely unknown great personality. Therefore scaffolding is twofold i.e., linguistic and content related. Widdowson, in his "Teaching English as Communication", very practically asserted that a learner picks up more language through the instructions given to attempt certain grammar exercise, because general talk is more authentic and life-like.

Constructivism in practice recommends role plays among other things. But a role play between a daughter and mother about classical music results in disinclination towards the activity whereas a simple talk between two girls about the preparation of groundnut chutney has more actual use and linguistic potential. All the while, it is the teacher who should exercise his choice between what works in the class and what doesn't. Further, following constructivist principles in ESL class room doesn't mean reconstructing everything or removing something. It is just the change of direction. The slogan would be 'don't

teach what he doesn't know: Start teaching from what he knew'. Unfolding it through concrete example, one can consider the teaching of the English phonetic system. Telugu speakers are already familiar with L1 sound patterns. Many of these sounds are similar to that of English sounds. A majority of the consonant sounds are not new to Telugu speakers and they have knowledge over vowel groups. Starting from what is familiar will create the feeling of closeness in terms of culture and lived experience. From there, it is easy to work upon unique sounds peculiar to English and Telugu. Local ESL classrooms should look at tapping the past knowledge of the learners. If the teachers also belong to the same region and backdrop, it would be relatively easier for them to presume what the students are familiar with.

**A Few More Inputs:** At the outset, it would not be preposterous to relate some of the first writer's classroom experiments.

1. Generally speaking, dictation improves writing skills. But its potential to enhance listening ability is remarkable. Here the writer's attention was not to correct spelling. The idea was while taking dictation children should pay their fullest attention to grasp the sounds. In rural AP schools the listening skills of children are poor as they rarely participate in authentic L2 conversation. The teacher's talk in the class is also minimum. Initially the writer preferred fluency of listening to accuracy of writing. Over a period of time it was observed that their ears were trained to hear correctly. Surprisingly their ability to spell was considerably improved.

2. The use of story to teach punctuation marks was another small experiment. Instead of presenting the rules, the students had been asked to locate the various writing marks they come across in the story. As several characters exhibit several speaking styles, learners observe the use of punctuation marks in natural context. Moreover it satisfies Krashen's L2 acquisition principles of 'comprehensible input' and 'natural order' hypothesis. With little effort students could identify what mark is used for which purpose.

3. Learning by teaching is yet another activity. From a range of texts, learners choose a fragment of their liking. They practise teaching it in the class. In doing so, they adopt different styles and strategies. Their performance is evaluated by a bench of judges who again are students. The audience will have to answer the questions from the topics taught. Therefore all teaching, learning and evaluating tasks are carried out by the students only. The activity provides a good opportunity for language practice.

4. Translation of jokes, anecdotes, short stories and other non serious material from L1 to L2 and vice-versa will gradually bring mastery over target language sentence structures. It also contributes to the quick development of vocabulary.

#### **Questions Not Yet Answered:**

1. ESL texts are framed on the premise "all learners are inclined to learn". Let us consider an actual Undergraduate ESL class situation.

Instructor: : How many of you intend settlement in life?



Students (response): : All 53 hands shot up.

Instructor : How many are aiming at government jobs? (Imagine everything goes your way)

Students: : Now only 21 hands rose.

Instructor: : What about you becoming fluent English speakers?

Learners: : It is again 21.

Instructor: : Do you think English is necessary in life?

Learners: TRANSITION

: The number is same.

These are graduate students and they know what they say. In that case who will make the horse drink?

2. If it is rightly exploited, a science laboratory, a social study project work has greater scope to practice English. Instructions or directions in the lab are authentic. Preparing a chart, drawing a map, making a model or participating in a mock assembly will give the opportunity to use language in its natural form. Constructivism erases content boundaries and fixes the responsibility for content on the teachers too.

Will they take the responsibility? That is the million dollar question.

3. Finally Veena Kapoor's article "Constructivism in ELT presents the following example:

In a traditional class the lesson "Seeds" may be taught in a period or so. The lesson would discuss types of seeds, different stages of growth, suitable conditions and many more to get it stored in

the mind of the learner. However, as a facilitator what a teacher intends to do in a constructivist classroom would be like this. Students are shown a variety of seeds. They are to identify and categorise the seeds into separate groups. They are to grow the seeds for themselves. They plant them in a dish of moist wool and will take care of providing the necessary conditions. In the process their observations in real time help to construct the new knowledge.

Their experiences will vary. Some of them may compare it to the growth of a foetus. They cultivate a sense of love for trees. Practically they know how difficult it is to raise plants and undoubtedly many conceptual, attitudinal and psychological issues involved in the process. But in a real class, English is a 50 minutes teaching period with an allotted topic to finish. Performance is measured in marks, competition is the way and retention is considered brilliance.

Who can remove the time constraints? Who will stop this rank race?

### **Conclusion:**

To illustrate the positive impact of constructivism as an approach to learning, it would be apt and impressive to relate a real life experience of Michael Thompson, an educationist, a Ted talk's speaker on YouTube, than to dig deep into dry theory.

It was 1992. Ms. Thompson; a recent graduate in education with her mother who was also an educator, attended a constructivist live class on music in Washington. To reproduce her words "I thought I would see nothing new, but what happened was completely new and

completely transformative”. It was a German teacher. The learners sat in a circle. She sang songs, she sang their names, she stopped and tied the shoe lace of a boy. What was surprising was that she never treated the children as a class or as a group?

She actually looked in every individual's eyes, which was like saying, “My boy you have your unique way”. To quote her words again “I hadn't quite seen that before or experienced personally and what happened that day when we were watching the children dancing is something happened in me that said what is this approach to this education that feels so real it feels so authentic”.

The last day the scene was unbelievable. The children clung to her feet begging her to sing a song for them. They certainly didn't want the session to end. A week ago they were strangers to the woman and naturally the viewers' eyes welled up with tears. This is all the result of a simple change of direction. A shift from ‘I give what I think is good for you’ to ‘I give what you want’, from ‘I teach’ to ‘You learn’. Whether it is ESL or EFL, maths or music,

constructivist principles work wonders and change will come unmistakably. Finally, as facilitator of learning, the teacher is required to reconsider, firstly, his or her attitude towards teaching and later his confidence in the learner's ability to make his own choice and to construct his or her knowledge.

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