How Constructivism Applied into China’s English Teaching

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Abstract. This paper aims to find a way to benefit China’s English teaching from a constructivist approach perspective and suggest applying constructivism into this field. In this paper, based on the review of the constructivist of learning and teaching, the author analyzed the drawbacks of Chinese traditional English teaching in the perspective of constructivist and gave six ways to improve English teaching practice in the certain context. It not only sheds a new light on China’s English teaching, but also makes it possible for Chinese English learners to learn a foreign language in the light of psychology.

Introduction

As English teachers, we try every means to make our teaching effective and efficient. We want to know more about our learners and the processes of language learning. In solving these problems, we are bound to use psychological concepts, because our thinking as well as language teaching is inevitably influenced by psychological knowledge. Three psychological theories have a powerful influence on language. They are behaviourism, cognitive approach (constructivism is one of its branch) and humanism. This paper aims to reflect China’s English from a constructivist approach perspective and suggest applying constructivism into China’s English teaching.

For decades, China’s English teaching has been greatly influenced by behaviourism, which emphasizes the importance of Stimuli-Response to learning. And believes that knowledge or skills is acquired through constant Stimuli (a large number of exercises), as we can see many drills in the textbooks. It is the easiest and quickest way to teach language this way: teacher’s explanation, students’ practice and repetition, or drills. Teachers who lack of professional ability can perform this kind of teaching mechanically and without too much daunting which may be met with in an interaction teaching. However, in recent years, many educationalists and teachers have realized a number of limitations, such as the learners are put in a passive position; there is no interaction between teachers and students; there is little concern for what goes on inside the learners’ heads and with little attention to the meaning that the drills convey. (William and Burden, 2000).

Another theory accepted by many English teachers of China in recent years is Krashen’s Input Hypothesis and Affective Filter Hypothesis, which are two important components of his Monitor model. According to Input Hypothesis, ‘humans acquire language in only one way-by understanding messages or by receiving “comprehensible input”’ (Krashen, 1981). That is, L2 acquisition takes place when a learner understands input that contains grammatical forms that are “i +I” (are little more advanced than the current state of the learner’s interlanguage). (Ellis, 2000) The Input Hypothesis
emphasizes the impression in the learner’s head after he gets the comprehensible input. But whether the impression remains after the input and how long it will remain depends on the learner’s affective factors of the learner. By this Krashen put forward his Affective Filter Hypothesis. According to Krashen (1985), ‘a mental block, caused by affective factors ... that prevents input from reaching the language acquisition device’. This “block” is called Affective Filter, just like a net. Although these two hypotheses are established on the base of second language acquisition, which is different from China’s foreign language learning, it can to some extent enlighten us and gives us a lot of implications in our language teaching, especially in teaching listening comprehension. But we should say that there are limitations about his theory. In terms of input, Krashen gives much weight to the external input, which he thinks will determine the success of the language acquisition, while neglecting the active role of the learner. He regards the learner as just passive receiver. After the language resources being filtered, some of the input becomes “intake.”

Actually, the acquisition of a language is through the learner’s active construction rather than his passive reception of external input. No matter how comprehensible the input is, it depends on the learner’s autonomous choice. If the learner doesn’t choose to pay attention to the input, there will be no intake, not even to speak of a successful acquisition. The learner’s original language structure interacts with new language input. The intake is not just what is left after being filtered, but a new structure.

To make our teaching effective and efficient, we should adopt constructivist learning approach to our teaching, which is quite feasible. Although learning language is different from learning other subjects, they still share commonness. According to Rod Ellis (1990): “One way is to assume that classroom language learning is just like any other kind of learning and can be explained with reference to a general theory of learning.”

**Constructivism**

One important concept in constructivism is cognitive development, which is influenced by three processes: assimilation, accommodation and equilibration.

Assimilation is the process by which incoming information is changed or modified in our minds so that we can fit it in with what we already know.

Accommodation is the process by which we modify what we already know to take into account new information.

Equilibration is a balance between what is known and what is currently being known. (William and Burden, 2000).

The dominant figure in this field is Jean Piaget, whose basic idea is that the children come to construct the knowledge of the world through their interactions with the environment. According to Piaget, we “come to know” things as a direct result of our personal experiences, but we make sense of those experiences at different stages of our lives. (William and Burden, 2000).

**A Constructivist View of Learning**

In contrast to more traditional views which see learning as the accumulation of facts or the development of skills, the main underlying assumption of constructivism is that individuals are actively involved right from birth in constructing personal meaning, that
is their own personal understanding, from their experiences. (William and Burden, 2000).

The main contents of a constructivist view of learning include two parts: what is learning and how to learn.

**What is Learning?**

From the constructivist view of learning, knowledge is not acquired from teachers’ explanation, but acquired by the learner’s active and meaningful construction with necessary learning materials and the help of others (teachers or learning peers) in certain social and cultural context. Constructivist learning theory emphasizes context, corporation, conversation and active construction in the learning process. (Yu et al., 2000)

- **Context:** The context in the learning environment should be propitious to the learner’s construction. Corporation: corporation goes through the whole learning process. It is very important to collecting and sharing learning materials, discussing the problems encountered in the process of learning and the assessment of the learning results. Conversation: The learning tasks can only be accomplished through conversation in the corporation. Active construction: This is the final aim of the learning process. What the learner constructs is the property and the rules of the things he learns and the relationship among the things he learns.

From above we know that the learners don not come into the classroom with nothing in their heads. They have various understanding of the society, various cognitive experience and formed cognitive structure. In the learning process, the new knowledge conflicts with the old knowledge. If learners want to solve a problem, they have to analyze the present problem using his old knowledge to choose, to deduce. Then the new cognitive structure will come into being. Therefore, the process of acquiring knowledge is creating a problem, analyzing the problem, solving the problem and forming a new cognitive structure.

**How to Learn?**

Constructivist learning approach advocates the student-centered learning. That is, students should be the principal part in information process and active construction rather than a passive receiver of the external input. The learners have to explore the meaning of the knowledge and relate what they learn now with what they have known. Then the learners should reflect this relationship, which is very important in active construction. The learning will be more efficient if the learners can connect this thinking process with corporation process (negotiation or communication with others).

**A Constructivist View of Teaching**

According to a constructivist view of teaching, teaching, like learning must be concerned with teachers making sense of or meaning from the situations in which they find themselves. Teachers’ beliefs about themselves as persons and about learning are of vital important. Therefore, the first thing for teachers to do is to make their constructions of learning and learners explicit. (William and Burden, 2000)

Teachers should regard their role in students’ learning (construction) as guide and helper instead of the authority of knowledge in class. According to a constructivist view of teaching, teachers should do the following things in class:

Teachers should help the students become the principal part of their learning by designing tasks that are inductive for student to decide their own learning aim in accordance with their own varieties. As we have mentioned before, the cognitive
conflicts create internally. The learning aim is the learner’s internal need, which may be somewhat different from the teachers’ teaching aim. The way out is to design tasks with some kind of flexibility for the learners to accomplish according to their own needs.

Teachers should create a good learning context, which is real, open and challenging. A good environment will encourage to communicate with teachers, partners and to encourage them to be interested in learning and explore their learning. (Yu et.al., 2000)

Teachers should provide chances for students to reflect their learning contents and learning process. Learning is not a one way street. In the process of learning, the learners should look back at his way to reflect his knowledge acquired and his learning process, which will make his following learning more efficient.

To be brief, the core of constructivism is student-centered, it emphasizes the active exploration and construction in contrast with traditional teaching, which conveys knowledge from the mind of the teacher to the notebook of the students.

**Drawbacks of China’s English Teaching from a Constructivist Approach.**

Traditional English teaching in China attaches too much importance to the explanation grammar and vocabulary, which is directly caused by the test-driven feature of China’s language teaching. Learners are in a very passive position. A lot is missing in this process from a constructivist approach. It mainly embodies in the following aspects:

Traditional English teaching does not mobilize the old knowledge or experience enough. In most cases, the language units are treated independently Learners are asked to remember them one by one. Perhaps the only related old knowledge is grammar or vocabularies learned before. There is no doubt that it will add the students’ burden and decreases their interest in learning the language.

Traditional English teaching neglects the learner’s needs of exploration. Curiosity is the internal need of all learners, especially children. According to constructivism, during the process of learner’s construction, the conflicts (problems) will emerge. However, most teachers just ask the students to receive and remember the results with no consideration to students’ need to know how the results come out, even not care the questions of the learners in the learning process. When I was a student, I have been forced to remember many collocations, sentences structures mechanically, especially in middle school and high school education.

Traditional English teaching neglects the learners’ learning strategies and their affective factors. Learning is a process, during which learners will employ learning strategies as well as control their feelings or emotions. Traditional approach just look at the results of learning, no matter how the results are acquired, by rote learning or by using strategies. Another serious problem is that many teachers think that English learning is just like the learning of any other subject. The strategies they impart to the learners are no more than memorizing, reading…Both teachers and learners have a blind faith in a large size of vocabulary and do lots of grammar and translation exercises to pass all the required examinations.

Traditional English Teaching neglects the communication among learners. This is maybe the most common problem in traditional teaching, which exist in most classrooms. There are two reasons to explain this problem. First, Chinese have a long tradition to respect teachers in terms of regarding them as the sole authority in the classroom. Learners can only get knowledge from teachers instead of other learners. In many people’s eyes, it is a waste of time to listen to other learners’ opinions because they are not authoritative enough. Second, it is another Chinese educational perspective.
That is, we advocate “independent thinking” in learning process. In childhood, children are asked to solve their problems or finish their homework independently without discussing with other peers. It is absolutely true that independent thinking will improve learners’ thinking ability, but what is forgotten is that we should listen before thinking. Learning is a kind of sharing between teachers and students, students and students. The learning among students will not only improve learners’ thinking abilities, but also their communicative abilities and observing abilities.

Traditional English teaching neglects the real aim of learning English— to communicate in real life. There is an unbalanced development in language competence. Learners are well exposed to reading and have an insufficient training in listening. They even get very limited training in productive skills— poor oral competence and weak in writing. Few teachers pay attention to learners’ pronunciation. These phenomena are caused by so many required tests in China. Teachers and learners are only interested in what will be tested. Learners have a lot of test experiences and are very concerned with test-taking skills.

**Implications of Constructivism to China’s English Teaching**

The implications of constructivism to education is that it will not achieve much if we just try to input knowledge externally. The meaningful education should base on the active understanding of the learners. Teachers’ job is to provide rich experiences with individual meanings to the learners, and learners should construct knowledge by themselves. The forced-feeding method of teaching should be brought to an end.

In China’s context, according to the problems in our teaching practice, there are several aspects for us to improve

**Promote Learner Autonomy in China.** In China’s educational culture, great importance has been attached to the teacher’s role as the only source of knowledge, the authority, and the judge. Although most teachers in China hold positive attitudes towards learner independence (Qi & Pang, 2002), they seem to have inadequate knowledge about how to promote it among learners. So teachers first need to upgrade themselves to fit in the new roles and acquire skills to promote it. Then teachers should help learners to prepare themselves for their autonomy. When learners come into the classroom, they bring their learning experiences and habits with them. (Bai & jing, 2000) The Chinese learners are used to dependence on teachers. Therefore, teachers should initiate activities to challenge learners’ traditional belief and cultivate their confidence.

**Mobilize the Old Knowledge of The Learners.** The old knowledge that influences our English teaching includes daily life experience; knowledge about Chinese language; knowledge about English language; knowledge about culture. Teachers should try to relate the old and the new and ask the students to find the similarities and differences by making comparisons and contrasts.

**Provide a Good Environment for The Learners.** Concerning with the relatively poor language learning environment in China, teachers should provide a real, open and challenging environment in which learners can get more chances to use the language and solve the problems by themselves. Constructivism advocates shortening the distance between knowledge and problem solving. And also the environment should be relaxing. The learners have opportunities to ask questions and to make errors.

**Help Learners to Form Their Own Learning Strategies and Affective Attitudes.** Teachers should initiate the students to reflect their own learning after a period of time.
Do I do well during this period? If so, what strategies do I take? If not, what is the problem? Teachers should collect these reflections and communicate with the students in time to help them to form their own learning strategies. In order to cultivate learners’ affective attitudes, which refer to interest, motivation, confidence, etc., teachers should first have confidence in their learners and praise or encourage them when they make any progress. Second, teachers should create a good atmosphere in which learners are treated equally and are active to speak out their opinions. The way of assessment plays a very important role here. Teachers should make the learners believe that learning is not to get a point, the more important is what you learn and what skills you develop in the process of learning.

**Promote peer Learning Among Learners.** Confucius believed that 'if you do some researches alone, you will become less informative without friends'. Teachers should cultivate the learners to care each other, to help each other and to respect each other. They should be convinced that learning can happen among their discussions and communications.

**Clarify The Real Aim of Teaching English.** The aim of teaching language is to communicate and equip the learners with another way of looking at the world, rather than passing the tests. Teachers should cultivate the learners to have a balanced development of all the language competence.

**Conclusion**

Constructivism has a lot of implications in the English teaching in China. As teachers, we should apply it into our teaching. But we should realize that language is indeed different from other subjects. Only construction of the knowledge is not enough, it really needs a lot of intimating, memorizing and practices.

**References**


