World Academy of Science, Engineering and Technology
International Journal of Educational and Pedagogical Sciences
Vol:8, No:3, 2014

On the Constructivist Teaching of Extensive Reading for English Majors

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Open Science Index, Educational and Pedagogical Sciences Vol:8, No:3, 2014 publications.waset.org/9997857/pdf

***Abstract*—**Constructivism, the latest teaching and learning theory in western countries which is based on the premise that cognition (learning) is the result of "mental construction", lays emphasis on the learner's active learning. Guided by constructivism, this thesis discusses the teaching plan and its application in extensive reading course. In extensive reading classroom, emphasis should be laid on the activation of students' prior knowledge, grasping the skills of fast reading and the combination of reading and writing to check extracurricular reading. With three factors supplementing each other, students' English reading ability can be improved effectively.

***Keywords*—**Constructivism, extensive reading, constructivist teaching.

I. Introduction

A. Constructivism Learning Theory

CONSTRUCTIVISM learning theory is a philosophy which enhances students' logical and conceptual growth. The constructivism learning theory argues that people produce knowledge and form meaning based upon their experiences [1]. Two of the key concepts within the constructivism learning theory which create the construction of an individual's new knowledge are accommodation and assimilation. Assimilating causes an individual to incorporate new experiences into the old experiences. This causes the individual to develop new outlooks, rethink what were once misunderstandings, and evaluate what is important, ultimately altering their perceptions. Accommodation, on the other hand, is reframing the world and new experiences into the mental capacity already present. Individuals conceive a particular fashion in which the world operates. When things do not operate within that context, they must accommodate and reframing the expectations with the outcomes.

Based on constructivism, which provides theoretical support for today's educational research and teaching practice, knowledge is not an objective existence independent of the cognitive subject (human beings), but is an active construction in understanding the outside world. This construction is the result of social interaction which occurs in the environment interacting with others.

B. Constructivism's Influence on Language Study

The enlightenment of social constructivism on learning, especially language learning, is deep and profound. First of all, it is trying to change our understanding of the nature of knowledge. Knowledge is learning subjects' (students) active construction on learning object (objective world). We should advocate discovery learning. Learning is not passively accepted. Learning subjects should be active to cognize and create from personal experience to construct a personal meaning.

Second, learning inevitably exists in a specific environment and is finished through interaction with others, especially language learning, because an important part of language study is to use the target language to interact and communicate with others. In this case, the environment here is not only substance such as classroom environment, but also refers to the social culture, education, family and interpersonal relationship, and even psychological environment. So we must pay special attention to social interaction's effect on learners' behavior and emotional factors, which is also the connotation of one of the basic theory of social constructivism—humanism.

Third, since the learner is the main body of learning, we should shift the emphasis of teaching to the student. To teach is to learn. The role of the teacher should change from the traditional knowledge transmitter to a mediator [2]. Instead of giving a lecture the teachers in this theory function as facilitators whose role is to aid the student when it comes to their own understanding. This takes away focus from the teacher and lecture and puts it upon the student and their learning. Teachers should provide learning opportunities and learning experience for students, so as to create learning environment and atmosphere favorable for constructing personal meaning, make learners strengthen autonomy, self-control and self-responsibility and improve the ability of using learning strategies in order to achieve the purpose of active learning. Such learning is more effective.

Fourth, learning should be full of educational value. Language learning is even more so. Language is also the media of constructing meaning and creating "reality". In a sense, what kind of choice and construction creates what kind of "reality". "Reality" embodies language users' position. Therefore, language use is creating culture. When we are constructing meaning in language, we are creating culture [3].

II. Reading Teaching and Constructivism Learning Theory

Constructivism claims that learning is a process of learners' actively constructing internal mental representation [4]. Learning is not passing knowledge from teachers to students but students' constructing their knowledge. Learners are not passive information receiver but those who actively construct information meaning. The construction cannot be replaced by others. Therefore in reading teaching, students should fully be

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given the autonomy of reading and teachers help students develop appropriate reading strategies, providing certain help and making them construct the understanding of the article.

Constructivism emphasized that students do not come into the classroom with empty head. They have formed rich experience in daily life and the previous study or concluded the explanation of the problem through sensible reasoning [5]. Teaching cannot ignore students' experience and store the new knowledge from the outside but regard students' knowledge of existing experience as "growing point" of new knowledge. Constructivism claims that the meaning of an article lies in learners' construction based on the existing information, knowledge, emotion, experience and culture rather than article itself. In fact, reading is a communication between readers and writers but not face to face. Therefore, in the process of reading teaching, on the one hand, the teacher should pay attention to students' previous experience which influence the understanding of the article, use teaching methods to activate students' prior knowledge and guide students to establish the connection between the old and new knowledge; On the other hand, the teacher should acknowledge the diversity of thinking and encourage students' critical thinking.

Teachers are not simple knowledge presenters, but ones who should pay attention to students' own understanding of all kinds of phenomena, listen to their views and have an insight into the origin of their ideas. Everything needs both teachers and students to explore some issues, communicate with each other and question each other in the process, know each other's idea clearly and make some adjustments. Because of the difference of experience, learners' understanding of the problem often vary, which constitutes a valuable learning resources in the community of learner.

Besides, the resources and lesson plans that must be initiated for this learning theory take a very different approach toward traditional learning as well. Instead of telling, the teacher must begin asking. Instead of answering questions that only align with their curriculum, the facilitator in this case must make it so that the student comes to the conclusions on their own instead of being told. Also, teachers are continually in conversation with the students, creating the learning experience that is open to new directions depending upon the needs of the student as the learning progresses. Teachers following Piaget's theory of constructivism must challenge the student by making them effective critical thinkers and not being merely a "teacher" but also a mentor, a consultant, and a coach.

III. Classroom Teaching Design

A. Activating Prior Knowledge

Constructivism claims that meaning is constructed in the repeated, bi-directional interactive process between the old and new knowledge. In reading, students' understanding of the text is based on prior knowledge. Schema knowledge is an important part of prior knowledge, which includes general knowledge of the world, social and cultural knowledge, theme knowledge and style knowledge. That knowledge plays a very important role in the students' understanding of the article and the construction of meaning [6].

One of the important tasks for the teacher is to help students establish or activate that knowledge. This stage can be achieved through the preparation before class activities or classroom teaching. For example: In the fifth unit, Book Four of Tapestry English Reading "Not Child's Play: the Work", the title has significant implications of the text content [7]. The teacher may start to activate students' prior knowledge about child labor. For example, the teacher may ask questions, "What do you know about child labor? Why do some businesses hire workers illegally? Do you think that illegal child labor is only a problem in developing countries? Illustrate your point." Those questions should be specific, instructive and students should be given sufficient time to think. Group discussion is encouraged. Here teachers may be reminded that they need to help students build schemata knowledge, because a lot of students know little about employment situation in such developed countries as America. So teachers can introduce, "You know, In the U.S., employers can save $155 in wages one year by hiring underage workers instead of legal workers". Besides, students can be required to find some related materials via the Internet or other ways. Take this unit as an example; teachers can arrange students to find information about child labor and different situation in different countries so as to obtain the schema knowledge. In a word, teachers should strive to expand students' background knowledge, guide their existing knowledge and motivate students' reading interest so as to lighten the understanding burden for students.

B. Guiding Students to Read Materials Correctly and Grasping Fast Reading Skills

Linguist Frank Smith thinks, "Reading is an active process of solving problems. In this process, the reader must try his best to find information and the answer." This process can't be replaced by teachers, but teachers can guide students how to read effectively, teach them reading methods and guide them to understand the main idea of the text correctly. Therefore, if the reading speed is too slow, it will be harmful for reading comprehension. This is because we only pay attention to individual words, rather than the outline of the article and the overall planning, that is, "the endless attention to trees at the expense of forests," which affects getting needed information from the passage. The brain can process information at breakneck speed, so low reading speed makes the brain in a state of underused so that the thought is not highly concentrated, vulnerable to outside interference and ultimately affects the reading effect. It is visible that not only certain amount of reading material but also certain reading speed are needed to improve reading level. In order to enable students to read fluently and quickly, fast reading training is needed for students in order to let them grasp speed reading skills. Reading can be divided into two steps:

1) Do fast reading once. Learners are restricted to a period of reading time, only grasping the theme and the main idea of the article without looking the news words up in their dictionary.
2) Read at normal speed again, and deal with new words and

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difficult problem.

In class, first of all, the teacher would like to ask students some questions related to reading comprehension for them to answer. If these questions are clear, they also understand the whole passage to some extent. Teachers can also ask them to brief the content of the passage in order to inspect students' previewing work. At the same time, teachers should introduce some text background knowledge to help students understand the text. And then, language points in the article and practice are dealt with.

C. Positive Innovation, Promoting the Combination between Reading and Writing

It is explicitly stipulated in the syllabus: "In-class reading quantity of 37. 50000 words are needed for Band 4, extracurricular reading quantity is 62.50000 words." With 2 periods every week, the teachers all focus on the teaching materials, which cause in-class reading quantity unable to complete, let alone extracurricular reading quantity. So, extensive reading should be the conscious extracurricular activities.

In 1990, after the comprehensive survey of the relationship between reading and writing O'Malley [8] found: writing activity is very useful to improve reading comprehension; on the other hand, the method of improving writing by reading is also very effective. With the development of psychological linguistics, linguists think that the process of reading is not merely a passive process of accepting, but an act of creating meaning. Through writing, students can express what they think and feel about a piece of reading material, completing the behavior of "create meaning". The teaching method of "combination of writing and reading" can make students be exposed to a lot of language materials through a wide range of extracurricular reading. Reading and writing are inseparable, closely related. Language input relies on listening and reading while language output relies on speaking and writing. The input and output supplement each other, complement each other and promote each other. The more rich input is, the more accurate and fluent output is. Therefore, if the teaching method of "combination of writing and reading" can be applied fine in extensive reading class, it is a good attempt. Teachers should ask students to read relevant books and write a book report out of class.

The author demands students to read any English material you are interested in, such as books, English newspaper or online material every week and write down a piece of reading journal. Through periodic inspection, teachers can find students' interest in reading, amount of reading and the degree of reading with concentrated attention. In addition, writing can also train students to think in English and the ability of using English.

IV. Conclusion

Reading class has always been considered to be a course difficult to grasp and often wrongly interpreted as the idea that only the word "reading" can solve it. But by the theoretical instruction of constructivism, in the reading class, teachers emphasize the activation of students' prior knowledge, master fast reading skills and inspect extracurricular reading by combination of reading and writing. The three factors supplement each other, complement each other both inside and outside the classroom, which can make reading classes informative but not boring class type. It is better to reach the demand of syllabus for English majors and improve students' English reading ability effectively.

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