

# Learner Autonomy Based On Constructivism Learning Theory

Haiyan Wang

**Abstract**—Constructivism learning theory lays emphasis on the learners' active learning, such as learning initiative, sociality and context. By analyzing the relationship between constructivism learning theory and learner autonomy, this paper explores how to cultivate learners' learner autonomy under the guidance of constructivism learning theory.

**Keywords**—Constructivism learning theory, learner autonomy, relationship, cultivation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

**B**ASED on the current situation of domestic ELT (English Language Teaching), the key factor of English teaching reform lies in whether the teaching model that teachers are solely depended to inspire students to acquire language can be broken. While as cognitive subjects, learners are passive from the beginning to end in the teaching process and it is hard for them to develop their initiative and enthusiasm. In order to change this condition, many educators home and abroad have done so much research from the theory and practice. Constructivism learning theory is the main result of theoretical research. This paper mainly focuses on the relationship between constructivism learning theory and learner autonomy and how to cultivate learner autonomy based on it.

## II. BASIC THEORIES

### A. Constructivism Learning Theory

As a main academic trend, social constructivism has received much concern and attention and it has provided favorable theoretical support for current educational research and teaching practice. Its basic concept is that knowledge (meaning) is from social construction. Knowledge is not an objective existence independent of subject (human being) but an active construction in human activity of knowing the outer world. This construction happens in the environment contacted with other human beings. This is a result of social interaction [1].

The enlightenment of social constructivism on learning, especially language learning, is deep and profound. Firstly, it tries to change our understanding of the nature of knowledge. Knowledge is learning subject's active construction of learning object (objective world). We should advocate discovery learning. Learning is not passive receiving. Learning subject should proactively perceive and create from personal

experience and construct personal meaning.

Secondly, learning necessarily exists in certain specific environment and is achieved through interaction with others. Language learning is even more so, because one important component for language learning is to communicate interactively in target language. The environment involved includes not only classroom environment but also social culture, education, family and interpersonal relationship, even psychological environment. So we should pay special attention to the effect that social interaction has on learners' behavior and affective factors. This is the connotation of one of the basic theories of social constructivism—humanism.

Thirdly, since learners are learning subjects, we should lay the emphasis of teaching on learners. Teaching is for the sake of learning. Teachers should change their roles from traditional knowledge imparter to mediator [2]. Learners should be provided with learning opportunities and learning experience to create the learning environment in favor of constructing personal meaning so that learners can enhance their self-responsibility and improve their ability of applying learning strategy with the aim of active learning. Such learning is more effective.

Fourthly, learning should be rich in educational value. Language learning is even more so. Language is not only transmitting knowledge but also a media of constructing meaning and creating "reality". In a sense, what kind of choice and construction would produce what kind of "reality". "Reality" reflects language users' standpoint, so language use is creating culture. When we are using language to construct meaning, we are creating culture.

### B. The Connotation of Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy is a new realm of learning. Researchers have different descriptions as to its definition. Holic thought that learner autonomy is learners' ability of managing their own study, including setting learning objectives, self-monitoring and self-evaluation [3]. Little treated learner autonomy as learners' psychological reaction to learning content and process [4]. For learner autonomy, attitude and ability are kernels, key factors to decide learner autonomy. Dickinson listed autonomous learners' basic features. They can understand teaching objectives and teaching methods, set their own leaning target, choose suitable learning strategies, monitor their own learning strategies and establish their own learning outcome [5].

Haiyan Wang is with the College of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology, Qingdao 266061, China (phone: 86-0532-88958959; e-mail: haiyanwang417@163.com).

### III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CONSTRUCTIVISM LEARNING THEORY AND THE CULTIVATION OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Constructivism learning theory holds that learners are active constructors of knowledge meaning, learning subjects. Constructivism learning theory emphasizes that "learning" is the center and learner autonomy should be given full play. During the whole learning process, teachers mainly play the role of organizer, guider and assistor [6]. Learners should not only understand new knowledge but also analyze, check and criticize new knowledge during the learning process. Teachers' prior task is to stimulate learners' learning interest and learning motivation and then connect current content with learners' original knowledge and experience organically. Learners don't come into the classroom with empty heads. They have formed certain knowledge and experience based on their past life and study, having their own opinions about everything. Even there are new problems in front of them, learners can form their explanation of problems based on their past experience and cognitive competence. So teachers shouldn't neglect these experiences and forcibly impart new knowledge to learners but cultivate new knowledge and experience gradually based on learners' current knowledge and experience. Besides, learners are unique. With different genetic predisposition, social environment, family condition and life experience, learners form their distinct physiological world. This individual difference should also be respected. Teachers should treat learners as non-substitutable subjects with many-sided development needs and possibilities, thus learners' learning initiative can be really activated and construct their own multi-angle knowledge hierarchy.

As is synthesized above, the cultivation of learners' learner autonomy is based on constructivism learning theory and reflects constructivism learning theory fully. They supplement each other. With constructivism learning theory as theoretical support, learner autonomy advocates learner-oriented study, emphasizing learners' role of cognitive subject. Knowledge is not passed on by the teacher but learners' acquiring through meaningful construction with the help of necessary learning materials and others (including teachers and study partners) under certain situation ( socio-cultural background) [7].

### IV. THE WAY OF CULTIVATING LEARNER AUTONOMY UNDER THE GUIDANCE OF CONSTRUCTIVISM LEARNING THEORY

#### A. *Cultivating Learning Motivation and Setting Learning Objectives*

Learning motivation is always considered as a key factor for second language acquisition. One of the most important reasons for the high success rate of children's acquiring mother tongue is that the motivation for children to acquire mother tongue is very strong. Mastering and applying mother tongue is the basic living need for children, because mother tongue is the sole language for children to communicate with others. In our country, most second language learners are instrumentally motivated. According to Gardner's distinction, most learners with instrumental motivation treat target language as an instrument, hoping that target language can bring about material benefit for them, such as improving their social status

and economic income. For most college students, their main purpose of learning foreign language is to pass college English test (Band Four, Band Six) so as to get degree or find a good job. They care less for whether they can speak foreign language well. This attitude of learning foreign language is the main source of the bad effect of their learning language. While learners with integrated motivation like and appreciate the language they learn and the culture related to learned language. They hope themselves to be more like one member of target language society and be accepted by target language society. Compared with "instrumental motivation", "integrated motivation" is obviously more beneficial to improve learners' communicative competence. So, in foreign language teaching, we should emphasize on cultivating learners' "integrated motivation", helping them get a clear understanding of the status quo and prospect of external exchange after China enter WTO in order to cultivate learners' ability of applying English.

#### B. *From Knowledge Accumulation to Meaning Construction*

Traditional teaching objective is to let students assimilate, practice and remember knowledge. This practice that only attaches importance to learning result but neglects learning process will make students memorize knowledge mechanically, lack thinking capacity and be unable to apply practically. In order to change the situation, teachers should firstly change the concept of ultimate teaching objectives. How much language knowledge learners acquire shouldn't be the ultimate aim. The more important thing is that teachers help learners construct meaning of this knowledge. Helping learners construct meaning is helping them get rather profound understanding of the nature, rule and internal relation among things reflected by the current learning contents. Teachers should emphasize the guidance of learning strategies and lay the foundation of how to study for learners. Once learners grasp suitable learning skills and strategies, they will be occupied in effective and autonomous learning. According to O'Malley & Chamot's [8] learning strategy training procedure, firstly teachers should make learners realize their acquired strategies. Then Teachers introduce and demonstrate new strategies and provide them with chances of practicing new strategies. At last learners themselves evaluate the effect of applying these strategies. By means of this procedure, learners are guided to adjust their learning objectives and learning strategies according to different needs during learning process so as to reach active construction of knowledge and meaning.

#### C. *Emphasizing Cooperation among Learners*

Constructivism learning theory holds that learners are unique and this uniqueness should be respected, so teachers shouldn't simply give a right or wrong evaluation as to students' different opinions but give them corresponding guidance by penetrating their different understanding, looking into their way of thinking and experience and background. Also, teachers should trigger students to have a further thinking about questions so as to make learning process be full of real personal meaning.

But constructivism learning theory also emphasizes the significance of social interaction in learning. It holds that knowledge is not only constructed through the interaction

between the individual and physical environment but social interaction is more important. According to constructivism learning theory, individuals will construct different understanding of the world based on personal experience and certain limitation will exist inevitably. Only by meaningful sharing and coordination, can understanding be more accurate, abundant and comprehensive. The mutual exchange and cooperation in learning process can provide rich resources and active support for knowledge construction. So interactions among students shouldn't be neglected in foreign language classroom. Besides while learners communicate with their classmates in the natural language environment, they are influenced by classmates and in the end they can improve their language competence together.

#### *D. The Combination of Formative Evaluation and Summative Evaluation*

Formative evaluation includes self-evaluation, evaluation among students and teachers' evaluation on students. By formative evaluation, students' learning process is observed, evaluated and supervised in order to promote students to study effectively. Summative Evaluation refers to curriculum examination and proficiency test, mainly testing students' comprehensive proficiency in applying English. It is one of the important indicators reflecting teaching effect and quality of running a school. By objective and scientific evaluation system, teachers can understand students' learning situation so as to improve teaching management and raise teaching quality. Learners can adjust their learning strategies to improve learning efficiency. In the new teaching mode, only the combination of formative evaluation and summative evaluation is attached importance to, can learners' ability of autonomous learning be promoted better.

#### *E. Making Use of Multimedia Technology*

Constructivism learning theory emphasizes student-centered, holding that students are the subjects of cognition, active constructor of knowledge and meaning. Teachers play the role of organizer, director, assistor and promoter. Learners will get the information through meaningful construction under certain socio-cultural background. In such information era, multimedia technology will play an important role in the cultivation of learners' ability of autonomous learning.

Multimedia Technology will not only provide students with abundant learning resources but also release students' nervousness and pressure in order to make students explore, discover and construct learned knowledge actively in the learning process.

### V. CONCLUSION

Constructivism learning theory abandons teacher-centered teaching mode and emphasizes the role of learners' cognitive subjects. Learner autonomy is the ability of learners' managing their own study. They supplement each other. Under the guidance of constructivism learning theory, language teaching should cultivate the ability of learners' autonomous learning so as to make language study have personal meaning for language learners and promote their progress.

### REFERENCES

- [1] L. Vigotsky, *Mind and Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978.
- [2] R. Feuerstein, P. Klein, et al, *Mediated Learning Experience: Theoretical, Psychological and Learning Implications*. London: Freund, 1991.
- [3] H. Holec, *Autonomy in foreign language learning*. Oxford: Pergamon, 1981
- [4] Little, D., *Learner autonomy: Definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin, Ireland: Authentik, 1991.
- [5] L. Dickinson, & A. Wenden, "Autonomy, self-direction and self-access in language teaching and learning," *Special Issue of System*, vol. 23, no. 2, pp. 151-164, 1995.
- [6] Y. Kafai, & M. Resnik, *Constructivism in practice: Designing, thinking and learning in a digital world*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associations, 1996.
- [7] H. Y. Wang, "On the Constructivist Teaching of Extensive Reading for English Majors," *International Journal of Social, Human Science and Engineering*, vol. 8, no. 3, pp. 3801-3803, 2014.
- [8] J. O'Malley, & A. Chamot, *Language Learning Strategies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.

**Haiyan Wang** received the MA degree in English Linguistics and Literature from Liaoning Normal University, Dalian, Liaoning Province, China, in 2005. Currently, she is working at College of Foreign Languages of Qingdao University of Science and Technology. Her research interests include linguistics, second language acquisition and language and culture.