



Constructivism in EFL Instruction:

Albanian Teachers' Perceptions and Practices

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Abstract

A lot of research has been conducted in constructivism as a relatively new theory opposing traditional learning theories with its innovative ideas. In the field of English language teaching, however, and teacher's cognitions of educational theories, research is still insufficient in the Albanian EFL context. This study explores Albanian EFL teachers' perceptions of constructivism and their classroom practices. The data was collected from four high school classrooms and two EFL teachers through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and stimulated recall interviews within a trimester. Results showed that teachers support the constructivist perspective and the existence of its techniques in actual curriculums by implementing it sparingly throughout their lessons. However, data also revealed that the use of constructivist techniques could not be carried out based simply on personal cognitions due to unsuccessful results in students' socio-cultural behavior. The shift in usage of teaching techniques is analyzed and according to classroom implications the collected data is stated as helpful to understand the unconsciously employed techniques compared to the theoretical cognitions of English teachers. The findings were interpreted considering the teachers; understanding of the constructivist teaching process and its suggestions for changes in the role of the teacher and student with the aim of building a perfect environment for teaching and learning.

Keywords: *Constructivism, EFL teachers, EFL classrooms, Teacher perceptions, Teaching practices*

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Introduction

Constructivism is one of the most recent educational theories that emerged as an innovative perspective of teaching and learning in 1974. Initiated by Ernst von Glasersfeld and developed by educational theorists such as Jean Piaget, Jerome Brunner and Lev Vygotsky, the theory supports that knowledge is actively constructed by learners who explore their environments and build knowledge based on pre-existing information schemas. There are many methods and models which represent constructivist approach for learning such as inquiry based teaching, discovery learning, discussion and debates, peer-assisted learning and reflective teaching (Schunk, 2012). According to the theory, knowledge is co-constructed with social interaction and is a process that lasts and is formed in several layers (Bandura, 1986). In this theory, the teacher acts as a facilitator that encourages curiosity and motivates learners by analysing their existing knowledge and adapting it with proper posed questions at specific moments of instruction (Baviskar et al., 2009). The classroom is student-centered and the curriculum is formulated based on the needs of the student.

Constructivist strategies have also proved to be very useful for students and teachers by making the teaching process active and interesting (Yilmaz, 2008). Many studies have explored teachers' perceptions as well as the actual practicality and applicability of the theory in real-life EFL classrooms (Yilmaz, 2008). Teachers lean on different thoughts regarding constructivism and use it accordingly in EFL classrooms. Since constructivism is new as an educational theory compared to older theories, there are various issues to be considered as to whether it can be successfully applied in Albanian EFL classrooms or not, and if teachers actually support and practice the theory.

Therefore, this study is conducted with the aim to investigate most frequent teaching techniques used in EFL classrooms and find possible relation to constructivist techniques; to explain teachers' cognitions, beliefs, and ideas of constructivism; to analyze external factors that influence the applicability of the theory. It is a modest contribution to research in further understanding EFL teachers' perceptions of constructivism and their classroom practices.

Literature review

The roots of constructivism are in Jean Piaget's work of age-related development stages which considered a child "a lone scientist of the world" (Hmelo-Silver & Barrows, 2006; Hmelo-

Silver et al., 2007). Piaget is considered a biological individualist and therefore constructivism seems to be applied more efficiently in science related fields since they have the proper amount of curiosity to offer for curious learners (Piaget, 1964; 2003). He considered the learning process as internal, private and mental and pointed out the idea that learners should first explore on their own before they share their knowledge with peers (1964). For Piaget, the individual possesses the prime value and puts it in the first place letting aside the social. This point of view was, however, opposed by Lev Vygotsky and Cole, who underlined the importance of the socio-cultural context pointing out that students can learn better by socializing and co-learning (1978). Piaget's revolutionary idea did not support passive learning in which the only source of information is poured from the teacher to a blank or empty "sponge", which is the student (Piaget, 1964; 2003). With his ideas it became more popular for curriculum designs to integrate student-engaging activities through participation in dialogues, in group work and in self-made projects, thus making students "more involved" in the learning process (Piaget, 1964). Considering these new practices, in the linguistic approach of constructivism, we notice a significant use of all these classroom activities with the aim of learning how to use languages more efficiently in real life situations as well as how to give and receive information in different social contexts.

Vygotsky introduced another perspective of constructivism identifying the social character of learning (1978). Unlike the psychological features of the constructivist theory, social constructivism deals with the importance that social interaction and cognitive learning have in constructing cognitive and emotional images of reality (Yilmaz, 2008). Vygotsky concluded that social interactions are the foundation in cognitive development. Becoming the inventor of social constructivism, he emphasized the importance of human learning by interacting with each other, which is directly related to the linguistic approach of social constructivism and how important the application of the theory would be in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978).

According to him, knowledge is a social product and learning is a social process (Abha, 2019). In other words, understanding is social from nature, and it is created by interactions with others. Vygotsky explains his theory speaking from a social and personal sphere, considering that perception is actualized only when the internalization of knowledge is created in interaction with others (Yilmaz, 2008).

Vygotsky attaches great importance to dialogue and different types of interaction between the learners (1978). According to him, every operation within the cultural development of the kid happens twice: initially, at the social level, and later, at the individual level; initially between individuals and then among the kids. This is applicable to learners' attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of ideas (Vijayakumari & Jinu, 2013). All higher functions occur as complete relationships between people. Vygotsky sees language as the main medium of interaction and communication and a prerequisite for absorbing and initializing the experiences gained from interaction. Therefore, constructivism as a learning theory, has many prospects in social-based fields where social interaction is more needed than personal exploration (Yilmaz, 2008; Alt, 2014).

Following Piaget, who somehow initiated the basics of the theory, Jerome Bruner established constructivism through his approach of interactionism. Basically, this contributes to a better understanding of the linguistic approach of constructivism, as Bruner explored language development and how learners acquire knowledge by communicating or interacting and therefore developing linguistic expression. Bruner highlights that social interaction is an important factor in child development. It contributes to the use of meaningful language and active participation in creating valid shared meaning through collaborative processes (Bruner, 1961). He argued that "one seeks to equip the child with deeper, more gripping and subtler ways of knowing the world and himself." (Bruner, 1961, pp. 117-118) thus pointing out that learning as a process is constructed based on the human's previous experiences. It is true that we can learn by putting into practice the knowledge we get from experience, but actually the whole learning process is socially related. Experiences show that human beings learn easier by interacting with each other, by encoding and decoding (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005).

Since it was invented, the theory continues to be increasingly employed by teachers all around the world, who try to find the most convenient learning style for their students. It holds that individuals require proper assistance at the right moment. Furthermore, the role of teacher as a facilitator is still necessary. This combination of the right assistance at the right time leads to very effective gain of knowledge in the learning process of a classroom where children try to gain more knowledge by interaction. Research shows that to be a successful constructivist teacher you should not only play the role of the facilitator but also create a conducive and social-friendly environment in the classroom (Abha, 2019). Learning should be contextualized in real-world environments that

make use of a context which makes learning relevant (Jonassen, 1991). Usage of the principles and methods of constructivism has demonstrated that these constructive methods of teaching are more effective than the traditional ones (Bandura, 1986; Bandura et al., 2001).

Concepts and Definitions

Constructivism suggests that learners construct their knowledge based upon their pre-existing information by adding it to their knowledge schemas. Learners create understanding of this information in an active way through participating in the process of receiving and giving information rather than passively receiving it (Vygotsky & Cole, 1978). They reflect on the new knowledge according to experiences and they create their own perspective of the received information according to their personal and social background.

Recent definitely suggest that teachers include in their lesson plans problem-solving activities which put students to the center of the learning process. The aim of the constructivist theory is to guide learners to think on how they can put theoretical acquisition into real-life use through assimilation and accommodation. Hence, language teaching and learning regards many practical everyday activities which can be thoroughly supported by the constructivist teaching model (Bada & Olusegun, 2014). Constructivism is a theory that aims for the instructors to simply be facilitators that provide students with contexts where they can explore and find interesting things about the new information (Hyslop-Margison & Strobel, 2008). According to this approach, every learner should be an active participant throughout the learning process. All said, constructivism is a learner-centered educational theory and to be able to transform our teacher centered educational models has proven to be challenging.

This theory includes significant concepts and processes such as assimilation and accommodation, zone of proximal development (ZPD) and scaffolding, an explanation of which will help in better understanding of this theory.

Assimilation is the receiving of new information from the learner who tries to fit it in his pre-existing schemas of knowledge (Piaget, 1964). Every individual has a set of knowledge schemas which are created since he starts grasping and understanding information. His mindset is created by adding more information to those schemas of knowledge.

Accommodation is the continuing process of assimilation where the learner takes the new information and tries not to fit the knowledge into the previous knowledge but actually “restores”, “revises”, “develops” and “transforms” the existing schemas to whole new schemas of understanding (Piaget, 1964).

The Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) implies the notion of “the more knowledgeable other” (Harland, 2003). Apparently there is always one or more persons who have a better understanding or skills regarding a specific area. The ZPD is the time that a learner cannot receive knowledge without proper encouragement or guidance. This zone is the time where instruction is much more needed in order for the student to develop the necessary skills (Yilmaz, 2008). This brings another important factor which is the role of dialogue and teacher facilitation for constructivism.

A critical element regarding the ZPD remains the fact that during their lifetime students advance from one approximate area to another, with progress that sometimes is slighter and sometimes larger, depending on various internal and external factors (Vygotsky, 1978).

Scaffolding is another constructivist concept that contributes to our understanding of the teacher’s role in constructivism. Scaffolding refers to the role of the teacher in providing learners with enough basic knowledge for them to pass the initial stages of learning a new subject (Bruner, 1961). Educators facilitate, organize, plan the lesson and use the more appropriate techniques to transfer the student exactly where his maximum understanding zone is.

Domains of constructivism

Constructivism is not a single or unified theory; rather, it is characterized by plurality and multiple perspectives. Varied theoretical orientations explicate such different facets of constructivism as cognitive development, social aspects, and the role of context (Yilmaz, 2008).

Cognitive constructivism, developed by Jean Piaget, centers around the concept that knowledge is constructed through active learning and not simply received passively by a single source of knowledge (Piaget, 1964). Furthermore, radical constructivism (Von Glasersfeld (2013) suggests that the acquired knowledge is not necessarily reflecting knowledge of a real world, since every individual has his own construction schemas. In addition, critical constructivism emphasizes a critical evaluation in the communicative ethics used in the classroom between teachers and

learners. It fully supports that knowledge is an adaptive process and that it is based on the experiences of the individual.

Social constructivism, according to sociocultural theory, suggests that human development is a social-driven process by which students learn better and faster by interacting with their more educated peers. In the foreign language context, the effects of culture are meant to appear with the appearance of the tools of intellectual development.

Social interaction is the main factor of social constructivism. In order to understand constructivism in the learning process, educators have to restructure their perspectives of teaching.. As social constructivism can be considered the future in the teaching process, educators have to focus on interaction, multiple perspectives, different learning inputs and different environments of learning in order to be able to contribute to this huge world of information (Le Cornu & Peters, 2005; Gijbels et al., 2008; Bozalek et al., 2013).

Constructivism in EFL Instruction

Based on the main focus of this study, constructivism in the English as a foreign language (EFL) context will be presented in terms of principles that build the ideas of this theory embedded in the classroom. Regarding relevant research, the discussion in this context began after the 1980s and the term constructivism became more frequently used in the context of EFL teaching. In accordance with constructivist principles, Wolff and De Costa point out that constructivist language teaching is a learning process which is prominently autonomous, subjective, student centered and active (2017), while traditional teaching is mostly based on a pedagogical-psychological concept where learners simply “react” to what is being taught and they either accept or reject the information. In constructivism, the learner tries to accumulate the received information and embed it to the pre-existing knowledge by actively changing the cognitive schemas.

Most important to the research is to understand how the sociocultural approach of constructivism is closely embedded with teaching English as a foreign language. Sociocultural approach in teaching English as a foreign language is teaching with interaction, negotiation and collaboration (Yilmaz, 2008). In the process of learning a foreign language, it is important for the teacher to intertwine collaborative learning by using experience and discourse for the students to

grasp meanings through peers. Since a foreign language is mostly learned for communication purposes, the sociocultural approach helps to understand how students use their sociocultural backgrounds to add and give from their foreign language knowledge (Yilmaz, 2008). Recent studies about EFL teachers have shown that the sociocultural approach in constructivism has helped them reach better results in their classrooms.

The EFL teaching process is oriented towards action orientedness and cooperative learning activity, which constitute significant principles of constructivism. Some of the many activities within this approach are pair work, group work and social forms of English speaking activities. The student is frequently asked to take the role of the teacher and so the student learns by teaching. As Wolff and De Costa claim, learning can be influenced by teaching but not in a way as traditional teaching suggests (2017).

Furthermore, Tenenbaum et al. also suggest that knowledge develops internally rather than simply transmitted by the teacher or another learner (2001). In a language classroom, for example, the learner is asked to choose teaching materials for classroom learning; as a result, the ability to make decisions promotes autonomy and learners are able to distinguish their preferable style of learning and recognition of skills. Before being able to decide, the student is informed that with decision comes responsibility and the crucial thing is that his chosen techniques and strategies should be applied actively during learning. Gaining proper learning awareness is followed by language and intercultural awareness which were explained in detail in the socio-cultural approach. However, not all constructivist approaches are applicable to the EFL teaching contexts. For instance, radical constructivism cannot be applied as it has many disadvantages in the explanatory level and in areas of inconsistency. The holistic language experience or the content-oriented EFL instruction is applied in bilingual contexts and according to it, learning a foreign language is very effective in complex learning environments.

Studies report interesting results regarding the usefulness of constructivism in EFL instruction. Reinfried argues in a more realistic approach to the application of constructivism in EFL teaching opposing learner-centered theories thus being more of an “absolute” and radical researcher (2000). Furthermore, Gul came to the conclusion that using constructivism in EFL teaching is more effective compared to traditional teaching approaches (2016). A study conducted by Al Muhaimed (2013) demonstrated that using constructivist techniques of English language

reading comprehension helped students in a school in Saudi Arabia learn how to read faster and better than using the traditional approach. In another study, in a school in India, Sengupta (2015) used an activity with collaborative writing tasks where all students discussed with each other while writing; thus, each student shared their personal knowledge and all of them took what they needed from other students' knowledge. By scaffolding, the students took claim of their original ideas and also provided a context where other students could generate new ideas and new content through their own engagement. In another example, Nikitina (2010) conducted a study where students used visual aids to prepare projects in groups; the results showed that students learned the foreign language better and faster. In this study, the activities were selected by the students and the results were beneficial to their learning.

The role of the teacher in the constructivist classroom

The principles of constructivism can be applied into different forms by the teacher as a facilitator. The teacher's role is to give experiences to the students, to help them interact with each other in order to encourage and to advance their individual learning (Le Cornu & Peters, 2005; Pitsoe & Maila, 2012). However, teachers must be careful that the experiences they give to the students are within their zone of proximal development (Karagiorgi & Symeou, 2005). As a result, it is clear that it is the teacher's responsibility to make students self-regulated learners. A good teacher might choose catchy topics in order to involve all the students in the process of learning. As questions lead to more questions, students' critical thinking would expand. In such specific cases, collaborative learning comes by way of peer interaction, but it is well structured and mediated by the cooperating teacher (Le Cornu & Peters, 2005).

In a typical classroom, the qualified teacher is the conduit for the effective tools of culture that properly include language, social context and other forms of information access. Learning in the constructivist classroom is constructed, active, reflective, and collaborative and independent inquiry based (Bada & Olusegun, 2015). A teacher is always one of the information resources and not necessarily the primary one. Most importantly, the teacher should assist students to understand their metacognitive process of learning and encourage student autonomy and initiative. During classroom interaction, the teacher facilitates communication in order for students to communicate as clearly as possible in their verbal and written responses since communication is the primary tool of interactionism and language is what explains proper understanding of all concepts.

Research has shown that teachers' perceptions of learning and teaching have a significant influence on their attitudes and approaches to teaching (Borg, 2003; Trigwell et al., 1999) and as a result, affect and determine their classroom practices (Borg, 2003; Sogutlu, 2015). Further research has also demonstrated the positive effects of constructivist learning environment and of implementing constructivist principles in the classroom (Tynjala, 1998; Vijayakumari & Jinu, 2013). Therefore, reconceptualization of teaching philosophies and raising teachers' awareness of learner-centered instruction through constructivist pedagogies become key elements to the accomplishment of teaching objectives.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design to collect the data and analyze them accordingly. The aim of the study is to explore the teachers' cognitions of the constructivist theory in Albanian classrooms and to analyze how constructivism can be embedded into Albanian EFL classrooms. It addresses the following research questions:

1. What are the participant EFL teachers' perceptions of constructivism?
2. Do EFL teachers use constructivist techniques and approaches in their classrooms?
3. What are the constructivist techniques already used and what should be added according to teachers' perceptions?

Participants and context

Participants in the study were chosen from an Albanian public high school in the rural area of the capital of Albania, Tirana. The study is conducted with students of three grades of high school with each grade having three classrooms. Observation was conducted in a trimester period of time from December 2021 to February 2022. All students in this high school have learned English for at least seven years or above during their schooling. All students vary in ages of 15-16 for 10th grade and 16-17 for 11th grade. In terms of proficiency levels, 10th graders are mostly pre-intermediate with almost 30% of them being beginners, while 11th graders are mostly intermediate where 20% is lower intermediate and 30% is upper intermediate based on self-report. Class 10A had 28 students, class 10B had 27 students, classroom 11A had 25 students and classroom 11B had 26 students.

As per the interviews, two teachers volunteered to participate in this study. For purposes of anonymity and confidentiality, we refer to them as teacher A and teacher B. Both teachers had 10-15 years of experience in EFL teaching. The only context in which they have taught English is public high schools and private courses as a second job. Both of them hold a master's degree in the profile of education and teaching EFL for high schools and both graduated from public universities.

The text books used throughout the lectures were named "On Screen" and level B1+ was used for 10th grade while B2 was used for the 11th grade. Not very frequently, extra materials were handed for extracurricular activities and exercises. Regarding assessment, teachers evaluated students by conducting semester exams and a final exam at the end of the year. In addition to exams, students were assessed for their projects, writing essays, articles or other activities as part of their yearly portfolio.

Instruments of data collection

Two high school EFL teachers were interviewed and four classrooms with a total of 106 students were observed every day during English language lessons. The research data was collected through three instruments: classroom observations, semi-structured interviews and stimulated recall interviews in one high school semester.

Relying on classroom observations, researchers are able to collect direct information from their own observations rather than participants' self-reported accounts. This observational data collected provided the opportunity to gather important information in a real context. Each classroom was observed two days per week with three hours in each lecture which concludes to 72 hours of observation for each classroom. Lectures were not recorded due to the length of the time, however, field notes were taken in almost each classroom by recording behaviors of students and teachers regarding specific topics of EFL teaching in a constructivist context. In order for the analysis to be more clear and specific, separate English teaching topics were chosen in order to explain teachers' techniques.

The lectures chosen to be more analytically explained in the study were mostly grammar topics. Four grammar topics were chosen including past and present tenses, passive voice, modal verbs and future tenses. Grammar topics are considered important in order to distinguish if the

teaching method used is constructivist since they are more difficult and complex in terms of explanation. In addition to grammar, two vocabulary sessions were observed and recorded with field notes. The purpose of classroom observation was to find out teachers' cognitions and perceptions of using constructivism all while observing them in action. On the other hand, the study observed the impact that these traditional and constructivist techniques had on students.

Another very important instrument is the semi-structured interviews. The teachers were asked not very specific questions, but they were rather let to talk freely about constructivism, socio-cultural theory and other EFL educational-related theories. Teacher participants of this study were interviewed separately and several times throughout the observational period; however, only one interview was formally conducted and recorded in an interval of one hour for each teacher. The chosen language for the interview was Albanian in order to not create any misunderstandings and to offer the teachers the opportunity to express themselves in more details. The interviews were later transcribed and translated into English. The interview included questions regarding the best learning theory that could lead EFL instruction to better results, what techniques they preferred to use and which one of them was considered more effective. They were also asked about proper methods to implement English language in classrooms and what techniques seem the students to like or dislike. Which teaching methods students actively participated in and do they think that the implemented curriculum was right for their students.

The last instrument is stimulated recall interview. Stimulated recall interviews include commenting and reminding participants' behaviors throughout the lecture in order to reflect on their daily teaching techniques in accordance to what they have said in their previous interviews. This is not conducted in order to add tension to the participants but for them to understand why they use specific teaching styles in specific contexts, situations under pressure or depending on each different classroom. For each question, teachers replied about why they used each technique according to which classroom they were teaching, their level, the social context or curriculum-based compulsory strategies. Participants were simulated to recall their teaching techniques and several questions were asked after a grammar lecture, listening and writing session, reading and exam sessions as well. For each lecture observed, several teaching segments especially for grammar and reading were selected and recorded in notes so that they could be discussed after classroom.

Techniques of data analyses

The data for this study was gathered in separate stages and qualitatively analyzed by using the above mentioned methods. All the data underwent the procedure of the six step data analysis from Creswell (2012) which is collecting the data, preparing data for analysis, reading the data, coding the data, coding the description to be used in the research report and finally coding the test for themes to be used in the research report. Once data was collected including observation notes of the students and teachers, recorded interviews, notes from after-classroom simulated recall interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed and translated, all English versions were presented once more to teachers to see for any misunderstood conception. The final version of all transcribed notes and interviews was taken for final analysis and results.

Procedures

The interviews were conducted after the observation phase. The simulated recall interviews were conducted after different topics of English language lessons were observed. Notes were kept throughout all the observation phase and were later on transcribed and translated. Students were not notified for the observation procedure with the aim of understanding the constructivist impact and so the school, teachers and students were kept confidential since ethical considerations are ensured throughout the study. Each of the participant teachers was given clear and sufficient information about the aim of the study and after their consent, the interviews were conducted and the data was obtained.

Results

Classroom observations

By observing both students and teachers during their teaching-learning process, we found that students did not participate enough to determine the classrooms as constructivist. As a matter of fact, the classroom was mostly teacher-centered and the students acted as receivers of information. The only source of information provided was the teacher's knowledge and the textbook. The role of the teacher was providing students with all the information and guiding the lesson throughout the whole lesson and it definitely had an authoritarian character. All activities were strictly followed as defined in the curriculum and were skipped partially depending on the students' level and capabilities. Depending on the type of lesson, students could participate when

asked. Frequent activities students were asked to participate were: reading the text in reading sessions, explaining grammar rules they were already taught, reading out writing exercises they were assigned in previous sessions, participating very rarely in group discussions and almost never in listening sessions. Students could add any information during grammar explanation sessions or in discussion groups by raising their hands and taking permission. The teacher would frequently ask students to express their thoughts and opinions on various topics of reading or grammar rules and exercises but only advanced students had the courage to raise their hands. Sometimes, teachers tried to not teach grammar explicitly but did not have any success as students either had no knowledge or were afraid of faulty answers, and because participating actively in the classroom during a teaching session is simply not part of their socio-cultural educational upbringing.

In cases of grammar explanation, the student is taken as a blank slate and considered to know nothing regarding the topic. The teacher might sometimes make references to the Albanian language teaching rules and give several sentences as examples in order to ease students' understanding. However, examples are only given after the rules are written on the board and explained one by one by the teacher. Students are asked to take notes as they will be asked for all these rules in the next grammar session. Students are taught to memorize the rules and all related concepts theoretically. While all grammar rules are explained thoroughly, the teacher asks frequently if there are any questions, but students rarely ask any regardless of their understanding of these rules. Only advanced students who have prior knowledge of the grammar topic might participate partially; however, almost 50% of the class is silent and simply attentive. 10th graders, especially, are all silent but this can be justified as they are trying to adjust to a new environment with new fellow students and teachers. As constructivism suggests and since this study is conducted in a constructivist perspective, we should accept that all student behavior must be analyzed in terms of socio-cultural approach since social upbringing has a huge impact in the educational experience and therefore not all the teaching-learning process is dependent on teacher behavior. Teacher A for example, definitely has great authority in the classroom but still tries to build interaction whenever she finds it more suitable during the lesson. Based on these observations, we can note that in grammar sessions, constructivist techniques are almost nonexistent but this also varies depending on both teachers, students' temperaments in each classroom and the grammar topic.

Episode 1: Grammar topic explained in 10th grade. Teacher A, Passive Voice, Lower Intermediate Level

Teacher A: *“Today we are going to explain Passive Voice, you will notice that this will be very frequently used in upcoming texts, articles and essays so be very attentive and take notes.”* (The teacher uses the students’ L1, that is, Albanian. Then the teacher proceeds to explain rules in English)

Teacher writes on the board the definition of passive voice, a table of how verbs change in passive voice in all tenses, the differences between active and passive voice, and finally, after writing the form structure for active and passive sentences, she writes down a sentence and then writes down how it is turned into passive. Students are silent throughout all the explanatory sessions. The grammar rule explanation lasts for almost 15 minutes.

Teacher writes a sentence in active voice: *“The farmers keep the dog in the yard.”*

Teacher A: *“Now, I want you to help me turn this sentence into the passive voice. Any ideas”*

-Students: (quiet, no response)

Teacher: *“Anyone?.....(no response) Okay, I will help you on this one”* and proceeds to explain how to transform the sentence: *“The dog is kept in the yard by the farmers”*

Teacher asks students to open the books and continue with doing some exercises together. The first exercise is done together and some students participate partially. Students then are asked to do the second and third exercise and are informed that they can discuss them with their peers. After ten minutes, students are asked to read the answers in the class. If anyone is wrong, another student is asked to read the alternative and if no one answers correctly, the teacher provides the correct answer.

In this episode there is reflected a grammar session technique that is used in almost every grammar lecture. Grammar is a crucial component in understanding English language and grammar knowledge is necessary in all the other skills. The most important motive for teacher A is to teach grammar for them to be able to use in exercises and in correct writing assignments. Based on the principles of constructivism we can come to these conclusions:

Constructing knowledge actively, not receiving passive information: in this and many other classroom observations, we notice that the teacher is the only source of information along with the textbook used for activities. The student receives passive information and tries to construct meaning with the new information but we do not have active feedback to determine the effectiveness of the transmitted knowledge except for the feedback given in the exercises. Therefore, the teacher and the class is not considered constructivist.

Using information of real-life situations and constructing knowledge with assistance of social interaction: The teacher tries to connect the theoretical information to daily-life examples and to simplify the passive voice theoretical part; however, students are still passively listening rather than actively using the passive voice in real-life contexts such as a short dialogue trying to use passive voice. Learning EFL is contextual and cannot be separated from the environment as it is explicitly a social activity. Teacher lets students discuss while doing exercises which is a form of social interaction and it definitely can be considered a constructivist technique. Many students in the episode seemed very interacting and helped each other in case of misconceptions or need of help. In this aspect the teacher and the lesson can be considered partially constructivist.

Critical, active, authentic, collaborative learning: Students did not show signs of critical thinking or pondering on the new theory but simply took notes with the aim of learning them by heart. Learning based on repetition is not considered authentic and therefore is not constructivist. The teacher does not actively encourage classroom participation or collaborative learning; neither does she ask questions. Students are only asked to participate in specific parts of the lecture and even then they hesitate to be involved. Therefore, based on this principle, the classroom is not considered constructivist.

Formative Evaluation: Students are expected to learn the rules by heart and are going to be asked next class about them. They are going to be evaluated for their correct answers in exercises and if students are active during the session. Active participation is appreciated and positively evaluated but not properly encouraged. Students will not specifically be assessed for their thinking process, critical thoughts, ideas or innovative thinking. Teacher is motivating in the long process but not very specific on what students need to improve. Therefore, in this case the classroom is not based on constructivist principles.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Based on teachers' answers and thoughts, we came to a mixed conclusion regarding their desire to apply such educational theories into their daily practices and what prevents them with regard to student behavior, feedback, practicality, curriculum and type of lectures. Both teachers supported the idea of constructivism as a whole, however they mentioned that not all principles could be applied in Albanian classrooms and that many constructivist activities could lead to chaotic unmanageable classrooms. Both teachers supported that the teacher should have the greater authority in the classroom even if that concluded in passive learners. Teacher B was more supportive of collaborative learning and critical thinking, while teacher A was supportive but did not put great attention during the teaching process. In terms of social-interaction, dialogues, group talk and projects or presentations, teacher B was very supportive and liked the practicality and the effectiveness these activities had in listening and speaking skills. Teacher A on the other hand, thought that learning could be more effective if it was more individual. The social context in EFL teaching is important, however each student has accumulated separate knowledge and has reached a different level of English. All knowledge is learned by effort she mentions. As for student responsiveness in these kinds of activities, both teachers agreed that it could be very difficult to mold their behavior into learning new things by exploring more than by listening. They mentioned that the curriculum had many activities of constructivist nature but not all of them are successful and this is due to student behavior and social context. Therefore, teachers seem to understand new pedagogical theories, accept them as positive to learning and teaching, acknowledge that they are present in curriculums but not fully practice them due to external factors. Further discussion of the recalled interviews is also supported with excerpts.

Excerpt 1 (Teacher A): *“I believe constructivism is a great theory overall, having students participate and be more interactive during the lecture could generate a fruitful lesson and I could actually understand more of what their level is, however having students interact in matters of new grammar I think it would create much more confusion.”*

Teacher A put more emphasis on grammar and thought that English is better learned by exercises and the best exercises come from grammar examples. Regarding the grammar explanation, teacher A thought that rule explanation is a must and every student should memorize in order to be able to use them. As per other activities, teacher A attaches little to no importance

to speaking or listening activities claiming that there was not enough time in the curriculum program to properly address grammar issues, vocabulary exercises or reading passages.

Excerpt 2 (Teacher B): *“I believe that a good English teacher should adapt to the students’ needs and actually use any kind of educational theory that suits them best in that situation. I love listening to my students’ ideas in English and when I see them trying to talk regardless of the accuracy, that is when I know I have succeeded in making them like English.”*

We notice that teacher B is more focused on the students’ needs and puts the student in the center of the lesson. The teacher’s aim is to encourage students to interact more, to be curious and make English more interesting to them either by making topic focus group discussions, role plays, presentations in groups and many other interactive activities that require authentic thought and ideas. However, as seen in the excerpt below, not all EFL activities can be adapted with constructivism as the teacher could be disrespected or not listened to in terms of class management. She also expresses that students must have an innate curiosity and be mature enough to understand that learning should not only come from a teacher source but actually make themselves a source of their own information.

Excerpt 3 (Teacher B): *“I am very fond of interactionism in the classroom and I think constructing knowledge in groups, dialogues or any other type of social interaction with their peers is great for their speaking and listening skills in English. Isn’t the whole point of learning English to speak and understand it properly? However, every teacher in Albania must have some authority so students respect them enough to actually listen to them.”*

As for students’ behavior and what teachers think of their preferences regarding constructivist activities, there is a positive approach towards constructivism as during the observation phase.

Excerpt 4 (Teacher A): *“I have seen that students love group discussions and group work but I also notice that the work is mostly done by the most responsible students and the other part receives credit for nothing. They also love problem-solving activities and slide presentations but I also notice that the lesson sometimes ends up with most students being inattentive and that is why I like traditional teaching in most cases.”*

During the observation phase and based on teachers' cognitions, students seem to like constructivist teaching activities; they consider them amusing and a way to escape the monotonous theoretical explanation. They also find them as an excuse to interact with their peers and when group discussions are based on an interesting topic, they are flattered to participate and share something of their own ideas. Despite the fun part, the students' learning outcomes can only be recognized after a long period of time and not directly. Since constructivism is not a regularly tested theory in Albanian EFL classrooms, we cannot know for sure if the theory actually works for Albanian students.

Excerpt 5 (Teacher B): *“Constructivism is a very wide theory from what I know and every teacher has a particular style of learning. One of the things I find difficult with every educational theory actually is assessment and with a theory so innovative we teachers wouldn't know how to assess students”*

The constructivist theory is mostly formative rather than summative and its real purpose is in fact to improve the quality of learning rather than simply grading students on a particular exam. This type of assessment seems to be very vague and baseless to Albanian teachers. Even if they appreciate interactive learners and active responders, they still value it positively but according to them it is not a basis for final evaluation.

Stimulated Recall Interviews - Factors Contributing to Teacher's Changing Cognitions

After several hours of observation and after the interviews were conducted, we found that participant teachers turned back to their traditional ways of teaching despite their reported beliefs and preferences. Teachers continue to disseminate information such as explaining grammar explicitly or translating vocabulary directly whenever they thought it was necessary for students. Teachers are aware that this phenomenon happens and according to their answers they have no other choice but to do what a teacher is supposed to do.

Episode 2 (Teacher B): Modal Verbs

-Teacher: *“...Who is going to tell us what do you know about modal verbs”*

-Students: (Around 7 students proceed to tell what they know shortly and mention some modals they already know).

-Teacher: *“Okay great, now let’s explain the various situations in which we can use them properly”*

Students open their notebooks and proceed to take notes as teachers starts explaining the topic.

Teacher B had expressed that she actively used constructivist techniques wherever seemed useful and classroom observation showed she was actually more open to new educational theories. After the class mentioned in episode 2 the teacher was asked why she didn’t use an exercise as an example and let students derive a conclusion on the modal verbs usage. Her response was:

Excerpt 6 (Teacher B): *“Albanian students, at least the students here always need something to focus on, write and take notes, an initiating information to start from. Even if they know the theory very well and they know how to use it perfectly, they still feel like an explanation from the teacher gives them more security about what they already know. And.... Despite all this, we don’t have that much time to listen to all students and wait for them to actually come up with concrete and correct results.”*

The teachers’ cognition changed according to the external factors contributing to the classroom. Sociocultural factors, student temperament, instructional time limits, curriculum and textbooks, students’ needs, examinations and assessment pressure as well as classroom management requirements forced them to teach in a particular way opposing their theoretical cognitions. The concept of education is definitely influenced by the Communist era where the teacher was the supreme authority in any occasion and that Albanian thinking of education still views the teacher as the absolute source of knowledge and management. Students also feel “safe” and “relaxed” when there is someone to give answers to their questions and correct their mistakes. A very noticeable issue as well is the limited instructional time. Even though the lecture has been lengthened to one hour and a half, the daily program requires coverage of many topics in that hour and therefore teachers have to follow the curriculum. Teachers have to closely follow the textbooks and this makes it difficult for teachers to find time for extra activities that would boost speaking and listening or interactive communication. This explains why teacher A constantly skips listening and speaking topics in the textbook. Teachers’ cognition can be easily subjected to contextual factors and therefore constructivism is highly valued but not always implemented.

Discussion

What are EFL teachers' perceptions of constructivism?

The participant EFL teachers have slightly different perceptions of constructivism and as the interview results revealed, each teacher follows a special pattern of educational strategies used in their classrooms. In the metacognitive perspective of the theory, teachers expressed a positive attitude towards the innovative practices of constructivism only on some specific areas of English teaching. However, the practical use is a matter that is affected immensely by external factors during the teaching process. Teachers are aware that external factors do not always allow the teaching process to run smoothly and so they are obliged to frequently turn to traditional techniques. Teachers also believe that every social group has special types of behavior in the classroom. This proves the constructivist socio-cultural approach explains the teaching-learning process in real-life contexts and not just theoretically.

In comparison to other educational approaches, constructivism has recently entered the Albanian curriculums and Albanian teachers are still not fully aware of all the teaching techniques and strategies due to lack of knowledge on the theory. This cannot provide this research a full and clear result for all Albanian schooling. Due to limited resources of educational theories training and provision of information to educators, Albanian teachers continue using traditional methods of teaching and they also believe that these techniques are necessary for the progress of the academic year within time limits. In general research on teachers' cognitions on constructivism, teachers are mostly fond of new theories in education. Most of teachers have positive perceptions on progressive teaching strategies such as constructivism, despite the socio cultural factors and their use of traditional teaching strategies, the answer to this question is that EFL teachers' perceptions of constructivism are prone to accepting and encouraging its use.

Do EFL teachers use constructivist techniques and approaches in their classrooms?

Based on the answer to the previous question, there is a slight contradiction between teachers' perceptions of the theory and actual use of its strategies. In many cases, teachers have reported that constructivist method cannot be used for all English language activities and this varies depending on the teachers' personal teaching methods or student temperament and learning styles as well. A very important aspect of learning that every teacher should consider is their

students' learning styles and the students' conditions as well. For instance, constructivism supports the autonomy of the learner and teachers use constructivist techniques for individual work, but they also believe that group work helps them advance their learning capabilities. However, activities should have certain restrictions. Albanian students, depending on the region they live, either have a lot of time to deal with individual homework or they do not have time at all due to responsibilities after school. For example, most students in villages or rural areas are obliged to work in order to support their families. Lack of time after school does not allow them to do homework individually, do research in libraries or even have the means to search other sources of information, which makes the teacher the only source of information. Teachers in such areas must find techniques that cover all the lesson and provide the necessary knowledge within class time. They should organize group work, projects and classroom work so that all students are able to receive all information needed.

In comparison to what teachers do and what they should do, Albanian EFL teachers use constructivist strategies in accordance with their students' needs and their personal requirements. They mostly follow the curriculum and they try to achieve all goals and objectives by the end of the year. Due to lack of time, teachers skip certain topics that seem less "important" than other topics required for students to pass exams. Since the evaluation system is predominantly based on formative exam evaluation in written forms, what is mostly important according to teachers, is grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing exercises. Therefore, they exclude listening and speaking activities which take time to organize in the classroom. Albanian students show lack of speaking skills even though they might understand the language fully, write great essays and stories and do amazing projects. Sometimes, students show that they understand the written language very well but have great difficulty understanding spoken language particularly native speakers. This is due to lack of speaking and listening exercises. However, we should consider that each teacher has special ways of teaching and managing classrooms; not all teachers pay the same attention to different topics of the English language. This proves that there is a variety in use of constructivist techniques in Albanian EFL classrooms.

What are the constructivist techniques already used and what should be added according to teachers' perceptions?

Constructivist techniques that are used in different learning situations are inquiry teaching, group work, group project presentations, cooperative learning and discovery learning. These techniques are moderately used in different classroom levels of high school and always depending on the teacher. Inquiry based learning is based on the question-answer method while presenting a new topic. The teacher that wants to present a grammar lesson with a constructivist technique will teach by asking students about their previous knowledge and let them guess the correct rules by their own mistakes and ideas. Constructivism puts great value to the inquiry teaching method as it enhances students' curiosity, research skills and critical thinking. One of the teachers observed in the research seeks a two-way interaction with her students and invites them to learn meaningfully.

Regarding recommendations from teachers, activities have already started to be part of the curriculum; they just have to be implemented earlier in educational years so students are adapted to the new way of learning. The already existing activities should be observed better in order to have successful results. Finally, the most significant issue to be revisited is the curriculum design and the learning hours which limits them into implementing these methods in the lesson.

Conclusion

This study explored teachers' cognitions regarding the implementation of the constructivist theory in Albanian EFL classrooms in a high school in a rural area in Albania. Based on teachers' cognitions and classroom observations, the research yielded significant information that can initiate more insights and perspectives into effective EFL teaching in Albania. The study was conducted using three instruments: observation, semi-structured interviews and stimulated recall interviews. The study results although limited, revealed that the teachers had positive views on constructivism and used it partially in terms of classroom activities. Their perspectives are complex and dynamic and inevitably shaped by external factors. Classroom observations showed that despite their cognitions, teachers chose different techniques depending on contextual factors and making decisions was proved to be a complex matter and not simply based on their opinions and beliefs. Observation revealed that Albanian EFL classrooms are not constructivist and even though many constructivist activities were accepted by the Educational Institutes of Curriculum designs, the activities are partly failed by the teaching system.

As part of the improvement of educational theories application, teachers need to undertake initiatives to constantly improve themselves and their teaching skills by updating on the latest and most effective EFL teaching techniques. For instance, they can take part in professional seminars, workshops, trainings and teaching courses. Future researchers should consider using a larger number of teachers for interviews and high schools in Albania in order to obtain more data on the use of the constructivist theory application in EFL classrooms in Albania.

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