

## **Enlivening Kurdish University EFL Classes with Constructivism**

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### **Abstract**

Conventional pedagogical approaches may not be the supreme way to satisfy learners' needs in higher education settings. Learners at this level have special expectations and professional prospects. Besides, in our ever-changing world, we rarely find jobs are being done in the same way they were done a decade ago. One of these jobs or professions is teaching. The way we teach needs to be different from how our teachers taught us. Therefore, teachers need to adopt appropriate pedagogical approaches and constantly update and validate their teaching methods and techniques to fulfil their students' needs in this ever evolving world.

This descriptive study intends to explain how the researchers employed the principles of constructivism, a learning theory, into teaching reading to Kurdish EFL learners with the intent of developing their students' vulnerable reading. Accordingly, the study provides a detailed description of the daily practices of

constructivist principles inside class and portrays how activities were performed. The study intends to focus on the classroom practices and expounds the facts concerning the real current EFL status in Kurdish higher education setting. All of this is done to give a boost to the status of EFL in Kurdistan Region and nourish their needs. The results of the study testify the assumption that the application is expedient to cultivate students' reading skills and make proper judgments. The study ends up with putting forward some conclusions.

### تنشيط الصفوف الدراسية الكوردية لتعلم اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية باستخدام النظرية البنائية

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#### الملخص :

قد لا تكون الطرق التربوية التقليدية الأنسب لكي توفي احتياجات الطلاب في محيط التعليم العالي. حيث أن الطلاب في هذا المستوى من التعليم لديهم توقعات و آمال مهنية خاصة بهم. في عالمنا الحالي المتغير باستمرار, نادرا ما يزاول مهنة ما بالطريقة التي كانت تزاولها الآخرين من قبل , و مهنة التدريس هي احدى هذه المهن التي تخضع لهذه التغييرات. لذا يتوجب على التدريسيين أن اختيار طرق تربوية مناسبة وعليهم أيضا تحديث الطرق التدريسية والتقنيات التي يستخدمونها باستمرار والتحقق من صحتها لكي تلبي احتياجات طلابهم.

في هذه الدراسة الوصفية, تحاول الباحثتان أن تشرحا كيفية استخدامهما لمبادئ النظرية البنائية للتعلم في تدريس القراءة للطلاب الكورد الذين يتعلمون اللغة الانكليزية كلغة أجنبية بغرض تطوير مهارة القراءة الضعيفة لدى الطلاب. وفقا لذلك فان الدراسة تزود القاريء بوصف مفصل للتطبيقات العملية للنظرية البنائية في داخل الصف الدراسي وتصور كيفية اداء الانشطة الصفية. بالاضافة الى ذلك فان الهدف الرئيسي من هذه الدراسة هو تسليط الضوء على الوضع الحالي لتدريس اللغة الانكليزية كلغة اجنبية في المحيط الكوردي وذلك لتعزيز حالة التدريس للغة الانكليزية في اقليم كوردستان. تشير نتائج الدراسة الحالية الى ان تطبيق مبادئ النظرية البنائية لها تاثيرات نفعية مؤكدة على تحسين مهارة القراءة لدى الطلاب و تعديلها بشكل مناسب. تنتهي الدراسة بطرح بعض الاستنتاجات من قبل الباحثين.

## **1. The Current Situation of EFL teaching in the Kurdish Context**

Teaching at university level in KR, including teaching EFL, is still suffering from the deep defects and the deteriorative effect of traditional lecturing system. This negative effect can be observed in the low quality of our university level, including EFL teaching.

Broughton et al (1994: 22) assert that a typical feature of traditional methodology is that teaching is deeply teacher-dominated and course content is broken into sequenced components which are presented to students through lecturing and rote exercises. This idea corresponds to the metaphoric description provided by Scrivener (2011:16-17), when he likens traditional teaching to "jug and mug" with an emphasis on "chalk and talk" assuming that attending a class in the presence of a talking teacher guarantees that learning will happen.

Conforming to this method, text book strapped instructors, total reliance on teacher-centred classes, the absence of group work/project, teachers disregarding students' choice and voice and many other negatives are not unusual to the Kurdish scene. We find that EFL is taught through exposing students to mechanical exercises and drills. Therefore, students learn rules and facts about the language rather than how to use it appropriately in communication. In this type of instruction, the emphasis is more on the flow of instructional sequence rather than real learning outcome (Nunan, 1999:74). Although vowing allegiance to modern approaches in practice in KR, we find that most teachers are de facto doing their best to teach these approaches theoretically rather than real implementation. In other words, communicative teaching is currently prevalent in KR more as a philosophy of education than as a concrete teaching methodology. This is affirmed by Wahab (2017) when he pointed out that although some reforming attempts have been made as to change the content and design of textbooks; the methodologies and approaches employed in teaching have stayed irrelevant to those changes.

The aforesaid traditional teaching does not approach knowledge in a critical way and does not allow students to be engaged in critical analysis or contestation with the information dictated to them. It is worth mentioning that teaching EFL in our universities is not exempt from this danger; on the contrary, it has got a lion's share in this academic deterioration.

So far, I have been describing the real status of teaching in the Region, including EFL. Since teaching reading is the main concern of this study (which lies within the border of teaching EFL), the researchers find it due time to talk about it now.

Over the past 15 years of the researchers' experience as university instructors at Salahaddin University, the teaching process in general, especially teaching reading, seemed to be the same type and teachers conducted their lessons in a relatively monotonous way. This situation led to undesirable consequences where Kurdish EFL learners are described in general as passive readers; poor at using their higher levels of thinking in reading appropriately, having difficulties in decoding meaning of a word in a text, and having poor skills in reading comprehension, especially in determining the exact meaning of words and predicting (Brime, 2012; Ismael, (2015); Jalal, 2015; and Fattah and Ali (2016).

An important point to be mentioned here is the fact that Kurdish students' reading low level cannot be attributed to their reading curriculum and methodologies adopted at university level only. One needs to consider their curriculum and the methods which they were taught in during their high school as well. Ahmed, Puteh-Behak, and Sidek (2015) express their doubts as whether the current reading curriculum of the twelfth grade (Sunrise 12) and the methodology followed by teachers who teach this curriculum cannot enable students to cope with tertiary education. This entails that Kurdish students' reading low level has its roots from their high schools.

In their trial to improve students' poor reading skill, some educators and researchers for instance (Stanovich, 1994; Lantolf, 2000; Mahmoud, 2014; Huang, 2016; and Ardiansyah and Ujihanti, 2018) indicated the usefulness of employing the

constructivist approach in teaching reading to EFL students. This is attributed to the fact that the social constructivist approach views reading not only as a passive decoding process, but also as a social interaction in real life situations. Proponents of this approach hold the belief that learners can extend their reading proficiency together with a capable peer (scaffolding). Such a reciprocal relation has not been clearly examined in the Kurdish context since the nature of reading instruction in KR has long been traditional and exam-oriented.

Depending on the principles of constructivism, this study, which is descriptive in nature, aims at explaining how the researcher utilised constructivism in teaching reading with the hope to eliminate the drawbacks of the prevailing traditional teaching.

## **2. Constructivism**

It is a well-known fact that there are many theories and schools of thought from which principles of effective teaching and learning can be developed. Among these theories, constructivism has gained momentum recently. This is supported by many recent studies.

Constructivism maintains that students do not passively take in information but, rather, meaningful learning entails creating and modifying knowledge structures. In other words, students use their existing knowledge, beliefs, interests, and goals to interpret any new information, and this may lead to modifying or revising their current knowledge structures. Hereby, learning proceeds as "each individual's conceptual schemes are progressively reconstructed as he or she becomes exposed to new experiences and ideas" (Palmer, 2005).

Fosnot (2005) delineates constructivism as a theory of learning, not a theory about teaching, "but when one analyzes the theory, one can begin to formulate a reformed practice that supports rigor, empowerment, and the construction of genuine understanding".

Schunk (2012:229) defines constructivism as "a psychological and philosophical perspective contending that individuals form or construct much of what they learn and understand".

Some principles of constructivist teaching and learning according to (Jonassen 1991) (Wilson and Cole 1991), (Brooks and Brooks 1993), (Ernest 1995), and Fernando and Marikar (2017) are as follows:

- learners actively engage in their knowledge building based on prior experiences,
- learning should take place in authentic and real-world environments with emphasis on social negotiation and mediation,
- support multiple perspectives and use multiple representations of content,
- support cooperative construction of knowledge through social negotiation,
- teachers are scaffolders who facilitate knowledge building, and students' assessment is interwoven with teaching.

In this paper, we shall discuss how these principles can be implemented inside class and how they contribute in motivating students and enlivening classrooms.

### **3. Constructivism and EFL Teaching**

Richards and Rogers (2001:1) emphasise the significance of teaching to lay down its foundations on the basis of a certain learning theory and cite "the notion of a systematic set of teaching practices based on a particular theory of language and language learning- is a powerful one".

Furthermore, Richards and Schmidt (2002:114) argue that in language teaching, constructivism has led to a focus on learning strategies, learner beliefs, teacher thinking and other aspects of learning which stress the individual and personal contributions of learners to learning.

Lee (2005) remarks that constructivism has proved its validity in teaching EFL since it appreciates interaction, communication, learning communities, and cooperation during the learning process, farther from drilling and rote memorization activities.

Wilson and Lianrui (2007) claim that Constructivist approaches to learning has grown and received recognition in the field of second and foreign language learning. They further think that the constructivist approach to teaching reading to EFL students

revealed how a dialogic approach to reading empowers readers to act as participants in making meaning together with the text and its authors, rather than remaining as “mute outsiders” to the reading process .

Mahmud (2013) affirms that constructivism made the first breakthrough against conventional teaching and put forth the idea of learner-oriented teaching and then reflective thoughts. It came up with a wider vision of the role of the teacher and clearer strategies for developing teaching and learning.

#### **4. The Experiment Overview**

This section is dedicated to describe the researchers’ experiment (the implementation of the principles of constructivism in teaching EFL) and which constitutes the main tool of the first researcher’s PhD study. It lasted for a whole academic year (20 weeks) in the academic year 2016-2017. It is worth mentioning that the current study includes the descriptive part of an ongoing PhD study, and it does not delve into providing statistical descriptions of the results of the experiment.

This study was carried out at the college of Basic Education/English department at Salahaddin University-Erbil. The third year students were the population of the study (group A and B). These students were demographically diverse, of various socioeconomic status levels but their age approximately ranged from 20 to 24 years old. Group A was chosen randomly to be the subjects of the experiment. Then, this group was respectively divided into two groups of participants, control and experimental each containing 21 students. Since cooperative learning is a key principle of constructivism, the researcher subdividing the experimental group into smaller seven groups of 3 students each. The control group received traditional teaching while the experimental group was taught in compliance with constructivism.

## **5. The implementation Phase**

When attempting to find a concise guide on how to implement constructivism in the classroom, the researcher found it difficult to gain a toehold in the literature. She reviewed many studies which contained useful ideas on some specific aspect of constructivism, but they described only part of what the researcher needed to know how to organize and manage a successful classroom. There are excellent resources on constructivism, but they do not present how to enact the theory into real practice. Therefore, the researcher was left without a clear picture of where to start and how to prioritize the formidable array of techniques and suggestions.

At the beginning of the experiment, the researcher found it difficult to depict how a constructivist EFL class operates and how it can be managed. Then, at the implementation phase, she found some principles were easier to put into practice than others, for example designing active strategies were less demanding than arranging and supervising students' group work. Besides, she found some principles to be more helpful and relevant than others. Thus, she reached a decision that teachers should make use of the best available evidences to guide their educational decisions. This was what she decided to do when embarked on her 'constructivist journey'. The researcher grounded her decision on the assumptions of the following authors:

Cooperstein and Kocevar (2004) hold the belief that in a constructivist environment, the teacher's duty is to "arrange the conditions of learning" in such a way that students will learn what is planned for. In the light of this, teachers would be required to carefully plan and take on proper tasks and activities that will drive students to an appropriate "Aha!" To put it another way, activities and tasks should be designed in a way that ensures the intended learning to happen.

Further, Scholnik, Kol, and Ababanel (2006) maintain that "constructivist approach can facilitate language learning by giving students choices and by providing language practice that is interesting and meaningful".



Moreover, Altun and Yucel (2015) argue that in order to make activities congruent with the constructivist approach that help students achieve a successful outcome, it is necessary for teachers to design relevant activities, choose and use suitable and practical equipment and materials, apply varied learning-teaching methods, implement appropriate measurement and evaluation tools, and above all to create suitable learning environments.

Dewey (1916) highlighted the importance of learning by and through experience. Further, he regarded it as a momentous stepping stone to the democratization of learning. Accordingly, projects and activities are situated in the heart of the rich and open pedagogical scenario of constructivist instruction. This stems from the conviction that meaningful learning necessitates engaging in interactive tasks and creating a supportive stress-free environment where students can discuss in a larger scope, i.e. to develop projects where students work cooperatively. The provision of divergent projects and tasks enable students to face the task of formulating their own problems informed by the goals they set, and inspired by their interaction with such stimulating educational environment.

Project work and assigning tasks are good indications of student-centeredness. If appropriately chosen or designed by teachers, they motivate students to use language in real life situations and can encompass a great number of students' feelings, skills and knowledge in the education process.

Projects include multi-skill activities which focus on themes/topics in addition to handling specific language aims which are prescribed prior to tasks/projects. While students concentrate their efforts on reaching an agreed goal, a project work can "provide students with opportunities to recycle known language skills in a relatively natural context" (Supe, and Kaupuzs, 2015). Every time, the researchers explained the projects/tasks in the form of a sequence of clearly identifiable phases to narrow the students' attention on a small number of tasks simultaneously and make sure that they will not go astray during implementing tasks.

Supe, and Kaupuzs (2015) maintain that project-based learning on different topics, especially in teaching EFL, arouses students' motivation since it affords opportunities to make the language use in the class real and active. Besides, it makes the learning process authentic and more exciting. Doing projects in EFL classes is helpful to improve the students' communicative, cooperative and creative skills. Moreover, when students feel themselves secure and interact with each other in positive atmosphere, their self-confidence as a language user increases and their autonomy will be promoted.

Finally, the researcher took the recommendation of Adams et al (2016) into account and informed her students about shifting the focus to help students learn, rather than on teaching itself. They were acquainted with the use of active learning and cooperative strategies in order to understand the expected advantages and be made aware of both their own responsibilities and their teacher's as well. The researcher also provided them with some instructions and a draft of a class constitution involving guidelines for group-work and day-to-day life in the classroom. More precisely, it handled issues like mutual respect, good communication, encouraging constructive feedbacks and avoiding destructive ones, time management, and shared responsibility.

The researcher considered these educational perspectives and followed them as an outline in choosing and designing her activities because she had the belief that creating sound constructivist educational environments can assist students' harmonious adaptation of the principles of this approach. It is important to note that the diverse principles of constructivism can allow for a wide variety of classroom procedures and techniques. Effective teachers, armed with a good lesson plan in advance, can design and implement lessons successfully.

The experiment in this study was based on putting the five constructivist principles into practice. These principles are the following:

**Principle 1 : Learning is an active process.**

Cey (2001) proclaims that active learning inherently implies a “doing”. Hence, a constructivist-directed classroom is expected to be based on performance and persistence on the part of the students. They are inspired to generate their own ideas and knowledge through execution, exertion, and expansion of their prior knowledge. The emphasis of instruction must be directed towards the creation of meaning and understanding while encountering new information or new contexts. Therefore, students must be given opportunities to be active in ways that will promote profound learning which results from acting in situations. Accordingly, we can regard active learning as an amalgam of activities that makes knowledge to be owned by the student.

This requires the use of active learning strategies to foster deep understanding. Faust and Paulson (1998) define active learning as “any learning activity engaged in by students in a classroom other than listening passively to an instructor’s lecture”.

Adams et al (2016) define active learning strategies as instructional activities which involve students in “doing things and thinking about what they are doing”. They are of the belief that when students learn, their role is not restricted to just listen; instead, they should be engaged in reading, writing, researching, discussing, or solving problems. Most importantly, it is crucial to engage students in reflective activities, application activities, and higher-order thinking activities as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

When the researcher decided to employ active teaching in her class, she considered the following factors:

a- Classroom dynamics

It involves the interaction between students and their teacher in a classroom community. Students were acquainted with the discipline followed to maintain order.

b- Students’ preparedness

Many students are at different stages of experience, confidence and skill development. This was seriously incorporated into the planning of lessons.

c- Applicability

It is significant to make classroom environment supportive of active learning and teaching. During the experiment, choosing a teaching strategy was done carefully, with an understanding of the goals of the class session.

Faust and Paulson (1998), Dias (2011), and Adams et al (2016) put forward a number of active strategies that can aid teachers to render their classes to active ones:

Agree-disagree opinion, The One-minute paper, Muddiest (or Clearest) Point, Classroom presentations, Wait Time, The Fish Bowl, Concept Mapping, Role Playing, Debates , Macro Tasks, and Project Learning.

**Principle 2** : Students actively construct their own knowledge. Students' autonomy is promoted.

Many researches have revealed that comprehension is a constructive process, in the sense that “the explicit information in a text is insufficient for the specification of the meaning of that text”. Instead, constructing the complete meaning of the text is achieved by combining prior knowledge with the information found in the text. This act of combining prior knowledge and new information to produce a good understanding of the text is referred to as construction (Spiro, 1980:2).

Studies show that learning shapes up in the first place from prior knowledge, and secondarily from the materials teachers present to students (Khaghaninejad , 2015). Hence, it can be said that a tenet of effective teaching is to launch the learning in our classroom from the prior knowledge of our student, i.e., to start from what they know and build upon it. Teachers, including myself, spend so much time gathering important and necessary materials that ensure good instruction. However, it is very substantial to know what students already know about the matter, and smartly connect it to what is to come. As educators, we should focus on the growth of a student's potentials and interests more than the mandates of a curriculum.

In the pre-reading activities, the researchers usually started their lessons by asking students to look through the title page,

noticing the title, the accompanying image, and a saying of a well-known character (usually provided by the authors) to wake up their schemata. Then, they proceeded to carry out an activity to activate their schemata. These activities helped the students to exchange their existing knowledge about the topic. The researcher noticed that other students' thoughts of what they know can remind individual students of their own schema. The following activities are alternatives to the traditional brainstorming and are effective ones that best align with activating students' schema in a wonderful way: KWL, word splash, graphic organizers, snowball fights, smiley faces/ sad faces, and alphabet game.

**Principle 3:** Knowledge is socially constructed. Cooperative work is encouraged.

Cooperative learning is a source of a number of effective teaching approaches and strategies for reshaping education. It helps to transform the classrooms into meaningful and student-centered learning, as well as resulting in social and intellectual development. In cooperative learning, the classroom functions as a learning community which requires learners and teachers to become collectively responsible for learning, and where the primary educational concerns are cooperation and active communication.

Cooperative learning can be defined as an approach to teaching and learning in which classroom organization is designed in a way that students work together in small co-operative teams. (Richards and Schmidt, 2002:124) maintain that this approach to learning promotes students' learning due to the following reasons:

- (a) it allows for a less threatening environment inside the class,
- (b) it furthers students' participation in the classroom,
- (c) the need for competitiveness diminishes, and
- (d) teacher's dominance in the classroom is reduced.

Rowell and Palmer (2007) describe cooperative learning as a teaching strategy "where constructivism reaches its pinnacle". They hold the belief that cooperative learning fosters the process of "meaning-making" in the classroom because of the active

nature of the assignment. In the same way, Schell and Janicki (2013) describe the cooperative model of teaching and learning as “an offspring of and closely related to the constructivist model”.

Moreillon (2007:8) mention the following benefits of cooperative Teaching for students:

- More individualized attention is given to students,
- Access to multiple resources,
- Shared responsibility for searching, gathering, and organizing information,
- Deeper investigation into concepts and topics is conducted,
- Expanded opportunities for showing idiosyncratic abilities and creativity,
- Acquiring skills for co-teaching and co-assessment of peers’ learning.

The researchers witnessed the positive impact of the above-mentioned advantages in their class. She perceived that an appropriate cooperative classroom environment makes students understand that they are accountable to their classmates in addition to being appreciated by their teacher. Thus, it becomes substantive for teachers to create the environment that Brooks and Brooks (1993:10) describe as essential for constructivist classrooms:

*“When the classroom environment in which students spend so much of their day is organized so that student-to-student interaction is encouraged, cooperation is valued, assignments and materials are interdisciplinary, and students’ freedom to chase their own ideas is abundant, students are more likely to take risks and approach assignments with a willingness to accept challenges to their current understandings. Such teacher role models and environmental conditions honour students as emerging thinkers”.*

The researcher narrowed her focus on establishing a physical and social environment in which her students can become the “emerging thinkers” that Brooks and Brooks describe a constructive student as so. In ideal constructivist learning

environment, students become ready to take risks, explore new ideas and become deeply engaged in the process of inquiry and knowledge construction. This is conditioned by teachers who support their students' pursuit of knowledge through careful observation, listening and delicate questioning. Excellent teaching can be described as having transformative power and a strong intuition as how to subtly intervene in the learning process.

In cooperative learning, students are structured into groups with defined roles for each student and a task for the group to accomplish. It requires advanced planning on the part of teachers. Accordingly, teachers play a substantial role in structuring opportunities for the development of discussion and debate among students. Gillies et al (2008:193) describe teachers' role in a cooperative class as a doubled role and cite "teachers orchestrate high-level classroom discourse in whole class as well as in small group settings".

Students have individual differences which account for different levels of proficiency in English, so teachers are supposed to divide groups chiefly via heterogeneity. Constructing groups on the basis of heterogeneity is beneficial for students since it urges teachers to prepare different layers of tasks for distinct levels of students. As such, students of different EFL proficiency levels can be encouraged to develop their individual sense of achievement. To this effect, a democratic and harmonious classroom atmosphere will cater for bringing students a sense of security and confidence, which contributes to task progression and accomplishment. (Brown, 2001 cited in Cheng and Kia, 2011)

Cooperative learning intends to create academically stronger students, and in order to accomplish this aim, students need to contribute their fair share. The teacher's duty is to organize the groups so that individuals do not have an opportunity to hide. For instance, the teacher regularly shifted the roles of the members of the groups and required them to present their group's results to other groups as part of their final assessment.

Throughout the experiment, the researchers perceived that their students use their own experience and prior knowledge to explain new knowledge. This was clearly reflected in the difference in their presentations of knowledge and students' made materials.

Finally, the researchers tried not to use cooperative work in a rote learning manner but in a meaningful way. For instance students were reminded not just to ask and answer their questions in a rigid turn-taking manner, instead, by engaging in a full discussion. This allowed the members of the groups to contribute multiple answers to one question, each answer building on the previous ones, before going on to another question.

**Principle 4** Providing multiple representations of reality. Authentic, manipulative, and multisource materials are favoured.

Giselle and Kniep (2000:1) assume that text book strapped instructors is one of the things that make school/university a chore for many students because they find much of what is taught senseless, irrelevant, and devoid of any meaningful context. This is doubled with the pressures teachers exert to cover the curriculum or to prepare students for standardized tests which is based on a curriculum that is content-driven rather than learner-based. When adopting such a curriculum, it seems difficult to mediate the needs and interests of the students while attending to the pressures of the curriculum. These curricula are "logical, organized, crisp, and in black and white. Students' needs and backgrounds, on the other hand, are extraordinarily diverse and complex".

To overcome this defect, teachers can incorporate some extra materials and use essential questions to engross students in the curriculum. These questions aid teachers to tackle the curriculum while helping them treat it as something to be discovered and negotiated. Hence, teachers can promote the level of discourse in a classroom by enabling everyone to question and investigate, to discuss and to debate. As a result,



teachers remind students that learning is a journey, that the quest to know is continuous and never-ending.

The researcher tried to expose her students to multi type and diversified materials so that to draw their interest and to meet the demand of students in the area of English language communication

Authentic and multi-source materials serve as the vehicle that students use to envision and practice the language in an integrated way. Further, they enable students to depart from the prescribed EFL books served up disregarding students' linguistic, academic, and social backgrounds. In general, manipulating different sources about a certain topic (videos, audios, articles, pictures, cartoons) would provide the actual voices of native speakers who speak fluently and with eloquence. All in all, these would constitute genuine excitement for students, which in turn, enlivens the class and fuels interaction among students.

**Principle 5** Assessment is authentic and interwoven with teaching. Dynamic assessment is encouraged to assess students learning in the context of teaching.

Sengupta (2016) maintains that assessment is viewed from different angles by behaviourists and constructivists. Behaviourists assume that “knowledge exists separately from the learner; therefore, students work to accumulate knowledge rather than to construct it”. They consider content as the only component of the curriculum upon which assessment is based. This type of assessment encourages rote learning or "mugging" disregarding any intellectual skill. The questions are closely connected to the material covered in the course and students tend to memorize and reproduce without any deep understanding. On the other hand, constructivists regard this view as “incomplete and short-sighted position”. They believe that curriculum consists of four parts: content, process, product, and environment. This view implies that how students learn, how they show what they have learned and the circumstances in which they learn are as essential as what they learn. Accordingly, this paradigm necessitates alternative testing to

assess student learning. This alternative assessment is a process by which teachers collect information that they will use to make instructional decisions that enables them to adjust their practice so that it addresses students' needs.

Giselle and Kniep (2000:26) assert that there has been an increasing tendency among educators to advocate authentic assessments since the mid1980 to aid students "engage with real or plausible problems and challenges". Accordingly, they call for refining the existing assessments system to culminate in a more authentic assessment. They are of the belief that assessment is authentic when it requires that students engage with real-life problems or issues. Authentic tasks help students to make sense of and apply what they have learnt and to establish a link between what they have learnt in universities and the world in which they live.

In this regard, the most popular type of dynamic assessment is the use of portfolio. It is defined as "a purposeful collection of work that provides information about someone's efforts, progress or achievement in a given area" (Richards and Schmidt, 2010:443).

Giselle and Kniep (2000:26) regard student portfolios as "windows into students' thinking and learning". They describe the traditional assessment tools as deficient in assessing students' knowledge and fall short of truly uncovering what lies behind such knowledge and skills. On the other hand, portfolios look beneath the surface and discover what students think, how they think, what they value, and who they are. When used appropriately, as they maintain, "portfolios are the most comprehensive tools for documenting students' growth, efforts, and achievements".

The researchers provided the students with a list of elements to be included in their portfolios. The students choose among their work to select the pieces that provide the best evidence of their progress. For example, she asked students to compile the following requirements: weekly vocabulary assignments, writing summaries, a copy of their seminars (slides), their macro tasks, a copy of their extra material searched in the net about the

topics they have studied, two end-of-chapter exercises, two forms of peer assessment, and a sample of their students made materials and flash cards.

It is worth mentioning that from the beginning the researcher was clear about what she was looking for and about the qualities that differentiate portfolios. The researcher explained to her students the rationale of a portfolio and how it works. She taught them how to develop a collection of their own work that captures their growth and achievement in the classes. She also identified possible portfolio contents and a schedule for selecting them. She encouraged students to make selections on a regular basis (at the end of each chapter) and discussed ways in which they can update their portfolios. Besides, she identified which contents will be required and which will be optional. Meanwhile, she tried to promote the idea of students' ownership of their portfolios; therefore, she gave the students enough autonomy to choose among their own work and gave them the opportunity to update their work. This was based on the researcher's conviction that taking students' choice into account enables students to hold the responsibility of their learning and monitor their own growth and achievement.

As a matter of fact, the aforesaid principles play a fundamental role in designing the constructivist setting, and each one of the principles is such a significant concept, that it is a field of research in its own right.

## **6. The Researcher's Reflection on Her Experiment**

In this section, we would like to add some of our reflections on the experiment. We were originally anxious about how such a classroom model would work. However, we strived to make the learning experience one where the students did most of the talking and nearly all of the doing. At this point, it is important for teachers to diagnose where students are in their understanding and application of the specific knowledge they are about to teach to determine the best instructional approach to adopt. Furthermore, teachers need to resort to modeling for a short while when they expose the class to a new activity totally unknown by their students. When the latter are on the right

track, they are given opportunities to discover, analyze, and create. It is essential to tell them that we don't reject what we were formerly doing but to use it as a base for a good beginning. It is worth mentioning that activities used in the class were interesting, yet they were time consuming. It needed several class periods to accomplish. At the beginning, the researchers thought about interfering and accomplishing some of the tasks, for the process was slow and lacking coordination. It was not easy to let the students make enormous effort when we could have so easily organized the process for them. As an aside, more than once the teacher (first researcher) questioned whether she was on the right track, or wouldn't it be a lot easier if she just taught and the students just listened and learned? Yet, the researchers were after the process but not the product. Consequently, the logical answer to their question would be: plausibly it was easier, but doubtlessly it was not better.

Nevertheless, the researchers could not negate what they were seeing: the students were excited about what they were doing. Further, they were active all along the class hour during group work activities; they acquired their own learning and became able to produce new knowledge. Meanwhile, they still recognized that their teacher would apparently be their mentor and best resource.

Generally speaking, authorising students did not mean that the teacher had a passive role in the classroom. We provided resource materials, instructed students on writing journals, taking notes, searching, and summarizing material. All what was happening, as Brown (2005) describes, was a shift in the roles played inside the classroom; teachers from “a sage on the stage” to “a guide on the side”.

In a constructivist-informed instruction, individual students are anticipated to construct their knowledge on their own. Therefore, the expected outcomes of this instruction would be different for each individual student. The researchers had this experience in their class with the experimental group. When the students chose an optional topic to study (different religions), the groups were asked to prepare something to be discussed for

the next lecture based on the material provided by the teacher (two articles, a video, an audio, some pictures/caricatures). Drown from the same material, different activities were prepared by the groups revealing different experiences, thoughts, needs, and interests. For example, different seminars were presented about religious occasions and feasts for each religion, the sacred places for each religion, and similarities and differences among religions.

An important point to mention is that the researchers resorted to using open-ended learning tasks based on her conviction that through these tasks she can teach much more than just topics and foster connection between the different aspects of language (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation). Cornu and Peters (2005) highlight the significance of open-ended learning tasks for students and how these tasks serve to promote students' interest for learning.

In the mid of the experiment, when students felt comfortable and started enjoying the plan, the researchers found it working to make room for students' voice and choice in the class, we gave them several topics and asked them to choose one of them to study instead of a chapter in the text book. This was done deliberately to go beyond the limits of the decided curriculum. They decided on 'Different religions and beliefs'. Next, the students were individually asked to write entries about what they already knew about the chosen topic. The researcher found this line of inquiry beneficial because it provided her with baseline data on student knowledge gaps and misconceptions when debriefing the topic. Then, she facilitated a discussion and the responses were evaluated in light of all the information presented. Students sought the best interpretations and solutions through group discussion. The process was repeated with each new topic as the teacher and students interacted to create new understandings built upon their previously negotiated knowledge and understandings.

Regarding students' assessment, a variety of different assessment tools were used to ensure that the material was understood. For this purpose, a portfolio was used by the teacher

during the experiment. It accommodated different components, e.g., (writing summaries, projects, searching extra materials, macro tasks, presentations, daily participation, doing and handing in their assignments, and making flashcards). The assignments gave students the opportunity to demonstrate their learning in a less stressful, more authentic way (Brown, 1995) as cited in Huang (2010).

Having in class participation count in students' total grade created an extrinsic incentive to show engagement and take part in the class. I did my best to let the student know how much I value his/her participation and I pointed out that not all students are getting the opportunity to participate. Moreover, setting guidelines for participation and discussion early in the semester conditioned that no one person should dominate the discussion and that all should have the opportunity to energetically participate in the class.

Employing alternative assessment approaches facilitates assessing language as a tool for communication and self-expression but not so much as structure. This holistic evaluation helps to recognize students as individuals who will grow and learn in different ways (Sengupta, 2016). In this regard, the use of alternative assessment urged students to be involved in a greater level of interaction with both the teacher and their peers and enjoyed playing active roles in class and showed good engagement and improvement.

We noticed that constructivist teaching strategies helped to create a more student-centered learning environment. First, by emphasizing the strategies in our classroom, we started reconsidering our role as teachers. We gained a broader perspective of how to encourage student initiative and consider their voices and choices, one of the principles of constructivist teaching. We laid more emphasis on encouraging independent thought, peer assistance, and development of ideas on the part of my students. We endeavoured to move away from a teacher-centered method of delivery, where we were the transmitters of knowledge. There is a possibility that we believe one must allow in the classroom. Teachers must accept the fact that they do not

necessarily have all the answers, and to accept situations where students find solutions to problems that have not occurred to their teachers. Teachers are no longer thought of as the one with all the answers. Teachers should carry with them this philosophy and try to incorporate it as a dynamic within their teaching practices. All of this is done with the intent of generating a new sort of autonomous learners who are able to respond to the diverse needs of the 21<sup>st</sup> century work market.

Towards the end of our experiment, we began to realize that teacher-centered and student-centered learning environments are mingled together, i.e., they do not exist separately. Now, we came to believe that it is essential for them to co-exist in harmony in an educational setting. Adopting student-centred methods to teaching did not mean to abandon or even underestimate teacher-centred approaches. There were situations that required a move from a student-centered approach to a teacher-centered approach in order to fulfil my objectives. Finally, it is the teachers' discretion how they structure a lesson. Besides, years of experience offer teachers with high capability of designing and directing appropriate instructions.

We released control in our class room, granting students more freedoms that I had never presented. We detected a shift in the organization of my classroom. It was no longer as rigid as before and we served to scaffold students with their needs, rather than simply have students work on a problem that we assigned, confined to the methods we prescribed. Eventually, we perceived that our role in this teaching method was not that of someone who assesses the capacities of their students in terms of a final product but in terms of the process. In our class, the teacher converted into a friend who guided students to refine their newly constructed knowledge and acted as a coordinator, as a facilitator, as a director who guided her actors how to perform well on the stage and as an advisor in the academic tasks and activities.

Finally, implementing the principles of constructivism in teaching had a reciprocal effect on both our students and us as well. First, we felt serious changes in our teaching methods,

which in turn, caused to increase active engagement on the part of students. This was clearly demonstrated during discussion time and during group work activities. The researchers felt the notion of "teachable moments", as described by Brook and Brook (2003:105). As educators, we have experienced moments when the students' enthusiasm, interest, prior knowledge, and motivation have intersected in ways that made our lesson surpass the ordinary lesson and enabled us to think with pride about that lesson for weeks. The researchers witnessed students' excitement about the tasks and discussions, and their extraordinary ability to attend to the task for long periods of time and with great commitment.

## **7. Conclusion**

Constructivism is a descriptive theory rather than prescriptive; it does not prescribe strict rules or procedures for designing a learning environment. Rather, it describes how learning occurs in meaningful cooperative environments. In defence of implementing constructivism in teaching, it can be argued that teachers can tailor the principles to the needs of their students. The researchers have explained how they employed these principles and adapted them in their classroom. They expounded how they created a classroom environment that is a supportive one and which yielded improvement in students' ability to be more active and responsible students.

Hence, it can be said that there is a real need for an alternative pedagogy which can be manifested in the application of constructivist pedagogy. This new approach conceptualises classroom interaction and cooperation as effective tools that would ground itself in the reality of everyday school life and integrate group work into the fabric of the school day.

To put it in a nutshell, our main conclusion is that a meaningful paradigm shift is needed where our student learning by means of active participation becomes the goal. It is necessary to review one's teaching approach. We need to believe in ourselves as innovative teachers and trust in our students' abilities as well. We and our students are not less than those teachers and



students who are achieving continuous progress and success every day. All what we need is self-confidence, persistence, and having the courage to decide; so, why not to start today???

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