

Social Constructivist Theory

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The theory of Social Constructivism calls attention to the significance of culture and the value of the social context for cognitive development (Brown, 2007). When individuals are focused on shared practices, they are actively constructing the cognitive tools needed for growth as human beings. Learning becomes primarily a process of enculturation into a community of practices, as social influences and the interactions with others generate the ability to advance and cultivate a shared meaning, thus transferring this meaning to each individual member of the group.

One of the main proponents of Social Constructivism was Lev Vygotsky, who challenged the views of Jean Piaget that mainly focused on cognitive development as an individual process, rather than a collaborative effort (Martinez, 2010). Although Vygotsky's ideas acknowledged individual psychology in cognitive development, he shifted the focus to external forces that were entwined with the internal world in which Piaget centered his theories. These influences, outside of the self, have a crucial function, serving to shape how humans view the world, through the language they come in contact with and the personal reflection that is derived from that input.

Perhaps Vygotsky's most well-known concept is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). According to Martinez (2010), the ZPD, "recognizes that individuals often exhibit higher levels of skill through the assistance, encouragement, and coaching of other people" (p. 14). With the aid of others, such as parents, teachers, and even fellow students who are at a slightly higher level of development, individuals can increase their competence to a more advanced stage in any particular area of knowledge. By presenting challenges that lay just beyond the individual's range of skill, with a small amount of support, the learner will be able to succeed in

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completing the chosen tasks (Martinez, 2010). Therefore, by using this instructional approach, the learner consequently raises their level of proficiency in a given area with minimal assistance.

Through the use of approaches involving Social Constructivism in the classroom, teachers can be actively involved in providing their students the cognitive tools needed for continued growth. A Social Constructivist teacher creates a context for learning in which students can become engaged in interesting activities that encourages and facilitates learning. The teacher does not simply stand by, however, and watch the students explore and discover. On the contrary, the teacher can guide students as they encounter problems, encourage them to work in groups to think about issues and questions, and support them with confidence-building praise and advice as they undertake dilemmas, exciting activities, and challenges that are embedded in real life situations (Chen, n.d., General Implications of Social Constructivism, para. 2). These challenges are both motivating for the students and rewarding in terms of the achieved outcome of their work. Teachers thus make possible cognitive growth and knowledge as do peers and other members of the learner's community.

There are many examples of classroom activities that can incorporate Social Constructivism. For instance, collaborative, or cooperative learning involves students sharing background knowledge and participating in a reciprocal nature in order to negotiate and settle on a shared constructed meaning. The teacher instructs the students how to use social skills and build knowledge as a group so they can work in cooperation more efficiently (Larsen-Freeman, xxxx). Those who surround the individual learner, and the culture within which that person lives, greatly affect the way he or she makes sense of the world.

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Another activity is a workshop, where knowledge is taught as an active, student-centered process that gives students, individually and in groups, much of the responsibility for making decisions about what will be studied and why. In a reading/writing workshop, for example, collaboration entails sharing responses, ideas, drafts, and finished written products through conferences with the teacher, conferences and journal exchanges with peers and the teacher, and with members of the student's wider, non-classroom, community such as parents (Stevens, E., 1995, as cited in Chen, n.d., *Social Constructivism: Reading/Writing Workshop*, par. 2).

One other method involves anchored instruction. The anchored instruction approach is an attempt to help students become more actively engaged in learning by situating or anchoring education around an interesting topic. The learning environments are designed to provoke the kinds of thoughtful engagement that helps students develop effective thinking skills and attitudes that contribute to effective problem solving and critical thinking (Chen, n.d., *Cognitive Constructivism & Social Constructivism: Anchored Instruction*, par. 1).

With these activities in mind, Social Constructivism emphasizes the central idea that learning and development is a social, collaborative activity. Using this approach, combined with Lev Vygotsky's ZPD, can serve as a guide for curricular and lesson planning. Furthermore, school learning should occur in a meaningful context and not be separated from learning and knowledge children develop in real-world situations, and experiences outside of the classroom should be related to those experienced by the child inside the classroom. In this manner, students will be able to master concepts and ideas they cannot understand on their own with the aid of teachers, parents, fellow peers, and the culture that surrounds them.

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LESSON PLAN

Time: 90 min. **Subject:** English Language **Class:** Intermediate – Advanced proficiency

Language Focus: Conversation discourse, Reading comprehension

Topic: Natural disasters

Objective: To teach students identification of keywords related to different types of natural disasters around the world, organizing brief descriptions of various types of natural disasters through investigation, and relating their own personal experiences of natural disasters through group discussion.

Prior Knowledge: Students will have had working knowledge of how to use the internet to perform an investigative search.

Materials: Whiteboard, Internet, Recent news article related to natural disaster topic.

STEP	Time	Tasks (Teacher)(T)	Tasks (Students)(S)	Interaction	Purpose
1	15 min	Introduction to topic natural disasters. T asks Ss to think of and identify all the different types of natural disasters	Listen, and then call out various answers as T writes them on board.	T<>S	Arouse interest in topic, activate background knowledge of topic.

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		that occur throughout the world, and as students name various disasters, T writes them on the board.			
2	30min	After T and Ss discuss various keywords associated with topic, T ask Ss to form small groups, and using the internet, to investigate particular natural disaster of interest.	Ss actively perform an investigation using the internet on natural disaster of choice.	Ss <> Ss	Through collaboration and use of the internet, Ss are able to identify key concepts and characteristics of particular natural disasters, analyzing and synthesizing new information.
3	15 min	T asks Ss to share their results of the investigations.	Ss orally share their results.	T <> Ss <> Ss	Students report what they have analyzed and evaluated to each other and to the

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					teacher in group discussion.
4	10 min	T presents current news article related to natural disaster topic, and asks students to take turns reading portions of article aloud.	Ss take turns reading portions of article aloud.	T <> Ss <> Ss	Students orally read passages from article to practice reading fluency with proper pace and intonation.
5	20 min	T asks Ss to share personal experiences of any natural disasters that may have occurred in their hometowns.	Ss take turns orally sharing their own experiences.	T <> Ss <> Ss	Students are able to use higher order thinking skills and verbally express their thoughts and sentiments through group discussion.

The purpose of this activity is to use Social Constructivist approaches, such as cooperative learning and anchored instruction, in order for students to actively construct new knowledge in the areas of conversation discourse and reading comprehension through social interaction and collaboration. The main learning styles addressed in this activity are visual and auditory, as well as bodily-kinesthetic, to a certain extent, by having them get up from the

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classroom and move to the computer lab for internet use. Higher- order levels of thinking are intended to be used, as the students are analyzing new information, evaluating, and making judgments based on their investigative research. By incorporating their own personal experiences in the final part of the lesson, the students are able to use a real-world context and background knowledge to construct meaning. In addition, relating personal experiences allows them to chunk new information with previous knowledge that has been stored in the brain, with the intention of storing the new knowledge in long-term memory.

References

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