

# Constructivist Theory and Its Enlightenment to English Teaching

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**ABSTRACT.** *Constructivism is the latest foreign teaching theory and a hot topic in recent years. It plays an important guiding role in English teaching. This paper aims to introduce the main theories of constructivism and its enlightenment to English teaching.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Constructivism, English teaching, English learning*

## 1. Introduction

The major representatives of constructivism are J. Piaget, O. Kernberg, Vogotsky, R. J. Sternberg and D. Katz. J. Piaget was one of the most influential psychologists in the field of cognitive development. His constructivism originates from his deep dissatisfaction with epistemology in western philosophical tradition. His basic view on constructivism is that children gradually construct their knowledge about the outside world in the process of interaction with the surrounding environment, thus developing their own cognitive structure. On the basis of Piaget's theory of cognitive structure, O. Kernberg made further research on the nature and development conditions of cognitive structure. R.J. Sternberg and D. Katz emphasized the key role of individual initiative in the process of constructing the cognitive structure and made a serious exploration on how to give full play to individual initiative in the cognitive process. Vogotsky's theory of cultural and historical development emphasizes the role of learners' social, cultural and historical background in the cognitive process.

The constructivist theory is very rich in content, but its core can be summarized as taking students as the center of teaching, emphasizing students' active exploration of knowledge, active discovery and active construction of the meaning of the knowledge they have learned; this is completely different from traditional teaching, which is teacher-centered and takes students as passive receivers of knowledge. Taking students as the center is to put emphasis on "learning" while taking teachers as the center means putting emphasis on "teaching", which is the most fundamental difference between the two educational thoughts and teaching concepts, thus developing different learning theories, teaching theories and teaching design theories. As the learning environment required by constructivism is strongly supported by the latest information technology achievements, the theories of constructivism are

increasingly combined with the teaching practice, thus becoming the guiding ideology for deepening teaching reform in many universities and colleges at home and abroad. The following is a brief introduction to the main theories of constructivism.

## **2. Theories of Constructivism**

### ***2.1 Learning View***

#### ***2.1.1 Assimilation and Adaptation***

Piaget believes that learners establish their internal knowledge structure in the process of interaction with the environment, and the process includes assimilation and adaptation. The former refers to the process in which an individual accepts external stimuli and integrates them into the existing internal cognitive structure, and it only involves quantitative changes in the cognitive structure; the latter refers to the process in which learners adjust their original cognitive structure to adapt to specific external stimuli, and it involves changes in the nature of the cognitive structure. When the learner successfully assimilates new stimuli with the original cognitive structure, his cognitive state reaches a balance. However, when the original cognitive structure cannot directly assimilate new stimuli, the balance will be destroyed, and only through the adjustment of the original cognitive structure can assimilation be successfully achieved, and meanwhile the new balance will be established. Learners achieve a balance with the environment through the two processes of assimilation and adaptation and develop their cognition in the cycle of balance-imbalance-new balance.

#### ***2.1.2 Zone of Proximal Development***

Vygotsky insists on the theory of social constructivism and further puts forward the theory of “zone of proximal development”, which holds that historical, social and cultural backgrounds provide support and help for individuals’ learning and development. There are two levels of learning: the actual development level and the potential development level. The former refers to the level that learners can achieve when they complete their tasks independently while the latter refers to the level that learners can achieve with the help of others, and between these two levels there exists a so-called “zone of proximal development”. Therefore, learning means that during the learning process, learners are continuously narrowing the distance between these two levels.

#### ***2.1.3 Elements of Learning***

The constructivist theory holds that learning is a process during which meaning construction is realized through cooperative activities between people under the social and cultural background, and therefore, learning should include the following four basic elements: 1) situation, in which students experience learning atmosphere,

interpersonal relationships and different occasions which consist of various learning resources and include material and spiritual factors; 2) collaboration, which is similar to negotiation including self-negotiation and mutual negotiation. Self-negotiation refers to the process in which one makes a comparative analysis of some of his thoughts so as to reach an agreement in his heart while mutual negotiation refers to the process in which teachers and students or students themselves discuss some controversial issues and then make decisions by negotiation; 3) conversation, which cannot be separated from collaboration. Teachers and students or students themselves must rely on conversation to discuss how to make learning plans and how to achieve learning objectives; 4) meaning construction, which, as the last step in the learning process, reveals the law of occurrence and development of things and understand the internal relations between them. The quality of learning depends on students' ability of meaning construction, not the teacher's teaching ability, as von Glasersfeld pointed out that "Knowledge cannot be transmitted; it cannot be neutral either. Instead, it is constructed, negotiated, propelled by a project, and perpetuated for as long as it enables its creators to organize their reality in a viable fashion." (Laroche, 1998)

## ***2.2 Teaching View***

### ***2.2.1 Student-Centered Idea***

Teachers should make a reasonable teaching design based on students' English knowledge and experience that they have and guide them to accumulate new English language knowledge and experience and to think and understand different English phenomena in multiple dimensions. Teachers should not consider themselves to be the authority of the English knowledge, but should encourage students to think independently in the learning process and to think in English and give students the autonomy to solve the problems that they encounter in English learning.

### ***2.2.2 Creation of Appropriate Situations***

The constructivist theory places a special emphasis on the significance of varying language situations for English learning, since the use of language is inseparable from social and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, in the process of English teaching, teachers should try their best to create different English learning situations in order to arouse students' enthusiasm for English and give students enough opportunities for them to apply the English language knowledge that they have learned in different language situations.

### ***2.2.3 Cultivation of Creativity***

The constructivist theory advocates the cultivation of students' English language creativity in English teaching and holds that teaching should be centered on the cultivation of students' language inquiry ability and their creative English thinking. Teachers should provide students with complex and varied real English problems

and make them realize that there are no simple answers to complex problems, thus encouraging them to find solutions to problems from multiple perspectives.

#### ***2.2.4 Teachers as Guides***

Teachers and students need to discuss some problems in English learning and students themselves need to learn from each other. If students want to improve their learning quality, they must be frank about their true thoughts. However, due to the differences in knowledge, experience and personality characteristics, teachers and students often have considerable differences in ideas. However, in fact, different ideas and thinking angles are rich learning resources in meaning construction, in which process teachers should play the role of guides, guiding collaborative discussions towards meaning construction.

### **3. Enlightenment of the Constructivist Theory to English Teaching**

#### ***3.1 Scaffolding Instruction***

Scaffolding instruction is a teaching method that provides a conceptual framework for learners' meaning construction. Learners are regarded as a building, and their learning is a process of continuously constructing themselves, while teaching is a necessary scaffold to provide them with support for their continuous construction. The teaching process includes four steps: 1) Putting up scaffolding, which serves as a conceptual framework focusing on the current learning themes and is established according to the "zone of proximal development"; 2) Entering the situation: Teachers provide students with appropriate questions and guide them into the situation created for the questions; 3) Independent exploration: Students are given opportunities to independently analyze and explore the essence of relevant concepts, and teachers need to provide help when necessary; 4) Collaborative learning: An in-depth understanding of the concepts learned is formed through discussion between teachers and students on the basis of thinking and achievement sharing so as to realize meaning construction; 5) Effect evaluation: There are two forms of effect evaluation, namely self-evaluation and mutual evaluation by students.

#### ***3.2 Anchored Instruction***

Anchored instruction needs to be based on real problems. Once such real problems are determined, the teaching content and the teaching process can also be determined. It advocates that learners can learn by acquiring direct experience, thus completing the meaning construction of the knowledge learned. Anchored instruction includes the following aspects: 1) creation of situations, which provides students with learning situations similar to reality; 2) discovery of problems, which is to discover the real problems which are closely related to the knowledge that is being learned and which are taken as the focus of learning; 3) independent

learning, which means teachers only provide students with tips to the solution of problems, and students arrange a series of activities to solve the problems by themselves, so as to cultivate students' independent learning ability; 4) collaborative learning, which helps to ensure smooth communication between teachers and students, who have many differences in ideas due to their different knowledge and experience, different cultural backgrounds and different personality characteristics, and cooperative discussion between teachers and students is a powerful means to tackle those differences; 5) evaluation of the learning effect, which is assessed through observation and recording of the learning process, during which problems are solved and by which the learning effect is directly reflected.

### **3.3 Radom Access Instruction**

Due to the complexity and versatility of objective things, it is often difficult to deeply and comprehensively understand their essence. In order to overcome this disadvantage, random access instruction should be adopted. Random access instruction means that learners can learn the same teaching content in different situations and different ways at will, thus obtaining a comprehensive understanding of the teaching content. Of course, each access has a different focus. Therefore, it does not mean that learners simply review what they have learned, but that they obtain a breakthrough in understanding the essence of what they have learned. Random access instruction mainly includes the following five aspects:

1) Presentation of relevant situations: Teachers provide students with situations related to what they have learned.

2) Random access into learning: Teachers should cultivate students' independent learning ability in this process.

3) Thinking development training: Teachers should also pay attention to the development of students' thinking ability because of the complexity of random access into learning.

4) Group cooperative learning: Group discussion and evaluation on the results of learning should be carried out.

5) Learning effect evaluation: The forms of evaluation mainly include self-evaluation and group evaluation. The evaluation content includes independent learning ability, the achievement of meaning construction, etc.

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