

Title: How can constructivism help teach literacy skills to ESL learners?

“To learn another language is to have one more window from which to look at the world” – Chinese proverb

English is the most spoken language worldwide and to understand it provides a lot of opportunity for a person. But getting to learn a new language can be at times intimidating, however the outcome of it is far greater than what the fear of attempting can bring you. In schools there are students who have English as their second language and there are multiple factors that can make the attempt on teaching this language challenging for the teacher and the students. Fortunately, through the years many researched multiple theories, approaches, and assessments to language teaching for example, Lev Vygotsky: Zone of Proximal Development, Jean Piaget: Constructivism and B.F. Skinner: Behaviorism, performance-based assessment, etc. Each having their own style on how to approach language teaching and a teacher can choose which technique works best for them and their students. However, we will be focusing on the constructivist approach. Because of this, an English teacher that understands what the constructivist approach means, how to use it with ESL elementary students, and know activities and assessments to use in class can help develop literacy skills in their students.

In order to see how can a teacher use the constructivist approach with her ESL students we must first understand it. Constructivism is a strategy where students construct their knowledge through interaction with others and using their prior

knowledge. This approach considers that acquired knowledge does not happen when the teacher is talking and simply giving information for the students seated and listen through the entire class. Instead, their knowledge is constructed by them taking an active role by building and creating their meaning and knowledge. It is considered to be an approach students-centered instead of teacher-centered and the teacher acts more as a facilitator. Constructivism provides flexibility, motivation and versatility for the teacher and the students. Inside this approach there are two variations, the Cognitive Constructivism (Jean Piaget) and the Social Constructivism (Lev Vygotsky). The cognitive constructivism is more into understanding how a student arrived to an answer and how the information is interpreted and processed by them. On the other hand, Social Constructivism deals with how can a student learn through social interactions where the teacher acts as a collaborator with their students (Sharma & Poonam, 2016).

Using this approach with elementary English Language students is beneficial in acquiring reading and writing skills. This is because they have background experience that can contextualize the information being taught. For teachers is essential to use their student's prior knowledge and their background in order to provide opportunities for the students to succeed and get involved in their education. This allows the students to see relevance in the content being taught to them. Students make their language acquisition relevant by, as previously mentioned, tapping into their prior knowledge and this will allow the students to eventually develop a deeper level of understanding. The teacher will do this by redirecting their prior knowledge and develop that knowledge to take them onto more complex concepts and then the students will understand them

within their own context. Furthermore, the steps leading to success for ESL students in the elementary level are similar, by relating new material they are learning with previous experiences to their knowledge, cultural background all within their native language. By integrating those aspects into the lesson, the students will become more invested and see the content as relevant (Mvududu & Thiel-Burgess, 2012).

Now, an essential part in language learning are the activities and assessments that teachers do to and with their students to track that knowledge process. Using authentic assessments is helpful because it includes multiple forms of assessments that reflect the students learning, achievement, motivation, and attitudes on relevant classroom activities. Authentic Assessment deals in a way with constructivism because the students construct information as they learn and then apply that information in the classroom. There are many types of authentic assessments including oral interviews, story, or text retelling, writing samples, portfolios, oral reports, journals which all help to develop in the ESL students their literacy skills (O'Malley & Valdez, 1996). Using a variety of assessments provides the teacher a wider view on how are the students learning. Moreover, using assessments like a portfolio, teacher observations, writing samples to track our students understanding will help us know what it is that we need to reinforce in class.

Finally, because the students' teachers encounter come with different personal experiences, strengths and weaknesses is crucial to adapt the lessons to the students needs. Meaning that this approach and techniques provided may not be effective for all the students, that is why teachers must adapt and not stick with just one way of

teaching. However, using the constructivist approach can be a way to help make the material relevant to the ESL students. Building on prior knowledge, making them have an active role in their process of creating meaning and knowledge can help them be successful in acquiring the new language and developing their literacy. Because our students are unique and bring a diversity into the classroom, teachers must be aware and look for ways to make a class that is integrated, and student focused.

References:

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