

Use of the Social Constructivist Approach in Teaching Oral Skill to First Year BA Students of English

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Abstract

Communication plays a vital role in learning oral skill. However, for most learners, particularly first year BA students, speaking remains the most difficult skill to master. Most students are reluctant to speak because of some psychological factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence, or because their motivation is quite low due to some adopted approaches which are mostly teacher centred and dominated by a few skilled and more advanced students. This state of affairs leaves the majority of students with very little or no participation in the classroom. It is, then, a great challenge for teachers to make students communicate verbally and express their thoughts fluently in oral classes. One possible solution to take this challenge is the application of the social constructivist approach to teaching the oral skill based on the works of Vygotsky. This paper will briefly review social constructivism, which is widely touted as an approach and which has been fruitfully applied in many EFL contexts though with some inevitable drawbacks. It also aims to investigate the possibility of applying it in oral classes in order to overcome the unwillingness of First year BA students to communicate. Substituting the classical monotonous approach by a more motivating one that triggers students' interests and enhances their learning strategies will considerably contribute to making them good speakers of English in and out of the classroom.

Key Words: Anxiety, constructivism, learner-centred, motivation, oral performance, oral skill, participation in class, teacher-centred.

Introduction

In the past, learning was mainly teacher-centred, and students were, in most cases, a passive audience of their teacher with little negotiation of the input or disagreement over it. Despite the fact that English language teachers have used different methods in teaching in the last few decades, speaking, as one of the four skills, remains difficult to handle. Moreover, students' language learning behaviour tends to have a considerable impact on teachers' teaching practices. Therefore, teaching speaking as a major component of the oral skill ought to resort to more sophisticated approaches and methods. Social constructivism, which is a student-centred approach, is more and more acknowledged by researchers as a potentially successful path to teaching speaking and overcoming most of what hinders a fluent and confident speech production by students.

1. What is Constructivism?

Constructivism is a theory of learning which has influenced the field of education, and particularly educational psychology. Many psychologists contributed to the shaping of this theory such as Jean Piaget (1960), Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Jerome Bruner (1996). Constructivism emphasizes a student-centred pedagogy in which the learner constructs his own knowledge and the teacher acts as a guide or a facilitator of the learning process (Blyth 51) and (Huang 1). Driscoll writes, "constructivism has multiple roots in the psychology and philosophy, among which are the cognitive and developmental perspectives of Piaget [and] the interaction and cultural emphases of Vygotsky and Bruner" (qtd. in Can 60).

Li Jin, for instance, states that constructivism is an active process of learning which tends to shift the focus from the teacher to the students. This shift in attitude makes the student the centre of the learning process in order to ultimately construct meanings and understandings of various concepts based on their prior knowledge and experiences (13). Accordingly, Robert Slavin firmly believes that the core concept of the constructivist theory is that learners must independently construct knowledge (257). To Slavin, a self-constructed knowledge can be achieved by providing students

with opportunities to discover, learn and apply new information and ideas themselves (257).

Can stresses the importance of content in learning through a constructivist perspective. In his viewpoint, learners need to be given a choice of the content in order to investigate issues and topics of their interest, while teachers can serve only as guides (65). In his turn, Jinyan Huang stresses the importance of a more appropriate classroom learning situation in matter of setting and cooperative work among learners and a better interaction with the teacher (1). In other words, the classroom is no longer a place where the teacher pours knowledge into passive students who unquestioningly accept it; rather they are actively engaged in their own process of learning.

2. Social Constructivism

Social constructivism is an outgrowth of Vygotsky's ideas and theories acknowledging the use of social interactions and environment in the learning process. Dougl's Brown states that the social constructivist theories focus on language communication between individuals(245). He further explains that this method of learning is highly associated with learners interaction with their peers, teachers and others in society (ibid 286-287). According to Vygotsky, learning is a social negotiation of concepts and meanings using language in order to help others and solve problems (98). As Can points out, "Vygotsky postulated that the concepts of development and learning of the individuals could not be understood without reference to the social and cultural context in which these concepts are embedded"(63).

The essence of social constructivism is the use of cooperative learning, project based learning and discovery practices. From a constructivist view, these practices emphasize the social nature of learning which enables most students to contribute and exchange ideas (Slavin 258). In cooperative groups, learners can hear the more skilful peers' inner voice out aloud when they try to solve problems; this increases their understandability more than when working individually (Slavin 258). This concept, derived from Vygotsky's theories, was called 'cognitive apprenticeship'. This was further defined by Slavin as "the process by which a learner gradually acquires expertise through interaction with an expert, either an adult or an older or a more

advanced peer” (259). Along with this idea, Vygotsky claims that learning occurs through dialogues between students or between teacher and students (98).

Mediated learning or scaffolding is another key principle of Vygotsky’s theories of learning whereby he stresses the importance of giving learners complex tasks that take place in real life to be solved with some assistance. This assistance is usually provided by teachers, peers or parents. Lianrui Yang and Kate Wilson point to the fact that these tasks need to be challenging in order to capture students’ attention; besides, enough support is needed, otherwise students may give up easily(265). They add that students learn as active members of society and, the teacher, in his turn, is responsible of setting up the appropriate environment of learning (ibid 265). The concept of scaffolding is also associated with the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) of students which concerns the range of tasks students may achieve unassisted through scaffolding practice (vygotsky 82).

BeaumieKim mentions that social constructivism is based on three main assumptions: reality (constructed through human activities), knowledge (a human activity that is socially and culturally constructed) and learning (a social process which takes place when individuals are engaged in social activities) (3-4). Kim later states the general perspectives of social constructivism on learning(5). Therefore, according to Gredler, there are four general perspectives of social constructivism. First, there is the cognitive tools perspective, which is developing cognitive skills and strategies of learning. Second, there is the idea based social constructivism perspective which concerns learners’ visions of various social concepts and meanings. Third, there is the pragmatic or emergent approach where meaning and understanding of the world can be developed in classroom. Finally, there is the transactional or situated cognitive perspective in which the relationship between people and their social environment is considered (qtd. in Kim 5).

In brief, Vygotsky’s view of social constructivism places emphasis on cultural and social context for cognitive growth. As Vygotsky firmly believes, social interaction plays a crucial role in cognition development at an awareness and knowledge building level (vygotsky 78).

3. Students’ Psychological Problems

Learning English speaking and communicative skills, despite its great importance nowadays, remains out of reach for many students because of some psychological problems like anxiety and lack of confidence.

3.1. Anxiety

Shu-Feng Tseng states that anxiety may have a negative effect on students' performance when speaking in the target language (76). She claims that this is related to one being afraid of failure or being negatively evaluated in front of others (76). This situation is common at the Department of English, University of Constantine, according to the authors of this paper's observations and experience. Many students are reluctant to communicate for these reasons in addition to their linguistic deficiencies such as lack of vocabulary. Tseng thinks that oral presentations and a very formal atmosphere in the classroom are the main causes of learners' feeling of anxiety and nervousness (80). He adds that another key anxiety-provoking factor is the fear of committing mistakes in front of others (80). These are some of the reasons why students tend to keep silent or seldom contribute in the classroom.

Generally, according to Lejla Basic, students who have speech anxiety are quiet and passive and thus get less attention from their teachers. These students give up very often at the early stages and continue to be calm during the rest of their learning years (10).

3.2. Lack of Confidence

Lack of confidence is a psychological issue that is considered as one of the greatest obstacles which negatively affects students' oral performance. According to Mariam Jamila, "lack of confidence is a headache for both teachers and learners" (164). This factor complicates the learning of a foreign language and hampers students from speaking fluently (Jamila 164). Viswat and Jackson claim that it is commonly difficult for learners with less motivation, or who lack confidence to perform well in oral presentations (qtd. in Jamila 162). Thus, it is broadly believed that students with high self-esteem can achieve much better and speak increasingly well compared to those afraid of losing face in public.

To Anna Törnqvist, it is important for a teacher to consider students' emotions when teaching oral skill, as they can substantially affect the learning process, on top of which is self-esteem (4). Brown argues that self-esteem has a profound effect on learning EFL (142). Since it is all related to one's emotions; teachers need to act as much of psychologists as instructors.

The authors have noticed, both as students and as teachers, that many students even with highly developed skills, especially writing, cannot express their thoughts verbally. They usually avoid any kind of talking in classroom. This can lead to a misunderstanding from some teachers who, for them, the best students are only those who attract more attention through participation. The authors have also noticed that the four language skills have received unequal interest from teachers and administrators for so many years. The writing skill, for example, has always been at the forefront because students always have a chance to update and edit what is written. Verbally, thoughts should be expressed on the spot, which means students are unable to prepare and organise their ideas in advance. All these factors lead to more anxiety and nervousness and hence make the speaking skill the most stressful one to be learnt and performed.

Students usually notice their lack of confidence when their speech productions cannot be understood by others (Juhana 102). They usually feel uncomfortable and frustrated in the classroom which makes it a great challenge for the teacher to make them feel secure and talk spontaneously with no hesitation.

High levels of speaking anxiety, therefore, may lead to negative consequences on the students' learning and motivation. Anxiety can be considered as the major cause of their failure in verbal interactions. In this situation, learners, when feeling more and more anxious, are overwhelmed by panic, and hence achieve very poorly when speaking in public. Low confident students tend to feel insecure when speaking because of their negative self-perception. Consequently, they become more doubtful about their own capacities which influences deeply their oral performance.

4. Classical and Current Teaching Methods of Oral Skill at the Department of English, University of Constantine

In the classical system of teaching 'oral expression', which dates back to the seventies, teaching English required achieving a set of objectives, on top of which was preparing students to be able to speak English fluently and discuss different topics and issues. In this system, students were supposed to reproduce speeches with accurate pronunciation, use and manipulate grammatical structures and verbal expressions correctly, use language functions correctly and communicate effectively through discussions and debates (Beghou 262). This state of affairs was not exclusive to this department. Jin, for instance, points to the traditional English teaching at Shandong University, China, which was based on rote memorisation of words, phrases and collocations, separately from their context (14). This method of teaching posed a great challenge to the students with limited socio-cultural knowledge who were unable to use words they learnt in an appropriate context.

The current syllabus of oral skill, under the Licence, Master, Doctorat (LMD) system, is still ambiguous and inefficient. It is composed of some basic teaching units that are closely associated with phonetics (sounds), sentence constructions and contexts of language use.¹ The teachers still have too much freedom in teaching oral English giving more consideration to receptive skills than to the productive ones. Furthermore, because of many linguistic and psychological problems affecting students, teachers still play the major role in classroom discussions. For instance, very few teachers make use of games like role-play to overcome language psychological obstacles such as anxiety.

This situation calls for novel approaches of teaching the oral skill. One of them might be social constructivism which has been applied in more than one instance and has brought about impressive results (Jin) (Törnqvist) (Yang and Wilson).

5. Social Constructivism as an Alternative

With the recent advances of technology and the wide array of technological tools available for students, teachers fail more and more to captivate their students' interest. In this paper, using the social constructivist approach in teaching oral skill at the University of Constantine is suggested. Two basic motives have fallen behind the advocacy of this method of learning. The first is to arouse the students' interest in

¹ *Offre de Formation Licence en Anglais, Département d'Anglais, Université de Constantine, 2005*

learning English speaking and reduce their anxiety or lack of confidence in classroom. The second reason is to transform the classroom environment into a socio-cultural context where students get to interact with their lecturer and peers, and enrich their linguistic and communicative competence. This is especially that, in the belief of many students, classroom is the only place where English, as a foreign language, can be used. Moreover, the use of some constructivist materials and resources such as the Internet can be considerably valuable compared to the traditional authentic or non-authentic used materials. In a similar vein, Can decidedly asserts that:

Constructivist approach is promising at promoting learners' language and communicative skills as well as at fostering their autonomy, social and interactive skills contributing to their development into more confident, proactive and responsible individuals by supporting incentives on diverse media in language learning and teaching. (60)

As previously stated, learning oral skill in the past was teacher-centred where the teacher takes the whole responsibility of class management and content or material choice. However applying a new pedagogy, usually referred to as 'student-centred instruction', from a social constructivist lens is ultimately in order to create a flexible and supportive atmosphere in classroom, in which all students can take an active part in real life conversations and express themselves more freely instead of being enclosed in a deep silence functioning as merely audiences to teachers and advanced peers participation.

"A language can never be regarded as an isolated phenomenon, but instead language should always be taught and practiced in a context." (Ericsson qtd. in Törnqvist 10). To materialize such a view, a set of constructivist methods are suggested to be used at the Department of English, University of Constantine, as an attempt to mainly tackle students' psychological issues of speaking confidently. In other words, applying this method will hopefully reduce students' anxiety and lack of confidence, on the one hand, and boost their oral communicative skills in classroom and in possible real-life public situations elsewhere than in their home country, on the other hand.

5.1.Group Work

Most students feel a lot of pressure when they are supposed to initiate conversations, giving speeches or making presentations about specific topics. Group work is an ideal strategy to shift students' attention from the others' negative feedback to the actual use of language. It enables students to share information and considerably decrease the level of anxiety (Shi 65). They may get more excited to present their thoughts orally than when they do it individually. In such a situation, the teacher will be more inclined to offer necessary assistance and guidance when required.

According to Vygotsky, working in groups is a way to increase one's knowledge through interactions between both novice and advanced learners (92). Törnqvist praises group work for being an activity that fosters students' communicative skills through asking and answering each other naturally (9). Later Lightbown and Spada assert, regarding the value of group work, "students produce not only a greater quantity but also a greater variety of language functions (for example, disagreeing, hypothesizing, requesting, clarifying, and defining)" (qtd. in Törnqvist 9). Hence, students through pair work or small group work learn English language use in a natural way, without even knowing that they are learning what should be learnt and used in future conversations and social communications. In other words, they are given more opportunities to practice the language in social contexts more than it was in the classical approach of teaching and learning oral skill.

Cooperative and discovery learning is a core methodology applied in constructivism, which facilitates the learning process and gain students' enthusiasm and consciousness. According to Slavin, discovery learning arouses students' curiosity and encourages learners to work more often until they find the desired explanations (261). Students generally discover what they are supposed to when they talk and ask the others naturally and appropriately instead of the classical unnatural way of question/answer. This makes students more critical thinkers by boosting their cognitive abilities.

The use of fun games, roleplay, debates and discussions are very important aspects of a constructivist classroom. Encouraging students to use these activities in natural social settings significantly improves their learning of speaking (Jamila 163). Dörnyei states that teachers need to create a negotiating environment which promotes

teamwork among learners and which in turn increases their self-confidence and eases their nervousness (qtd. in Jamila 163).

UmiKalsomMasrom and Dahlia Md.YusofSyahrani state that the use of fun games through a constructivist approach has been fruitful since they noticed a great confidence in their students' English speaking. Besides, their students learnt how to work in teams in order to solve various tasks(24).

Jeremy Harmer points out "if students are not using English everyone is wasting their time" (qtd. in Tseng 7). To Harmer, students should be encouraged to use English in and outside classroom in different contexts to achieve a successful teaching and learning process. Discussion, for instance, is the best way to exchange ideas and learn the target language in a relaxed and natural way. Vygotsky, in his turn, reveals that collaboration representing the social and cultural aspects enable learners to boost their language skills through interaction, arguments and discussion (94). In group discussion, the learning atmosphere is no longer stressful or boring since students are working together and therefore learning together (Masrom and Syahrani 24).

Consequently, a limited exposure to the target language culture creates a serious obstacle in learning social and communicative language. The use of idioms and proverbs, for instance, can be considered as a serious problem when talking to a native speaker. Discussion in this case can be a better means to know more about the target language culture. Students, for example, can look for some cultural aspects through a discovery learning process and come to class to identify and discuss what they found with their peers. Likewise, Yang and Wilson highlight the importance of the target country's culture when learning a language in order to overcome speaking fluency barriers (270). It is highly believed that culture and language are closely related, and, hence, to understand and speak English fluently, and more importantly, confidently, a cultural background needs to be enhanced.

5.2.Problem-Based Learning

One of the approaches of constructivism is problem-based learning (PBL). In this approach, students learn by contributing in different problem-based activities when the teacher only offers the necessary help (Masrom and Syahrani 24). PBL may

be beneficial in many ways, especially because of students' centeredness, i.e. they are the only responsible of learning and problem solving, mostly through free communication. Students are given more opportunities to develop independent learning instead of a complete reliance on the teacher's instruction. They also develop critical thinking and cooperative learning via teamwork (Masrom and Syahrani 22). Yuan writes:

The aim of English teaching is to train the students how to use the language, yet this kind of ability will more quickly be developed on condition that the students are greatly engaged in the English language learning and immersed in an atmosphere of using the language. (qtd. in Yang and Wilson 270)

In other words, students should be the speakers in the class, and not regarded as passive listeners, and all involved in different tasks and activities.

5.3. Use of Technologies

In recent times, students have developed a great interest towards technology, such as the Internet, smart phones and digital cameras. Can, in a well thought article, suggests learning and teaching languages online through a constructivist approach by means of many tools. In accordance with his views, the author highly advocates promoting the use of some technological tools in learning oral skills through a social constructivist perspective. Students can use the internet's websites and social networks not only as a means of exposure but also as a means of language use and practice via web searching and chatting with native-speakers. Videoconferencing, suggested by Can, may also be used as a means of teaching in oral lectures (67). The advantage of this form of learning appears in getting wider audience and attention with less nervousness and greater motivation. Can further adds that videoconferencing enriches the classroom by different types of electronic communication which serve as valuable sources in learning real life language and the target culture (70).

6. Advantages and Limitations of the Social Constructivism

The constructivist theory of learning avoids direct instruction and favours, instead, active engagement of students in the learning process under the teacher's supervision (Wendypp). Nyaradzo Mvududu and Jennifer Thiel-Burgess consider that

one of the benefits of this method of learning is students' centerdness; they say, "a focus on student-centred learning may well be the most important contribution of constructivism" (116). This is quite valuable since learners can be more eager in a classroom-learning environment where collaboration and exchange of ideas as a team is a major feature. Social constructivism promotes communication and negotiation, which help students enormously to increase their awareness of the real-world interactions between individuals outside the classroom walls.

Patrick Gleeson states that students enjoy this approach because they learn better and faster when they are involved in learning projects than when solely through rote memorisation. Gleeson later adds that this method prepares students to be collaborative in their daily life.

One of the notable advantages of social constructivism that goes alongside with this paper aims is reducing if not diminishing students' feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence. This is clearly explained by the fact that social constructivism provides a democratic learning environment which upholds knowledge sharing through collaboration and develops cognitive skills by student-centred practices.

Social constructivism has been praised by many researchers and studies in the field of higher education. Nevertheless, like any learning theory, shortcomings are unavoidable. Thus, despite the previously stated educational advantages, there are some scholars who have voiced out their oppositions to constructivism such as (Masrom and Syahrani 24) who claim that constructivism is not practical enough since there are students who can learn faster than others with lower prior knowledge. They also refer to a category of students who are teacher dependent, i.e. those who after being overexposed to the traditional method of learning and cannot swap to the new one that encourages independent learning and less reliance and dependency on teachers and on specific materials.

Palmer, an educational psychologist, draws attention to the fact that in order to challenge students and get their focus, teachers may use inappropriate materials which transform the classroom setting into an entertaining environment. This can be negatively perceived since students learning in this kind of setting will not be able to face rigorous lecture-based teaching methods (qtd. in Gleeson).

In opposition to the constructivist approach, (Wendypp) argues “the biggest disadvantage is its lack of structure. Some students require highly structured environment in order to be able to excel”. Another drawback of social constructivism is its self-evaluation and assessment, which may lead students to misevaluate themselves since there is no precise standards of grading like in the classical methods (Wendypp).

Conclusion

The technological swift advance and globalization have increased demand of learning English as a foreign language and as a means of communication more than ever before. Lecturers and syllabi designers have had to invent new methods of teaching that respond to the learners’ needs in such an environment. The speaking skill has resisted many innovations. Teaching and learning it are not without many problems and require taking many challenges for both teachers and learners. Two major problems are anxiety and lack of confidence. They constitute a great challenge to teachers and learners. This paper suggests the implementation of the social constructivist approach based on Vygotsky’s theories in teaching the oral skill to first year BA students of English. This approach cannot be but reliable because teachers act as guides and students take an active participation in the learning course through an interactional process and inside an appropriate learning classroom with a comfortable and collaborative environment and a friendly atmosphere; students’ communicative skills will immensely improve, and their feelings of anxiety and lack of confidence will truly diminish by group works and discussions, which mainly encourage solidarity and support among students rather than selfishness and egocentricity. In the social constructivist approach, learners construct their knowledge and enhance their socio-cultural backgrounds on their own with just the teacher’s remote guidance.

All in all, learning the speaking skill should be students-centred using a social constructivist method, which triggers students’ attention and encourages cooperative learning. Nonetheless, it cannot be used as an absolute learning system since it has its own weaknesses. Therefore, associating this approach with some other approaches

that are student-centered will result in an eclectic one from which the students will benefit more in their endeavour to master the oral skill.

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