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Learner Autonomy in Constructivist Classroom while Teaching English Grammar to ESL Students at Secondary Level- Limitations and Remedial Measures

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Abstract

Constructivist teaching is based on the belief that learning occurs when learners are actively involved in a process of meaning and knowledge construction as opposed to passively receiving information. Learners are the makers of meaning and knowledge. Learner autonomy is an important principle of a constructivist classroom. According to Henry Holec, "Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions." Language, as opposed to other disciplines of knowledge, is more acquired than learned. Constructivism in language learning functions as a key element in aiding students, especially second language students, in acquiring language skills in the most natural manner. This paper titled "Learner Autonomy in Constructivist Classroom while Teaching English Grammar to ESL Students at Secondary Level- Limitations and Remedial Measures" probes into the various facets of teaching English grammar in a constructivist classroom at secondary

level, its limitations and measures for improvement.

Keywords: English-grammar-constructivism-learner autonomy-secondary education-ESL-language teaching.

According to Audrey Gray (1997), constructivism is a view of learning based on the belief that knowledge isn't a thing that can be simply given by the teacher at the front of the room to students in their desks. Rather, knowledge is constructed by learners through an active mental process of development. Learners are the builders and creators of meaning and knowledge. So, a constructivist classroom should be learner-centered, and the teacher provides students with experiences that allow them to hypothesize, predict, manipulate objects, pose questions, research, investigate, imagine and invent. The teacher's role is to facilitate this process.

Secondary students are adolescents and they like to mingle in social groups, especially peer groups while learning. This

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feature of adolescents implies that social constructivism in language learning will help students to acquire adequate language skills. ESL students around the world have certain features. Students of commonwealth nations tend to develop a sense of reverence towards English language and its users as an aftermath of British colonialism. On the other hand, students of some other nations like France and Germany do not have that sort of awe and respect towards the language. Thus, attitude towards the language across the world is different. Teaching grammar in a constructivist classroom often takes in inductive approach in learning grammar. Here, the students construct rules of grammar from specific circumstances in ongoing usage of language in different classroom contexts.

There are some disadvantages to constructivist teaching. The training necessary for constructive teaching is extensive and often requires costly long-term professional development. This may be unreasonable for school budgets as well as disruptive to the students' learning. With an average number of students in one classroom, teachers are unable to customize the curriculum to each student, as their prior knowledge will vary. The constructivist curriculum also eliminates standardized testing and grades. This eliminates grade-centered goals and rewards as well as the comparison of

student's statewide or district-specific progress.

One of the major drawbacks of constructivist approach is that without the knowledge of the basic tenants of language, students are made to use it. Especially, when it comes to grammar, students tend to follow false abstractions based on classroom experiences. It is impossible for the teacher to monitor all uses and exchanges of language in a constructivist classroom. To overcome the limitations in learner autonomy while teaching grammar, the teacher can adopt a few strategies.

The raising of learner autonomy is not always pure joy and fun. It involves risks. Some conflicts among the students or between you and the students may –and almost inevitably will- develop. As Dam (1995) summarizes the problems you may encounter:

It might be difficult to bring learners to make decisions and accept responsibility for these decisions. And it might not be easy to respect the students' "right to make" wrong decisions. You may not find enough ready-made activities in the course book that are suitable for autonomous learning and have to spend some time designing new ones... It may be and in fact it is scary to relinquish the traditional means of classroom control and rely on new or modified methods of discipline. In general,

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it might be difficult for you to “let go” and trust the pupils’ ability to take hold”. On the other hand, required course content and externally applied assessments are realities that teachers must accommodate. Thus it is very likely that sometimes we may panic and believe everything was a mistake. We might feel angry and blame the students for not appreciating the wonderful opportunity they have been offered. As a result, we might go back to traditional teacher-centered classroom to get control. However, if we always bear in mind that “learning begins with the learner”, we may calm down and do our job more patiently and in the end more effectively.

Teachers should try to bring in an effective blend of constructivism and instructive in the classroom. Autonomy doesn't mean anarchy, especially when it comes to second language learners. Care should be taken to cater for individual specific needs in language learning. Grouping of students based on effectiveness of exchanges should be judiciously done. Remediation for drawbacks and correction of mistakes should be time bound and ample. Subtle reinforcement strategies can

also be used to ensure repetition of correct outputs. Constructivism in classroom isn't about the learner being the teacher, it's about teachers catalyzing the natural language learning process that can happen in a perpetual social gathering called 'classroom'.

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