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Students' opinions of foreign language education on constructivist learning environment

Arif Sariçoban ^{a 1}

^a*Department of Foreign Language Education, Hacettepe University, Ankara, Turkey*

Abstract

Constructivism is a theory or an approach in educational studies and said to shed light on the assertion that individuals can create and construct meaning of the world around them. It consists of some learning environments such as learning a. world, b. science, c. how to express thoughts, d. how to learn, and 5. how to communicate, which this study especially focuses on. To conduct the study, 72 language group students at tertiary level participated, 58 of whom study in the English Language and Literature department, 6 of whom are in the Linguistics department, and the rest 6 are in the English Language and Literature department. The findings indicated that there is almost no correlation between constructivist learning environment and foreign language (FL) achievement. However, only a correlation was observed between learning how to learn and FL achievement. At the end of the study some recommendations are made for foreign language teachers.

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1. Introduction

Constructivism is believed to take its place among the most recent approaches to foreign language teaching. It is the construction, formation, interpretation and improvement of the knowledge. In this approach, other than the well-known classical ones, it puts heavy stress on open teaching; that is, it is not a teacher-centered classical method that can be called as closed-teaching. On the contrary, in this approach the teacher transfers the knowledge to the learners or the learners get the knowledge through books or other related sources. However, it is not the case that the perception of the knowledge is not synonymous with the construction of the knowledge. When the learner faces a new bunch of input, s/he uses previous knowledge to define and explain the world s/he lives in, or forms new rules to explain perceived knowledge (Brooks & Brooks, 1993:9). In other words, constructivism is to forge a strong link between the environment and human brain, which is the main focus of this study.

As to the basic features of constructivism, it helps (a) to search, interpret and analyze the knowledge, (b) to improve the process of knowledge and thinking, and (c) to combine previous experiences with the new ones (Perkins, 1999). Perkins states that instead of just reading and listening, the learners take an active role in learning environment by discussing, defending opinions, hypothesizing, inquiring and sharing opinions (Open-teaching/learner-centered). In this approach the interaction among learners is of great importance. The learners do not accept the knowledge as it is, and they create or discover it on their own (Perkins, 1999).

It is the most striking feature that the constructivist learning and teaching environment helps learners how to learn and make the learning process meaningful for them. The ultimate purpose of this environment is to create such a model that knows how and where to use the knowledge with the help of effective learning strategies that s/he produce and that makes use of previous experiences to produce new forms of knowledge (Abbott, 1999: 68). The main focus of this study is, therefore, to enlighten the possible role of constructivist learning and teaching environment which includes learning (a) the world in which s/he lives, (b) the science, (c) how to define thoughts, (d) how to learn and (e) how to communicate

Corresponding Author: Arif SARIÇOBAN name. Tel.: +9-0312 297 8575
E-mail address: arifs@hacettepe.edu.tr

2. Method

2.1. The participants

In order to reach the ultimate purpose of this study a total of 72 students, 28 of whom are males and the rest 44 are females, have been chosen randomly from the departments of English Language Teaching (ELT) (n=58), Linguistics (n=6), English Language and Literature (ELL) (n=8) that enrolled in ELT certificate program at Hacettepe University during 2011-2012 Academic Year. Of these participants, 6 are 1st year, 6 are 2nd year, 39 are 3rd year, and 21 are 4th year students. They range in age 20-24 and over. As to their GPAs, 5 are between 3,50-4,00, 17 are between 3,00-3,49, 25 are 2,50-2,99, 17 are 2,00-2,49, and the rest 8 are between 1,99 and below.

2.2. The instrument

The present study seeks to examine the ELE students' overall opinions on constructivist learning environment in their undergraduate studies. To search this issue, the questionnaire developed by Taylor et. Al (1997), the Turkish version of which has been adapted from Aydın et.al. (2012), with a 5-point Likert type (1:Never, 2:Rarely, 3:Sometimes, 4:Often, and 5:Always) has been administered to the above mentioned participants. It consists of two sections. Section A asks the demographic information of these participants. Section B includes 5 subcomponents related to constructivist learning environment. These are learning the world in which s/he lives, the science, how to define thoughts, how to learn and how to communicate with others. As to the reliability of the questionnaire for this study it is $r=,784$ which indicates that this questionnaire has a high reliability level and is applicable.

2.2. Research Questions

In order to see if any difference exists among English language education (ELE) students' opinions on constructivist learning environment, the following research questions have been formulated.

1. Do ELE students differ in their opinions on constructivist learning environment?
2. Is there any significant difference among English language education (ELE) students' opinions on constructivist learning environment features such as
 - a. Learn the world in which s/he lives,
 - b. Learn the science,
 - c. Learn how to define thoughts,
 - d. Learn how to learn and
 - e. Learn how to communicate?

2. Data analysis and discussion

The aim of this research is to investigate the relationship between Constructivist Learning Environment and Foreign Language Education Achievement. In this respect, 5 types of learning faculties of constructivist learning environments such as:

- a. Learn the world in which s/he lives,
- b. Learn the science,
- c. Learn how to define thoughts,
- d. Learn how to learn and
- e. Learn how to communicate

are investigated and which one of them is closely related with foreign language education achievement is tried to be defined. To serve this purpose, SPSS 20.0 has been run for data analysis.

Do ELE students differ in their opinions on constructivist learning environment?

Is there any significant difference among English language education (ELE) students' opinions on constructivist learning environment features such as (a)learn the world in which s/he lives, (b) learn the science, (c)learn how to define thoughts, (d)learn how to learn and (e)learn how to communicate?

A careful analysis of Table1 indicates that ELE students have favorable attitudes towards constructivist learning environment (m=3,37). Therefore, the researcher has only focused the students' overall opinions that are above this value. Therefore, it can be speculated that the participants of this study thinks that learning how to communicate with others (m=3,75), learning science (m=3,72), and learning thoughts (m=3,46) are among the features that provide an effective learning environment for learners.

A deeper look at the table implies that students are affected by values of science (m=3,93), the change of science by time (m=3,73), the modern science (m=3,72), the role of science to produce theories (m=3,66), science used by people from different cultures (m=3,55). Another striking result deals with learning thoughts. The participants of this study prefer to ask their teachers why they should learn the specific topic under discussion (m=3,79) and question the teaching methods utilized by their teachers (m=3,48). Next issue is about learning how to communicate. The participants like to share what they have grasped about the subject matter with their classmates (m=4,36), ask their friends to express their opinions the topics they discuss (m=3,73), require

their friends to ask them to express their own opinions on the issue (m=3,58), negotiate with their friends to solve problems (m=3,56), require their friends to ask them to express their own thoughts on any topic (m=3,51). Lastly, with special reference to learning about the world they like to learn interesting things that happen outside the school walls (the outside world) (m=3,51).

Table 1. Descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
A1:learn outside world	72	1,00	5,00	3,0556	1,09915
A2:new learning starts outside the school	72	1,00	5,00	3,2639	,93437
A3:science as a part of life	72	1,00	5,00	3,2222	1,05112
A4:understanding the world outside	72	1,00	5,00	3,3472	,98094
A5:learn interesting things for outside world	72	1,00	5,00	3,5139	1,06140
B1:science changes by time	72	1,00	5,00	3,7361	,97855
B2:science affected by the values and opinions of humans	72	1,00	5,00	3,9306	,93938
B3:learn different sciences used by other cultures	72	1,00	5,00	3,5556	1,08626
B4:modern science different from the past	72	1,00	5,00	3,7222	1,01012
B5:the role of science to produce theories	72	1,00	5,00	3,6667	,99293
To ask my teacher	72	1,00	44,00	3,7917	4,97582
C1:why I should learn this	72	1,00	5,00	3,4861	1,18670
C2:about the teaching methods	72	1,00	5,00	3,2917	1,18009
C3:complain about confusing learning activities	72	1,00	5,00	3,2917	1,11882
C4:complain the things that hinder my learning	72	1,00	5,00	2,6667	1,15063
D1:what I should learn	72	1,00	5,00	2,8611	1,11716
D2:how I can learn better	72	1,00	5,00	2,9306	1,10475
D3:useful activities	72	1,00	5,00	2,5139	1,00692
D4:how much time for learning activities	72	1,00	5,00	2,6111	1,08193
D5:activities I should do	72	1,00	5,00	3,1806	4,89704
D6:evaluate learning/progress	72	1,00	5,00	3,5694	1,16070
E1:negotiate with my friends on how to solve problems	72	1,00	43,00	4,3611	4,72722
E2:share my understandings with friends	72	1,00	5,00	3,7361	1,08761
E3:ask my friends to express their opinions	72	1,00	5,00	3,5139	1,11321
E4:my friends ask me to express my thoughts	72	1,00	5,00	3,5833	1,13522
E5:my friends express their ideas to me	72	1,00	4,60	3,2806	,73593
A. Learn world	72	1,00	5,00	3,7222	,79048
B. Learn science	72	1,00	13,25	3,4653	1,54299
C. Learn thoughts	72	1,00	9,83	2,7940	1,23761
D. Learn how to learn	72	1,00	11,40	3,7528	1,33870
E. Learn how to communicate	72	1,00	11,40	3,7528	1,33870
overall	72	1,16	6,64	3,3761	,78927
Valid N (Listwise)	72				

In order to see if any difference exists among students' opinions on constructivist learning environment, One-way Anova was run. It has been noted that the only difference is seen among ELE students' opinions on *learn how to learn* (sig.,008).

At the end of the study, it is seen that only learning how to learn of constructivist learning environments has a meaningful significance on foreign language education achievement (Sig. .008).

The students have created the impression of a questioning generation by stating that they can question the teaching methods in use and ask for more explanation on the things they couldn't understand. The fact that learning is not confined to school but also takes place outside the school has been revealed, which partly constitutes lifelong learning.

4. Conclusion

Considering these results we, as foreign language teachers, should instill the followings into our students and raise them in accordance with the needs of our country. They should learn how to learn. Learning is not confined to school and does not take place within boundaries. It begins from birth and takes place throughout life. For lifelong learning to be meaningful, they need to communicate and share their ideas with others in a desired way since learning is the only way for one to improve himself.

The most interesting result of this study is the fact that the means of learning how to learn are the lowest ones among other constructivist learning settings. However, the fact that the means gathered in sub-dimensions of these settings are above 2,5 shows that the students are sensitive to issues such as planning to learn how to learn, time allocated for each topic to be covered, and evaluation of their learning.

Last but not the least, it can be concluded that ELE students benefit from constructivist learning environment. Therefore, foreign language education policy makers, educators, teacher trainers, teachers, and other parties should consider relevant teaching methods, techniques, and design activities for their students at this level.

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