

## Social Constructivism Theory in a Sociolinguistic Classroom



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**ABSTRACT:** This paper aims to examine the efficacious of using social constructivism in teaching sociolinguistics. The students of a bachelor's degree in a department of English language and linguistics used to suffer in doing sociolinguistic projects and some of them failed in doing so although they obtained good marks in the written exams. This noteworthy dilemma led the researcher to conduct an action research as an attempt to discover the causes of this problem and to propose solutions. This action research took place in a sociolinguistic classroom for a one academic semester. The researcher decided to modify her teaching method by applying social constructivism theory which is embodied in student-centered method. Furthermore, the instructional scaffolding was used in the classroom to facilitate the knowledge flow and the students learning. The data was collected from the students' performance in three related sociolinguistic tasks and to test the progress in the students' cognitive and linguistic skills another data was collected from the course final project. The data revealed that students are struggling with the high level of cognitive abilities such as, applying, analyzing, justifying and thinking critically. Furthermore, students also lack some crucial linguistic and research skills such as, do phonetic transcription correctly, explain the findings based on the sociolinguistic theories and principals, highlight the importance of their work, steer clear of pilgrims and avoid redundancy in writing. The results of the action research showed that implementing social constructivism theory, which is based on the concept of learning by doing, in sociolinguistic classroom helped the students to absorb and digest the knowledge simultaneously with developing their cognitive skills.

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### INTRODUCTION

There is nothing fret the teachers as the student's failure in accomplishing a course project. This problem becomes more complicated when the students achieve good results in the written exams but wrestle in applying their knowledge in a particular project; a project that has a nature of practicality where the students need to use advanced skills. The researcher, who is a university teacher, finds that her students in sociolinguistic course are doing well in the written exams but can't implement the final project successfully. This dilemma urges the researcher to investigate the reasons and to unearth affective solution; she relies on action research to solve this problem. Milles (2007) states that action research gives teacher researchers different and new knowledge about how to develop teaching practice and solve significant problems in classroom. The researcher starts with applying social constructivism theory in her teaching which is a theory that emphasizes the concept of learning by doing. To be able to utilize the knowledge in real life, students need to acquire this knowledge in an educational collaborative environment. In this environment students participate and contribute to the learning process, rather than being passive learners. Kim (2006) points out that learning in constructivism framework contributes to intellectual, social and psychological development of learners to convey it in different authentic contexts. The findings of the current research reveal that students who participate and engage in learning, build up high level of cognitive skills such as, applying, analyzing, justifying and solving problems. The results also show that students in the current research became able to confidently interact and communicate with other in a real-life context. The students also showed a good progress in their performance which was reflected in their marks.

### SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM AND EDUCATION

The main concept of social constructivism is to engage students in a real social context to enhance their learning. Vygotsky (mentioned in Kurt, 2020) believes that learning cannot take place outside a meaningful context, there is an interwoven relationship between human cognitive aspects and social context. Dewey is an educator, philosopher and social reformer whose research was blended with Vygotsky's one to conclude that students learn by doing rather than by observing which something that Dewey call progressive teaching. Dewey (1938) describes this version of teaching as "a product of discontent with traditional education" Therefore, the role of teachers in this theory is facilitator, therefore, students need to do self-learning under their teachers' supervision.

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In the field of education, teachers who implement social constructivism theory in their teaching tend to use student-centered or task-based approach of teaching and accordingly they plan their lessons and design the course activities. So, rather than exposing the students to a traditional lecture, teachers have to engaging their students in a real and related social context which in turns help them to stay active, to be motivated to learn, to absorb and digest the content and then to apply what they have learned to solve every-day problems.

There are various benefits of applying social constructivism in the field of education. In general, this approach helps students to develop their critical thinking skills, their communication skills, their problem-solving abilities and it provides them with a lifelong learning. Larson (2001) stated that using student-centered approach in the classroom improve students' social skills as they have more opportunities to practice what they have learned in an authentic social context.

It is important to mention here that using social constructivism as a teaching framework would face some challenges. Some teachers are not willing to use student-based or task-based approach because they will be stripped of the authority that they used to have in the traditional classrooms, students will practice the freedom to discuss, to engage to contribute and to seek for other sources of knowledge. Thamraksa (2003) pointed that in some cases teachers do not welcome this approach because they lack knowledge and skills to incorporate it in the classroom. On the other hand, there are challenges related to students' attitude and compatibility with any change. In general, students prefer to stay in their comfort zone and this modifying in teaching method requires them to work harder and to become responsible of constructing their knowledge. They also have to participate actively in the learning process which is not always a welcomed idea specially by those shy students.

### **WHY USING SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIVISM TO TEACH SOCIOLINGUISTICS?**

Sociolinguistics is a distinct linguistic branch. It is lively and so connected to different aspects of peoples' lives. Sociolinguistics is the science that uncover the influences of social, political, financial and religious...etc contexts on the language and dialect use. In sociolinguistic classes, students discover two basic situations among many others: a) some people are not aware of the dynamism of language albeit they are the main contributors to language activity, change and progress; b) some others feel and notice this characteristic in the language, but they cannot explain it. Hence, getting involved in learning sociolinguistics theories, concepts and principals help the students to comprehend the linguistic situation around them. However, learning these theories, concepts and principals in a traditional class does not mean that students become able to understand, analyze and apply their input in an authentic context. Students need to practice.

Since social constructivism theory embraces the idea of learning by doing, this would be an affective framework for preparing and designing sociolinguistics lessons which may guarantee the deepest understanding of the course.

### **THE RESEARCH CONTEXT**

This research was undertaken in one of the Saudi universities in an English language and linguistics department, particularly in a sociolinguistic classroom. The students were 37 females, doing bachelor's degree, and sociolinguistics was one of the core courses in the department's program. Students take this course in the last semester of the program which means that they have reached a good level of linguistic competence and cognitive skills. However, they still need to improve these skills and to move from the stage of memorizing, understanding and applying to a higher stage where they can analyze, interpret and justify (Bloom, 1956).

### **THE PROBLEM**

Despite of the students' good results in the exams (which show a good level of comprehension), but most of them failed in doing sociolinguistic projects and small research. This is an indication that students lack the deep understanding which is vital to do the final project successfully.

The researcher decided to adopt the social constructivism theory to modify their teaching method. This theory pushes the teacher to engage the students in the learning process, give them the opportunities to practice what they have learned and to discuss thoughts and ideas. By doing so, students will be able to build a deep understanding of the course and they will be able to reach a good level of constructing sociolinguistic knowledge and skills which underpin their final project.

### **ACTION RESEARCH**

To find a solution for this problem, the researcher conducted an action research. The main goal of the research is to help the students to build up deep understanding for the course through the whole semester. The researcher relied on the instructional scaffolding (Hogan & Pressley 1997) approach in which they provided the students with the needed support through various classroom activities until they mastered the content and gained the high cognitive skills, so they became able to do the final project without any help. By the end, the researcher role was just facilitator and supervisor.

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### THE PROCEDURE

The students in the classroom were characterized by diversity on the level of dialect and culture. This feature makes this sociolinguistic class an ideal and authentic context in which students can be the center of learning and construct the knowledge in their own way. Thamraksa (2003) identifies a crucial characteristic of student-centered classroom “They have opportunities and increased responsibilities to identify and self-direct their own learning needs, locate learning resources, and construct their own knowledge based on those needs”

In the first small task, the researcher divided the students into groups, four in each, and gave them different sociolinguistic tasks (mainly related to dialect change and variation). The researcher benefited from the students’ linguistic and cultural diversity and asked each group to notice and write down, phonetically, the difference between them in articulating specific sounds. The first group worked on the diphthong (aw), the second group worked on the diphthong (ay), the third group noticed the interdental (θ) and the fourth group checked the sound (ð).

The groups should accomplish three related tasks during the first two months of the semester. The first task was to notice the variation in the sounds, to transcript the varieties and then to do basic percentage. The main goal of the first task was to trigger the discussion between students, stimulate their linguistic sense and to practice their linguistic knowledge. The second task was to write a summary of the history of the examined sounds (students should utilize their research knowledge and skills and use original sources), and investigate the changes occurred in the sounds. The aim of this task was to encourage collaborative work among students, continue the discussion and sharing ideas and thoughts. The third task was about explaining and justifying what they have discovered which should be supported by sociolinguistic theories and principals. The results also should be linked to a social factor which is tribal and non-tribal background. This task aimed to push the students to a higher cognitive skill which are interpreting and justifying.

In the three tasks, the researcher’s role was guiding and supervising. The researcher used to meet the students twice a week in the classroom. In the first class, she delivered the knowledge which is supported with local and international examples. Then she dedicated the rest of the of the class to the students’ discussion with her and their colleagues. After that, students worked on linking this new information to their task. In the next class, the students worked together to build the argument and discuss the ideas. Between theses class, students were able to meet the researcher in the office hours for consultation. The researcher also was ready to lend them books and articles if they could not find what they need in the library. During classes, the researcher used to praise and encourage the students to show them that they are in the right track. In contrary, if they were struggling with a specific point, the researcher helps them with suggestions and ideas.

These three tasks were practical training for the students to be ready for the final project. The project was a duplicate of the previous tasks but with a different linguistic feature and in a bigger social context (outside university campus). The researcher gave the students a list of some linguistic features and asked them to choose. These slight changes empowered the students, made them responsible of their choice, broadened their thoughts, increased their level of discussion and communication, and put them in a challenge to solve different problems in a bigger community. Students in the final project, found themselves in need to think of wider social factors such as gender, education and neighborhood which are something that they did not consider in the three tasks. Students also needed to read more to understand the linguistic feature that they chose. The researcher continued giving guide, support and lending books when they need. Weimer (2002) describes the change of the teacher’s role in this classroom as moving from the “sage on the stage” to the “guide on the side”.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results interestingly showed a good progress in both students’ cognitive skills and their level of knowledge. The students proved that over time and through learning by doing, they built a good stage of critical thinking. This gradual progress was so obvious in their performance of the three tasks and final project. For instance, in the first and second task students were continuously comparing between the sounds they heard and the classical Arabic sounds. This was a mistake that researcher every time drew the students’ attention to (the sound variation is between local dialects despite of their classical Arabic variant). Students at this stage needed to absorb an important sociolinguistic concept that is, there are no right or wrong sounds; simply they are just variants that occurred in our dialects because of different linguistic and social reasons. One of the students who is coming from tribal background said, ‘it took me time to understand that my dialect is not the correct or the best one’.

Another important problem is related to the research skills. Students were not aware of the seriousness of plagiarism, they thought that paraphrasing is enough to not cite the main author(s). These tasks were good chance to assure the correct way of citation and paraphrasing. Some students admitted that they were not aware of the criticality of citation. One of the excellent students mentioned in one of the classes “I used to think that paraphrasing is enough to claim that these are my words” (translated by the researcher).

In the third task, students started to discuss and explain the results by linking them with the social factor, tribal and non-tribal background, and draw a clear picture of the relationship between the usage of these linguistic features and the social factor.

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Students went back to the findings of the previous related studies, and based on the researcher's instructions they had to do the following:

The instruction	The student's performance	The researcher's action
a- Check the similarities and differences between their current findings and other studies' findings.	They did very well, however, they gave exaggerated comments e.g.: 'the sound (θ) occur in most of Saudi dialects which proves that it is the correct sound'	The researcher ensured that mentioning the salient points does not mean exaggeration.
b- Explore how other researchers explain their results based on sociolinguistic theories and principals	Students struggled with this point and found it difficult	To help the students to overcome this problem, the researcher provided them with some examples with a thorough explanation.
c- Discover the best way to highlight the importance of their findings and explain why people should care about their work.	Students said 'they understand how to do it, but they do not know how to apply it'	To help students to overcome this problem, the researcher wrote an imaginary result on the board and showed the students how to discuss it and how to highlight the importance and significance of it.

The student's marks in the three tasks varied from B to D and the main problems were about exaggeration and redundancy. They also have problems with the phonetic transcription, they frequently committed mistakes which is something I may ascribed it to the lack of the practice. Before, starting with the final project, the researcher dedicated two classes to help the students to pinpoint and identify their mistakes and do more phonetic transcription exercises.

Students started their final project with passion; however, the researcher drew their attention to some challenges that they may face in the community such as: refusing to participate and altering speaking style (observer paradox). The researcher provided the students with possible solutions based on well-known studies and theories. They also have the opportunity to visit the researcher in the office-hours for consultation.

The students' performance was much better in the final project. At this point, students showed a good progress in their linguistic skills which was noticeable in the phonetic transcription skills and in avoiding non-academic words such as *super*, *actually*, *sort of* and *pull off*. The progress was also clear in their ability to highlight the significance of their findings by focusing on what support their argument and on what aligned with the main sociolinguistic theories. In addition to that, students were good in communicating with people from different ages (the researcher discover that during office-hours discussion); students were excited to talk about their experiences specially with old people. Interestingly, students pointed that they loved this experience, they felt it and they were enthusiastically collecting the data. Several students gave positive comments about the whole process of their work saying: "I was so happy to meet people and listen carefully to their different dialects"; "I enjoyed collecting the data, I felt that I am a real sociolinguist"; "I can't believe how much I have gained from this experience; I lived and practiced all what I had in the classroom, honestly, I can say, now and just now, I really learned". Some others commented in general on the course by saying:

*"this course enriches our knowledge and improves our skills, now we are good at noticing, analyzing and interpreting the dialects spoken by people around us. In fact, we are obsessed by evaluating others' dialect"*

In general, the students' marks were higher than their marks in the previous three tasks and none of them failed in doing the final project.

NO. of students	Their grade
3	A+
1	A
5	B+
9	B
9	C+
6	C
4	D+

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### CHALLENGES AND SUGGESTIONS

The researchers faced some challenges during this experience; for instance, the number of students in the class was 37 which made the process of checking each student's progress extremely demanding. Another crucial challenge is the weakness in the students cognitive and linguistic skills. This is an accumulative result of the continues use of traditional teaching; the students were not participating in the process of teaching and learning, in fact, they were spoon-fed. This made the implication of social constructivism approach in the class difficult for both teacher and students. Moreover, the nature of the course, sociolinguistics, is demanding; the students suddenly found that they have to remember and apply what they have learned in previous courses such as, phonetics, phonology, syntax, morphology and academic research methods.

It is important to mention that this action research is just a point of departure. Some teachers in the department should re-consider their teaching style; the traditional teaching, teacher-centered method, is not efficacious anymore. It will be useful if the department administration encourages such research to keep improving teaching and learning methods and techniques which in turns will be reflected on the department's outcomes. Another suggestion that is worth to mention here is related to the department policy; the researcher proposes that department policy needs to have a framework for teaching process that includes a planned integration between teachers, especially those who teach courses and their pre-requests. Those teachers need to meet and work together to put intertwined goals, to design interlinked activities and to agree with more effective methods of teaching. This hard work should create independent learners who are responsible for their learning. Wright (2011) suggests that "However, the onus is on the faculty to redesign and conduct the course in a way that requires students to hold up their end of the educational contract.

### CONCLUSION

Teachers' job is not just a matter of delivering information, in fact, teaching is about preparing independent and long-life learners. The researcher, who is a university teacher, recognized a major problem in her sociolinguistic class in which students are able to attain good marks in the written exams but they struggle with the practical or empirical project. This problem propelled the researcher to modify her teaching method by implementing social constructivism theory in planning the lessons and designing the activities. The researcher also used the instructional scaffolding to help students in their leaning process. An action research has been conducted to for a whole academic year to in a sociolinguistic classroom with 37 female students. The data showed that students have problems in utilizing what they learned in an authentic context. However, applying social constructivism theory, which is represented in the student-centered method, revealed that students were able to build up their high cognitive skills and improve their linguistic abilities when they were engaged in the learning process. The researcher arises two suggestions which are: a) To solve education problems, teachers need to be encouraged to conduct action research; b) To help the students to be independent and self-learners, the department policy should write a teaching framework that encompasses integration between teachers to plan the courses and design the activities in a way that guarantee a long-life learning.

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