

PRACTICE OF CONSTRUCTIVISM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AMONG HIGHER SECONDARY SCHOOL TEACHERS OF KERALA STATE: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY

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Abstract

Social constructivism is the present chief curriculum foundation and transaction approach in the schools of Kerala. It is introduced from 2007 along with the Kerala Curriculum Frame Work. Strategies like cooperative learning, collaborative learning, grouping, peer tutoring and learners' projects are substituted to the teacher centred lecturing. Though the implementation of the constructivist approach changed many aspects of education, teachers are still in complex situations and tended to follow the established teacher centred approaches. This paper is an outcome of the research pursued to find out the teachers' perceptions on the practice of constructivist approaches in the school classrooms of Kerala. Researchers analysed studies on the field and the experiences of teachers. Phenomenological analysis was adopted to explore in to the data resources. Study revealed that; (i) Classroom facilitation in constructivist paradigm is an area of difficulty for many teachers, even after ten plus years of its implementation, (ii) Teachers appear to be unsteady about the normal fundamentals of Constructivism and (iii) Lack of proper assignation of teachers during the transformation from behaviourism to constructivism and the enrooted conviction in behaviouristic classrooms have affected the implementation and practice of constructivism in Kerala.

Introduction

Following the National Curriculum Frame Work 2005 and Kerala Curriculum Frame Work 2007, Social constructivism has been adopted as the chief curriculum foundation and transaction approach for schools in Kerala from minus two to plus two programmes. Ever since, the State Department of Education has conducted training programmes and workshops to support teachers in assimilating the basic tenets of constructivism in a time bound manner. Even then it is not academically rigorous to claim that all teachers have comprehended the nuanced sense on constructivist philosophy and praxis. Researchers in the scenario of English Language Teaching (ELT) have identified a serious shift in the pedagogic perspectives and approaches of teachers in Kerala.

Adoption of constructivist approach for the teaching-learning processes made deep-seated changes in the pedagogic practices in Kerala. Teacher role has changed to facilitator in classrooms. Learning processes become student centred. Strategies like cooperative learning, collaborative learning, grouping, peer tutoring and learners' projects are substituted to the teacher centred lecturing. Innovative evaluation strategies also introduced in to the scenario. Though the practices of education in schools have changed by the

intruding of constructivism, changes have not been accommodated properly by teachers. The assessment practices are still following the old teacher centred approaches. This paper is aimed to juris prudence the practices of constructivism in the schools of Kerala, with particular importance to English Language Teaching.

Significance of Analysing the Teacher Perceptions on Constructivism

Teacher perception is highly significant in implementing any programmes in schools. Success of any new practices are depending up on the awareness, understanding, perception and attitude of teachers, who are the major stakeholders of educational programmes. The general opinion in the education scenario is that the constructivist practices in Kerala are theoretically appropriate but practically improper. Teaching community are seemed to be sceptic in the organisation and practice of constructivist methods. Teachers of schools pursue the principles in deviated ways. It will be beneficial if researchers can come out with exact status of theoretical and practical orientation of the present practices of the approach in schools. The study is significant because it may propagate the new ideas for promotion of the method and also may reveal the existing status. The present study is designed up on this assumption.

Teachers are the visible link of any curriculum. The idealised vision document gets its real and tangible manifestation through the creative acts of teacher in the classrooms. In a constructivist class room, the role of a teacher is diverse and manifold. They include roles like facilitator, motivator, guide co-learner, democratic leader, reader, content creator, researcher and progressive assessor. Besides being a creative facilitator, he should also be passionate and vibrant both intellectually and emotionally. It is important investigate the perceptions of teachers on all these significant roles as a constructivist teacher.

Research Questions

Organization of this research was predated up on the following research questions

- What are the specific views of the researchers and teachers from Kerala on the presently practicing constructivist teaching approach?
- Do the English Language Teachers possess specific outlook on the constructivist method of teaching? The study also aimed to answer the inquiry that whether the teacher perceptions on the constructivist approach of teaching be assorted as supporting the presently practiced systems?

Objectives

The study aimed to survey the teacher perceptions on the constructivist approach of teaching learning processes in the schools of Kerala state. The objectives of the study include;

- To explore the perceptions of English Language Teachers of Kerala on constructivism-based teaching-learning process in schools
- To assort the research studies on constructivist practices in the schools of Kerala, with focus on assessment methods.

Method adopted for Pursuing the Investigations

In the light of the studies and authors' own personal experiences as teachers and as resource persons with the SCERT-Kerala, SIEMAT (State Institute of Educational Management and Training) and certain other agencies for various school educational programmes, they found the degree of assessment scholarship among teachers is specifically interesting. Expertise of teachers in non-invasive assessment is crucial in constructive paradigm, but the same ability is conspicuous in its absence. The teachers have different types of understanding and perceptions on constructivist approach and allied operations for teaching learning and evaluations. Hence this paper proposes to investigate the perception of Higher Secondary English teachers on constructivism with special reference to its assessment procedures. In order to measure the actual and experiential understanding of the assessment strategies; the researchers have employed phenomenological research method. Husserl (1937), the German thinker and phenomenologist. He was evolving a universal method to devoid of presuppositions focusing on the phenomena which is directly available in a field or context. His approach is neither deductive nor inductive, but intuitive. True to his vision Husserl has defined phenomenological research as the exploration of the essence of the lived experience using methods like interview and participant observation. Researchers in this mode remain faithful to the experience under study and support the participants to explore their experience without imposing his own biases. Data thus collected are interpreted for identifying the key themes in the end.

Constructivist Approach of Higher Secondary School Teachers of Kerala State: Brief Analysis

In order to find out the perceptions of teachers and educationists on the success of implementation of constructivist teaching in the school of Kerala, we were analysed certain studies, articles and field notes. Based on the analysed resources, we had reached on certain assertive facts. Implementation of constructivist approach in schools in teaching process was on apt time. However, the method didn't focus on its successful amplification. Awareness programmes on the newly introduced method was not up to the mark. As a result, most of the teachers remained in the formerly practicing behaviourist approach in the teaching sessions. The crux of analyses is given under.

Indulekha (2018) in her study on Constructivism in Secondary Schools of Kerala has enumerated the key shifts in English classrooms in terms of teaching and learning. Her study revealed that activity based, thinking oriented, learner friendly and collaborative class rooms are no longer fanciful theoretical constructs in schools of Kerala. But the vital transformation in pedagogic plan did not find reflected in other components of the curriculum. Indulekha has pointed the disturbing lack of engagement from the side of teachers during the transition from behaviourism to constructivism. She also explains to the unwillingness or disinterestedness among teachers of English to mediate between the much-hyped self-regulation and the understudied teacher domination in English classrooms.

Philip (2011) has highlighted his concerns in the article "Evaluation in Constructivist Class rooms". He says "the primary reason for this complication is that though the paradigm shift in the vision of learning, learning materials and the transaction process has been affected, a concomitant paradigm shift has not happened in the evaluation process." Teacher facilitation in constructivist classroom is so complex that often pedagogic obfuscation (complication) arises out of this. Philip zeroed in on the point that 'some teachers perceive facilitation as an excuse to be inactive and passive onlooker on what is happening in the classroom.' But according to constructivist practitioners, teacher facilitation is very demanding. Facilitation is essential in constructivist classroom than in regular teacher dominated classrooms. They know the value of long term and short-term planning of curriculum objectives, appropriate learning experiences, and corresponding non-invasive assessment procedures. Interestingly the research studies on teacher role in constructivist classrooms are not that optimistic.

Nair (2004) has written about dearth of involvement and commitment from the side of teachers. Involvement and commitment from the side of the large number of teachers of English, in her study on the Second Language Acquisition Program (SLAP) implemented in Kerala. Jonny (year) in his book "English Teaching: Constructivist paradigm" says about the comprehensive failure of teachers of English in Kerala to imbibe the spirit of constructivism in its true sense.

Krishnamurthy (1956), the leading ELT scholar in India, endorses this view when he says "For the true teacher, teaching is not a technique, but it is his way of life. Like a great artist, he would rather starve than give up his creative work." Constructivism, being a learner friendly perspective, the pedagogic thrust of this school of philosophy is very important. Teachers need to reflect on the pedagogic decisions taken at different points of time. His perspective on classroom activities must go beyond the traditional classroom learning tasks, incorporating students in pair and groups. Students must be able to perceive the personal, physical and social value of the given activities so as to ensure their fuller participation in the classroom activities. It is obvious that the behaviourist classroom does have serious limitations in supporting students in their learning and engaging their learning through innovative and non-invasive assessment protocols as is projected in the constructivist revisualisation.

Constructivism mandates teachers to have high voltage assessment scholarship to support children in their learning engagement. Jacob Tharu Committee (2010), appointed by the Government of Kerala to suggest the ways for reframing evaluation in school education in Kerala, has emphasised the responsibility of teachers to innovate assessment techniques and formats inside the classrooms. Constructivist teachers are expected to develop in students' attitude of accountability for their own learning through self, peer and impassive assessment strategies and devalue the role of teacher as the central agency of assessment in a phased manner. But how far this realisation has set in among teachers in Kerala is a big question. Teacher's role as a sensitive and progressive assessor in constructivist teaching is still an incomplete project, at least in Kerala.

Philip (2011) also shares the similar feeling when he says, "constructivist classroom is a carnival ground of activities, carefully planned, administered and monitored by the teacher facilitator. This multiple intelligence conscious and emotionally and cognitively challenging activities make the evaluation in constructivist class room varied, challenging, and complex and to some teachers even a complicated process.

Many studies have identified the factors negatively affecting the constructivist classrooms in Kerala. They include grossly linear learning materials and process monotony (Nair, 2004), lack of teacher investment (Study on SLAP), inadequate pre service training program and unmanageable student diversity (Indulekha 2018), teacher predilection for behaviourist tradition (Johne, 2020), has written about the "Cultural Shock" within Indian Classrooms, where the so called progressive, learner friendly and process oriented constructivist expectation stand in definite contrast with the traditional Indian family system where obedience and conformity with the system was celebrated at the cost of agency and criticality.

Disadvantageous Understanding by Teachers on Constructivism

Interestingly, contrary to the popular concerns about constructivism, our conversation with the teachers reveals a totally new pattern of concern. All the teachers who participated in the study irrespective of their age, experience, seniority and expertise and position have indicated alarming similarity in their ignorance about the key foundational principle of constructivism. They appeared to be stable about popular postulates of this progressive curriculum approach like process-oriented classroom, learner background and its importance in knowledge construction and scope for application. But the same teachers were found to be unsteady about the nuanced and less discussed constructional premises like student directed learning, self-regulation, probability of multiple voices in the classroom, equating the knowledge constructed with the epistemological structures. Still complex ideas in constructivism like metacognition, authentic learning tasks, focusing on real life complexity, and non-invasive assessment procedures were rarely if not entirely considered by the teachers.

Even the experienced teacher who had enough expertise as resource person with SCERT, Kerala too declared "I'm not constructivist alone" too was not an exception here. This disturbing lack of critical understanding of constructivist philosophical postulates is symptomatic of the inadequate pre-service and in-service teacher training program, disinclination of teachers towards researches, lack of opportunities for attending academic seminars and erudite lectures by ELT Scholars. Benton (1987) had written about American teachers in his book "What has happened to the Teachers" is equally valid about higher secondary teachers of English in Kerala too. "Most of the teachers are not very informed or conscious. They read very little; their favourite magazine is Readers Digest. Many of them read only about one book per year, of those who read more, most read light escape fiction."

Nair (2004) had hinted at the key limitation of Constructivist Curriculum implemented in Kerala in 2000 itself. In her study on the Second Language Acquisition

Programme, she pointed out the major issues like unnecessary linearity of the learning materials, especially in the presentation of linguistic structures, inability to redefine the structures in the discourse pedagogy and the failure to specify the precise strategy for error management. She also underscored the issue of process monotony for the students and teachers. Interestingly my study also emphasizes the concern raised by Nair (2004) in her studies.

Majority of teachers who participated in the study rarely explored creative learning strategies other than the popular group activities. At least a few teachers have failed in assimilating the pedagogic gravity of the term learning activity in its fullest complexity. Besides the diverse possibilities offered by activities within the classroom like individual, pair, half the class, whole class, were rarely tapped with the students. The creative and innovative possibilities in terms of pace, constitution, complexity was also under explored. Due to the simplistic comprehension of the term activities, diverse interaction possibilities like personal, interpersonal, textual and teacher level were not explored in its fullest sense.

The academic complication with activities by teacher of English is well explained by Johny (2020) in his new book on Constructivism. "I recite traditional agricultural songs to excite my students towards demanding lesson "When a sapling is planted, and act the fight between clouds and peaks of hills in the early morning when I implemented the poem "Sunrise on the Hills" by FW Longfellow." The dynamic female teacher of English of this class was also vocal about the use of silence, music, mimicry, and videos in her class to touch the emotional orbits of her students. This episode underscores what Indulekha (2018) said about the dynamic youngsters engaging more efficiently with the constructivist demands and pressures within the class room context. Constructivist experimentation in learner engagement is much debated these days.

Reyes and Vallone (2008) in their book 'Constructivist strategies for Teaching English Language Learners' have talked about forty language teaching strategies like modelling, contextualising, content-based learning. A few other out of the box strategies like music, silence, humour, community resources drama techniques, multidimensional assessment have also been suggested in this book. To extend the longevity of constructivist classroom and to address the issue of process monotony more interesting and engaging fun oriented activities need to be integrated along with the traditionally proved discussions and debates with special focus on the attitude and age and socio-economic background of the children.

Use of mother tongue in classrooms of English is a much-debated proposition. There are supporting and opposing arguments in this regard. But studies argue in favour of mother tongue abound in ELT circles and constructivists endorse this view without inhibitions. In a massive study incorporating two thousand Spanish students in five states, Ramivez, Yuen and Ramey (1991) found that late exit and developmental bilingualism proved superior to early exit, transitional bilingualism and English only immersion programs. Interestingly all the teachers who participated in this study were

unanimous in rejecting mother tongue during English lessons. Both the experienced and inexperienced teachers were confused about the immersion perspective of Direct method and the Communicative language teaching approaches and the meaningful use of mother tongue in constructivist English classrooms. "It is a real threat; besides it would encourage mother tongue in English class room", lamented a teacher. But another teacher who differed from the first view appeared to be a little more reflective about the issue and said, "Using modelling, contextualizing, content based etc

Excerpt on the Experiences

Language acquisition paradigm is believed to encapsulate the basic principles of constructivism in the context of language teaching. Consequently, the non-conscious language acquisition procedure was identified as a component for collecting the views of the teachers. All teachers maintained almost unanimous views in this regard reflecting a thinking posture on this account.

Excerpt on the Experiences- One

A newly appointed teacher reveals her excitement about the acquisition paradigm in the following words. "I bring newspaper reports of a mother killing her own son to escape with her lover to discuss the poem titled 'Any Woman' more contextual, meaningful and analytic." She also claimed to have arranged thinking space for children through debate and discussions about the thematic concerns of the poem. She also revealed her understanding of the language acquisition paradigm as arranging learner friendly space and materials for generating maximum English in classroom." I regularly use all social contexts to implement English elements meaningfully to my students.", responded another teacher indicating the scope of acquisition paradigm in English language teaching. Interestingly the teacher cum SCERT Resource Person was apprehensive about the sufficiency of time for constructing discourses within the allotted periods. He says, "we are not constructing discourses, we don't have enough time for it. We are just supplying discourses to the students." He also expressed his concern about the negatively inspired parents and fellow teachers sabotaging the beauty of the natural learning mode in these words. "He wastes precious time through lot of meaningless activities and equates acquisition mode as a mere waste of time and energy of students."

Excerpt on the Experiences - Two

Senior teachers in the study expressed their concern about the deteriorating standard of English Language in higher secondary classrooms while responding to the implementation of acquisition mode in classroom. "We need to teach the four basic skills to children as in other nations. They should be implemented surgically from early classes. Due to the non-cooperation of my students inside the classroom, I often end up with a fantastic explanation of the chapters to my students". However, she still leaves a scope for negotiation between the behaviourist and constructivist mode through the words, "I often give them chances to present their views in discussions and presentations.

In constructivist assessment context also, the teachers under the investigation, have generated very diverse, but not conflicting views. The much-hyped constructivist

pedagogic shift has not happened in the assessment regimes in the schools of Kerala despite finding a few irregular elements in this regard. The dynamic teacher who was diligent in her views about constructivism and its pedagogic ramifications had this to say about assessment, "The philosophy underlying continuous evaluation not exactly being clarified by experts. To be frank, I didn't see the source book prepared by the educational agencies on evaluation till date. I am slightly shaky about the key areas suggested for assessing higher secondary students in Kerala".

Excerpt on the Experiences: Three

Not surprisingly most of the teachers are not interested in doing any research in assessment procedure that are non-invasive and student friendly. No teacher was curious about any innovation in assessment other than implementing typical state mandated programs of evaluation. The less experienced teachers were found to be more inclined to do innovations in assessment "sometimes I intentionally tap the possibilities of sports and games for developing English Communicative skills among children. Besides students led projects and Inhouse magazines I also try for a balanced assessment diet for different segments of student community. Confusion regarding the objectives and methods of language teaching among teachers also contributed to their misconception about their perspectives on language assessment too. These teachers have also made a few pertinent proposals to bring more sanity in assessment decisions among teachers. The SCERT trained Resource Person was more eloquent about assessment reform, as he had the privilege to attend many seminars and workshops conducted by the state institute of education research and training. "The current stress on terminal examinations should be reduced. This 80/20 principle, that is 80 marks for external examination and 20 marks for internal assessment, is boring. Can we try for 60/40 or allocating thirty each in four language skills?" He also mooted, as in Europe, for A level and O level to cater to the students' diversity in English classrooms.

Excerpt on the Experiences: Four

The teacher turned Principal was concerned more about the quality and frequency of teacher training in continuous evaluation conducted by the SCERT. The same point was made in a different way by another teacher who said, "I didn't receive any form of training in CCE, I am going to retire soon. "The optimism of Principal was evident in his words when he said. "I do make it a point to monitor all students at least once in a year in all the prescribed areas like process, portfolios, and unit assessment. Besides, the documenting and specific feedback enabled me to support them score high in the summative and to negotiate the earlier gap between the scores in formative and terminal evaluation. "The experienced teacher in the group was more pragmatic and said, "There is no point in becoming a fundamentalist in constructivist assessment procedures and we must decide strategies according to the students, content, context and subject matter. Out of the concern for the less performing students' principal representative also added the suggestion that beyond the process component, a certain percentage of scores should be set apart for the content part so as to support the underprivileged students from low socio-economic background. Though not really fresh the teachers also suggested the scope for revamping

assessment strategies to include viva voce and project-based learning to make assessment more constructively rigorous and learner friendly. It is presumed that Dissertation, the new proposal for CCE by the education department would do great as suggested by these teachers in the study regarding the restructuring of assessment in higher secondary English teaching.

Key Findings of the Study

- Despite offering series of workshops and training programs, teachers of English in Higher Secondary Segments appear to be unsteady about the normal fundamentals of Constructivism.
- The Constructivist pedagogic perspectives of teachers occurred in Kerala classrooms. But the corresponding shift in teaching learning materials and assessment are yet to happen.
- Classroom facilitation in constructivist paradigm is an area of difficulty for many teachers, even after ten plus years of its implementation.
- Lack of proper assignment of teachers during the transformation from behaviourism to constructivism and the enrooted conviction in behaviouristic classrooms have affected the implementation and practice of constructivism in Kerala.
- Teachers have failed in grasping the complex sense of the constructivist procedures to be practiced in schools. Their understanding is more or less generic in nature.
- The constructivist procedures like Student Directed Learning, Self-Regulation, Multiple Learning Tasks and Metacognition are conspicuous to teachers.
- In-service and pre service programs are inadequate in addressing the concerns and apprehensions of teachers in this regard.
- Young and freshly appointed teachers have been found to be more experimental in constructivist learning and assessment strategies than aged teachers.
- Constructivist practitioners should think about integrating more learner engaging, fun oriented and age specific activities with the traditional discussions and debates inside the classrooms.
- Confusion regarding the use of mother tongue in English classroom is widespread among teachers. Constructivist thrust on meaningful use of mother tongue is not known to many teachers. Direct instruction is still impacting the pedagogy of English teaching in Kerala.
- Teachers are generally unwilling to do any experimentations in assessment protocols. They are just satisfied with the state mandated evaluation strategies.
- Teachers are generally dissatisfied with the issues of assessment procedures. However, these teachers are unaware about the strides in Constructivist Assessment and not trying to acquire awareness on changes happening in the constructivist pedagogy.

Conclusion

From the experiences of teachers those are detailed in excerpts, we reached on the conclusion that the present system of education management failed to properly train the teachers on understanding the constructs and its paradigms. Teachers didn't get sufficient

awareness on different facets of employing constructivist methods in classrooms like class orientation, lesson transaction, organising the learning tasks and assessment and evaluation. Teachers' doubts and anxiousness have not been cleared sufficiently. They remain sceptic on the practical implementation of constructivist strategies in classrooms. They are not sceptic on the sumptuous academic possibilities of constructivism, but were on its practicability. This is the dichotomy to be addressed.

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