“Spotlight on Re-Search: A New Beginning”

Selected Proceedings of the 2008 Michigan Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages Conference

October 24-25, 2008

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Xuan (Anna) Li

2009

The Selected Proceedings of the 2008 MITESOL Conference
Constructivism in Online ELL/ENL/ESOL Teacher Education: The Learners’ Perspectives
Snea Thinsan
Indiana University

Abstract

As the popularity of teacher training programs via distance education increases, much remains to be studied in terms of which pedagogical techniques work, how, and how well. This action research report features K-12, ELL/ENL teachers’ perceptions of an online teacher-training course designed according to constructivist principles. Titled Bilingualism and Bilingual Education, the course adopted constructivism as framed by prominent theorists. The data were collected from synchronous and asynchronous communication records: forum discussions, submitted assignments, standard course evaluations, participants’ feedback on learning tasks, emails, and chat records. The analysis was conducted through three rounds of systematic coding. Satisfaction with the learning experiences was reported as high, and reactions to the multiple, innovative, constructivist learning tasks were also highly positive, although a few challenges were reported by participants who were unfamiliar with the open-ended, non-linear, and complex nature of the learning environments. Implications for online ELL/ENL/ESOL teacher training and further research are offered.

Introduction: The Practical Problem and Rationale

More and more teacher training institutions, especially in the U.S., Europe, Australia, and some Asian countries, are offering their programs online, as Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) technologies have become increasingly useful components of online educational environments (Marra, 2006; Romiszowski & Mason, 2004). Meanwhile, research during the late 1990s and early 2000s has indicated the promising potential of CMC (see Estrada, 2004; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001; Oh, 2004; Suthers & Hundhausen, 2001) and explored how to make CMC work better in higher education. (See, for instance, Bonk & Dennen, 1999; Bonk & Dennen, 2002; Campbell & Norton, 2007; Duffy & Cunningham, 1996; Gordon, 2008; Kirschner, Strijbos, Kreijns, & Beers, 2004; Larochelle, Bednarz, & Garrison, 1998; and Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, & Chang, 2003.) Nonetheless, much is still left to be further studied in specific terms (Gordon, 2008), especially in terms of how knowledge can be best constructed personally and socially as part of virtual classrooms. At the same time, research findings have also suggested the increased necessity for reflective teaching and action research that inform and lead to more effective practices in virtual environments. (See, for example, Estrada, 2004; Norton, 2008; and Pawan, et al., 2003.)

This paper reports only part of the findings from an action research study that examined the quality and quantity of online construction of knowledge among
ELL/ENL/ESOL pre-service and in-service teachers and their reactions to and attitudes toward their learning experiences in an online teacher training course designed based on constructivism. Specifically, it reports the qualitative findings based on the views of the participants in a constructivist online course.

**Conceptual Frameworks**

This exploratory qualitative study was guided by the literature related to CMC in distance teacher education and learning from sociocultural perspectives, or constructivism. Constructivist principles were synthesized from the works of different sociocultural constructivist theorists and translated into the learning tasks on which the participants commented at the end of the course studied.

**CMC in distance teacher education**

CMC was claimed at an earlier stage in the 1990s as potentially useful in making online education better than the traditional face-to-face mode in several ways. McCreary (1990) claimed that CMC users were more oriented toward exactness, organization of thought, and clear expression, as later supported by Condon & Cech (1996). In higher education, CMC was also found to promote critical skills for academic endeavors. Garrison et al. (2001), for instance, claimed that CMC allowed learners to construct experiences and knowledge through analyzing the subject matter, questioning, and challenging assumptions. Thus, they maintained that CMC could be used to promote critical thinking if employed properly. Similarly, Kirschner et al. (2004) argued that CMC could be used to promote critical thinking, as well as meaningful problem solving and knowledge construction. Marra (2006), having extensively reviewed related literature, concluded that CMC had the ability to promote knowledge construction and meaningful learning.

Despite such positive claims, however, more research is still needed to provide insights into whether, how much, and how CMC tools work as claimed in teacher education. On the instructor’s side, much is left to be researched in terms of what pedagogical approaches work and how they do. On the learner’s side, much more needs to be understood about whether, how, and how much different learners learn in the online environments under the popularized constructivist paradigm in which learners are held more accountable. Reflecting such research needs, the literature during the past decade has featured studies that intend to analyze and understand what is encrypted in the discourses generated by the learners in terms of how CMC and implemented pedagogy work. Gunawardena, Lowe, and Anderson (1997), for example, found that the construction of knowledge in the studied community had five phases of development: sharing & comparing information, exploration of inconsistency, negotiation of meaning or knowledge construction, testing/modification of proposed synthesis, and applications of newly constructed meaning. Jeong (2003) also looked at the data generated by learners and found that interactions involving opposing ideas promoted more discussion and
critical thinking, and that evaluation of arguments was more likely to occur as participants were reaching conclusions, but not as arguments were being shared. These studies suggest that learners’ interactions and views are important for greater understanding of learning in the virtual world.

**Learning and constructivism**

Pedagogical void, or the lack of rigorous pedagogical principles, in online courses has been addressed since the 1990s. Bonk and Dennen (1999) found that most online courseware was pedagogically negligent. Three years later, they still found that, despite some progress in CMC tools, “assistance in developing rich situations for collaborative knowledge construction, information seeking and sharing, reflection, debate, and problem-based learning is generally overlooked in the design of standard courseware tools” (Bonk & Dennen, 2002, p. 330). Pedagogical issues have continued to dominate the literature on distance education research up to the present, especially in terms of the need for both teachers and learners to adopt new ways of teaching and learning (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004), the capacity for connectedness of teaching constructivist lessons (Gordon, 2008), interactive communication strategies (Mackinnon, 2004), and how to scaffold for more effective discussions (Oh, 2004).

Pedagogy should necessarily be based on learning theories when responsibility in education has been shifted from the teachers to the learners. Nieto (1999) looks at learning from the sociocultural and political perspective and defines learning based on the works of prominent educators during the past 50 years as the following:

- Learning is actively constructed (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970)
- Learning is influenced by cultural differences (Gardner, 1983)
- Learning is influenced by the context in which it occurs (Bruner, 1996; Piaget, 1951)
- Learning is socially mediated and develops within culture and community (Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978)

These characteristics of constructivist learning have become the prevailing foci in online teacher training and research in distance education. Tobin (1993) contends that knowledge can be constructed both socially and personally as a dialectical relationship existing between the individual's contribution and the social contribution to knowledge in distance education. Bonk and Cunningham (1998) regard a learner as an active constructor of knowledge within a socially interactive environment in which negotiation of meaning and co-creation of knowledge occur. In addition, Gordon (2008) argues that “constructivism has helped to shift the way in which knowledge is understood and assessed” (p. 324). He adds that Vygotsky’s (1978) concept of the “zone of proximal development” allows us “to realize that human learning, development, and knowledge are all embedded in a particular social and cultural context in which people exist and grow”
Also recently, Ogan-Bekiroglu and Sengul-Turgut (2008), who interviewed 15 students before and after using constructivist lessons, found that teaching methods and strategies based on a constructivist approach helped the students move their epistemological beliefs in physics through upper levels.

**Research questions**

Along with the reviewed positive claims above, questions concerning whether and how learning takes place have been ones still requiring more research-based answers. Despite the increased body of literature on constructivist pedagogy in distance teacher education during the past decade, Pan and Bonk (2007) have argued that one of the most troubling concerns about constructivism in more recent years remains its lack of empirical findings. This article contributes to this literature by reporting the voices of pre-service and in-service ESL/ENL/ELL teachers as learners in an intensive, six-week, constructivist online class. This study was designed to focus on the experiences of the participants in a course that the author taught for the third time in 2008 with an effort to redesign the course according to constructivist principles. The entire study was designed to address four major questions, but this article only reports and discusses the exploratory findings of questions 1-3 below.

1. What were the challenges faced by teachers as learners going through an online constructivist learning environment?
2. What features of the constructivist course were favorably reported?
3. What features of the constructivist course were least favorably reported?
4. What were the quantitative and qualitative differences of learning when the course became more constructivist?

**Method**

This exploratory action research, again, was part of a larger study. It only focused on the learners’ perspectives from the 2008 course. Future analyses will aim at the comparative quantity and quality of participation and products by learners from all three years.

**Participants**

The participants included 16 teachers with different backgrounds, diverse experiences, and teaching levels that were enrolled in the course titled “L524 Bilingualism and Bilingual Education” offered in summer, 2008. They all participated fully in the course and provided various types of data required for this study, except that only 14 of them filled out the online course evaluation. The 2008 course was offered to ELL/ENL/ESOL K-12 teachers in Indiana and, for the first time, to teachers and graduate

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1 For more information about the entire study, see http://thinsan.org/MITESOL08/.
students across the U.S. who were working, or were interested in working, with ENL, ELL or ESOL students in the U.S., Korea, Taiwan, and Japan. All of them had taken at least one online course previously.

Procedures: Syllabi and constructivist learning tasks

The constructivist learning tasks were planned deliberately for the course taught in 2008\(^2\). The 3-credit graduate course, offered at a large public university in the Midwest, was conducted entirely online. The author had been teaching the course for three consecutive years, and this study was focused on the third year of his teaching, in which he consciously made changes to reflect more constructivist principles in the design of the course. Below is a brief summary of the 2008 course.

The 2008 course

The course remained an intensive one lasting only six weeks and was conducted entirely online this time\(^3\). The required text remained Baker (2006). The major changes from previous years were in the assignments deliberately designed to reinforce constructivist principles and to respond to the lessons learned from the previous years.

Constructivism in action

In order to ensure that the course became saliently constructivist, the author revisited his teaching philosophy\(^4\) that was informed partly by his two earlier years of teaching the course and over five years of teaching teacher-training courses online. Then, he designed the learning tasks based on the constructivist principles mentioned earlier and as illustrated in Appendix A\(^5\). In sum, the constructivist principles emphasized in the design of the course include the following synthesized concepts:

- **Collaboration:** in pairs and groups among learners
- **Interaction:** extended, meaningful, constructive interactions
- **Intense cognitive engagement:** increased level of participation and tasks requiring higher order of thinking
- **Scaffolding:** both from peers and the instructor with diverse experiences, as well as rich resources from various sources
- **Modeling:** by the instructor, peers, and products of students from previous years
- **Personalization of learning experiences:** more individual tasks
- **Socializing:** more pair and group assignments

\(^2\) The 2008 syllabus is downloadable via http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/examples/syllabus08.doc, and the 2007 syllabus, which was also used in 2006 at http://thinsan.net/forums/assignments/syllabus.htm as a reference.

\(^3\) The same course taught in the previous two years was offered mainly online, but face-to-face workshops were conducted at the beginning and the end of the semester.

\(^4\) See http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/teachingphil.doc

\(^5\) For full descriptions of all constructivist learning tasks and rubrics for evaluation, please visit http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/examples/syllabus08.doc.
Reflections: deep reflections encouraged
Applications: application clearly emphasized
Connection with the real world: relevance
Prior knowledge & experiences: both stimulated and valued
Actions: practical tasks promoting actions

Data collection and analysis

The data were taken from both synchronous and asynchronous communication records: forum discussion portal, submitted assignments, standard course evaluations, learners’ feedback on all learning tasks, emails, and chat records. For a general sense of the richer data in the third year, as compared with those in the previous two years, please see Table 1, which does not include the course evaluations and learning assignments because they were not suitable for quantification.

Table 1 Overview of data collected

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Participants (N)</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Email exchanges</th>
<th>Total forum postings</th>
<th>Total # of topics</th>
<th># of words in chat data file</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8 weeks/S2</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>400</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>2214 (social)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6 weeks/S1</td>
<td>162</td>
<td>643</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>955 (social)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>6 weeks/S2</td>
<td>Sent 212; Rec’d 252</td>
<td>1668</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>50,946 (required)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As evident in the table above, the data generated by the participants in 2008 stood out as greater across the board because of more required tasks and stronger encouragement from the author for learners to be accountable for constructing their own knowledge.

The data analysis involved three rounds of systematic coding. The author had read the forum postings and emails several times informally during and right after the course before the actual coding. The first analysis effort was to select and sort the potentially relevant data from different sources into a document file that was divided into sections according to the research questions, as well as to identify tentative emerging themes, which were guided by the constructivist principles mentioned at the end of the “Constructivism in action” section above, and generate a coding scheme according to the three focused questions. The second effort was to look at the sorted data for more emerging themes and to organize the direct quotes and notes under each identified theme. The third round was to review and refine the coded data and themes, as well as to any omitted parts to the second round analysis log. Interpretation was made by going through the analysis logs and weaving narratives according to the research questions.
Reliability & validity

In absence of a co-rater that would have made the study more rigorous, repeated coding was adopted as described above to improve reliability and validity. In addition, thick descriptions of both the actions and the findings are offered to provide the reader with adequate insights into reliability and validity issues. Triangulation was also employed by using different sources of data elicited at different times over the course. As an instructor working hard and closely with the participants, the author regards himself as a useful research instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Marshall & Rossman, 1995), especially when it comes to interpreting what the participants reported. However, a risk involved could have been the tendency of imposing the author’s own views on the outcomes. To avoid such a risk, he tried to use the “participants’ exact wording” (Creswell, 2008, p. 257) in weaving the narratives of the report.

Results

Please note that the quantitative terms used in this section are meant to provide a clear sense about how many people are represented under each theme below that describes three main larger sections: challenges, the most favored elements, and the least favored elements. However, it must be noted that the participants were not forced to provide their comments on every constructivist feature or element of the course. Moreover, the participants were able to choose to do different assignments among the given options. Hence, the quantitative phrases should be considered accordingly.

What were the challenges faced by in-service teachers as learners going through a strong form of constructivism?

Time and intensity

While satisfaction with the learning experiences was reported as very high (see in next section below and Appendix B), five participants reported the pressure to participate in the multiple tasks of different natures as intimidating. One participant said, “There were too many tasks. Simplifying would be preferable.” One of them summed up, “Interesting things were being discussed in many different places, but I couldn’t join all because of the time.”

Complexity and non-linearity

Another reported challenge concerns the confusion caused by complexity and ambiguity in the constructivist environment in which learning was virtually non-linear and multiple learning opportunities and responsibilities were competing for their attention, as also reflected in the above quote. Like three other participants, one participant advised the author to “make [the] syllabus more clear, more linear.” However, they rated the course design positively—4.57 out of 5—as positively as one student put it, “The course was very well-designed and sequenced.”

Difficulty in collaborating
The other notable challenge involves the difficulty in collaborating with more than two people. The course required both pair and group assignments, so collaboration was compulsory. While twelve of them clearly reported benefiting from collaboration, three others expressed challenges associated with collaboration, agreeing with this voice:

Different work schedules and working styles left me feeling like I had to do all the work. I don’t know how to remedy this and the instructor did give us the option of working with a partner instead of a group of three. Next time, I will stick with one partner!

In sum, reports on challenges appeared fewer in number of participants mentioning each challenge than the number of voices in favor of the constructivist features. To be specific, only six participants mentioned challenges, but 14 reported about their favorite learning activities. Most other responses were positive, as one of them concluded, “all in all, a very intense but useful course,” and the other one corroborated: “This is a crazy time of year, trying to close school and take a class at the same time. But I'm glad I did it. It was a great experience.”

**What features of constructivism were favorably reported?**

In general, the participants viewed their experiences quite positively, again as reflected in the course evaluation (see Appendix B). More specific comments are elaborated under the captured themes, which can be linked to the salient principles listed in Appendix A. Note that some of the themes below are interconnected and sometimes overlapping.

**Collaboration, interaction, and role assignments**

Eight out of 14 participants reported that they loved collaboration and meaningful interactions among themselves in pairs, in groups, and/or as a whole class, as well as with people outside the course and with the instructor. One wrote: “The collaboration with fellow students. The forum, message and chat options were very helpful.” Another one listed, as favorite tasks, the assignments that reinforce collaboration and interactions such as “discussion forums and the readings along with the chapter expert assignment. The bilingual teacher/school profile, too.” Another one explained the above voices further, indicating: “I learned a lot from peers and instructor through discussion of questions and assignments.” Finally, related to the favored collaboration and interaction, role assignment was reported by eight participants as helpful for their construction of knowledge, as one wrote:

The weekly discussions were well-organized by chapter, and again I think it is good practice to assign roles to students, as you did with the chapter expert/questioner [forum starter] and the provocateur. The good experiences were sharing each others' backgrounds and experiences.

**Relevance, application, real world connection and human touch**
Constructivist learning tasks that promote relevance, practical application, real world connection, and human touch were reported as favorable. The following voice illustrates it well as a representative of ten other voices:

This assignment [Bilingual program profile] gave me a chance to critically look at a program based on the learning I was absorbing from the class and the text. I think it helped me to put the text to practical use. I was able to see strengths and weaknesses in the program/teacher so that growth can occur within the school.

Essentially, the learning tasks associated with “taking course material and making connections with real life experiences and situations” were reported as very useful and much appreciated. Ten participants reported having wonderful opportunities to learn from people around them, including colleagues, friends, and students, as well as bilingual programs, and to learn more beyond the texts from such people or programs. The below voice illustrates such a view further:

I loved this assignment [Bilingual learner profile] because I was able to interview two international quadrilinguals. It was great listening to their experiences of learning languages other than their L1’s. It also underscored how language is a very political issue in countries that were former colonies of major countries such as France.

Rich resources and scaffolding

Multiple resources and experiences that serve as scaffolding in the construction of knowledge were reported as highly helpful elements. The following quote represents the views of six other participant voices:

The forums were a great place to extend the learning of concepts covered in the text, or clear up any confusion. I gained so much knowledge for reading others' posts and personal experiences. It was a very unique class as we had people from all backgrounds, situations and grade levels. I not only learned about state-wide policies, but also national and global as well. I really do enjoy working with such a broad learning community.

Options, freedom, autonomy and personalized learning

Six participants expressed in the course evaluation high satisfaction with the options and freedom granted, as well as autonomy in learning, that they developed through the course. One commented: “Great course. I loved the freedom you gave us and how the learning was autonomous rather than teacher driven. Thanks for helping us to create our learning.” Another one linked the options with creativity, reporting: “I liked the creativity we were allowed with each assignment without having the limitations of an example.” One wrote, emphasizing autonomy, “I loved that the instructor allowed the students to create conversation and autonomous learning, rather than instructor-led learning,” and the other one corroborated:
I liked how we each had different roles for each week's assignments and discussions. I loved the questions being posed by the other students instead of the teacher. I thought the roles would add stress but really they caused less stress. [Forum]

Reflections, cognitive engagement and knowledge construction

The participants mentioned the reflectively deep engagement in constructing knowledge personally and socially as favorable. At the individual level, constructivist learning tasks that fostered reflections and cognitive engagement were reported favorably by eight participants. One wrote, “the chapter expert assignment helped me deepen my understanding of my chapter,” as another one expressed her appreciation for individual reflections along with her desire to further personalize her learning diary:

The learning diary was a great idea because it is always something teachers say they need to do but never have time. I wish I would have been more free to talk about my own teaching situation instead of the book chapters so it was more like a reflective professional journal that just a list of notes from the book. [Course evaluation]

At the social level of knowledge construction, one said as a representative of nine other similar voices: “The discussions were the meat of the course for me. That's where a lot of my learning took place. I appreciate being able to bounce ideas around and was always interested in how others would view an issue.” To help emphasize that knowledge construction occurred both individually and socially, the other participant explained how she benefited from deep individual reflections and from reading others’ notes:

I enjoyed maintaining the learning diaries as it required me to reflect upon the readings. Not only was I able to add my thoughts but my doubts or questions as well. As I read other diaries, I saw similar questions and gained answerers as well. [Forum]

Instructor: teaching presence, feedback, support, modeling, scaffolding

Although constructivism suggests putting learners at the center of learning and knowledge construction, all the participants regarded the instructor as a crucial element. (Please see Appendix B for satisfaction with the roles of the instructor.) To begin with, prompt and ample feedback from the instructor was reported as one of the most appreciated elements. “The instructor offered feedback and suggestions on assignments even before they were turned in. I loved the amount of time and effort [he] put into this,” wrote one of them. Another one stressed how important it was for the instructor to offer the felt presence, reporting: “The instructor was extremely present and available should we need help. I am amazed how detailed the feedback from the assignments was.” Among those who were at the verge of being flattering, the following voice shows their understanding of how constructivism worked with a role of the instructor in it:
He promptly answers all questions and as a pre-service teacher, I had many. What I really enjoyed was his scaffolding of the topics to bring a deeper understanding of the varied issues (social, cultural and political) concerning bilingualism. As he saw us struggle with some of the issues, he provided links, videos, and articles to help us take the next step in our ZPD. He has a wealth of sources and experiences that he was willing to share. He encouraged us to construct our own knowledge to look outside the box. He was an exemplary instructor! [Course evaluation]

Clearly, the instructor was regarded as an important contributor to their learning success as a source of academic and psychological support and encouragement.

**What features of the course were least favorably reported?**

**Similar or repetitious tasks**

Participants also reported a number of features that they did not see as very useful. One of the participants mentioned the *Chapter expert* assignment as her least favorite one, but without specifying the exact dislikes, except that she already learned enough from other venues. Four other participants suggested removing either the *Chapter expert* or the *Learning diary* assignments because they are very similar. For example, one wrote she regarded *Learning diaries* as the least useful, reasoning that: “The assignments and forum discussions should be enough to show what students are learning. The diary seems to be added work that regurgitates what was already posted somewhere else.” The other one reported, “I kept most of my notes in a less public way and saw the Learning diary as a task, not a help.” [Forum]

**Low applicability or relevance**

In addition, one participant did not like the *Lesson plan* assignment because she could not apply parts of it well: “Not real fond of the way the lesson plan assignment was done--parts of it were not applicable to teaching, maybe it could be in two parts (a one page paper and the actual lessons).” Another participant thought that the textbook was geared too much toward children. She had hoped “it would be balanced between adults and kids.”

**Discussion**

The findings related to challenges faced by the learners in an online constructivist course, though few in number, deserve close attention. Constructivism puts huge responsibilities on the learners’ shoulders. Having to read over 400 pages of Baker (2006) within six weeks, participate intensively in the daily forum discussions, keep learning diaries, and carry out other pair and group tasks required of them was reported as a challenge. Plus, all of the K-12 teachers were still teaching their classes during the first few weeks of the 6-week course. Collaboration, in addition, requires the learners to spend more time planning and doing things with other peers, and, for busy participants with
tight schedules and those who prefer less social learning, collaboration can become a 
cause for frustration. In addition, even a small issue about the interface of the discussion 
forum should be heeded as the learners under such a challenging learning environment 
could benefit from all sorts of facilitation in the reported non-linear complexity of this 
online world of learning.

The reportedly favorable constructivist features are in agreement with what the 
key theorists have proposed as sound. Tobin’s (1993) suggestion that knowledge 
construction occurs at both the personal and social levels and Bonk and Cunningham’s 
(1998) emphasis on the latter appeared to be perceived by participants as agreeable. 
Furthermore, the participants cited enhanced reflections, collaboration, interactions, and 
active engagement in knowledge construction as helpful elements, as Bruner (1996), 
Dewey (1916), and Freire (1970) would agree. Essentially, the participants suggest that 
knowledge construction takes place because of thoughtful reflections and active deep 
cognitive engagement that occurred both individually as an extension to prior experiences 
(Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916) and socially (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1978) under 
well-planned role assignment as Pawan, et al. (2003) advised. What is more, such efforts, 
meanwhile, were viewed by the participants as positively contributing to their learning 
because of the practicality of learning tasks that allowed the participants to relate the 
content with the real world and to connect with real people outside the class (Bruner, 
1996; Vygotsky, 1978). Essentially, learning constructively needs the richness of the 
knowledge, ideas, and information in a given sociocultural context (Gordon, 2008) and 
from diverse texts and sources, as well as multiple real-world experiences of the 
participants (Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916), as the necessary and useful scaffolding that 
yields more fruitful knowledge construction. In addition, the participants thought that 
knowledge construction should take place because of the options that allow the learners 
to be creative and autonomous in personalizing their learning to the fullest, as 
Ogan-Bekiroglu and Sengul-Turgut (2008) also found. Finally, yet importantly, the 
successful constructivist learning experience was reported as best enhanced by the 
teacher and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2001) that serves as a source of 
knowledge, feedback provider, facilitator, and motivator. Instructors’ roles appear to be 
viewed as very important. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the least favorable 
features reported in this study include repetition of the tasks, the excessive demand of 
work within a short period of time, and the irrelevant examples in the core text.

In conclusion, it seems that the pedagogical voids that Bonk & Dennen (2002) 
listed, namely collaborative knowledge construction, information seeking, reflection, 
debate, and problem-based (or real-world) learning, as others (Bennett & Lockyer, 2004; 
Gordon, 2008; Oh, 2004) have also mentioned, were filled by the promise of 
constructivist tasks in the studied course.
Limitations

This study did have some limitations, however. In addition to the absence of a co-rater, the author also did not manage to interview the participants for more in-depth accounts because of their unavailability. Another limitation is that the course was very intensive, and the time allowed may have been too short for constructivism to have a fuller impact on learning to the level that participants could realize it well enough, either positively or negatively. The other thing that could have been done was to elicit feedback on all constructivist elements from all willing participants so that quantification would be more proper and the results would become more proportionally insightful.

Implications

Practical implications

Challenges faced by the learners in this online constructivist class deserve close attention. The reported challenges associated with the intensive nature of the course that was coupled with the multiple, non-linear, concurrent learning tasks cannot be ignored. Some learners may be less tolerant of ambiguity, the lack of linearity, and the open-ended nature of tasks. Hence, they would benefit more from a constructivist class if they were assisted by an instructor’s proper facilitation and support. In addition, interactions were embraced as helpful, but collaborative tasks in light of the participants’ busy schedules and different working styles could pose discomfort on some participants. Clear examples of anticipated products and clear directions, as a few suggested, seem necessary. Furthermore, the discussion forum and the course portal interfaces may be a factor hindering the quality of knowledge construction. Therefore, selection of an online portal should consider the available software that facilitates interactions and collaboration, and learner feedback should be sought. If necessary, technical support should be provided to less technologically savvy learners.

Meanwhile, much can be learned from the positive comments by the participants in this study. It appears that the following features were perceived by the participants as positive elements contributing to their satisfactory learning experiences: options; learner-centered atmosphere with adequate and helpful teacher presence with prompt and helpful feedback; enough venues for both personalized and social construction of knowledge; meaningful interactions with and scaffolding from multiple resources, peers, people in the real world, and the instructor; and structured class management, i.e., via role assignment. These features should thus be further reinforced or experimented with in various contexts.

Implications for future research

Several implications for future research are offered. First, since this study only relied on the participants’ written reports, further research should incorporate in-depth interviews as part of a case study approach to seek deeper insights into whether, how, and how much constructivism works. Second, research on the quality of learning or
knowledge construction still needs refined pedagogical frameworks. More research along the same line as this study will be necessary. Third, the question of what exactly a workable constructivist action is like remains to be explored in various contexts to either confirm or problematize the results from this single study. Finally, a longitudinal study on how a constructivist teacher training course like this has an impact on the participants’ practices after they have returned to their classrooms will be worth an effort. Future efforts could try to intentionally reinforce these elements and learn more from the participants more closely via follow-up interviews.

Conclusion

As a participant immersed in the six weeks of intense actions, the author has personally acquired or developed some beliefs and thoughts that may be beyond the reported results. First, knowledge construction requires intense interactions among the original text, other texts, resourceful people in the community, peers, and instructor through both personalized and social tasks. Hard work by all participants, thus, seems unavoidable. Second, some students may not be automatically adjusted to the constructivist approach to learning, so modeling, clear directions, feedback, clarifications, support, and thoughtful plans by the instructor are critical. Teacher and teaching presence, thus, should be felt adequately and positively under the learner-centered atmosphere. Third, the instructor can be overwhelmed by the volume of participation once the participants are inspired to engage deeply in their knowledge construction and must, hence, be willing to work hard in catching up with the flow and in providing timely feedback and scaffolding where necessary. Fourth, constructivism does not work automatically; the instructor should plan to communicate clearly his or her pedagogical expectations, rationale for doing things, and the purposes of each task. Finally, action research is empowering, and reflective teaching and research should be promoted more in programs that train ELL/ENL/ESOL K-12 classroom teachers. Especially for those teachers who have limited exposure to bilingual issues and ELL/ENL/ESOL experiences, constructivism seems to offer the needed element of scaffolding offered by the instructor, other participants, texts, and learners or teachers in bilingual programs that some learning tasks target. Constructivism, in sum, serves as a kitchen full of ingredients that can allow for more cooking possibilities.

Author Note

Snea Thinsan, Distance Education Coordinator and Visiting Faculty for the Center for Social Studies and International Education, School of Education, Indiana University. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Snea Thinsan (sthinsan@indiana.edu).
References


Appendix A

Constructivist plans for enhanced learning experiences

For the best view of the matrix, please see the Constructivist Plans for Enhanced Learning Experiences at http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/appendix_1.htm. Please also see descriptions and evaluation rubrics of the learning tasks above at http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/examples/syllabus08.doc

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Concepts</th>
<th>Individual work (10%)</th>
<th>Individual plus group work (20%)</th>
<th>Group work (no more than 5 members) (20%)</th>
<th>Group work (5 or more members) (15%)</th>
<th>Research projects (Option) (20%)</th>
<th>A. Lesson plan</th>
<th>B. Chart/Map</th>
<th>C. Individual work (10%)</th>
<th>D. Oral performance</th>
<th>E. Written assignments</th>
<th>F. Reflection</th>
<th>G. Group work (no more than 5 members) (20%)</th>
<th>H. Group work (5 or more members) (15%)</th>
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<td>A. Collaboration</td>
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<td>B. Interaction</td>
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<td>C. Depth of cognitive engagement</td>
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<td>D. Staffing</td>
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<td>F. Personalization</td>
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<td>G. Socializing</td>
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<td>I. Application</td>
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<td>J. Collaboration with the real world</td>
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<td>K. Prior knowledge &amp; experiences</td>
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</table>
## Appendix B

End of the course evaluation (rating), Summer 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation aspects</th>
<th>Average points out of 5 (N = 14)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Overall, I would rate the quality of this course as outstanding.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>My instructor listens attentively to what students have to say.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
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<tr>
<td>My instructor makes me feel free to ask questions in class.</td>
<td>4.86</td>
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<tr>
<td>Overall, I would rate this instructor as outstanding.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>The objectives of this course are clearly stated.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>Announced course objectives agree with what is taught.</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know what is expected of me in this course.</td>
<td>4.36</td>
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<tr>
<td>My instructor is well prepared for class meetings.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor treats students with respect.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor answers questions carefully and completely.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Progression of the course is logical from beginning to end.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor illustrates relationships among topics.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor uses teaching methods well suited to the course.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topics covered in the course are well integrated.</td>
<td>4.57</td>
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<tr>
<td>My instructor clears up points of confusion for me and other class members.</td>
<td>4.79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor is enthusiastic about teaching this course.</td>
<td>4.79</td>
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<tr>
<td>Course assignments help in learning the subject matter.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>I developed skill in critical thinking in this course.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
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<tr>
<td>My instructor emphasizes a conceptual grasp of the material.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity and length of course assignments are reasonable.</td>
<td>4.36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor stimulates my thinking.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor is knowledgeable on course topics.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The instructor promotes an atmosphere conducive to learning.</td>
<td>4.50</td>
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<tr>
<td>My instructor suggests references for added reading/research</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor shows genuine interest in students.</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The course improved my understanding of concepts in this field.</td>
<td>4.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My instructor is regularly available for consultation.</td>
<td>4.86</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I developed the ability to solve actual problems in this field.</td>
<td>4.64</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The 5-scale responses were weighted as follows: Strongly agree = 5; Agree = 4; Undecided = 3; Disagree = 2; Strongly disagree = 1. For course evaluation of previous years, see [http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/06-7eva.pdf](http://thinsan.net/MITESOL08/06-7eva.pdf). Note that the 2006-7 version used a different 5-scale weighting system: Strongly agree = 4; Agree = 3; and Strong disagree = 0.