

The Effectiveness of a Constructivism-Based Program in Developing Some English Reading and Writing Skills of Prep School Students and Their Attitudes*

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Summary:

The main aim of the study was to examine the effectiveness of a constructivism-based program in developing some English reading and writing skills of prep school students and their attitudes.

Recent research that affirms the importance of EFL reading and writing skills and their crucial role in learning, endeavors have been made to suggest modern approaches focus on the process rather than the product and affirm the active role of learners in the process of their own learning. These has been a call for integrating new dimensions such as learner autonomy and learning strategies in the course of the

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learning process; aspects endorsed by the constructivist theory of learning.

In spite of the importance of the reading and writing skills to prep school students, studies confirm that most of students are poor and inefficient in reading and writing and their negative attitudes towards the English language. Thus the need for the present study was established on both the theoretical and the actual bases to investigate the effectiveness of a proposed constructivism-based instructional program to improve the reading and writing skills of prep school students and develop their positive attitudes towards English language.

The results of the study hypotheses as a proof to the proposed program. So, it can be concluded that the proposed program is effective on improving students' reading and writing skills and developing their positive attitudes towards the English language, as it provides a variety of methods and techniques that enhance learning, depends on students' prior experiences and backgrounds, develops their ability to interact in a situation, introduces knowledge in context and real situations, and improves the students' ability to apply rules appropriately in reading and writing.

The findings of this study are in live with the findings of previous research (Hendry, 1996; Nyikos and Hashimoto, 2007; and Christianson and Fisher, 2009) that indicate that the constructivist approaches show a significant impact on the students' learning outcomes. They facilitate students' learning, allow students to be more autonomous, improve

their capacity for critical thinking, and to look for and analyze information needed to propose a solution. Furthermore, a constructivist approach builds up students' team work skills and communications abilities.

Findings also show that learning should involve activities to process the new material, linking it to what the student already knows. Tasks should be authentic, set in a meaningful context, and related to the real world (Larochelle, 2010). Thus, constructivism offers real promise for improving the students' reading and writing skills and developing their positive attitudes towards English language.

Results of the Study:

The results of the present study reveal that there is an obvious improvement in the experimental group students' reading and writing skills on the post administration of the test. This significant improvement may be attributed to administering the proposed constructivism-based program to the experimental group.

It is worth mentioning that the experimental treatment took place in a well-organized classroom, comfortable seats, and suitable ventilation was also provided. These factors helped to motivate students to participate in the program. Moreover, their willingness to improve their reading and writing skills played a crucial role in engendering their motivation to engage the program. The clear and systematic procedures of the constructivist program made it easy for

students to follow the researcher and to know exactly what they were supposed to do in each stage. This contributed to fostering their feeling of success and to their awareness of the good experience they were passing through.

In addition, focusing on the process of learning rather than the product decreased students' anxiety about final results and scores. It was stressed throughout the program that the process of learning and understanding is more important than the final outcome, and that the successful processes lead to a successful product. That is why students did their best throughout the activities which led to significant final results. That helped in creating positive attitudes towards learning the English language.

Statistics in table (6) illustrate these percentages of the averages are significantly accepted as an evidence of the effectiveness of the program in achieving its stated goals and basically in improving all the student's reading and writing skills. On the contrary, the percentages of the average in "Skim and Scan written texts" and "Provide descriptions of people, objects, and places in writing" are significantly not accepted. This may be due to the general atmosphere inside the classroom while applying the test and the few number of their activities in the program activities. Or it may be translated according to the fact that the effect size of these dimensions in comparing the mean of the post-test of the experimental group scores and those of the control group was low. Although, it was high in comparing the students' pre- and post-test mean scores. This indicates that the effect of the

control group in this was the real reason in this low in both the effect size and the percentages of the averages gain in these dimensions.

Actually, the results of the present study are consistent with the results of the studies conducted by, De Foe (2000), Ferguson (2001), Kolling (2002), Calhoun and Haley (2003), Lynn (2003), Murphy (2005), Woolley (2005), Hollingsworth (2007), Neumann (2008), and Blecher; Hope; and Moffitt (2010) in that they proved the effectiveness of learning strategy instruction in improving reading and writing skills. That program comprises a combination of learning strategies involving memory, cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies that were implemented as part and parcel of the proposed program.

Again, the students' positive attitudes were apparent in their eagerness to study English, their obvious enjoyment during the lessons and their warm and enthusiastic behavior towards the teacher. Also, the students were very happy at the beginning of each English lesson and expressed their sadness at the end of the program because they wanted to spend longer hours in learning by the constructivism –based program.

It is worth mentioning that, a constructivism-based program was effective in changing students' attitudes towards learning English, but it is important to realize the fact that attitudes are changeable, namely, if the teacher used another method other than a constructivism-based program, these positive attitudes may change again easily into negative ones.

Thus, it is important for the teacher to consider the students' reactions towards the teaching methods s/he uses in order to build positive attitudes towards learning English.

The improvement can be attributed to the effectiveness of the constructivist approach in learning which was adopted in the present study and was evident in the following features:

- Students were active participants in the teaching process and had positive attitudes towards the program and towards learning English.
- Scaffolding was provided by the researcher to the students until they could depend on themselves and finally become autonomous learners.
- The learning strategies included in the program were new to the students; they had the curiosity to explore and apply them.
- The healthy atmosphere in the classroom, as reported by students throughout the program, was an effective factor of making students interested in the learning process cooperative group work, fruitful discussions, and the friendly relationship between the students and the teacher, were among the factors that led to this healthy atmosphere of learning; a factor that is highly stressed in the constructivist classroom.
- The proposed constructivism-based program helped students change their view towards considering English a difficult language.

- Students took responsibility of their own learning and were aware of their roles in the teaching/learning process.
- The stages of the instructional program allowed students to actively construct new understandings, make use of their previous knowledge, reconstruct misconceptions, and test their new assumptions and constructed ideas.
- Shy students became more willing to participate in the learning situations inside classroom. That resulted from the silent period that was provided, to encourage them, made them feel at ease and reduced anxiety and lowered the affective filter.
- They know that they have some weakness in their reading and writing skills and knew the reasons for that weakness. That is why they had a strong will to develop their reading and writing skills.
- Students recognized that reading and writing need systematic practice in order to improve. Thus, exert sincere efforts to develop their skills.

Interpretations:

In this study the first research question investigated the reading skills required for prep school students. The researcher prepared a reading list including (12) items of the reading skills. The researcher selected these skills to be developed in the present study. The skills were introduced to

respondents who chose all of them as suitable for prep school students.

These (12) skills were introduced in a questionnaire to respondents to rate the degree of importance. The researcher benefited from the results when building the achievement test and they were developed in the suggested program.

These results about the degree of importance of reading skills conform to the results of the previous studies and literature conducted by massive number of researchers and writers such as: (Keene, 1997: 153) who assured the importance of Making Inferences, Asking and answering questions, Visualizing. (Harmer, 2001) focused on Prediction and guessing, interpreting texts. Raymond (2009: 32) wrote about the importance of Summarizing. Debbie (2009: 1) about Visualizing.

The researcher investigated the second research question which is about the writing skills required for prep school students. The researcher prepared a writing list includes (14) items of the writing skills. The researcher selected these skills to be developed in the present study. The skills were introduced to respondents who chose all of them as suitable for prep school students.

These (14) skills were introduced in a questionnaire to respondents to rate the degree of importance. The researcher benefited from the results when building the achievement test and they were developed in the suggested program.

The researcher investigated the third research question which is about the proposed constructivism-based program for improving the English reading and writing skills and attitudes towards English language. The researcher designed the proposed constructivism-based program was submitted also to a group of jurors for validation. Then, the sample was divided into two groups: the experimental group that was taught the constructivism-based program and the control one that was taught the regular method. Then, paired sample t-Test was used to determine the significance of differences between the mean scores of the students in the control and experimental groups in the post- measurement (test and attitude scale). Mean scores in the experimental group were higher than that of the control group. Such finding indicates that the proposed constructivist program had a positive impact on improving students' reading and writing skills and attitude towards the English language.

To answer the fourth question: What is the effectiveness of a proposed program in developing the English reading skills of the target group? t- Test was used to determine the significance of differences between the mean scores of the students of the experimental groups in the pre- and post- administration of the test. Results indicate that the students' mean score in the overall reading skills in the pre test was (8.08). On the other hand, their mean score in the overall reading skills of the post test was (17.69). These results indicate that the higher mean is for the post administration of the test. Therefore, students' overall reading

skills have been improved after exposure to the proposed program.

To answer the fifth question: What is the effectiveness of a proposed program in developing the English writing skills of the target group? t- Test was used to determine the significance of differences between the mean scores of the students of the experimental groups in the pre- and post-administration of the test. Results indicate that the students' mean score in the overall writing skills in the pre test was (10.67). On the other hand, their mean score in the overall writing skills of the post test was (23.22). These results indicate that the higher mean is for the post administration of the test. Therefore, students' overall writing skills have been improved after exposure to the proposed program.

To approve what is the effectiveness of a proposed program in developing the English reading and writing skills of the target group, the effect size is estimated. Statistical results show that the proposed program achieves 74.6% improvement in students' reading and writing skills, as the scores curve of the experimental group students in the post-measurement is higher than their scores curve in the pre-measurement (see tables 8, 9, and 10).

To answer the sixth question: What is the effectiveness of a proposed program in developing the attitudes towards English language of the target group? t- Test was used to determine the significance of differences between the pre and the post administration of the attitude scale on the

experimental group. Results indicate that there were significant differences between the pre and the post administration on the experimental group in favor of the post administration as the mean scores between the pre and the post administrations were (43.801) and (56.060) respectively. Also, the value of $t = 11.262$ was significant. Also, Results indicate that constructivism approach helped students in gaining positive attitudes towards the English language. That was clear in the significant differences between the mean scores of the pre administration (43.801) and the post one (56.060) of the attitude scale (see table 13).

According to the preceding discussion, it could be extracted that the present study provided an evidence for the effectiveness of the proposed constructivism-based program in developing some English reading and writing skills of prep school students and their attitudes.

Conclusions:

Constructive principle is that teachers enlighten students to construct their knowledge structure autonomously, instead of indoctrinating knowledge to students. To say it more specifically, through observation, experiment, independent thinking, and active searching, students gradually understand and master the inner relationship between how things happen and how to recognize them. It promotes students to construct a good knowledge and ability structure. Prep school students, with the reasonable and effective application of Constructivism,

students can master and use the language better. This not only reflects the need of quality education, but also improves students' practical application ability, and of course it helps to meet the social need. The social constructivist approach to reading and writing offers tools and principles for teachers which can help them to draw their students into energetic participation in text events, entering into active dialogue with texts, not as outsiders, but as active participants.

Considering the results previously discussed in Chapter Four, the following points were concluded:

1. The present study provided evidence for the effectiveness of using constructivism in developing students' reading and writing skills. This result adds to the validity of other studies investigating similar aspects such as that of Kowalewski (2002), Caposey & Heider (2003), and Hollingsworth (2007).
2. The present study highlighted the possibility of integrating learning strategies within a constructivist program to enhance reading and writing.
3. Constructivism integrates so many aspects that enhance active learning and positive attitude towards reading and writing. It encompasses learners' affect and social interactions, and collaboration in working together.
4. This study provided evidence to the effectiveness of using a constructivism approach in helping to change students' negative attitudes into positive ones towards English language.

Implications:

Based on the results of the study and the relevant literature, the implications for improving reading and writing skills and positive attitudes towards learning the English language and future research are provided in the following parts.

Implications for Learning Activities and Experiences:

1. Classroom management should be emphasized by the instructors more. However, the teachers should develop an understanding of constructivist classroom management based on managing the classroom through engaging students in the tasks that arouse their interest rather than through forcing them (Dewey, 1916, cited in Erdem, 2001).

2. The students should be acquainted with alternative learning activities such as journal writing, keeping portfolios, and drama that are not frequently used in the classrooms.

3. In order to enhance negotiation, cooperation rather than competition among the students and the learning activities requiring cooperative work such as group or pair work, discussions, group projects and so on should be emphasized more.

4. Teachers and students should be convinced of the importance of activating a constructivism theory to develop reading and writing skills.

5. The learning activities should be student-centered and encourage creative and critical thinking and independent learning.

6. The time allocated to lecturing should be reduced and lecturing should be supported with such activities as discussions, cooperative work and student presentations more.

7. Like lecturing, question and answer techniques should also be made more interactive and evoke higher-order thinking rather than requiring a single and a correct answer. Such techniques as fill-in-the-blanks and dictation should be replaced by the activities which encourage the students to use their higher-order thinking.

8. Course books should be supplemented more by the instructors with a variety of materials and resources such as supplementary textbooks, articles, handouts and so on.

9. The courses should be designed flexibly with regard to its objectives, content and evaluation strategies considering the characteristics of the students and the instructors in each classroom.

10. Students' suggestions for improving the learning activities should be considered more.

11. Low achievers and students in English should be provided by constructivist learning activities and evaluation strategies more.

12. Students should practice improving their higher-order thinking skills, especially reflective and creative thinking through relevant learning activities.

13. Students should have more opportunities to take part in social activities to improve themselves and to come together with their classmates outside the classroom.

14. School and classroom environment should be provided with motivating equipments to enhance students' enthusiasm and increase interest.

15. Students should be familiar of the language learning strategies and convinced of the value of the systematic use of those strategies.

16. Multiple instructional strategies and technology are strongly recommended when teaching reading and writing skills.

17. Alternative teaching techniques should be implemented in our schools to enhance better learning.

Implications for Evaluation Strategies:

1. Written exams should be supplemented by more meaningful evaluation techniques such as term-papers, reports, projects, assignments and portfolio assessment.

2. The teachers should be less grade-oriented and emphasize the process of learning rather than the achievement at the end of the course.

3. Students should take part more in evaluating the course and their teacher. The evaluation should be done informally rather than through official forms.

4. Students' performance could be evaluated through the criteria and methods for evaluation can be decided through negotiation between the students and the teacher.

5. Students should take part more in evaluating their own and peers' performance.

6. Students' class participation in addition to their cognitive and affective characteristics including their abilities, capacities, motivation, interest, personality and so on should be considered in evaluation more.

7. Students' social development such as their ability to work cooperatively, negotiate ideas and so on should also be considered in evaluation.

Implications for Teachers Roles:

1. Teachers should be able to establish a balance in their classroom management and relationship with their students. In other words, they should be neither authority figures for the students nor too familiar with them.

2. Teachers should be cognizant of their students' individual differences consequently, they introduce materials and use techniques which may foster positive attitudes towards learning English in general and reading and writing skills.

3. Teachers should leave their roles as lecturers and knowledge dispensers and should be facilitators and guides in students' learning. They should encourage the students to learn through searching, discovery and depending on their friends rather than depending on them.

4. Teachers should be able to think like students and to understand their points of view for empathizing with them effectively.

5. Teachers should provide a learning environment for the students that is free from stress and relaxed for supporting students' learning.

6. Teachers should provide more freedom, autonomy and responsibility for students' learning.

7. Teachers should be more tolerant towards students' mistakes emphasizing that making mistakes is natural in learning process.

8. Teachers should avoid teacher-centered classes and encourage student-centered classes.

9. Teachers should be aware of their students' needs and abilities and choose the suitable techniques for before the reading and writing.

Implications for Research:

1. In future studies, survey studies on constructivist classroom characteristics should be conducted at the different levels of education for developing English language skills.
2. More experimental studies could be conducted to compare the relative effectiveness of constructivist and traditional learning environments with regard to their contribution to students' learning outcomes in developing English language skills and their attitudes. In such studies, the effect of some student characteristics (e.g. sex, achievement, perceived competency in the course) and instructor characteristics (e.g. sex, teaching experience, and perceived competency in the subject matter and teaching skills) on the results of the study could also be explored.
3. More qualitative data collection and analysis could be conducted through analysis of documents such as students' journals, portfolios, home assignments, lesson plans and so on.

Recommendations of the Study:

Based on the results and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are suggested:

1. The proposed constructivism program is recommended to be used as a framework for developing reading and writing skills and it can be adapted to develop other language skills.
2. EFL teachers and trainers should make use of constructivist teaching specially for EFL learners as it is interesting, enjoyable, and authentic, and yields immediate positive reinforcement.
3. Emphasizing the importance of effort, persistence in learning is required in the constructivist classroom. Mistakes are part of the process of learning opportunities. The teacher should respond to an error with encouragement and positive reinforcement about what was correctly accomplished.
4. New techniques for enhancing reading and writing should be explored and exploited, so that language learners will easily make their way to their proficiency goals.
5. Providing an appropriate and healthy climate as well as an interactive environment is essential for fruitful and effective learning.
6. Friendly relationship between the teacher and students is essential for bridging gaps of thinking, and for building bridges of confidence between them.

Suggestions for Further Research:

Constructivist approach has been used in developing EFL reading and writing skills and positive attitudes towards learning the English language. The respondents have shown their interest and preference in all aspects of learning the English language. The respondents were aware that English though is not their first language or the mother tongue yet it is an important language to be learnt in schools by selecting appropriate contents to solve their daily life problems. Following are areas for further investigation using constructivists learning approach:-

1. Designing other constructivism-based programs for developing other language skills than reading and writing.
2. Studying the applicability of the proposed program in developing the reading and writing skills of other EFL students at different stages (e.g. university stage).
3. Testing the effectiveness of the proposed program in developing the different language skills.