



Breaking Frontiers:

Promoting the Use of English in EFL
Classroom—Constructivist and
Communicative Approach

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Introduction:

This article renders the drastic shifts towards my principles, experiences, theoretical and practical acuity as an ESL teacher over the years - bracketing my educational roots and practices in the Philippines and in Thailand. Moreover, this paper predominantly focuses on the EFL teaching methods and turns that have been materializing in the context that I am presently working in, which is, an EFL milieu here in Thailand, which is in Plearnpattana School.

1. Theoretical/Conceptual Keystones: Augmenting Your Performance as an Educator through Classroom Study

1.1 Questioning Oneself: Identifying

Rooms for Improvement

To be an effective and continuously dynamic educator, you must always be open to the probability of improvement. In order to identify how you can improve, you must visit each room of your practice and approach to check-out if you are still satisfied with what you offer to your students and if there's anything wrong throughout your praxis. Once you found rooms filled with enquiries like, "Am I doing my best?" or "Why 'this' and 'that' don't work out?", you will be able to highlight the factors that you can disentangle.

Based on my personal experiences, I have encountered great deal of enquiries like these. As a result, I realized that these are the sum of my dissatisfactions and disappointments on my pedagogical routine. Therefore I was skeptical and eager to find answers for my dissatisfactions. Dewey (1993) noted that learning your



As educators, we have our own values when it comes to our teaching principles and practices. Correspondingly, there's always a bed of notions where we can pick any views that we want to help outline our educational values. According to Roche (2012), teachers have innate and unnamed values with regards to education which are also based their on epistemological and ontological stances. Now, we might have encountered these “epistemological” and “ontological” constructs before from our books back in our college days. We might know what these theories are by definition; however, the question is, how do we look at its nature and application? It is good that we are packed and embedded with strong theoretical understanding with regards to our craft. On the other hand, knowing and understanding the educational theories and applying them into practice are both different stories. None of us want to sound so ideological, right?

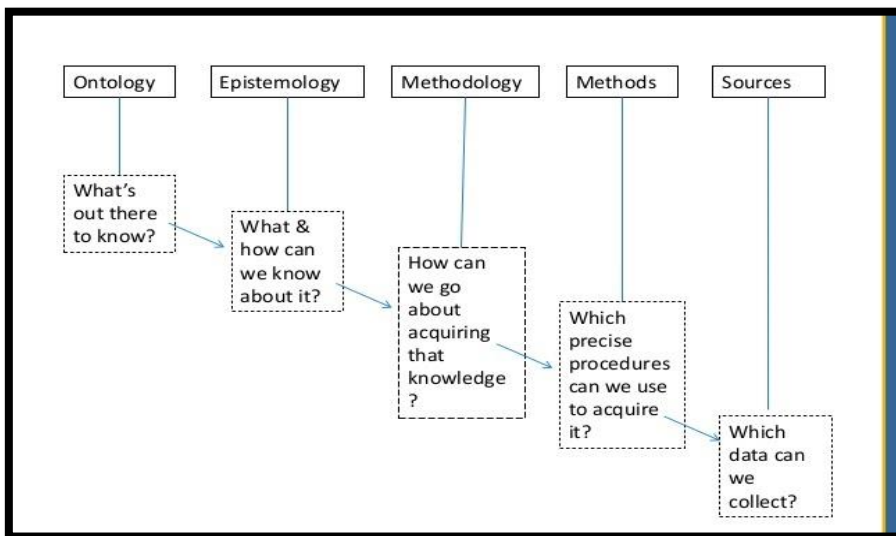


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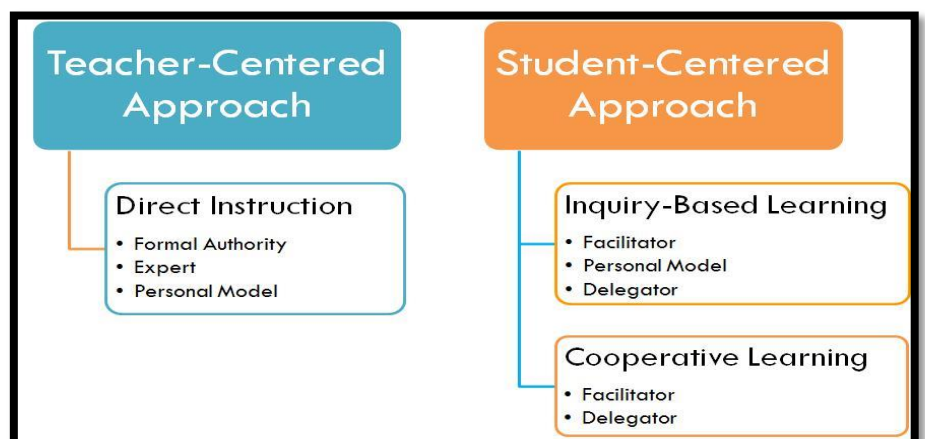


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Take it from me; Let me share my experience...

At the outset, mostly, we educators think that it's all good to have our diploma and bachelor's degree in our hands, secure a teaching job and teach our assigned subject matters. Nevertheless, as we continue to stride towards teaching, we find things that blocking our ways to improve: ourselves, our practice, and the teaching outcomes we produce. I remember when my first teaching experience commenced in 2015 which is in the Philippines; I thought that I was already successful, because I had the teaching job that I wanted. As the months went on, I did not even think about how I was doing as a teacher. I did not even bother improving my plans. I just gummed my classroom activities according to the syllabi given by the institution I was in. I did not think out of the box. My classroom drills were all the same and creativity was nowhere to be found. Sometimes my plans were a little bit constructive but not communicative enough or contrariwise—not really consistent. As per my teaching strategies, I would say they were all lackluster and monotonous. Occasionally, the class was all teacher-centered. Conversely, on my second year of teaching, realizations and questions began to hit me when I saw how a seasoned teacher from my school taught his students. It was a grade-3 English class, and I couldn't believe that the discussion was so interactive and the students were able to debate answers and defend their stands. When I looked at my co-teacher, he was just approving and giving instructions. It was confounding, but at the same time, it stirred my interests as to how he could do it to his class. Looking at my class, I felt so clouded with "what ifs" and the things I should have done before in my class. I reviewed my educational theories and examined them, and I was sure that I was applying them correctly, but then again, they wouldn't be correct if there were better classes than my class. So, starting from that day, I tried to look for answers to my questions like "How can I improve my teaching styles?", "What should I do?" and etc. Once I identified the areas that I needed to diagnose, it was easy for me to prepare the things I needed to improve them.

When we graduate, we are packed with intangibles such as our educational values and theories. Now, I realized that my epistemological perspective is based on how I look at, acquire and generate the knowledge around me. On the other hand, my ontological outlook is based on the nature of the people around me. I believe that these are some of the most vital paradigms in educational research and application. These embrace the core values we have and with these; we are able to see if there is growth in our teaching performance. Being a specialized person in a certain field, especially teaching, always encompasses the consistency of tracking one self's practice or development. For teachers to develop as professionals, there must be 'a process of reshaping teachers' existing knowledge, beliefs, and practices rather than simply imposing new theories, methods, or materials on teachers' (Johnson and Golombek, 2002). Through constant monitoring one's improvement, we are able to update our skills and strategies in teaching. Also, we will be able to avoid monotonous or repetitive activities and routines in the classroom.

Now, I will demonstrate how from identifying my dissatisfaction lead to the process of reshaping of my practice.

2

The Process to a More Autonomous Teaching Experience

2.1 Recuperating my epistemological standpoint

Having identified the rooms of my improvement, as a teaching professional who sought for contemporary underpinnings for my practice, I decided to venture out to a most autonomous teaching and learning setting: abroad, which happens to be here in Thailand.

What really happened?

Looking at my seasoned co-teacher from my previous school in the Philippines made me question my capacity as a teacher. I was too confident that I was doing the right things inside my classroom. Having the theories embedded in me from college, I knew I was on the right track. However, I felt like my strategies were unvaried and there were some things that were missing. I wanted to know how to make my students think critically during class discussions, and I wanted to make the classroom atmosphere to be more relishing but still communicative and constructive in the sense that students can raise critical questions and answer with accuracy with well-thought judgment. Therefore, I started reading books again and watch videos online about new strategies and activities. All seemed challenging but I did not have enough time to maximize the benefit of the, I believe, “improved plans” that I made. I made anecdotal records of my practice and tried to understand what might be the problem. Moving on, after two years, I decided to improve my epistemological stance in teaching. I told myself that I won't be able to learn something new and different if I would still stay in the place where everything becomes repetitive. So, I went here in Thailand and see for myself what I could learn and what could I recuperate.

2.2 Cultural-induced working environment:

The Rise of New Challenges

As educators, in order to make sure that we are bringing success to students' learning, we must also be sure that we are seeking professional development. Today, professional development runs the gamut from one-shot workshops to more intensive job-embedded professional development, which has teachers learn in the day-to-day environment in which they work rather than getting pulled out to attend an outside training (Zarrow, 2016). I had attended many seminars and three-day workshops on

how to improve my teaching strategies. Sure, they worked out for quite some time in my classes; however, I still ran out of ideas, whenever the strategies I got from these workshops do not work out.

Alternatively, I thought it would be better to learn new things, if I'll be in a new spectrum with new variables. As a result, my decision about going here in Thailand remains the best verdict I had to myself ever since my teaching career began.

Landing an ESL teaching job in Thailand, which is an EFL speaking country in context, I realized that I should be tougher and be more hard-wearing when it comes to unfamiliar challenges. There are so many things to consider when you are teaching students who don't speak your language and who have a hard time to speak the language you teach.



Language, language, language...

Is it a barrier to communication?

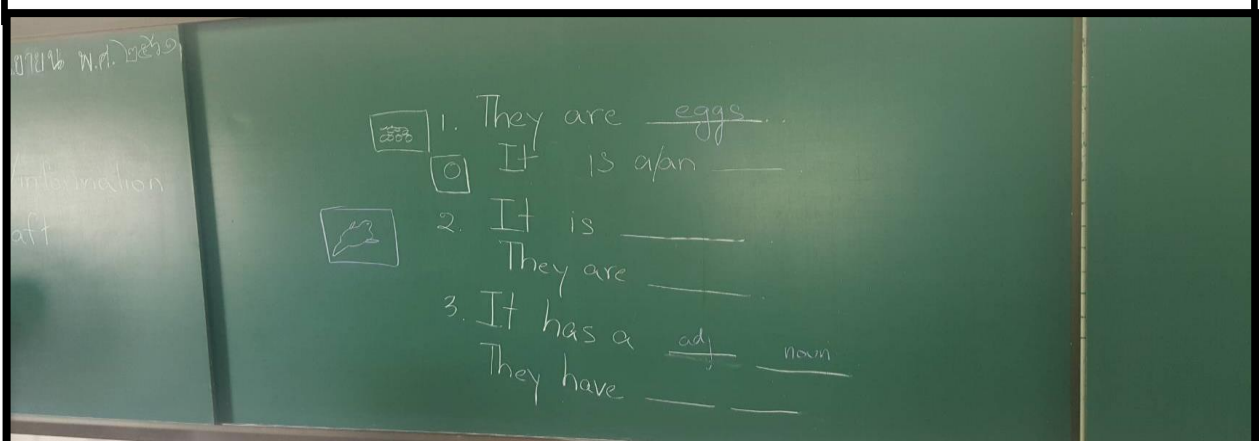


The first time I arrived at Plearnpattana, again, I sounded so ideological. I thought that all the theories I reaped and the experiences I earned from the Philippines would be all applicable in all situations I faced here. During my first week, I completely understood 0% Thai language. I thought it was fine. Nevertheless, I saw students did not understand my instructions. Some were spacing-out and talking to their seatmates. My plans which supposed to be constructive didn't work-out. That time, I was again questioning myself: How can I make my class interactive and constructive? Is language really a barrier to a successful classroom discussion? The first remedy I did was to look at the way how I delivered my instructions. Maybe I was too prompt when it comes to delivering explanations. So, I put myself on my students' shoes. If I were them, with some who completely don't know how speak and understand English, would I be able to understand my teacher if she'd talk fast and using highfaluting jargons? No, it would be hard for me to understand what she's saying. When my plans continued to flunk, I had this realization that the students that I have in front of me are completely different from the students that I had in the Philippines. Thus, I made juxtaposition and tried to weigh down the situation. First thing I did was to tone down the level of my vocabulary and spoke to them with gradual phase. Also, I added gestures to my paralanguage and Thai translation to some difficult words in my PPT slides that I used in the class.

This strategy didn't have fast successful outcomes, but it was worth it because students were able to, eventually, learn how to keep up with me and use English as their mode of communication. So, at this point, I saw that teaching English to children who are in the EFL context is not impossible even if you don't know their mother tongue as long as you have the patience and perseverance to apply all of these in a specific time frame given. address this problem for me since I was new in the EFL context, on the other hand, it helped me to look deeper on the context and thought new strategies to improve my plans. Language plays a major role in effective communication.

Having experienced this struggle in my first few months as an ESL teacher in an EFL context sounds so exhausting and at same time frustrating since I didn't have any experience teaching learners who didn't know how to speak English, on the other hand most ESL teaching strategies suggest that teaching children in EFL milieu really takes time. Cramming to see successful outcomes in a short period of time will only produce half-baked products or disappointments. Real Life English (2013) noted that teaching English let student make as many mistakes as they can--- mistakes aren't bad: in fact the more mistakes the students make, the more teachers can correct them and the more students can analyze which area they're wrong. Teachers shouldn't be there to "teach" you the language. They should be there to increase your passion for it and to help you learn it.

"Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire" – William Butler Yeats





During the course of my teaching, it was given that language could be one of the major struggles in classroom communication, but the biggest thing that I encountered was teaching the plans that I made according to how it should be taught. Planning the lessons was tough since we (together with my buddy and coordinators) joined our ideas altogether just to produce communicative and constructive plans; I was expecting that everything will go smoothly. However, I realized that not all good plans produce good learning results in the classroom. It really depends on how you teach the plans and how students react and acquire them.

Steps - Communication and Construction of Knowledge

Planning lessons are easy if you just copy and paste activities from the internet to your word file. On the other side of the coin, do not expect that all of the activities you copied will be effective or work out in your class.

When I was starting out as an ESL here in Thailand, I set a goal that at the end of the year, my students should be able to speak English even if it would look and sound like that it's hard for them to speak it. However, in order to achieve that goal, I needed to improvise plans that could let them utilize English as their tool of communication.

At first it was hard because not all plans were working out. Moreover, most plans were too tight to be done in one time frame. Another is that, not all plans were fitted to carry-out in all classes. There was one class that had really disruptive behavior and their motivation for learning was quite different from the rest. To address these challenges, I, together with my ESL coordinators, devised plans which both communicative and constructive approaches were maximized rather than the other steps from the plans.

Here at Plearnpattana School, there are 6 steps in a plan: 1) Readiness and Inspiration; 2) Preparation for Learning (Input and Unfold); 3) Formation of Situational Problem; 4) Language Creation and Problem Solving; 5) Interaction of Knowledge; 6) Conclusion/ Synthesis/ Creation of New Knowledge. Each step of the plan has vital role for students' learning.

1 – Serves as students' motivation towards the upcoming topic to be taught and reviewing their previous acquired skills;

2 – Here's where all knowledge unfolding and expansion should happen. Of course, do not forget to make learning interactive. Add some games and activities!

3 – This is where you set students' mind to be critical. You are serving them a whole plate of situational problems and they need to reconcile with proper answers and applications.

4 – At this point, students need to apply the intangibles from step 2 and internalize step 3. This part shows their learning output.

5 – Their speaking skills will be tested here. They'll present whatever they have in step 4.

6 – This part is where you will know what students have learnt from the topic and here's the best part where students should reflect.

We always have to consider the real-life situation---if all goals are achieved without shortchanging the students.

It was recommended that we need to focus more on situational problem and its application and lessen the time for input. At first it sounded so arduous, but it turned out to be the best decision that we made. As a teacher, I was able to give more time to supervise weak students and help on improving their spelling and speaking skills. Also, I was able to connect more with the students since interaction mostly happen on step 3. Furthermore, students had more time to talk and interact in English. They were able to share more and do more. Some activities that we had for situational problem were phonics relay, group works: choosing the right clothes; treasure hunting; snakes and ladders; and etc.

2.3 The Constructive and Communicative Approach

We might have heard constructivism as a learning paradigm in the area of educational psychology. Whereas, Communication can always be found in Linguistics subjects. These constructs can be easily acquired by our executive function; however, it is imperative that as teachers, we know how to utilize these constructs inside our classrooms.

In order to make successful lessons plans, it is necessary to adjust each part according to the children's learning phase. Although it might sound tiring and another pile of work on your desk, trust me, after you get the right formula, all you have to do is to chill and see good outcomes. I once mentioned about the tight plans I did. These plans had lots of games during the inspiration and input stage. As a result, I didn't have time to carry out the situational and problem-solving parts of my plan--- which are the most important parts. So, the dilemma was solved when I tried to minimize the time I allot in inspiration and input parts.

Let's try to define again the terms *communicative* and *constructive*. If you hear the word constructive or constructivism, the proponents that come into our minds are Vygotski, Piaget, Dewey, and Bruner. These authorities noted that constructivism, in general, is how individuals gain knowledge and learn. According to Learning-Theories' website, "constructivism as a paradigm or worldview posits that learning is an active, constructive process. The learner is an information constructor. People actively construct or create their own subjective representations of objective reality. New information is linked to prior knowledge, thus mental representations are subjective. A reaction to didactic approaches such as behaviorism and programmed instruction, constructivism states that learning is an active, contextualized process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring it. Knowledge is constructed based on personal experiences and hypotheses of the environment. Learners continuously test these hypotheses through social negotiation. Each person has a different interpretation and construction of knowledge process. The learner is not a blank slate (tabula rasa) but brings past experiences and cultural factors to a situation. A common misunderstanding regarding constructivism is that instructors should never tell students anything directly but, instead, should always allow them to construct knowledge for themselves. This is actually confusing a theory of pedagogy (teaching) with a theory of knowing. Constructivism assumes that all knowledge is constructed from the learner's previous knowledge, regardless of how one is taught. Thus, even listening to a lecture involves active attempts to construct new knowledge."

Meanwhile, Wikipedia defines communication as the act of conveying meanings from one entity or group to another through the use of mutually understood signs, symbols, and semiotic rules. Likewise, communication is always used in a vast area of specializations including teaching. Communicative approach as its variant jargon in education, is based on the idea that learning language successfully comes through having to communicate real meaning. When learners are involved in real

communication, their natural strategies for language acquisition will be used, and this will allow them to learn to use the language (Teaching English UK, 2018).

During the course of adjusting the plans I made, to make them more communicative and constructive, students should be able to utilize their natural strategies for language acquisition which would allow them to use English as their medium of communication. Also, students should be able to construct knowledge from their schema and from what the teacher had taught during the input process.

In my plans, these approaches are mostly present in step 3: situational problem and step 4: problem solving.

Here is a concrete example from my plan:

Step 3 Situational Problem (5 minutes)

3.1 Clothing Relay: The class will be divided into 5 groups. T stocks a pile of clothing in front of the room. The members of each group shall pick one student to stand in front. When T says a weather, example: rainy day, a representative from each group will go and get a clothing that suits the weather mentioned and dresses up the person standing in front. Afterwards, once the person standing in front is dressed up, the whole group will say: "He is wearing a raincoat."

Step 4 Language Creation and Problem Solving (40 mins)

4.1 The ss do the clothing relay Challenge.

Here, students are learning about the weather and the proper attires to be worn during these different weathers. The students need to think which attire suits for the given weather. Then, students need to say what their members are wearing using the sentence pattern subject+be verb+main verb – ing, without realizing that they're being prepared for the next topic to be discussed next meeting which is the present continuous or progressive tense of the verb. This will serve as their schema for the next topic.



During these activities, students were able to maximize the use of English since the contexts given forced them to use English as the only tool of communication. Could it be adding a rule like, if one member of the group would speak in Thai, there's one

point deduction to their group's score. Another one is that, they need to read and follow instructions through strips of paper and say everything in English.



3

Conclusion

There are so many things that I've learnt in my first year of journey as an ESL teacher here in Thailand. Not only I am able to communicate with my students but also looking at my teaching dynamics, I am able to raise the level of my understanding towards my craft. I am able to look deeply at the activities I need to utilize inside my classroom. I learned the authenticity of diversity and that all learners are unique. You cannot expect them to learn all the things you are serving them in a short period of time. To be an effective teacher, it is important to always understand students' roles in the class, and how you can promote learning at the same time how you can learn

from your students. Making time for your plans is necessary. I realized that your plans and how you carry them out is your reflection as a teacher.