

# The Usage of Social Constructivism to Improve Contemporary College English Curriculum

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## Abstract:

The contemporary college English curriculum is a core curriculum for English major students to learn in university to emphasize the importance of intensive reading. Although this curriculum has a lot of inspiration, it still contains some perceived problems. This essay aims to briefly introduce the perceived problems and improve the curriculum under the guidance of social constructivism.

## Keywords:

Contemporary college English curriculum

Social constructivism

Problem-based learning classroom

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Main features of the curriculum

Contemporary college English curriculum is a core curriculum for English major students to learn in university to emphasize the importance of intensive reading, which contains different genres, such as fiction, prose, speech, and so on.

### 1.2. Perceived problems with the curriculum

Although this curriculum has given me a lot of inspiration, it still has some perceived problems. Firstly, the teacher usually leads the students to appreciate foreign literature together in class. The teacher is the one who chooses and decides on what topics to teach the students and also decides how and when to teach the topics subjectively<sup>[1]</sup>. This means this curriculum mostly takes the teacher-centered approach, so students have little chance to share their opinions. Secondly, the teacher-centered approach

is widely applied in the university, so the teacher training programs usually focus on this approach, which means there isn't a systematic training program for teachers to change their unsuitable teaching methods. Thirdly, in this curriculum, the teacher mainly conveys knowledge to students in class, the practice is always completed by students themselves after class without the teachers' correctness, so this method lacks effective feedback.

This study will first briefly introduce the rationale for choosing the curriculum, explain why this theory is more suitable to the curriculum, and then how to improve the curriculum under the guidance of this theory.

## 2. Why focus on social constructivism

### 2.1. What is social constructivism

Social constructivism, a sociology and communication theory, studies how individuals construct knowledge about

the world. This theory supposes that comprehension, significance, and meaning emerge through collaborative interaction with other human beings <sup>[2]</sup>.

## 2.2. Why focus on social constructivism

As the editor Yang stated in the textbook of this curriculum, the curriculum aims to cultivate specialized people with a profound literary foundation as well as the habits of independent critical thinking, and the courage to pursue truth <sup>[3]</sup>. The teacher-centered approach is incompatible with this fostering objective since this approach portrays students as basically passive, the students only need to obey and take orders from teachers. On the other hand, social constructivist scholars treat learning as an active process in which learners are asked to find principles, concepts, and facts autonomously, hence guesswork and intuitive thinking are advocated by them among learners <sup>[4]</sup>. Within the context of social constructivist classrooms, students actively engage, creating a democratic phenomenon where interaction becomes a crucial component of the learning process <sup>[5]</sup>. The principles advocated by this theory enable students to achieve the fostering objective, thus this study chose social constructivism as the theory, providing some steps to help improve the curriculum and let it become more suitable to the goal of this curriculum.

## 3. Three steps to improve curriculum

### 3.1. The systematic teacher training program

The alternative perspective offered by constructivism, which defines learning as a process of personal construction of meaning, offers a potentially impactful way to reconsider teacher education <sup>[6]</sup>. As pointed out in the critique, the teachers of this curriculum usually accept the traditional training focusing on the teacher-centered approach, which leads to the lack of comprehensive knowledge and understanding of a social constructivist classroom, so a systematic training program is required. There are two major goals of this systematic training program: (a) enhance the conceptual understanding of content, constructivism, and constructivist pedagogy among teacher candidates, and (b) improve the implementation of constructivist pedagogy in classrooms by teacher candidates.

When it comes to the content of this training program, this study draws on Julie Rainer Dangel's six key mediatory experiences for preservice teachers as a reference <sup>[7]</sup>. They are social interaction, meaningful learning experiences, ownership, reflection, developing a personal theory of learning, and a supportive environment, which are needed to apply in training programs to enable a transformation of beliefs, understandings, and practices of constructivist teachers.

Social interaction is a significant factor in constructivist theories and programs based on its principles, so it is highly encouraged in the learning community. In this program, teacher students can be given some topics like the social constructivist pedagogy and placed in small groups to discuss, letting them explain cognitive conflict, assimilation, accommodation, and so on by themselves <sup>[8]</sup>. The meaningful learning experiences can be denoted as chances to link conceptual understanding with classroom practice. Jadallah and Fosnot proposed that teacher students should construct knowledge from their experiences, social interactions, and collaborative learning experiences that permit experimentation, which is crucial for facilitating constructivist teaching <sup>[9-10]</sup>. Therefore, the training program should guide teacher students to construct their understanding of social constructivism according to their own experience. In terms of ownership, Richardson argues that constructivist teacher education demands a radical change of power relationships and a shift towards new understandings <sup>[11]</sup>. Canella pointed out that teaching students without experience in their education that facilitates learner empowerment would have difficulty understanding teacher models that are different from their construction of learning. In this training program, teachers should be recognized as learners or discoverers, and it is also necessary to give teacher students a solid foundation in developmental theory and research, enabling them to become autonomous professionals capable of making informed decisions about what and how to teach <sup>[12-13]</sup>. Mosenthal and Ball emphasized the significance of the relationship between profound content knowledge and satisfying teaching through reflection <sup>[14]</sup>. Hence, encouraging teachers to reflect regularly is critical both in training and in teachers' classes. Then as for the personal theory of learning, it is suggested that social

constructivist programs' central feature was to inspire teacher candidates to comprehend social constructivism and develop their theories of learning, serving as a foundation for instructional decisions. The research said that teaching students who can transcend conceptual labels and clearly express reasons for employing specific instructional practices were more prone to develop and implement lessons in alignment with conceptual understandings of social constructivism. The program needs to guide teachers to get the hang of the ability to construct their theories of social constructivism so that they will know how to use their understanding in class later. The last element is the supportive environment, which includes constructive feedback, reinforcement, openness to new ideas, and a favorable atmosphere<sup>[15]</sup>. Thus, as teachers and educators engage in teaching students in constructivist processes, they have a duty to support students who are facing difficulties and embrace political shifts to rethink their teaching practice<sup>[16]</sup>.

These six elements work together in systematic training so that teachers can gain professional growth and can teach their students under the guidance of social constructivism theory and social constructivism-based pedagogy.

### 3.2. Problem-based learning classroom

Social constructivist teaching approaches emphasize reciprocal teaching, peer collaboration, cognitive apprenticeships, problem-based instruction, and other methods that involve learning with others<sup>[17]</sup>. After systematic training, teachers can get the hang of some social constructivist teaching methods to guide students to appreciate literature as a facilitator, among these teaching methods, problem-based learning (PBL) can be very useful for this curriculum as it allows students to acquire knowledge through complex and open-ended problems. This approach provides more chances for students to engage in authentic communication using the language they learned<sup>[18]</sup>. This nurtures critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication as well as lifelong learning skills, which are the same as the abilities that this curriculum hopes the students to develop<sup>[19]</sup>. Moreover, the students in the curriculum are all English major students who have enough ability and relative knowledge of literature to start teamwork with their classmates

independently.

In a PBL classroom, professional teachers can design problems to meet the requirements of the students, which is beneficial for enhancing practical English within a social context, so that students realize understanding and seek meaning through studying the problem and learning about the solution in small groups. According to Ali, this study concludes some basic steps that teachers can design and implement for applying PBL in the classroom. Firstly, teachers identify the learning aim that is in line with PBL and also develop rules for PBL assessments. Secondly, teachers should outline a real-world and course-related problem to allow students to brainstorm solutions. It is crucial to design appropriate problems that stimulate students thinking, discussion, research, and learning. Thirdly, teachers can initiate students' research with an easy problem and explain their expectations. Teachers conduct some sessions dedicated to the assigned problem, covering background, research topics, data acquisition, and so on, allowing students to establish their roles and responsibilities for a comprehensive understanding of the problem. Fourthly, teachers should assist students in presenting and synthesizing materials to develop their research, discoveries, solutions, and understanding. Finally, teachers make rules to assess the meaningful participation of students. This type of research has a beneficial impact on students' future studies.

Teachers should implement PBL under the guidance of social constructivism according to the steps introduced by Ali so that students in the curriculum can have more chances to share and discuss their opinions with classmates with the help of the teacher. Therefore, both the teacher and students in this curriculum could have a better understanding and special insight into the literature in the textbooks.

### 3.3. Effective feedback mechanism

In the previous critique, it was pointed out that this curriculum lacks proper feedback. Effective feedback to students has been identified as a key element in learning and teaching<sup>[20]</sup>. Effective means that the feedback is suitable and timely and suits the requirements of the context<sup>[21-22]</sup>. It is said that feedback's main function is communication, which plays a crucial role in knowledge attainment. Therefore, feedback must serve as a chance

for learning and for fostering an orientation toward learning aims, indicating in the future how students can progress in their work area.

What kind of feedback should teachers provide to their students? Research led by the University of Sydney concentrates on students' perceptions of the effectiveness of feedback provided by their university teachers. Three key aspects were listed concerning "effectiveness", including the perception of feedback, the impact of feedback, and the credibility of feedback. In the end, the study found that students preferred detailed and timely rather than general feedback, and the significance of feedback is also taken into consideration<sup>[23]</sup>. This means feedback not only offers guidance on enhancing grades but also provides useful suggestions in their professional attempt after graduating from school. The research also mentioned that the role of the provider shapes students' perceptions of the credibility and impact of feedback.

Van Houten divided feedback into three dimensions, including the nature of feedback, including its content, he suggests feedback should be effective, and how it is delivered, so teachers should choose the most effective medium to deliver information to students. As for the temporal dimensions of feedback, Van Houten thought feedback whether it is immediate or delayed should take the form of reinforcement and error correction. For the role of the person delivering feedback, factors like

scheduling and time constraints may compromise the effectiveness of supervision by university supervisors, thus peer coaching is also a crucial way.

In other words, teachers in this curriculum should seek appropriate mediums like the Internet to provide effective feedback that can both point out students' errors timely, letting them make some changes and also benefit their future development, at the same time, under the guidance of coordination principles of social constructivism, peer coaching is also an effective feedback method.

#### 4. Conclusion

The problems of the curriculum in this study mostly concentrate on the traditional teacher-centered approach, which is outdated and inflexible. Social constructivism is chosen as the rationale to improve this curriculum, in which the teachers' attitude must first be changed, let them realize the shortcomings of traditional teaching methods, and participate in the systematic training program so that they can be professional in organizing social constructivist curriculum. After training, teachers can use the PBL model and effective mechanism feedback in the classroom to meet the fostering aims of this curriculum.

#### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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