

Received : 14-12-2023

Accepted : 02-03-2024

A Reshuffle of the Roles of Instructors and Learners in Online Education

Dr. Yosra Sellami-Sellami^{1*}

¹ University of Sfax, Tunisia

Introduction

How learning in general and second/foreign language learning occurs as a life and formal classroom pursuit has always been a contentious issue among psychologists, language teachers, and the learners themselves who display varying levels of motivation to learn and different outcomes presumably matching the effort invested. Attempts to understand the mechanisms of learning generally fall under two umbrellas: those concerned with theory such as Skinner (1950), Chomsky (1965), Vygotsky (1978) and others, who have developed theoretical systems accounting for learning as controlled by stimulus-response, mental processes, and socially mediated interactions, respectively. On the practical side, much recent work was undertaken in relation to motivation as an overriding factor in second/foreign language learning (Gardner, 1990, 2001; Brooks 1999; Chance, 2014, Dörnyei, 1990, Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011, etc.). These works consider motivation from internal and external standpoints and draw attention to personal, cognitive, and social factors as theoretical learning models.

Nowadays, the advent of technological devices and the easy access to the internet worldwide pave the way for online education to take place. Consequently, a reshuffle of the roles of instructors and learners take place. Such a change leads to implications for the pedagogy and the experiences teachers design for their students.

The present paper seeks to determine the new roles assigned to teachers and students in an online educational environment so as to achieve a successful educational process that keeps students highly motivated and engaged during this process.

The move towards online education

During the 20th century, the teaching practices paradigm shifted from a traditional teaching method, known as the Audio-lingual Method (ALM) to a flexible teaching approach, labeled

the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Such a change leads to a move from didactic instruction to interactive construction aiming at creating an educational environment that excludes passive learners and promotes active learning. Put differently, the teaching-learning process moved from a teacher-centered approach to a learner-centered approach.

Reviewing the literature urges us to think of how each learning theory accounts for learning as the outcome of processes that are external to the learner in the case of Behaviorism, internal, and taking place within the very cognition of the learner in the case of Cognitivism, and occurring as a result of social interaction in the case of Constructivism. The latter approach is the major premise upon which the online distance learning environment is based, which emerged excessively in the 21st century due to sophisticated technology devices that serve as the perfect means for online teaching and learning.

Constructivist learning theories, along with behaviorist and cognitivist learning theories represent three theoretical frameworks which shaped the study of learning during the 20th century (Harasim, 2012, p. 9).

The distinctive features of the main competing theoretical lenses to understand learning: Behaviorism, Cognitivism and Constructivism, are illustrated in the Figure below:

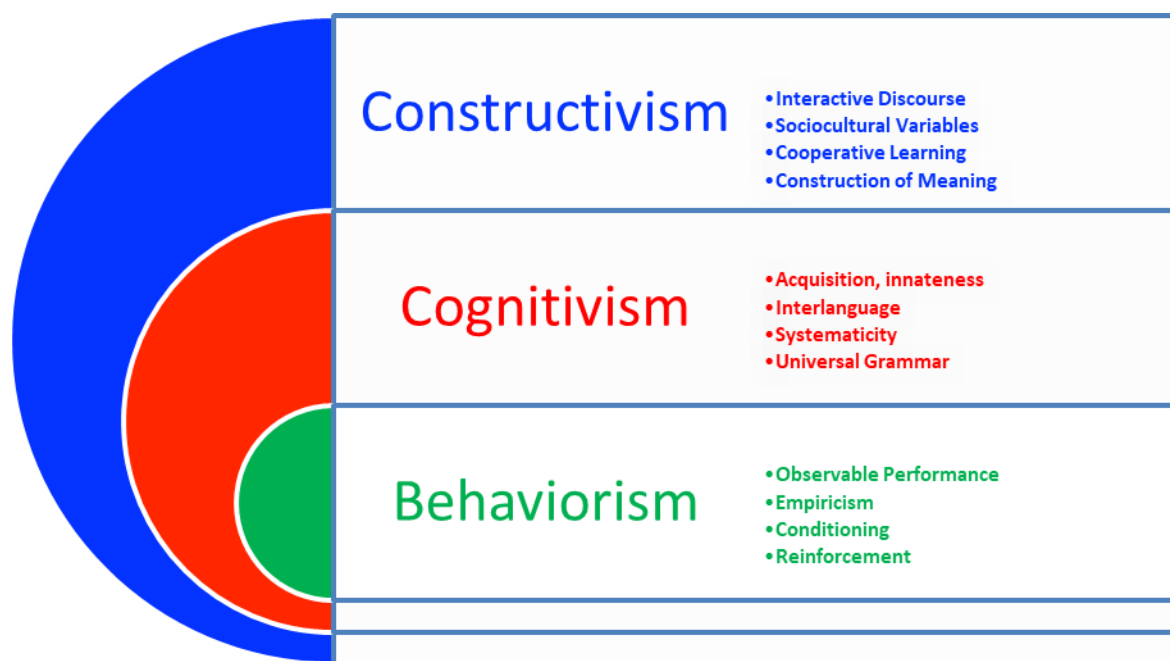


Figure: The distinctive features of Behaviorist, Cognitivist and Constructivist learning theories

The above illustrated figure with information on the distinctive features of each of the major learning theories, suggests that the theory of behavior is part of the reality of learning and the

mechanisms explaining it. Cognitivism dwells on internal mental operations the learner is believed to conduct to make sense of the data around them. Constructivism highlights the role of socially mediated learning.

In contrast to behaviorist and cognitivist learning theories, which presuppose that “the primary role of the learner is to assimilate whatever the teacher presents (ibid, pp. 11-12), *constructivist* learning theories *hold the view that learners are able to learn* “by constructing their own understanding and knowledge of the world through experience and reflecting upon that experience” (ibid, p. 12). *It seems evident that constructivism teaches students how to be autonomous to deal with daily life activities since it stimulates them “to solve real-life problems”* (Davar, 2012, p. 161).

In tandem with the constructivist frame of thought, Merrill (1991) provides the following five assumptions (cited in Keengwe & Onchwari, 2008, p. 52):

- (a) Knowledge is constructed from experience; (b) learning is a personal interpretation of the world; (c) learning is an active process of meaning-making based on experience; (d) learning should occur (or be situated) in realistic settings; (e) testing should be integrated with the task, not a separate activity.

It transpires from the above-stated assumptions that constructivist theorists view learning as “student-centered” in contrast with “teacher-centered” models of Behaviorism and Cognitivism (Lever-Duffy, McDonal & Mizell, 2003, cited in Keengwe & Onchwari, 2008, p. 52). Henceforth, the teacher’s traditional role of a “purveyor of knowledge” has been changed to be “instigator, promoter, coach, helper, model, and guide of knowledge construction” (Jonassen, 2000, p. 276, cited in Keengwe & Onchwari, 2008, p. 52). Put differently, with constructivist learning theory, teachers’ role is “to challenge students’ thinking and encourage reflection in the learning process” (Keengwe & Onchwari, 2008, p. 52). Consequently, teachers’ and students’ roles changed drastically in an online educational setting. These roles will be dealt with in the next section.

To link back to the main focus in this paper which is the change in the roles of instructors and learners in online environment, constructivist theory is the dominant approach in online education (Weller, 2017).

The roles of instructors and learners in an online educational setting

Constructivist theory opposed the view that learners are passive agents who repeat and memorize the material presented by the teacher in the classroom. In this regard, Harasim (2012) claims that, with Constructivism, there is a shift from the conviction that “humans

could be programmed like robots, to always respond in the same way to a stimulus” (*p. 12*) to the argument that learners can actively construct knowledge in collaboration with teachers and peers (*ibid*). This seems to stimulate learners’ intrinsic motivation to learn. In fact, students are allowed to “control the learning environment, articulate learning goals and organize learning activities along with the teacher” (Davar, 2012, p. 161). This explains why the constructivist learning pedagogy is based on the following four chief principles:

1. Active learning, which means stimulating “students to participate and act, such as conduct a real experiment, rather than passive learning (listening to a lecture, reading a book)” (Harasim, 2012, p. 69).

2. Learning-by-doing, which means that students learn by “building and constructing for themselves the specific knowledge that they need rather than having a teacher dictate numerous facts. Teachers play a role as knowledge facilitators” (Logo Computer Systems Inc., 2002, cited in Harasim, 2012, p. 70).

3. Scaffolded learning which refers to the use of some particular “teaching strategies or tools designed to support learning when students are first introduced to a new subject” (Harasim, 2012, p. 71).

4. Collaborative learning, which typically refers to “a small group (of perhaps three to five students) for a team project or up to 20 students in a group discussion, debate or seminar. Students work together to discuss the topic or to conduct the project” (*ibid*, p. 72). (For a detailed description of the Constructivist Learning Pedagogy, see Harasim, 2012; 2017).

The above-mentioned constructive pedagogy principles focus on learners being actively involved in the learning process to construct knowledge, in contrast to the behaviorist and cognitivist pedagogies which focus on the instructional designer or instructor being actively involved in the teaching process while learners are supposed to be passive recipients who wait for the teacher to instruct them (Harasim, 2012, p. 68). In an attempt to better understand the constructivist learning theory, it is vital to shed light on its essential characteristics which are set below.

Essential characteristics of the constructivist learning theory

Jonassen et al. (1999, cited in Pritchard, 2009, pp. 32-33) claim that the following six characteristics represent the corner stone upon which the constructivist learning theory is built:

- The construction of knowledge and not the reproduction of knowledge is paramount...
- Learning can lead to multiple representations of reality ...
- Authentic tasks in a meaningful context are encouraged...
- Reflection on prior experience is encouraged...
- Collaborative work for learning is encouraged...
- Autonomy in learning is encouraged...

The first characteristic stipulates that the learner is actively engaged “with, and in control of, the learning process” (ibid, p. 32). As for the second characteristic, it links diversification of resources to the presentation of alternative viewpoints on the subject in question, fostering, thus, critical skills in learners (ibid). The third characteristic highlights the fact that learning be situated in familiar and realistic context (ibid). The fourth characteristic of the constructivist learning theory integrates pre-existing knowledge and experience with new information, which could lead to either understanding the schema or amending it (ibid). A schema is defined as “a representational model of all the knowledge that an individual has of any given topic. Schemas are organized around themes or topics; the individual elements of a schema are linked by this common theme” (Pritchard & Woollard, 2010, p. 11). The fifth characteristic foregrounds the need for dialogue with others with review to having alternative perspectives that are conducive to better comprehension (Pritchard, 2009, p. 33). The sixth characteristic boosts in students a greater amount of responsibility for their own learning.

It transpires from the characteristics of the constructivist learning theory summarized by Jonassen et al. (1999) that the above-stated set helps learners be interactive through dialogues and discussions with peers and classmates; as well as be autonomous in learning so as to believe more in themselves which results in high self-efficacy and high self-worth.

Despite the fact that some educators criticized constructivism on the basis that it dismisses “the active role of teacher or the value of a parent or a knowledge expert” (Harasim, 2012, p. 69), the above-mentioned features of the constructivist learning theory implicitly highlight the role of the teacher as a guide for students throughout their learning process. The constructivist teacher, for example, “introduces techniques such as problem-solving and inquiry-based learning activities whereby students formulate and test their ideas, and draw conclusions and inferences” (ibid). To be able to do these activities successfully in an online

educational atmosphere, Conrad and Donaldson (2012) developed a model including five of phases of engagement, namely connect, communicate, collaborate, co-facilitate and continue.

Each phase explains the roles of instructors and learners, the process of implementing activities evidenced by some examples. The five “C” phases of online engagement as I name are best illustrated in the following table.

Table: Phases of Engagement

Phase	Instructor Role	Student Role	Process	Activity Categories
1. Connect	Social negotiator	Newcomer (individual student)	Activities are interactive and allow learners to become acquainted. Instructor provides expectations for engagement, orientation to the course, and keeps learners on track on a one-to-one basis.	Icebreakers, individual introductions, discussions about community issues such as Netiquette.
2. Communicate	Structural engineer	Peer partner (two-student pairing)	Instructor forms student dyads and provides activities requiring critical thinking, reflection, and sharing of ideas.	Peer reviews, activity critiques, pro-and-con discussions.
3. Collaborate	Facilitator	Team-member (three-to-five-member groups)	Groups collaborate, solve problems, and reflect on experiences.	Content discussions, role playing, debates, jigsaws.

4. Co-Facilitate	Community member/ subject matter expert	Initiator/ partner (continued member of same group)	Activities are learner-initiated or learner-led. Learners direct discussion and facilitate interaction. Projects are developed collaboratively with instructor guidance.	Group presentations and authentic projects, learner-facilitated discussions.
5. Continue	Supporter	Contemplator	Activities are focused on the transformation of the online learner that has occurred as a result of engagement activities.	Self-reflections, evaluation of course engagement, plans for future engagement.

Thus, it is possible to observe a clear shift in learning theory from one where there is little place for the learner in the act of learning, other than through repetition and memorization, to one where the learner is busy cognizing the world at their own, individual mental level, and finally to one where social interaction plays a major part in learning (Moallem, Hung, & Dabbagh, 2019, p. 54). Effective Introduction and implementation of the five phases of online engagement bring the learner to the fore. Palloff and Pratt (2003) state that “When the instructor sets the stage appropriately, the virtual student begins to understand that his or her individual learning process depends on the participation and commitment of the other students in the group” (p. 23).

Online learners are recognized for what they bring to and contribute to the learning process. They are now deemed an important role in the learning process and context. Learner styles and motivations are now added to the mix, along with the role of the instructor who is responsible for designing learning activities that suit learners’ different learning styles. The latter refers to the “mode of learning – an individual’s preferred or best manner(s) in which to think, process information and demonstrate learning” (Pritchard, 2009, p. 41). According to Anderson (2008, p. 37) effective online learning activities include journalizing, research, read,

listen and view, apply, practice and summarize. (For further information about the components of effective online learning, see Anderson, 2008).

Conclusion

In digital era, the transition from traditional to online education is a worthwhile experience. It assigns value to the role of the individual learner who is an active participant in the learning process, and not merely a passive acquirer. Learners take charge of understanding the world around them through experiencing it and reflecting upon their experiences and integrating new experiences into their updated knowledge.

Despite the fact that online education is fruitful for both instructors and learners, it has some institutional barriers, technology and technological barriers, pedagogical barriers and interpersonal barriers which must be taken into account when designing the learning activities.

References

- Anderson, T. (2008). *The Theory and Practice of Online Learning*. (Second Edition). Canada: Athabasca University Press.
- Brooks, J. G., and Brooks, M. G. (1999). *In Search of Understanding: The Case for Constructivist Classrooms*. Alexandria: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Chance, P. (2014). *Learning and Behavior* (Seventh Edition). Australia: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- [Chomsky](#), N. (1965). *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press.
- [Conrad](#), R. M., [Donaldson](#), J. A. (2012). *Continuing to Engage the Online Learner: More Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- [Davar](#), M. (2012). *Teaching of Science*. New Delhi: PHI Learning.

- Dörnyei, Z. (1990). Conceptualising Motivation in Foreign Language Learning. *Language Learning*, 40(1), 45-78.
- Dörnyei, Z., and Ushioda, E. (2011). *Teaching and Researching Motivation* (Second Edition). Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.
- Gardner, R. C. (1990). Attitudes, Motivation, and Personality as Predictors of Success. In [T. S. Parry](#) and [C. W. Stansfield](#) (Eds.), *Language Aptitude Reconsidered* (pp. 179-221). Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Gardner, R. C. (2001). Integrative Motivation and Second Language Acquisition. In Z. Dörnyei, and R. Schmidt (Eds.), *Motivation and Second Language Acquisition* (pp. 1-20). Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press.
- [Harasim](#), L. (2012). *Learning Theory and Online Technologies*. New York: Routledge.
- Keengwe, J., and Onchwari, G. (2008). Constructivism, Technology, and Meaningful Learning. In: T. T. Kidd., and H. Song. (Eds.), *Handbook of Research on Instructional Systems and Technology* (pp. 51-64). Hershey: New York Information Science Reference.
- Martin, F., and Kumar, S. (2021). Barriers in Online Education and strategies for Overcoming Them. In [L. Cifuentes](#) (Ed.), *A Guide to Administering Distance Learning* (pp. 43-60). Leiden; Boston: Brill.
- Moallem, M., Hung, W., and Dabbagh, N. (2019). *The Wiley Handbook of Problem-Based Learning*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley Blackwell.
- Palloff, R. M., and Pratt, K. (2003). *The virtual student: A profile and guide to working with online learners*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Pritchard, A. (2009). *Ways of Learning: Learning Theories and Learning Styles in the Classroom* (Second Edition). London: Routledge.
- Pritchard, A., and [Woollard](#), J. (2010). *Psychology for the Classroom: Constructivism and Social Learning*. New York: Routledge.

Skinner, B. F. (1950) Are theories of learning necessary? *Psychological Review*, 57(4), 193-216.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*. Cambridge, M.A: Harvard University Press.

[Weller](#), M. (2017). *Delivering Learning on the Net: The Why, What and How of Online Education*. New York; London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group.