

Constructive Alignment Vs Experiential Learning for ESL Students

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Abstract

This study looks into the two important pedagogical strategies of teaching based on the author's experiences: constructive alignment and experiential learning. The researcher proposes that English language teachers should not only master the theories, concepts and principles of teaching and learning, but rather they have to try, to use, re-apply, re-invent, re-develop, implement, and evaluate their pedagogical strategies that work to a certain subject or course or to a certain class of students. This paper concludes with some best practices in teaching and learning that will lead to quality improvement and professional growth. This paper uses the descriptive type of research through documentary analysis and reflective observation. The findings show that whatever type of pedagogical strategies will be used inside the classroom, should not matter at all, as long as the strategies fit the students' learning styles and preferences. The question: "What have my students learnt after the course?" should be expounded by this piece of work.

Keywords: constructive alignment, experiential learning, effective teaching and learning

Introduction

There are many qualities of a good teacher but the qualities can never be compared to being a reflective teacher, who tries to identify his/her methods/strategies of teaching and evaluating them to improve quality teaching and learning. In this paper, the researcher will show how the two pedagogical strategies of teaching have changed her ways of teaching preparatory students and how these best practices improved her not only as a teacher but also as an individual. There is no such thing as an excellent teacher, but the researcher believes that there is a reflective teacher. Quality teaching has a measurable impact on student outcomes. According to Ramsden (2003), the demands to improve quality teaching are necessary both for accreditation purposes and professional development. He discerns that:

Teaching is one of the most delightful and exciting of all human activities when it is done well; and is one of the most humiliating and tedious when it is done poorly. (p. 5)

This paper specifically examines the effectiveness of two pedagogies of teaching at Jubail University College (JUC) – Female Branch. It seeks to find out specific answers to the following questions: (1) What is constructive alignment and experiential learning? (2) How are these strategies applied to teaching ESL students? (3) What are the implications of these two strategies for teaching and learning (4) How do these strategies improve our current practice as language teachers?

I. Review of Related Literature and the effects on the researcher

There are no empirical or comparative studies about this topic; however, there are some related literatures describing the two pedagogies of teaching. These are described below along with the experiences of the researcher and her development as a teacher.

It is a common belief that teaching and learning is a two-way process – that learning is defined as a change of an individual caused by experience or by development (Vega, 2006). There are various theories of teaching and learning, but these theories depend on how they are applied in the classroom. The “teacher-centered” and “student-centered” approaches are terms that were unclear to the researcher until she started evaluating her methods and strategies of teaching. When the researcher took her Post Graduate Certificate at Southampton Solent University, she was convinced that in a teacher-centered classroom environment, teachers serve as the center of learning and that they can control the students and their access of information. (PGC: Southampton Solent University, 2010).

However, the researcher strived to shift from a teacher-centered to a student-centered approach in teaching at JUC. She applied various instructional materials, online references, games, portfolio writing, debate, buzz sessions, panel discussions and the like. At first, it was very difficult to employ both constructive alignment and experiential learning, but as time went on, students gradually embraced and enjoyed them. Pekcan (2008) claimed that when a teacher uses the student-centered strategy, students come with their own perceptual framework and learn in various ways. According to Pekcan, in terms of learning outcomes, there is a higher order of thinking because students solve problems, critically analyze and also organize information. In this sense, learning takes place through the active behavior of the student. It is what the student does inside the classroom that is more important than what the teacher does. Similarly, in constructive alignment theory, Biggs (2007) proved that students construct meaning from what they do in order to learn. The Intended Learning Outcomes (ILO), the Teaching and Learning

Activities (TLA), and the Assessments are carefully aligned to measure whether ILO's are achieved or not.

On the other hand, based on Kolb's study (1984 by Fry, 2004), an appreciation of experiential learning is necessary to underpin many of different types of teaching activity based on the notion that understanding is not a fixed or an unchangeable element of thought but is formed and re-formed through experience.

Summerlee and Hughes (2010) highlighted the importance of reviewing pedagogies employed, the content of programs, and the instructor's professional skills. They discovered that:

There is a need to ensure alignment with institutional policies and practices to facilitate this vision of high quality teaching and learning. (p.243)

The researcher postulates that it doesn't matter what methods and strategies are used in the classroom, as long as they fit the students' level and interest. This paper reports on the effort to determine whether these strategies will work with the students.

II. Methodology

This paper has utilized descriptive type research through documentary analysis and reflective observation. In documentary analysis, the researcher has provided descriptions and examples, critical analysis of the workshop conducted with 40 teachers and a group of students at JUC and the various literatures on similar studies. Reflective observations were used to find out what worked well and what were the things to be improved in terms of teaching and learning. There were 100 student respondents during the conduct of the formative survey. These were carefully and qualitatively analyzed as shown in this piece of work.

Descriptive research is commonly described as an approach to apply the result of the study in a practical sense. It can be a good tool to disseminate information and to help improve the teaching-learning process.

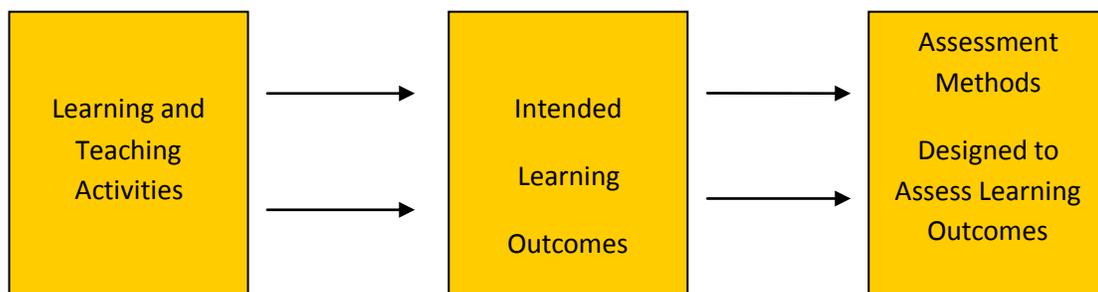
III. Discussion

1. Discussion of Terminology

A. What is Constructive Alignment

Constructive Alignment is one of the most influential ideas in higher education (Biggs, 2007). Students construct meaning from what they do in order to learn. In this strategy, the teacher aligns the planned learning activities with the learning outcomes as shown:

Fig.1 Aligning learning outcomes, learning and teaching activities and the assessment. Adapted from Biggs (2007)



In application of constructive alignment, teachers should begin with what the student knows (McKeachie, 1996). The student compares the old or known information or process from the new and unknown information and this allows the student to grasp new information more quickly.

B. What is Experiential Learning

In this pedagogy of teaching, Kolb (1984) states that learning involves the acquisition of abstract concepts that can be applied flexibly in a range of situations. The development of new concepts is provided by new experiences. Experiential Learning has the following components:

1. Concrete Experience - a new experience of a situation is encountered, or a reinterpretation of an existing experience.
2. Reflective Observation - pertains to a new experience.
3. Abstract Conceptualization - reflection gives rise to a new idea, or a modification of an existing abstract concept.
4. Active Experimentation - the learner applies them to the world around them to see what results.

Figure . *Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning. Retrieved March 26, 2013 from: [Http://www.google.com.sa](http://www.google.com.sa).*



2. How are these strategies applied to teaching ESL students?

A. Analysis on the Workshop Conducted at JUC

In determining whether the pedagogy of teaching is used as a constructive alignment or experiential learning, the researcher has analyzed the workshop that she conducted with 50 teachers and a group of students at JUC as follows:

1. Group 1: Basic etiquette of using the mobile phone

Objective: To learn the basic etiquette of using the mobile phone

Activity: Telephone Conversation

Presentation: vocabularies and phrases, use correct language usage, how to respond and close telephone conversation

Assessment: To determine the use of vocabularies and phrases such as: Hello, good morning, this is Julie speaking, this is Ms. Pitt's residence, how are you? Thank you, have a nice day, what is your message, Sir/Ma'am?

The teacher used the constructive alignment of teaching. The objective of the lesson was aligned with its task and the type of assessment given. Tyler (1940's) developed a four-part model for delivering and evaluating instruction that became known as the *Tyler Rationale as follows*:

- a. What educational purposes should the training seek to develop? (Defining appropriate learning objectives)
- b. How can learning experiences be selected which are likely to be useful in attaining these objectives? (Introducing useful learning experiences)
- c. How can learning experiences be organized for effective instruction? (Organizing experiences to maximize their effect).
- d. How can the effectiveness of learning experiences be evaluated? (Evaluating the process and revising the areas that were not effective).

In this lesson on Listening 001, the teacher succeeded in bringing out what students already know (Mc Keachi) about telephone conversation. The students applied their basic etiquette of telephone conversation. It is what the participant does that he/she learns, not what the teacher does (Biggs and Tang, 2007; Prosser & Trigwell, 1998). Since the topic and the task were interesting, the students learned the topic so easily.

2. **Group 2: Advantages of using the computer**

Objectives: To help students (1) identify the main advantages of using computers. (2) demonstrate the use of computers save time. (3) identify the activities in which computers can be used to save time.

Materials: Computer lab/classroom with multimedia

Activity: Group Activity- First Group: will use the textbook Second Group: will use the computer to look for specific information

Assessment: Research output on the advantages of using computers

In this lesson, the teacher used the textbook to identify the advantages of using computers. The students discovered the advantages and discussed them in their own group. During the discussion, students shared their own experiences while looking at the advantages. The second group worked on the computer and easily looked into the advantages. Both of them realized that the use of computer saves time rather than using the textbook. Since the skill used here is Reading, students were given time to read and answer the teacher's questions. The pedagogy of teaching used was Experiential Learning because students were able to share their own experiences using the computers. They also applied what they learned from each other. It goes on and on as represented by the cycle.

3. **Group 3: Advantages and disadvantages of cell phones**

Objective: Find out new vocabularies and transitional words effectively in a paragraph

Tasks: Based on the passage given, write a paragraph about advantages and disadvantages of cell phones.

Assessment: Transitional words must be applied in writing one paragraph

In this lesson, the teacher taught writing. The constructive alignment was used because students were tasked to elicit responses on what they know about cell phones. Further, students were given the chance to think about transitional words that they have in mind and elicit new vocabulary words. These transitional words were used in writing their own paragraphs. As a supplement to this task, students performed a role play by calling a similar group of students to

the front of the class where a “daughter and mother” talked about the advantages and disadvantages of cell phones.

4. *Group 4: Transitions*

Objectives: (1) Use transitions correctly in written and spoken language. (2) Express ideas clearly about a given topic.

Tasks: buzz session, give sentences using transitions based on the passage, analyze the sentences, summarize the lesson

Assessment: Oral practice (games) and written practice on identifying transitional words based on the given sentences/paragraphs.

In this lesson, the teacher taught grammar in class. She provided buzz session activity as its motivational strategy to facilitate learning. The lesson was based on the similar topic above. Students should be able to find out all transition words correctly in this lesson. Both the teacher and the students achieved their objectives and this is another example of constructive alignment.

As a teacher, what do you want to achieve in teaching? Biggs and Tang (2008) shared that:

The focus in teaching is not what we teach but what we would like our students to learn and how we can help them achieve that. The first step therefore is to define the ILO for our students. Teaching and assessment are then designed and implemented to align with these outcomes. (p. 7)

The Intended Learning Outcomes

According to Biggs and Tang (2007), subject or unit level of attaining ILO is answering the question: what are the intended learning outcomes for students taking particular subject/unit at a particular level within the program? ILOs are statements of what students are expected to be able to do as a result of engaging in the learning process (studying a program). The following generic high level verbs are used in conceptualizing and expressing ILOs:

Table 1: List of ILOs from Biggs and Tang (2008)

Apply	Conceptualize	Reflect
Create original insights	Solve unseen problems	Generate new alternatives
Critically review	Hypothesize	Theorize

Based on the above scenarios, there were three evidences of constructive alignment while only one in experiential learning. Both were used to critically evaluate the learning of students. Using these strategies is not only shifting from the teacher-centered to student-centered method, but it is important to know the students' learning preferences and their study habits to make learning possible.

3. *Towards quality improvement*

Quality improvement in teaching can be attained through concerted efforts among individuals, management level to rank and file. There are so many ways of improving our teaching methods, strategies, instructional materials, etc. when everyone is ready to embrace a constructively aligned teaching and learning. Biggs and Tang (2007) emphasized the value of formative evaluation, particularly the planning of institutional evaluation. In their book “*Teaching for Quality Learning at University*”, they partly mentioned about action research or other designs of evaluation that need to be taken into account. They suggested some sort of teaching quality

committee that could have a reflective report on the experience in implementing such constructive alignment at the end of the year of its implementation. Issues may include:

1. The impact on teaching: data from teachers' portfolios could be compiled and course evaluation by students
2. Impact on student learning: Much similar data as gathered by teachers for individual course evaluations.
3. Comparisons across different aligned courses: What ones are working well? What ones are experiencing difficulties? What difficulties and how were they dealt with?
4. What operational structures have the department with respect to implementing and monitoring the innovation?
5. Concerns regarding continuing implementation
6. An action plan for future improvement

Quality and accreditation are two issues related to all university levels, but these depend on how the whole institution shall respond to this change. As Biggs and Tang (2007) claimed that:

QA is concerned with maintaining the quality of the work institutions... Quality enhancement is concerned with reviewing not only how well the whole institution works in achieving its mission, but also how it may keep improving in doing so. (p. 263)

What are the reasons why students are unmotivated to learn?

One typical example of quality improvement in teaching is to find out the reasons why students are not motivated to learn. Perhaps, they have reasons that a teacher should understand and one way to solving this problem is to align her teaching with the learners' styles and preferences. The researcher tried to conduct a short dialogue with 50 students in preparatory year. Below are the top reasons why students feel unmotivated to study:

Table 2: *Students' reason why they are not motivated to learn in the classroom*

Rank	Reason
Rank 1	<i>I am used to sleeping late. I love chatting with my friends and relatives abroad. When I am in class I feel tired and want to sleep.</i>
Rank 2	<i>I finished all my paragraphs and my mind is empty when I'm in the class. I want to go home early.</i>
Rank 3	<i>Miss, the room is so cold and I couldn't help but to take a nap for a few minutes...</i>
Rank 4	<i>I feel bored sometimes because of too many topics in the book. I think understanding all of these topics are not so easy.</i>
Rank 5	<i>Eating inside the classroom is prohibited, so I would rather ask permission and go to the cafeteria and buy food to eat. I don't usually check the time when I come back to class.</i>

For quality improvement purposes, the researcher conducted a short dialogue through a written interview with only one question: What makes you unmotivated to learn in the classroom? While doing this short dialogue, she felt that there was "a close relationship" by not just listening to them, but also knowing what and how they feel. After knowing this, the researcher decided to

fully implement the student-centered method coupled with various pedagogical strategies. She realized that these pedagogies are mostly applicable to students who belong to low, average, or superior levels. So, as a result, students' level of engagement becomes high. Therefore, it made them motivated to learn.

3. What are the implications of these two strategies for teaching and learning?

Both constructivism and experiential learning play important roles in teaching and learning, but the former is effective in constructing new knowledge based on prior learning and experience. The Kolb's learning cycle focuses more on the experience of an individual that helps improve our reflection process. If a teacher uses the student-centred method, this may lead to students' autonomy and more opportunities for interaction in the classroom.

Unknowingly, the researcher has been using the constructive alignment and experiential learning in the classroom. She found out that both are effective means of enhancing students' learning; however, experiential learning cannot always be applied in all language skills. It always depends on the students' own experience and how they translate these into the real world.

Although as an educator, the researcher never stops from knowing how her teaching and learning progresses by conducting *research and continuous reflection* on what she does as a teacher and how her students learn best.

In contrast, Kolb's learning stages and cycles can be used to critically evaluate the learning provision typically available to students and to develop more appropriate learning opportunities (Kolb, 1984). Whatever strategy a teacher should use as long as it suits the learners to engage learning, this does not matter at all. In Experiential learning cycle, students can learn more effectively by identifying their preferred learning styles. There is a need to develop and re-develop our teaching and learning materials, the use of learning materials and handouts, compendiums, activities and the like. Ultimately, the purpose of improving our teaching is studying our students' learning (Ramsden, 2003).

4. How do these strategies improve our current practice as language teachers?

After a thorough examination and investigation of the two pedagogies of teaching, the researcher gradually noticed that the following aspects are needed to be improved not only in her level as a language teacher, but basically helping to enhance the teaching and learning process in general:

- a. **Teaching and Learning in Higher Education:** The researcher discussed her experiences by applying some of the theories of teaching and learning, but she delved only into the most applicable ones that have totally changed her perspective of teaching and learning. One of which is how she became a reflective thinker in the use of Kolb's Learning cycle and the second is the constructivist theory that proves how her students learn through constructing new things based on experiences and relate these experiences into reality. As a language teacher, shifting to student-centered is not easy, but it encourages her to do it because she has no doubt that growth in teaching can be done through research and continuous reflection. As Skillbeck (2001) opines:
Higher education should mean a higher quality, a standard against which experience of many kinds, learning at all levels and of all types, study and reflective inquiry are to be appraised. (p.1)
- b. **Curriculum Design and Development:** An anonymous writer states that "teaching is something that takes place when learning does. No matter what the teacher is doing in

her class, if her students are not learning something significant, she is not teaching. When the student fails, the teacher fails more.”

In constructivism, learners construct new ideas or concepts based on prior learning. Faculty designs instruction around a learning objective, gather resources, and provide students with an opportunity to explore, build and demonstrate their learning. It shifts the learning environment from one that is teacher-centered to one that is very student-centered. The 5E’s Model is most often associated with Constructivist Learning Design. These are: engage, explore, explain, elaborate and evaluate ([Http://www.miamisci.org/ph](http://www.miamisci.org/ph) Retrieved April 5, 2013). The 5E’s of constructivism is based on constructive alignment theory wherein, learning is what students do, experience, apply, and to make personal reflections about what he is trying to do. What he learns is the product of what the teacher has taught and his own learning in his environment thus, learning can be a product of *change* not only acquiring knowledge.

- c. **Evaluation and Feedback:** Where teaching and learning act hand-in-hand, where one depends on and affects the others, how well the students have learned is the aim of evaluation and feedback. Angelo and Cross (1998) state that the current view in higher education is that we should focus on student learning rather than teaching in order to improve students’ college experiences. There is a need for “change and constructive alignment:

Figure 3: Transformative reflection: constructively aligned teaching and learning

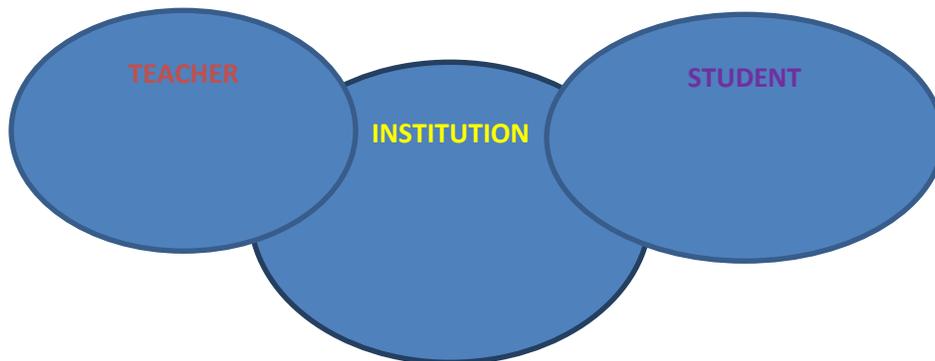


Figure 4: How People Learn by Bransford Retrieved March 25, 2013 from: (<http://www.assessment.ucon.edu>)



The researcher perceives that it is not the number of topics from the chapters that make students learn, but it is how students learn based on the experiences provided by the

teacher through various tasks and assessments that they can easily execute or practice in their own practical way.

- d. **Effective Learning Environment:** The school environment plays a significant role in the deep engagement of learning. The school should support the needs of the classroom to produce a good learning environment. The students' experiences using various methods and strategies and the use of online resources and other references will possibly make an effective learning environment.

Reflections on-practice

"I strongly count on one of my goals as a teacher is to develop my students the ability to learn how to learn. It is my duty and responsibility to encourage them to attain the highest level of self-esteem and self-confidence to perform the tasks required of them. Thus, it is essential to re-study teaching/learning theories in order to adapt with necessary learning strategies for the students. After this study, I was totally convinced about the constructive alignment theory. Students develop critical thinking, problem-solving, active and reflective use of knowledge. Reflection is brought by the idea of Kolb's Learning Cycle. There are many principles and theories underlying teaching and learning but these cannot all be applied in one class without actually trying this out (active experimentation). Aligning to curriculum and instruction and assessments can possibly be done. Indeed, Squires (2009) corresponds standards can be aligned to the curriculum provided there is a match between the standards, instruction and assessment even if the standards are considered general and the curriculum is more specific. Taking a look at the standards of teaching in higher education, these will provide and improve instruction and the curriculum which calls for an alignment in higher educational institutions."

IV. Conclusion

The changes in the researcher's professional practice and personal development are due to reflections from her past experiences and relating them to present. Teaching in Saudi Arabia can be challenging and as a language teacher, she has proven some aspects to be improved such as: understanding teaching and learning in higher education, curriculum design and development, evaluation and feedback, and effective learning environment. It is not that easy to embrace change but the optimism of the researcher can be part of attaining her goals. It is also important to appreciate continuously the value of reflection in-action and reflection on-action because these will eventually promote new learning and change into personal and professional aspects of her life as a teacher (constructive alignment). In conclusion, re-studying, re-developing, and re-trying out innovative changes in teaching will lead to quality improvement (experiential learning).

The researcher concludes and recommends that language teachers should not stop from re-inventing their methods and pedagogical strategies. It is also advisable if they can find time reviewing all their Intended Learning Outcomes (ILO) in a certain course and align them with their Teaching-Learning Activities (TLA) and assessments. An action research can also be part of alignment by knowing students' problems and finding solutions to these for improvement and professional growth. No matter what type of strategies are we going to use in the classroom as long as it is appropriate to the learner's style and preferences. What is important is to pause and think about this question: have my students learned after teaching them the course?

About the Aauthor:

Ms. Ethel Reyes-Chua has been connected with Jubail University College – Female Branch since 2010 as an English Instructor. Prior to this, she has ample experiences in teaching English as a second language in her own country, Philippines. She graduated with the degree in Bachelor of Arts in English and Masters of Arts in Teaching major in Literature. She also finished her Post Graduate Certificate (PGC) at Southampton Solent University in June 2010 with flying colors. She is actively participating at presenting research papers to various local or international seminars and conferences to improve her methods and pedagogical strategies of teaching.

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