English High-School Teachers' Beliefs About Constructivist Teaching And Their Classroom Practices: A Case Study At A High School, Vietnam

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Abstract

This Study Aims To Investigate English High-School Teachers' Beliefs About Constructivist Teaching (Ct) And Their Actual Classroom Practices (Cp) At A High School In Vietnam. The Present Qualitative Case Study Was Utilized To Achieve A Detailed Understanding Of The Issues Via Investigation. Data Collection Instruments Including Semi-Structured Interviews, Classroom Observations, And Stimulated Recall Interviews Were Employed To Gather Data, Which Then Were Analyzed Using Thematic Analysis, Particularly Ensuring The Trustworthiness Of The Results. Three Groups Of Teachers Are Identified As Traditional Conservers, Neutral Pragmatists, And Adaptive Originators. Within This Article, The Researcher Gave The Detailed Discussion Of The Major Results From The Traditional Conservers (Tcs), Whose Beliefs About Teaching Were Mainly Teacher-Centered, Supportive Of Traditional Teaching Methods, And Pupils In Their View Might Be Passive And Obedient Learners. These Tcs Had A Limited Comprehension Of Ct Approaches, And They Were Not Willing To Change How They Were Familiar With Traditional Teaching Methods In Practice.

Key Words: *Constructivist Teaching, Teacher Beliefs, Teaching/Instructional Practices, Traditional Conservers.*

I.   INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, the teacher holds an exclusive role in imparting knowledge, while pupils are trained to listen to and obey the teacher (Ladd & Ruby, 1999). Another role the teacher is supposed to take on is the person who gives feedback and corrects the student's mistakes whenever such errors occur. The other role of the teacher lies in the fact that they must evaluate student performance on tests and examinations.

In Vietnamese context, learners are expected to be "parrots" who are passive listeners and obedient imitators of their teachers. One-way interactions between teachers and pupils as the main approaches are observed in practice. In everyday language, pupils answer the teacher's questions when being asked. The emphasis appears to be on pupils passing all of their tests and examinations at the end of the semester.

The teacher in a constructivist classroom transitions from being a "knowledge presenter" to a "facilitator of knowledge". To do this, the teacher must grasp the learners' prior knowledge, guide them to clarify their opinions, and provide logical and challenging explanations.

Parker (1997) suggests that constructivist teachers motivate learners to create knowledge based on their previous knowledge and relate that knowledge to the environment in which they live. Jonassen (1999) also identifies three critical roles for teachers (as facilitators) to build constructivist learning environments (CLEs) in the classroom including Modeling - Coaching – Scaffolding.

In constructivist class, the teacher provides different learning situations to the pupils with the aim change the student's roles from "acquiring knowledge" to "building knowledge". In this model, learning refers to a means of creating new information, and pupils actively create new knowledge by fusing it with previously held knowledge. Learner involvement in a relevant activity helps to further structure and restructure ideas. Each learner constructs meaning concerning a phenomenon, object, or event as they learn individually and collectively. Teachers allow learners to ask questions about what they are learning at school and encourage them to answer in their own experiences. Thus, constructivism also helps pupils pursue personal interests and goals.

II.   LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' beliefs have a crucial influence on how the curriculum is conducted (Tobin, Tippins, & Gallard 1994) and strategies for instructions are chosen (Driscoll, 2000). Teachers may help fully express the beliefs or theories underlying their practice or even be aware of their thoughts (Sahin, Bullock, & Stables, 2002). Argyris and Schön (1974) suggest that to know how to use a person's theory, the researcher must observe

his/her behavior. In another study, Pajares (1992) identified beliefs as precursors of behavior individuals perform based on their beliefs. Belief is thought to drive action, and the relationship between belief and action is interactive (Richardson, 1996).

According to empirical research, educator opinions may align with or diverge from their actions. Teachers' beliefs about educational instruction are compatible with their own practices, according to Beswick (2008) and Mitchell & Hegde (2007). However, several studies have also discovered that teachers' perceptions and reality diverge (D. M. Kagan, 1992; I. Lee, 2009; Y. S. Lee, Baik & Charlesworth, 2006). Inconsistencies in teachers' beliefs and practices are due to several internal factors. Kang (2008) reported that vocational and practical teachers only act on their beliefs when they know the content sufficiently. Mouza (2009), in his longitudinal study, confirmed that pedagogical content knowledge is essential for teachers to express their beliefs. Consistency between teachers' ideas and practices can also be hampered by a lack of self-reflection and self-awareness (Roehrig, Turner, Grove, Schneider, & Liu, 2009).

The connection between belief and practice is still one of the recurrent issues in the literature when it comes to teacher beliefs. In accordance study findings, the beliefs of educators have a big impact on their practice (Fang, 1996; Skott, 2015). Thus, much of the research on teacher beliefs has been motivated by a desire to explain the approach (Basturkmen, 2012). Studies are also predicated on the idea that "beliefs are frequently detected as precursors of behavior" (Buehl & Beck, 2015, p. 64). Therefore, understanding teachers' beliefs provides a profound understanding of what teachers conduct in the classroom.

External factors such as pupils, peers, and the school can also interfere with aligning teachers' beliefs and practices. Savasci and Berlin (2012) report that the most frequent self-report challenges when implementing constructivist beliefs are student behavior and student abilities. For example, the pupils preferred worksheets over inquiry-based instruction to avoid in-depth thinking. Furthermore, one of the findings of Kang (2008) suggests that teachers need to be supported by more experienced teachers to fulfill their beliefs. Additionally, Kang (2008) contends that pre-enlistment teachers ought to have complete support while they voice their opinions on the job. Numerous research have been conducted to determine the connection between pedagogical beliefs and the use of investigative techniques, curricular reform, and CT in light of the significance of teachers' pedagogical views in the process of language education reform (Bybee et al., 2006). The study's findings showed that teachers' opinions regarding certain reform goals, instruction and learning, and their responsibilities evolve and "filter" innovative initiatives, even when teachers announce their implementation (Sampson, Enderle & Groom, 2013).

According to studies by Raths (2001), Handal (2004), Zheng (2009) and Meena (2009), the opinions of the teacher or tutor have a variety of effects on the actions in the classroom. In the Australian context, Handal (2004) investigates teachers' instructional ideas towards incorporating technology. Handal (2004) noted that the planning to implement educational innovation for teachers proved to be a failure when teachers' feelings, conceptions, and views on teaching were not considered in curriculum development. Professional learning goals relied on teachers' attitudes, beliefs and behaviors stimulate teacher ownership and success in implementing programs. Accordingly, Handal (2004) uncovered that teachers resist change when there is a lack of confidence to support it, ingrained transformational practices, lack of time to prepare for lectures, limited continuing professional training, as well as fake and real resources to aid in teaching (Handal, 2004). As a result, it is of the utmost importance to consider the influence of beliefs while making decisions on CT and learning.

As mentioned above, some researchers recommend starting at the beliefs level to improve teaching. Addressing teachers' ideas and providing them with support to harmonize them with their constructivist teaching methods is essential to ensuring the effectiveness of a constructivist approach to both teaching and learning.

III. METHODOLOGY

This research used a qualitative case study design for the following reasons: First, a qualitative research design was used in the study to gather information on high-school teachers' opinions, expertise, and experiences with constructivist teaching (CT). Second, the qualitative research design was ideal for gaining detailed and organized understanding of high school teachers' perspectives on CT. The quantitative design, which frequently entails collecting numerical data, would not give rich data to address the study objectives. In contrast, a qualitative design might take the shape of a case study, the researcher opted to utilize one (Creswell, 2012). Additionally, qualitative research design were aligned with critical pedagogy, training transfer, and social constructivist perspectives, which engaged the researcher in comprehending backgrounds reflected in the interactions, social structures, and cultural influences of human behaviors represented in the study (Creswell, 1994; Grunbaum, 2007).

In the present study, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and stimulated recall interviews were employed to collect data. This study employed MAXQDA for data analysis as this program saves time and allows researchers to organize and retrieve the coded data (Kuckartz & Radiker, 2019). MAXQDA received all of the data sources from the observations and interviews. Case analysis were made

easier for the researcher as well by utilizing MAXQDA to code the data. The researcher coded the data for one participant and then conducted a qualitative analysis on that individual's data, then made notes of analysis remarks or paragraphs to put in the report later as the researcher was coding.

IV.   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The group of teachers was identified as the "Traditional Conservers" (TCs). The "Traditional Conservers" can be called "traditionalists." The "Traditional Conservers" are similar to Carnall's (1995) model of people that must often experience change when they have no choice but to confront and face it. The "Traditional Conservers" in this study were people who whether they saw the need for a change in constructivist teaching or not, refused to change constructivist teaching because change threatens their beliefs. In other words, TCs seem "resistant or closed to change" and tend to be negative to innovation. As a result, they do not implement new ideas; if they do, it is done superficially. Two Traditional Conservers, namely Teacher 1 (T1) & Teacher 2 (T2), were among the participants.

> **Theme 1: TCs' Beliefs about Knowledge construction/ Prior knowledge**

Results from the interview unfolded that the Traditional Conservers (TCs) expressed their rather favorable commitment to the tenets of constructivist teaching (CT) regarding certain aspects of recalling pupils' prior knowledge.

Teacher 1 (T1) indicated they take into consideration learners' previous knowledge when they plan lessons, but checking the previous lesson is not their typical habit. Such a belief was evidently illustrated in the following excerpts.

> *"I believe that activating pupils' pre-existing knowledge may help them to clarify the topic and understand the concept, but I don't have enough time to check their prior knowledge through homework because I have forty-five pupils in my class [laughing], so I often ignore this activity."* [T1.I2.01]

Teacher 2 (T2) had the same opinion with T1 in her explanation:

> *"Before introducing a new topic, I sometimes request learners' previous knowledge pertinent to that topic, but actually,checking the previous lesson consumes time a lot."* [T2.I2.03]

In T1's practice, I observed that she only gave her own ideas to her pupils. There was little teacher-learner interaction in her actual classes. In addition, her method was not effective in linking the pupils' previous knowledge with new lessons. I saw that pupils in her classes could not relate new lessons to what they had learned before. It seems that new knowledge was transmitting from one direction - from the teacher only. In other instances, a few real-world examples were employed to demonstrate brand-new concepts. The majority of pupils, however, were unable to offer examples of their own.

In T2's grammar lessons I have attended, her lesson started with an explanation for rules and then moved on to practices. For instance, in one class, instead of having pupils recall what they have learned, T2 spent the fifteen minutes explaining various uses verbs. Then, she gave other exercises that required learners to underline the verb and tell the form and the use of these verbs in reported speech to the hold class. Below is a sample of the introduction of another lesson on reported speech.

In brief, findings from the interviews and observation uncovered that the Traditional Conservers (TCs), generally verbalized their slightly favorable beliefs about recalling pupils' prior knowledge. However, they did not allow the learners to formulate their own ideas and remained stiff to change in practice.

> **Theme 2: TCs' Beliefs about Collaboration learning**

The interview data revealed that the interviewed teachers were favorably supportive of the CT tenet regarding Collaboration. As reported, TCs believed that interaction was an important factor to create chances for mutual understanding and generate comments and feedback:

> *"In my view of point, pupils can learn from their friends' vocabulary;… and they can see their friends' mistakes [uhm] as well as assist their friends; oh, even, I see they can overcome, maybe the gap."* [T1.I2.07]

In the same vein, T2 explained:

> *"Work in pairs or groups brings my pupils more chances to learn from each other Those who are informed are able to educate those who are not. As a result, they mentor and support one another. They feel satisfied about it. In addition, their comprehension and that of their peers both improve. They connect with their peers and listen to their mates instead of doing something independently or only*

paying attention to me. This helps them develop. They have a great opportunity to exchange their views in teams or pairs, thus I believe they function better in those settings. They put their newly acquired knowledge learned into reality, practice collaborating with one another, and sharpen their speaking and listening abilities. [T2.I2.09]

Even though TCs said that using pair or group work was one of the key aspects of constructivist educat ion, their instructional behaviors did not correspond to these claims.
There remained a lot of instruction for the whole class, yet the classes I watched had
very little collaboration or teamwork.
Teacher 1 highlighted the importance of good interaction in a group in the initial interview. She said,

"In groups, members should interact well so that they can produce something good." [T1.I2.08]

Therefore, she always asked the groups to turn their chairs to face other pupils to enable the group to interact. The following is an example of a classroom observation episode that describes T1's way of encouraging pupils to interact with their group mates:

After a few seconds, she [T1] changed his mind. She grouped the pupils into four again. She said, "Now I want you to work in a smaller group, A, B, C, D [pointing to each group] Please turn around your chairs so that you can interact with your friends [in the group]." She then monitored the pupils and made sure that they turned around their chairs to discuss the task. [T1.O2.Unit 5.Grade 10]

She explained,

For instance, in a group, certain pupils do not do the work. They disturb their friends in the group. They are noisy. Sometimes, I do not know to handle this. I have told them to stop but they will not. It is hard to change it [uncooperative behavior].[T1.I2.09]

I observed that T1 seemed to forget such uncooperative behavior. Therefore, I wrote in my field notes (FN):

When she [a group representative] was reading, some pupils were not paying attention. They kept on talking. T1 should have reminded the pupils to pay attention. She stood at his table and then moved to sit in front of her table. She was looking around, yet she needed to remind his pupils to pay attention. [My FN, T1]

T1 reported during stimulated-recall interviews that she was aware of the pupils' behavior, but sometimes, she felt exhausted telling them to pay attention. She said,

"They [the pupils] would stop chatting and start paying attention when I reminded them. It would not last long though. They would start making noises again after a while." [T1.SR1.07]

She also mentioned in the semi-structured interviews that she could not just pay attention to some problematic pupils, as she had to focus on other pupils as well. She reported,

"I would ignore one or two difficult pupils because they are hard to change. I have consulted with the teacher counsellor about their behavior, but there has not been any improvement." [T1.I2.12]

Due to the pupils' diverse origins and low skill levels, Teacher 2 (T2) reported having trouble implementing interaction in her classroom and only sometimes giving general English pupils the chance to participate. She stated,

"Both their English proficiency levels and their backgrounds are significantly diverse." [T2.I2.11]

T2 went on to say that, the qualities of the pupils' ostensible involvement in their educational experiences also hindered her execution:

"A number of the kids appear to be quite unengaged and hesitant about attending the lesson."[T2.I2.13]

She was unable to take full use of the chances for engagement in the English course because of the following issues and time restraints:

"How do you foster collaboration in the learning environment with merely forty or forty-five hours and 10 units of instruction?" [T2.I2.14]

From the classroom observation, T2 also had difficulties organizing teamwork activities. T2 asked her learners to make a group of three or four. She asked the pupils to sit face-to-face. Some pupils moved from their seats and formed a group, not with their nearest neighbor. She freed the pupils to choose. Then she gave a worksheet for each group to discuss. At the end of one lesson, she gave a quiz from a worksheet. The answers to the quiz were submitted to her before the end of the lesson. Due to limited time and big class size, she failed to have all groups report their products, which disappointed her.

In another T2's class, I observed that pupils rarely spoke. For example, in a forty-five-minute lesson in class 10C, T2 talked the whole thing - Highlighting the distinction between the two types of voice took up most of the time. Nothing from a pupil, not even a single word. Pupils seldom have the opportunity to complete an exercise on their own in most classrooms. The teacher read all the answers as soon as a task was given, and the pupils copied them down. The teacher then ticked off their notebooks and moved on to another assignment. It is understandable that pupils could not do anything on behalf of themselves after receiving so much instruction. In the lesson, there was frequently little to no student participation since the pupils were so docile and uninterested

in the material. Simply transmitting knowledge from the instructor to the pupil constituted teaching. *[T2.O1.Unit 6.Grade 10]*

In the stimulated recall interview, T2 explained having difficulty organizing teamwork. She retold,

> *"I have 52 pupils with different characteristics. Some of them are talkative. Some are quiet. Some pupils disobey and are rejected by their friends when they form groups."[T2.SR1.03]*

When I asked her what she would do with them (the talkative, quiet, and disobedient pupils), she replied,

> *"If pupils who talk a lot get together in a group, I will divide them [into different groups]. If they're in the same group, they'll chat about something else [not quests]."[T2.SR1.04]*

She also reported that one of her pupils spoke so loudly and uncooperatively that her friends did not want to join her group. T2 reported,

> *"For example, one of my pupils, Hong, always borrows things from friends and talks too loudly. So her friends don't want to accept her as a team member". [T2.SR1.05]*

In the third observation, I observed that Group 3 consisted of a top student who did everything, three girls who said nothing during group work, and a boy reading the answer to the best girl. Most were writing answers on a piece of paper.

In stimulated recall interview, T2 confirmed that the three girls in Group 3 were quiet pupils so that the dominant girl would ignore them.

To sum up, results from the interview and observation, on the whole, indicated that the Traditional Conservers (TCs) slightly held their positive views toward the CT with regard to collaboration learning in their teaching but they had difficulties to organize team work activities, so most of the time in class, teacher – talk dominant is their preferred ways of teaching.

Theme 3: TCs' Beliefs aboutActive learning

Overall, the TCs in the interviews emphasized the significance of active learning contributing to effective communication classes, and expressed their high CT orientation toward this CT tenet, which was measured by the frequency they employed such activities, the benefits that these activities offered them in communicative classes. However, they believed that,

> *I highly recommend my pupils' active participation in the class, but the teachers should still act as "authority" to impose the content of the lesson and activities and the teachers' role as an imparter of knowledge is very important. [T1.I2.13]*
>
> *In my opinion, in a language class, the teachers act as a transmitter of knowledge and a controller of what goes on in class. [T2.I2.15]*

T1 provided the following justification for her belief that teacher dominance is the greatest way to gain knowledge:

> *Teachers should not allow pupils to construct solutions that may be inaccurate when they can merely communicate the answers straight because they are far more knowledgeable than pupils. [T1.I2.15]*

As I observed, T1's courses were unusually teacher-centered; she provided practically all the solutions without giving the class time for the pupils to figure things out themselves.The following extract was provided for this illustration.

After seeing the aforementioned session, I initially questioned T1 about why she kept handing the children the responses without letting them do any of the work on their own. She claimed that:

> *"Should I allow them to handle it on their own? The lesson could last a long time if I had to wait for them to finish it all, so I must answer "no," but I am inclined to hurry things along. I will thus sometimes do it. I provide them with the solution. I guess I'm also simple to mark. {laughs} After that, I bookmarked without reading. {laugh}. [T1.SR1.09]*

T2 had the propensity to clarify all that to her learners as well. T2 was the only one doing the talking during instruction in reading, so I requested her to clarify what she was doing. She stated:

> *Since [pupils] have no prior information or understanding, it typically takes me several minutes to explain. I read loudly as what I do. I don't ask my brightest pupils to read aloud in class as some professors do. I always read the piece aloud to myself because if I had the greatest student read it, she would fumble and not be able to halt everything in time. If you fail to comprehend it correctly, you won't grasp what the author is saying. I then instructed them to highlight any words they did not understand. I'm aware that you don't need to comprehend every word in a chapter in order to grasp it, but because we're attempting to teach additional terms and [help] them comprehend as much as possible. [T2.SR1.09]*

She added,

I have to prepare content, activities and convince my pupils to participate. For my teaching style, I have used active learning in part because it is not an easy task with many obstacles. For example, a student's goal is to get a good grade. Due to the pupils' timidity and lack of confidence, it is not appropriate for English classes. Additionally, there are time and assessment restrictions. It is inappropriate to engage in class at my school in these circumstances. [T2.SR1.11]

In conclusion, both TCs agreed that the teacher's contribution, either in clarification or in correction, was essential to learning.

Theme 4: TCs' Beliefs aboutAuthentic learning

Data from the interview indicated that the TCs acknowledged the significant importance of this CT aspect in making connections with the real world, but it is not easy for them to implement linking theory into practice in all situations. Take some excerpts as good examples of this.

As usual, I first put the actual context in which some examples are provided to introduce the grammar item to be taught. Then, I ask pupils to see the examples on the slide and find the rule, which helps them to remember the rule well and to use the correct language in the communication contexts. However, in some cases, I have trouble coming up with those examples [T1.I2.16]

In addition, T2 believed that learners should be provided with examples in real-life situations embracing a new grammar item to be taught and required to work out the rules from these examples by themselves when learning grammar. As a result, learners can quickly memorize the grammatical rules and produce language spontaneously in diverse contexts. [T2.I2.17]

With this way of teaching grammar, T2 held their favorable belief about CT but she stated that it was not realistic to expect everything to be related to learners' lives. *[T2.I2.18]*.

T1 remembered her approach of use numerous real learning resources. She mentioned that she had to plan appropriate genuine learning materials taking into account the various English skill levels of their pupils. Still, she failed because one drawback of the listening class was that only people with a high level of English could actively participate. For example,

When working in groups, my kids stayed quiet and were obedient followers of other pupils while actively engaging in the lesson. I wish I had also prepared easier listening materials to entice people who weren't very adept at it to participate more. [T1.I2.19]

In TCs' class, rarely did I observe evidence of their accomplishment in the classroom when utilizing authentic resources.

In sum, the TCs did not pay attention to utilizing authentic learning in their practice because of their pupils' low performance and they found it changeling to use local examples while elucidating concepts.

Theme 5: TCs' Beliefs aboutReflective activity/ Reflection & Metacognition
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Overall, the TCs in the interview expressed, to some extent, their negative view of the CT regarding reflective activity. The TCs shared their view that that reflective thinking was not the goal for their instruction or that when pupils did not learn basic skills, they would not be able to think for themselves.

The quotes below from Teacher 1 and Teacher 2 reflected such beliefs.

I do not have patience to wait for pupils' responses; it's just a waste of time. Anyway, pupils are used to teachers telling them what to do. I feel comfortable teaching in this way. [T1.I2.23]

My pupils are not willing to deal with higher-order thinking until they have known basic skills. For language learning, unless pupils are communicative competent, they would not be to argue for some points of view or decide what activities should be done. [T1.I2.24]

Class time is limited. If I wait for pupils' responses, I cannot deliver much knowledge in a class. When pupils do not acquire basic skills, they are not able to express themselves, and they won't be able to do higher-order thinking. The designed dialogues in their textbook are good for them to practice their communicative skills and develop their communicative competence. [T2.I2.19]

The TCs agreed that teachers should not let their pupils waste time figuring out the answer when they can simply state the solutions in straightforward language. In other words, instead of providing the pSupils with opportunities to solve the problem, the TCs solved it for the pupils. The following passage is from a class on the written description in which T1 always corrected her pupils' mistakes right away.

I explicitly questioned her as to the reason why she continued to fix every mistake without letting the pupils do any independent work. In her words:

Surely, I ought to have left them to handle it by themselves own. However, I wished to hurry up the lesson. . So do that occasionally. I correct them and leave. It's simple for myself to make the mark, too, no? {laughs} I have to check the box. You can skip reading. {laughs}. [T1.SR1.12]

It is undoubted thatthe TCs think that reflective thinking was not the goal for their instruction and underestimated the reflective learning in their actual classroom.

In short, the Traditional Conservers' beliefs about teaching were mainly teacher-centered, supportive of traditional teaching methods, and pupils in their view might be passive and obedient learners. These teachers had a limited comprehension of constructivist teaching approaches, and they were not willing to change how they were familiar with traditional teaching methods in practice.

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