A Study to Explore Social Constructivist Instructional Approaches and the Use of Cognitive Text-Processing Strategies

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Abstract

The purposes of this study were to: (1) determine the predominant instructional approach used by middle and senior years content area teachers; (2) identify the use of cognitive text-processing strategies; and (3) gain insight into the challenges faced by teachers implementing social constructivist practices.

Instruction in the content areas may be classified as following either of three major approaches: (1) a transmission model, or (2) a social constructivist model, which includes the use of scaffolding and collaboration. Raphael (1984), for example, takes into account the historical-cultural context related to instruction that recognizes how past experiences influence current literacy instruction. The historical-cultural model may account for the predominance of a transmission model of instruction in some content area classrooms in that many teachers teach the way they were taught. The underlying theory of the transmission model is that knowledge is transferable from one person to another through the act of listening. By definition, instruction is teacher-centred, characterized by lecturing on the part of the teacher and passive note-taking on the part of students, followed by memorization of the content for later recitation on tests.

A social constructivist model, on the other hand, emphasizes that meaning is constructed through the dynamic interaction between teachers and students (Au, 1998, Palinscar, 1998). Both collaboration and scaffolding are involved. Collaboration is based on the theory that meaning is constructed by providing opportunities for student/teacher interaction in which listening, speaking, reading, writing, viewing and representing lead to greater understanding of content-related topics. Scaffolding also predominates with the teacher providing a supportive environment, allowing time for students to work through their understanding, while providing explicit instruction, modeling, prompting and guided learning.

In association with a scaffolded learning approach, this study also investigated the use of cognitive text-processing in which students are taught to monitor their understanding by employing before, during, and after reading strategies. The role of the teacher in cognitive text-processing is to model and demonstrate comprehension strategies that are appropriate for reading different kinds of text (Roehler & Duffy, 1991) and to teach for the transfer of these strategies (Baker & Brown, 1984).
Significance of the Study

These findings add insight into the implementation of constructivist instructional approaches and the use of cognitive text-processing strategies in the content areas at the middle and senior years levels, leading to a better understanding of instructional and situational differences and tensions encountered by content area classroom teachers endeavouring to use innovative teaching practices. Findings from the wealth of data gathered in this study will provide teacher preparation programs as well as policy makers with evidence to reconsider influences associated with (a) the current curricula, (b) testing, (c) class size, (d) class make-up, (e) differentiated learning needs, and (f) support for teachers in implementing new instructional strategies.