

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Comparison of Traditional and Constructivist Teaching Approaches in Using English Language Learning Strategies; (Grade Eleven Students of Bahir Dar Preparatory School)

Alemayehu Bishaw* and Yosef G/Egziabher**

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to compare constructivist and traditional teaching approaches in enhancing students' use of appropriate English language learning strategies. Quazi experimental research was employed. Out of 20 grade 11 sections, two sections (N=97) were selected randomly. The first section contained 50 students and was taught using constructivist teaching approach. The second section of students had 47 students and was taught using traditional teaching approach. Learning strategy inventory questionnaire which was adapted from strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) L2 students of English, (Oxford, 1990) was employed before and after students were taught using two different teaching approaches. The actual classroom teacher was assigned to teach for 9 weeks (40 periods) after given adequate training on both types of teaching approaches. Paired Sample and Independent Sample t-tests were employed for data analysis. The pretest results indicated that there was no significant mean difference between constructivist group students and that of the traditional ones. The pretest-posttest comparison indicated that except in changing students' English language learning strategy in learning writing, no significant differences were observed in other language learning areas among students taught by traditional approach of teaching. The pretest-posttest results in the constructivist group of students have revealed that significant mean differences were observed in all language areas: reading, writing, vocabulary and English language as a whole. Similarly, the posttest comparison of the two groups of students in all language areas students in constructivist teaching approach exhibited significant changes in using appropriate English language learning strategies compared to the traditional group of students. From the results of this study, it is possible to conclude that the constructivist teaching approach improves students' use of appropriate English language learning strategies compared to the students taught by traditional teaching approach.

**An Associate professor at Bahir Dar University, Faculty of Educational and Behavioral Sciences. Tel. 00251-918-76-90-63 E-mail alemayehubishaw@yahoo.com*

***Educational Expert in Education Bureau, Amhara Regional State.*

INTRODUCTION

The most significant factors presumed to affect students' academic achievement are individual factor coupled with teacher variables. Individual factors include students' learning strategy which has a direct connection with their cultural background. The current trend of multiculturalism pointed out that teachers' skills in both the knowledge of subject matter and the way of teaching the contents are of less value unless they take students' cultural backgrounds into account. It is because students' learning strategies are shaped by the experiences drawn from their information gathering, processing, retention and application in their daily life as it pertains to their culture (Banks, 1997). As a result, serious considerations in enhancing teachers' teaching strategies that are in congruent with the students' learning strategies is the issue of concern today in teaching and learning. This shows that the teaching methods teachers employ are required to meet the learning strategies of their students. The concern in this regard is which approach of teaching best fits students' learning strategies.

Learning strategies are used by students to help them understand information and solve problems. A learning strategy is a person's approach to learning and using information. Students who do not know or use good learning strategies often learn passively and ultimately fail in school. Learning strategy instruction focuses on making the students more active learners by teaching them how to learn and how to use what they have learned to solve problems and be successful (Steinert, 2004).

There are varied learning strategies used by students. For instance, one of the learning

strategies may focus on how students acquire information. It includes strategies for learning how to paraphrase critical information, picture information to promote understanding and remembering, ask questions and make predictions about text information, and identify unknown words in text (Tylor, 1992).

The other type of learning strategy helps students study information once they acquire it. It includes strategies for developing memorization and other devices to aid memorization of facts as well as strategies for learning new vocabulary. These strategies help to prepare students for tests.

A third type helps students express themselves. It includes strategies to help students write sentences and paragraphs, monitor their work for errors, and confidently approach and take tests. This shows that no single strategy is a panacea. For instance, in English language learning, there are reading strategies that help students figure out what a word is, comprehend what they are reading, acquire vocabulary, and understand the structure of a text. All of these strategies are essential for a well-integrated, balanced reading program (Sampson, 2001).

In Ethiopia, the enactment of the New Education and Training Policy (1994) has given due consideration to the students' cultural background in the curriculum and methods of teaching. As a result, the government has introduced various innovations/interventions on which child centered teaching approach is one element of the package. Even though the government has exerted lots of packages, the way they are implemented is highly affected by teachers' understanding of the knowledge base of the innovations and the

strategies of implementing them in actual school/classroom context (MOE. 2003). With this in mind, the researchers have tried to see the impact of constructivist teaching approach in shaping students' use of appropriate English language learning strategies. In doing so, comparison was made with the traditional teaching method so that the extent of the impact of constructivist approach can be inferred

Theoretical Framework

The latest and the most fashionable word in education is constructivism which is applied both to learning theory and to epistemology-both to how people learn and to the nature of knowledge. As a philosophy of learning, constructivism can be traced at least to the eighteenth century and the work of the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico, who held that humans can only clearly understand what they have themselves constructed, has played a great role. Many others worked with these ideas, but the first major contemporaries to develop a clear idea of constructivism as applied to classrooms and childhood development were Jean Piaget and John Dewey (Richardson, 1997).

In constructivist approach, learning is an active process in which the learner uses sensory input and constructs meaning out of it. The more traditional formulation of this idea involves the terminology of the active learner (Dewey's term) stressing that the learner needs to do something; that learning is not the passive acceptance of knowledge which exists outside of the mind but that learning involves the learner engaging with the world (Dewey, 1987).

In the classroom, the constructivist view of learning can point towards a number of different teaching practices. In the most general sense, it usually means encouraging students to use active techniques

(experiments, real-world problem solving), to create more knowledge and then to reflect on and talk about what they are doing and how their understanding is changing. The teacher makes sure s/he understands the students' preexisting conceptions, and guides the activity to address them and then build on them (Vigotiski, 1978).

Contrary to criticisms by some (conservative/traditional) educators, constructivism does not dismiss the active role of the teacher or the value of expert knowledge. Constructivism modifies that role, so that teachers help students to construct knowledge rather than to reproduce a series of facts (traditional approach). The constructivist teacher gives strategies such as problem-solving and inquiry-based learning with which students learn by themselves, draw conclusions and inferences, and pool and convey their knowledge in a collaborative learning environment (Prawal, 1999)

As opposed to traditional approach, constructivism transforms the student from a passive recipient of information to an active participant in the learning process. Always guided by the teacher, students construct their knowledge actively rather than just mechanically cramming knowledge from the teacher or the textbook (Prawal, 1999).

The crucial action of constructing meaning is mental: it happens in the mind. Physical actions and hands-on experience may be necessary for learning, especially for children, but it is not sufficient. Teachers need to provide activities which engage the mind of students as well as their hands. Dewey (1983) calls this reflective activity.

From the constructivist point of view, learning is a social activity. Learning is

intimately associated with students' connection with other human beings, their teachers, their peers, their family members as well as casual acquaintances including the people everywhere. Much of traditional education, as Dewey (1987) pointed out is directed towards isolating the learner from all social interactions, and towards seeing education as a one-on-one relationship between the learner and the objective material to be learned. In contrast, progressive education (to continue to use Dewey's formulation) recognizes the social aspect of learning and uses conversation, interaction with others, and the application of knowledge as an integral aspect of learning.

Learning is contextual. People do not learn isolated facts and theories in some abstract ethereal land of the mind separate from the rest of their lives: People learn in relationship to what else they know, what they believe, their prejudices and their fears. One needs knowledge to learn: it is not possible to assimilate new knowledge without having some structure developed from previous knowledge to build on. This implies that prior knowledge is the basis for new learning to take place. Therefore, any effort to teach must be connected to the state of the learner and must provide a path into the subject for the learner based on learner's previous knowledge (Vigotski, 1978).

The constructivists conceive that learning is not instantaneous. For significant learning, we need to revisit ideas, wonder them, try them out, play with them and use them. If one reflects on anything he/she has learned, he/she soon realizes that it is the product of repeated exposure and thought. Hardy and Tylor (1997) point out that traditional way of teaching affects the students' participation and the teaching and learning environment becomes boring.

They also assert that conventional teaching and learning process was criticized for the inadequate awareness of engaging teamwork and development of skills in enquiry. Schon (1987) also points out that in the traditional teaching and learning environment, students got soon fed up of information from the textbooks. Neg (2005) also argues that optimal students' participation in the traditional teaching learning process is imperative to ensure the students are able to effectively practice self-regulated learning strategies. Mahony (2003) argues that some teachers were too dominant in their teaching. A teacher being too dominant in his or her teaching may trigger tension and conflict in group which may eventually lead to lack of competence, cynicism and/or student truancy. On the other hand, if the teacher is too submissive, then the students as well as the learning process might also come to be ineffective.

In so far as the researchers' capacity to solicit literature is concerned, little/no research has been conducted in Ethiopia by relating the teaching approaches in different curriculum theories and their implications to students' learning strategies.

Objectives

The main objective of this study was to compare the effects of constructivist teaching approach and traditional way of teaching on the students' use of learning strategies. Based on this general objective, this study is aimed at:

1. Investigating whether there is a difference in students' learning strategies between the two groups of students taught through traditional and constructivist approaches.
2. Investigating whether there exists significant difference in students' use of learning strategies before and after intervention.

Research Questions

Based on the above objectives, this research seeks to answer the following basic questions.

1. Is there statistically significant difference in students' English language learning strategies between those taught in traditional and those taught in constructivist approach?
2. Is there statistically significant difference in students' use of English language learning strategies before and after intervention in both traditional and constructivist group of students?

Significance of the study

The new education and training policy of Ethiopia has brought a paradigm shift from teacher centered instruction to student centered learning and teaching. As a strategy to realize the goals of the policy, various programs were introduced and implemented. These programs include Teacher Education System Haul, Continuous Professional Development and School Improvement Program to cite some. All these programs are meant to equip teachers with the necessary pedagogical and psychological principles to apply active learning, (the oldest synonym of Constructivist teaching approach). The results will help teachers to know the direct application of constructivist teaching approach in actual classrooms. The education offices at different levels will benefit from these results to design training packages that are appropriate to the actual school context.

Delimitation of the Study

This research is delimited to identifying students' use of learning strategies. The three language skills/areas of English language learning, namely, reading, and writing, vocabulary.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**The Research Design**

The researchers applied quantitative research approach. That is a quazi-experimental research design was used. The researchers applied this design because it is difficult to select students randomly and assign an experimental study and control groups to teach for long period of instruction. As a result, students were taken from the already available sections.

Population and sampling

The target populations of the study were grade 11 students who were learning at Bahir Dar Preparatory School. Grade 11 selected because the teacher in this school was the only volunteer to participate in the study and teach both groups. Before the teacher started to teach, he was trained by the researchers about the nature of the two teaching approaches, traditional and constructivist. Simple random sampling technique was employed in this study. From the total of 20 sections, only two sections (97students) were selected. While one section students (N=50) were grouped under experimental group, were taught using constructivist teaching approach; the other group of students (control group, N=47) were taught using traditional way of teaching. The selection of experimental and control groups was done using lottery method.

Data Collection Instruments

In this study, learning strategies questionnaire, focus group discussion and observation were used as data collection instruments.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire which was adapted from different sources was one of the main data collection instruments. The items in the questionnaire were close-ended which encompassed two parts. The first part

explained background characteristics of the respondents' sex and the group they belonged to (experimental or control). The second part focused on investigating the learning strategies the students employed to learn English language skills.

The questionnaire which includes 22 items was used to measure students' use of learning strategy. It has four groups of items, and they were employed to assess the students' use of reading strategies (7 in number): strategies used to learn writing (4 in number), vocabulary learning strategies (5 in number) and the strategies of learning English as a whole (6 in number). These 22 learning strategy inventory items were adopted from strategy inventory for language learning (SILL) L2 students of English (Oxford, 1990) and <http://homework.wtuc.edu.tw/sill.php> (May 5, 20013).

The items in each part of the questionnaire were administered in a jumbled order. However, during analysis, each item was reshuffled into its component parts for the benefit of keeping the concordances and consistency of the findings. Again to circumvent the artificiality of the respondents on their response, the researchers administered the questionnaire before FGD was conducted.

The questionnaire was given to two professionals who were working in the educational bureau and having M.A. in TEAFL. Subsequently, the instrument was piloted on grade 11 students who were not included in the control and the experimental group students. During the pilot test, the respondents were given space for commenting and indicating unclear and irrelevant items as well as ambiguous instructions. Afterwards, modifications such as avoiding ambiguous words, correcting imprecise sentences (repeated ideas and items) were made. Finally,

Cronbach Alpha coefficient was used to check the reliability of the questionnaire. Thus, the coefficient of the reliability of the leaning strategy inventory questionnaire was 0.78 and this was acceptable

Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

When the researchers designed this instrument, they selected 6 students from each group. (6 students from experimental and 6 students from control group) The items of the FGD were prepared to assess students' reflections on the changes they observed in their learning. Particularly on investigating students' improvement of learning strategy use. More importantly, it allows the researchers to examine the effect of constructivist approach of teaching on improving the students' use of learning strategy compared to the traditional approach of teaching as the students' actual responses can easily be expressed in the language they use when referring to teaching and learning.

The instrument was also employed to gather additional responses about the role of constructive approach of teaching on the students' use of learning strategy. To avoid bias during FGD, the researchers selected the teacher as facilitator in each group and time was taken to create awareness about the purpose of the FGD and to brief about each item of the FGD. To record the data uttered by the participants of the FGD, audio record was used. However, before the discussion, the researchers asked the FGD participants to use audio recorder and got the consent. Subsequent to the completion of the discussion, the verbal data from all speakers were transcribed and categorized into meaningful units based on the FGD items. Finally, actual classification of data was carried out and the resulting data were examined, compared and connected to answer each

research question. But, the FGD was not the only method used to answer research question.

Observation

The aim of this instrument was to investigate the teacher's and students' role in the control and experimental groups. Moreover, it was also used to assess which group of the students made good participation in the teaching learning process and, in general, to assess the classroom behavior. To do this, the researchers conducted a 6 days' observation on each class-totaling to 12 observation periods. Before observing the teaching learning process of each group, the researchers prepared an observation checklist which was used to assess the classroom behaviors of the control and the experimental groups.

Data Collection Procedures

The data for this study were gathered two times-before treatment and after treatment. Before the teacher taught both groups by using constructivist and traditional way of teaching, he was trained on how to employ constructivist and traditional approach of teaching. Before the students were taught using the two approaches, the two groups of students (both the experimental and control group) were given learning

strategies inventory questionnaire. Then, the results were collected and analyzed quantitatively. After the treatments were given (after nine weeks), learning strategy questionnaire was also given to both groups for the second time. Regarding the FGD data, the researchers trained the teacher as a facilitator and made him lead the focus group discussion and record the discussion.

Method of Data Analysis

In order to determine the effectiveness of constructivist teaching on improving students' learning strategies, pre-test and post-test scores were statistically analyzed with teaching approaches as the independent variable and learning strategies as dependent variables. To check the difference between the two approaches of teaching on students' use of English language learning strategies, pre-and post-test mean values were compared, whereas to calculate whether there is a significant difference or not on the constructivist and traditional teaching on the students' use of learning strategies, paired sample t-test and independent sample t-test were employed. Last, the information obtained from FGD and observation were analyzed qualitatively to substantiate the results obtained through the questionnaire.

DATA ANALYSIS INTERPRETATION, DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Table 1: Independent Sample t-test of Pre-test Results of Both Traditional and Constructivist groups

Sources	Traditional		Constructivist		df	Sig.
	mean	SD	mean	SD		
Pre-test reading	20.60	2.52	20.42	2.28	95	.736
Pre-test writing	19.50	6.88	20.46	2.74	95	.414
Pre-test vocabulary	20.95	2.51	20.92	2.41	95	.966
Pre-test Total	21.25	2.95	20.53	2.40	95	.714

Questionnaire to measure students' learning strategies in learning various language areas was given before the experiment. Four independent t-tests were conducted to see whether there exists a significant mean difference between students taught by traditional and constructivist teaching approaches. The

results in Table 1 revealed that there is no significant mean difference in applying language learning strategies (reading, writing, vocabulary and English language as a whole). This shows that before the intervention, students of both groups applied similar language learning strategies.

Table 2: Paired Sample t-test on Pre-test Post-Test Comparison of Traditional

Sources	Pre test		Post test		df	Sig.
	mean	SD	mean	SD		
Reading	20.52	2.61	20.82	2.89	47	.736
Writing	19.50	6.88	21.51	2.72	47	.000
Vocabulary	20.95	2.51	21.53	2.95	47	.414
English	21.25	2.84	21.53	2.45	47	.431

Teaching Approach

The same questionnaire used before the experiment was given to both groups of students (traditional and constructivist) after the experiment to see whether the intervention brought changes in using language learning strategies. In doing so, four Paired sample t-tests were conducted

to see whether there existed mean differences between pre-test and post-test results of the traditional group. The results in the above table portrayed that students did not show changes in applying appropriate language learning strategies in all variables except in learning strategies to learn writing.

Table 3: Paired Sample t-test on Pre-test Post-Test Comparison of Constructivist Approach

Sources	Pre test		Post test		df	Sig.
	mean	SD	mean	SD		
Reading	20.42	2.28	27.55	2.31	48	.000
Writing	20.46	2.74	24.47	1.58	48	.000
Vocabulary	20.92	2.41	27.70	2.01	48	.000
English	20.53	2.40	23.25	1.37	48	.000

The pre-test post-test comparison of students in constructivist group use of learning strategies to learn reading, writing, vocabulary and English language as a whole indicated that significant mean differences between pre-test and post-test results were observed in favor of post-test. This implies that the intervention

(constructivist teaching approach) resulted in significant changes in the use of various learning strategies. That is, students in this group have claimed that they showed significant changes in applying appropriate learning strategies in learning reading, writing, vocabulary and English language as a whole.

Table 4: Independent Sample t-test of Post-test Results of Both Traditional and Constructivist groups

Sources	Traditional		Constructivist		df	Sig.
	mean	SD	mean	SD		
Post-test reading	20.82	2.89	27.55	2.31	95	.000
Post-test writing	21.51	2.72	24.47	1.58	95	.000
Post-test vocabulary	21.53	2.95	27.70	2.01	95	.000
Post-test English	21.53	2.45	23.25	1.37	95	.000

To ascertain whether the changes in using appropriate learning strategies by students taught by the constructivist teaching approach are significant, the results were compared with the changes observed in the traditional group students for the same. In doing so, four independent sample t-tests were employed. In all four areas of English language learning, significant mean differences were observed in favor of the constructivist group students.

DISCUSSION

This experimental study was primarily aimed at examining the effectiveness of constructivist teaching approach in shaping

students' use of appropriate English language learning strategies. To see the extent of the effectiveness, the constructivist approach was compared with the traditional teaching approach. The results of the experimental research portrayed that before intervention, students in both traditional and constructivist teaching approaches had similar English language learning strategies. That is, the Independent sample t-test results suggested that there were no significant mean differences in the pre-tests with regard to reading, writing, vocabulary and English as a whole learning strategies. After that one group was taught using traditional teaching approach and the other group of students

was taught using constructivist teaching approach for nine consecutive weeks (40 periods). After the intervention, similar learning strategy questionnaire was dispatched to both groups. Then, two Paired sample t-tests and one Independent sample t-test were employed on the data obtained.

The results showed that in the pre-test post-test comparison of traditional group of students, in three variables (learning strategies with regard to reading, vocabulary, and learning strategy in learning English as a whole), the mean differences were found to be non-significant. This implies that the intervention, in this regard, the traditional teaching approach did not bring changes in students' use of appropriate language learning strategies. However, the traditional teaching approach has brought significant change in the use of appropriate learning strategy with regard to how to learn writing. To the contrary, the constructivist group of students exhibited significant changes in using appropriate English language learning strategies. The Paired sample t-test has showed statistically significant mean differences between the pre-test and the post-test means in favor of post-test.

Correspondingly, the results obtained from FGD indicated that while the students in the constructivist approach showed an improvement in using different strategies to improve their reading skills, the traditional groups did not employ other strategies than the strategies of learning they used before. Except one student who tried to use different kinds of reading strategies, most of the traditional group students stated that whenever they read texts written in English, they read it repeatedly if they did not understand it. Whereas the constructivist participants in the FGD said

that they have applied the different reading strategies they shared in the classroom and from their English teacher while reading texts written in English. However, two of the participants in the constructivist group stated that they did not show much improvement in using different reading strategies other than the ones they used before.

Like that of the quantitative results which portrayed that the traditional group students did not usually use different kinds of vocabulary learning strategies, such as using new words in their day-to-day communication, reviewing the meaning of new words until it is well recognized, guessing meanings from contextual clues etc, the FGD results have also shown that students from constructivist group explained the changes in using various learning strategies after intervention compared to before the intervention. This finding is in line with Dewey's (1987) view that states much of traditional education is directed towards isolating the learner from all social interaction and towards seeing education as a one-on-one relationship between the learner and the objective material to be learned. In contrast, progressive education encourages the social aspect of learning which constitutes the use of conversation, interaction with others, and the application of knowledge as an integral aspect of learning.

Similarly, though there is a little improvement in using learning strategy after using the traditional approach of teaching, the post-test mean value indicated that this way of teaching did not encourage students to use different vocabulary learning strategies compared to the constructivist approach. In the constructivist approach, while the pre-test mean value indicated that there was no significant, mean differences with the

traditional group students to learn the new vocabularies, the post-test mean value showed that the students employed varieties of vocabulary learning strategies to learn the meaning of the new words. Similarly, the results from FGD of the traditional group indicated that most of them did not use varieties of vocabulary learning strategy to learn a new word, while the constructivist group stated that they used varieties of vocabulary learning strategies. However, in the traditional group, two students stated that they used different strategies and in the constructivist approach, one respondent stated that he did not use a different vocabulary learning strategy other than the ones he used before. This implies that the traditional way of teaching does not have much significance in improving students' use of various kinds of English language learning strategies. However, in the constructivist group, the highest increment of the post-mean value indicated that there was an improvement of the students' use of different kinds of learning strategies in learning English language. This implies that the constructivist teaching approach enhances the use of appropriate learning strategies in learning English language compared to the traditional teaching approach. This result is in congruent with the view of Prawal (1999) which states that in the constructivist teaching approach, students are made to be engaged in various activities than being passive recipient of information.

Moreover, the results obtained from FGD indicated to improve their language skills and knowledge, students employed different kinds of learning strategies like group /work, getting advice from their English teacher, reading different kinds of reference books, asking questions freely, preparing themselves before they attend the class, paying attention etc.

In addition, they stated that they were glad when they made dialogue or conversation using English language because they believed that if they speak and discuss together, they can develop their language skills. Moreover, they confirmed that when they studied in group, they could easily understand difficult concepts, and they were also very happy when they made an argument on a particular issue. They explained that they had got this trend when they learned in the constructivist approach. This was also proved from the data obtained from observation. Hence, in the constructivist approach, the classroom environment was changed frequently based on the learning activities and the students utilized some resources.

Most of the time, the students determine the classroom activities like doing group discussion, group presentation, monitoring their own learning. However, in selecting the topics for group discussion and presentation, the teacher took the roles. In line with this methodology, most of the time the teacher used cooperative learning, different kinds of arts, independent classroom tasks, and there was a student-student, teacher-student and student-teacher interaction, social negotiation and discovery learning.

This means after the students had been given a hint, they were encouraged to discuss important points and investigate new ideas. In light of the students' participation, they actively moved in the class from one group to another to get pieces of information and they displayed their work in the classroom. Moreover, though most of the time the teacher facilitated the group discussion, as a supporter for slow learners, monitor and motivator, he also explained the lesson; sometimes used gaped lecture.

The results of FGD indicated that the traditional group stated that though group and project work helped them to improve their English language skills, most of them learnt English language by paying attention while the teacher was teaching them, listening effectively by sitting in front of the classroom, reading different kinds of grammar books, etc. In line with this, the classroom observation portrayed that in the case of traditional approach, most of the time, the teacher arranged the classroom, designed students' setting, checks the students' work, determine class rules, focused to cover the course, depended on his lesson plans. He also directed the students' behavior. This idea was supported by Mahony (2003).

The results might be due to the fact that in the constructivist teaching approach students are made to take responsibility for their learning. They were made to follow their own strategy of learning. That is, in the classroom they were made to freely talk and discuss with any one they choose in the classroom.

CONCLUSION

As it is clearly seen in the results of this study, the experimental group students (taught using constructivist teaching approach) have shown higher results in the post-test compared to the control group students (students taught using traditional teaching approach). Thus, from the results of this study, it is possible to conclude that the constructivist teaching approach is a more effective method to improve students' use of appropriate English language learning strategies compared to the traditional teaching approach.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Teacher education colleges, institutes and universities have to integrate the application of constructivist teaching

approaches in each subject methodology courses.

2. Teachers' continuous professional development should incorporate discussions on how to apply constructivist approach in each subject.
3. Further research is recommended on how to apply constructivist teaching approach in different subjects.

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