A case study of the Traditional Conservers' beliefs and their practices of constructivist teaching in the Vietnamese high-school context

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Abstract- This study aims to identify the beliefs toward constructivist teaching (CT) of a group of English teachers at high school from a mountainous province in Vietnam. In addition, it seeks to shed light on the nature of constructivist teaching in their English actual classes. The current research is a qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews, classroom observation and stimulated recall interviews as basic instruments for gathering the data. To fulfill these aims, the following questions were addressed: 1) What are high-school English teachers' beliefs about constructivist teaching? How do these beliefs influence their classroom practices? 2) How do these teachers perceive the need for change in constructivist teaching practices? Findings from the data revealed major important beliefs of the traditional conservers (TCs) emerging from themes related to individual learning, motivation learning, teachers' roles and students' roles, which may or may not similar to their actual practices in class.

Index Terms- *Constructivist teaching, Traditional Conservers, beliefs, teaching practices.*

I. INTRODUCTION

In Vietnam, the need to reform teaching methods has now been highly appreciated and considered as "one of the most concerned national strategies for education development" (Decision No. 711/2012/QĐ-Ttg, 13th June 2012, Chính Phủ, 2012).

Nevertheless, teaching methods or instructions in an actual classroom at high schools remains a teacher-centered approach even though teachers have well-acknowledged the importance and theories of modern teaching methodologies. Actually, from my experience as a teacher of undergraduate-students in a teacher education program at a teacher training institution in Northern area of Vietnam, as well as from our training courses for English high school teachers at my local, the current researcher recognized that the majority of the classrooms that were observed used rote memorization techniques and repeated exercises along with skill-based approaches employing grammar-translation and audio-lingual teaching models. In addition, the current researcher found that the teachers' actual methods occasionally conflicted with the pedagogical theory presented in their lesson plans and appeared to conflict with top-down educational policy.

Understanding teachers' thought processes, or how they receive, analyze, and evaluate evidence, is ultimately a useful way to predict how they will behave (Kagan, 1990, p. 13). It is undoubted that acknowledging the values and guiding concepts that teachers adhere to is crucial. As a result, many academics stress the significance of understanding teacher beliefs in order to implement educational change successfully (Taylor, 1990; Cronin-Jones, 1991; Fang, 1996; Abdullah-Sani, 2000; Haney, et al, 2002; etc.). In the context of Vietnam, teachers' beliefs and their practices have recently merited enormous attention from a large number of scholars and researchers (Le, V.C, 2011; Son, V. N., 2013). However, relatively few studies have been, to the best of my knowledge, carried out to explore high-school teachers' beliefs of constructivist teaching and their actual practices of using CT approaches in the English classroom in Thai Nguyen, a Northern mountainous province in Vietnam.

Considering the motivation for the study, the need for change in terms of teachers' beliefs and actual practices at schools in the Vietnamese context, the researcher would like to conduct this study to examine changes in high-school teachers' beliefs of CT and their actual practices of using CT approaches in the English classroom. The present case study addresses this topic from the perspective of high school teachers.

In this study, 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.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research is a qualitative case study using semi-structured interviews, classroom observation and stimulated recall interviews as basic instruments for gathering the data. The participants in the current research were two English high school teachers from a high school in Vietnam. The qualitative technique of theme analysis was used to examine the data. This study employed MAXQDA for data analysis as this program saves time and allows the researcher to organize and retrieve the coded data (Kuckartz & Radiker, 2019).

III. MAJOR FINDINGS

Table 1 below depicts the Traditional Conservers' beliefs and practices of constructivist teaching.

Table 1. The Traditional Conservers' beliefs and practices of constructivist teaching

Themes	Beliefs/ Practices	The Traditional Conservers' (TCs') beliefs and practices of constructivist teaching
Theme 1: TCs' beliefs & their actual practices about Individual learning	Beliefs	- Do not believe that pupils' self-management roles included participation in decision making about the nature of their classroom learning activities.
	Practices	- Encourage independence in her pupils, but failed to do this approach of pupils' lack of confidence and competency.
Theme 2: TCs' beliefs & their actual practices about Motivation learning	Beliefs	- Believe that Grading" or "Giving mark" is the best way to motivate pupils.
	Practices	-Give bonus points or gifts such as school supplies or snacks
Theme 3: TCs' beliefs & their actual practices about Teacher's roles	Beliefs	-Believe that the role of the teacher was as a knowledge provider and top responsibility is to help pupils quickly absorb knowledge and remember longer.
	Practices	-Play the didactic teacher role in her two grammar lessons. - Act as a grammar interpreter, as "authoritative directors" of dictating to pupils for language production through grammar activities.
Theme 4: TCs' beliefs & their actual practices about Learners' roles	Beliefs	- Believe learning seemed to be passive, whereas the teacher was active. -Be responsible for providing the best conditions for pupils to study under teacher's guidance.
	Practices	Pupils as grammar analysts.

Theme 1: TCs' beliefs & their actual practices about Individual learning

This section depicts findings from the interview and observation related to the Traditional Conservers' (TCs') beliefs and their actual practices about Individual learning.

With reference to Individual learning, the TCs agreed that in order to enhance the pupils' communication, their learning performance should be evaluated in individual activities as these activities encouraged their pupils to enhancing their autonomous learning. However, The TCs disagreed that learners' autonomy responsibilities included choosing the types of instructional activities they would engage in in class.

The following quotes clarify this perspective.

> I don't think that pupils have on their own educational journey because of how well they are at it. I believe pupils need direction because, in many circumstances, they will have no idea what they want to learn next, what they need to learn next, or what logically comes next from where they are in the syllabus. [T1.I2.25]
>
> Because each kid is unique and has different needs, it was challenging for me to insist that they undergo a process of questioning, requesting clarification, and reflection at their personal rate. [T2.I2.20]

By observing the class, the researcher was able to conclude that T1 promoted independence in her pupils. For instance, at various points during the lesson, pupils had to navigate around the room, explain tasks and assignments, and respond to questions without interrupting the teacher. As a result, the rest of the classroom environment out their duties satisfactorily.

In the observation class, when T2 prompted her pupils to "Raise your hand and tell me how you enjoyed the book" after their reading assignments, she assisted them in gaining independence. Along with the typical comprehension questions T2 posed, this gave the kids a chance to express their thoughts and feelings. T2 also pushed her pupils to make projections and defend their decisions. This required taking risks and increasing the pupils' confidence and skill. Unfortunately, T2 was disappointed with pupils keeping silent all the time. In sum, TCs considered pupils' individual differences but failed to make this approach of pupils' lack of confidence and competency.

Theme 2: TCs' beliefs & their actual practices about Motivation learning

This section indicates findings from the interview and observation related to the Traditional Conservers (TCs)'s beliefs and their actual practices about Motivation learning.

With regard to Motivation learning, "*Grading*" or "*Giving mark*" were believed to be the best way to motivate pupils from the viewpoint of the TCs.

T1 stated that she often employed credit for motivating pupils when completing an activity. T1 said,

> *"Maybe it's just the teacher's authority that makes them think...it will affect their score somehow if they don't. ... Without giving marks or gifts, my pupils seemed not eager to join the learning activity." [T1.I2.27]*

T2 also calculated group scores to encourage team members to support each other in their learning. T2 tried to explain:

> *"I need to grade participation because my pupils wish to get a high mark." [T2.I2.24]*

T1 said the Vietnamese educational system promotes studying more for grades than knowledge acquisition. As seen by her subsequent comment, she believed that she had to establish a strategy to assist pupils in passing exams:

> *The learners are allowed to take the exam when I conclude the lecture. The Vietnamese educational system places greater emphasis on grades rather than on learning more. This is one of the study's objectives to finish the test. [T1.I2.29]*

In a similar vein, T2 claimed that her pupils' motivation is to pass a competence exam or tests rather than to learn English.

> *Some of my pupils have asked me, "Why are we doing this? Can it be tested for?" Pupils demand more routine activities since their main concern is achieving a proficiency exam rather than really studying English and preparatory courses. They want to get ready for the test. As a result, it is difficult to convince them that studying English is of greater significance than passing a test. [T2.I2.25]*

From the actual class the researcher observed, before making a request or question, TCs often encourage pupils by giving bonus points or gifts such as school supplies or snacks. For example, during T1's three classes, she always said, *"Come on guys. If you answer this question correctly, you will get an A score for the oral test*". Similarly, in T2's class, her preferred statement was, "*Well done, a small gift for you.*"

In summary, the TCs thought that using grades and prizes to drive both inspired and uninspired learners to study was a viable strategy. To put it another way, the TCs believed that encouragement was a crucial component of acquiring English. They do believe that some individuals' desire to study English can be exam-focused, though.

Theme 3: TCs' beliefs & their actual practices about Teacher's roles

This section depicts findings from the interview and observation related to the Traditional Conservers' (TCs') beliefs and their actual practices about teachers' role in the classroom.

Overall, TCs espoused a traditional view of teaching as transmitting knowledge because they stated that they needed to find methods to make learning easier, and for the majority of them, guaranteeing pupils' success in exams remained a top goal.

Considering belief that the teacher' role was as a knowledge provider, T1 was concerned about how effectively she presented the knowledge. In addition, she was worried about her ability to explain the content to a level to her student.

T1 believed that high school pupils lacked "*base knowledge*" and that the first step of teaching was "to give them information" because she felt that pupils came to the learning experience without any "*base knowledge*," facilitating did not make sense to her:

> *The word "facilitator" does not mean to me. I mean, it is the movement, be a supporter. I dislike that word because when you facilitate, the kids already know what they're doing, and you're just directing them in a specific direction. And at this level, you have to teach it [and] then facilitate. So it should be two steps. You have to give them information first, make connections, and then enable them to learn more deeply, but we have to be the purveyors of knowledge, at least basic knowledge. Copy, then allow them to expand and expand on that knowledge. . . . At this stage, they don't have a good base as they need or should be. . . So, you need to present and then facilitate. [T1.I2.31]*

T1 believes in examples that learning is a linear process in which individuals learn abstract knowledge first and then apply that knowledge to the concrete through hands-on activities. In her view, the teacher's role is to supply knowledge as a fact or a real problem, and the student must apply the knowledge received to concrete examples. This traditional teaching view led her to separate theory from practice; Pupils are considered passive recipients of knowledge. Instead, T1 defines learning as "absorbing information" and applying it to the real world. "Getting information" from the authority is a prerequisite for applying what has been learned *[T1.I2.32]*. Thus, in her two-step learning process, the teacher is first responsible for imparting knowledge and then providing pupils with applications. T1's beliefs about teacher's roles suggest that she has a positivist epistemology, in which she views knowledge as an authority-given entity. Although her familiarity with the term facilitator implies that she was introduced to constructivist epistemology, she did not seem to believe it.

T2 believes that the teacher must be the knowledge authority to lead the classroom; A teacher's subject knowledge is essential for a teacher, and knowledge authority will aid in classroom management. She also believes pupils will respond to her concerns respectfully and generously. However, T2 has difficulty developing a caring relationship with pupils.

In particular, in her class, she tried to earn the respect of her pupils. Also, the researcher observed that she was always waiting for the pupils to be quiet. She faced discipline from pupils who did not respect her as a teacher, something she never expected. T2 believed that imparting knowledge was the teacher's role. She believed teachers must be "a main source of information for learners." As she said,

> *[My role as a teacher] introduces pupils to different ideas and concepts that they were not aware of before. . . Someone said a pattern [but] that is too broad. Other practitioners have different role models; I can only do it for some. I don't have the opportunity to fulfill them - just a main source of knowledge for pupils. [T2.I2.27]*

T2 used metaphors when describing the teacher's role. She views teachers as "interpreter" who "[provides] pupils with information [that will] help them understand more about what [had] happened around them." Believing that the teacher is a translator, T2 worries about being able to "convey [concepts] to pupils in a way that they [can] understand"; this made her worry about her understanding of concepts. T2's beliefs about teacher roles imply that she has a positivist epistemology, in which she believes teaching is the presentation of content. Her top responsibility is to help pupils quickly absorb knowledge and remember longer.

In both of her grammatical classes, both TCs assumed the role of the pedagogical teachers. The information in Extracts 1.4 and 2.3 below shows how each lesson was dominated by the teacher's chalk talk-style speech about grammatical principles and how to apply them to specific situations.

The TCs assumed a high level of authority, including three roles in terms of "grammar interpreters", "language demonstrators" and "'authoritative directors'" when aimed at developing pupils' grammatical competence. First, acting as "a grammar interpreter", T1 attempted to encourage pupils to learn the rules in order to acquire the language by presenting the new target grammar by providing extensive, in-depth explanations of its nuances *(Extract 1.4)*. Second, as a 'performer' of language usage, TCs demonstrated how grammar generates language. Third, they completely take on the role of "authoritative executives," dictating to pupils through grammatical exercises that place an emphasis on precision *(see Extracts 1.4 and 2.3 below)*.

> **Extract 1.4: Example of T1's grammar worksheet and classroom transcription**
> **T1:** Look at sentence one, guess what the missing verb is. When you have foods, do you eat, play or drink foods? He….what… chips for dinner? Which verb fits for the chips?
> **S:** Eat
> *[Teacher ignores a student's answer]*
> **T1:** Eat or Eats? The subject of the sentence is 'He', so the correct form of the verb is…
> **S:** Eats
> **T1:** Oh, yes. The correct answer is the verb 'eat' with –s. Then you might like to have some drinks with your chips. Number 2, the missing verb is…? What with coffee?
> **Ss:** Drink
> **T1:** Good, 'Drink coffee'. "I drink coffee three times a day", is it too much?. Look, 'drink' not 'drink' with –s. OK. I will let you do your own exercise. Any questions?
> **Ss [Silent]**
> **T1:** The exercise is very easy. No difficult words in any sentence. So you can do it on your own. Review the rules any time you are not sure how to use the correct form of the verb in agreement with its subject, OK?
>   [T1.02.Unit 5, G10]

In sum, the TCs hold belief that the teacher's role was as a knowledge provider during their teaching. The reason for that lies in the fact that they needed to find methods to make learning easier and for them, guaranteeing pupils' success in exams remained a top goal.

Theme 4: TCs' beliefs & their actual practices about Learners' roles

This section depicts findings from the interview and observation related to the Traditional Conservers' (TCs') beliefs and their actual practices about learners' roles.

The interview data revealed that the pupils in TCs' beliefs about learning seemed to be passive, whereas the teacher was active.

Although T1 talked about the pupils "jumping into their learning," she did not discuss how they could do that. Instead, T1 seemed to claim ownership of their learning. First, she saw the teacher as the primary agent in the classroom and essential to any teaching. The teacher originates the questions and creates purpose and direction. The pupils are there to learn the information he gives them. Second, she got much of her own knowledge about teaching from experts in the field - through reading, conferences, and in-services. T1 usually seemed to construct her own knowledge through experience or personal inquiry; if she did, she did not recognize those as important to her pupils' learning.

T2 believed that,

> "In our situation, teaching English has as its objective assisting pupils in passing tests". [T2.I2.29]

T2 said that although pupils were responsible for doing well, the teacher was responsible for providing the ideal setting and circumstances for studying. It is my obligation to "*add value, add entertainment, and make that process a little more engaging*" as she said a teacher's role to be. Getting the pupils interested and doing something beneficial was our obligation. There seemed to be a shared responsibility between teachers providing optimal conditions for learning and pupils making the most of what is provided.

In two TCs classes, learners acting as grammar analysts could be found. The teacher transmitted grammar instruction in TCs, and learning was centered on the explicit explanation of rules and uses. This illustrated how teaching grammatical analysis and eventual grammar mastery to pupils was done. Second, by delivering grammatical monologues, TCs controlled classroom conversation. Reading the guidelines and examples given was one of the reactions from the pupils. Pupils were unable to communicate and "use the language"

since there are no communication activities present. As grammar analysts, pupils first learnt the rules by heart before building instances of the desired grammatical points using the rules as a guide. Because they had never attempted to employ grammar in conversation, they were conventional people who learn languages.

In conclusion, the TCs perceived pupils as knowledge receivers because they had strong ideas about the prominent role of teachers as information transmitters in the learning process.

IV. CONCLUSION

The findings from interviews and observation showed that for the TCs, the notion that learners should be submissive and passive learners, as well as a strong teacher-centeredness, influenced how people felt about teaching. These participants were resistant to alter how they used constructivist education in their practices because they had a limited awareness of the variety of techniques available.

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