Evaluating EFL Classroom Characteristics from Constructivist Perspectives in Sudanese Universities

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ABSTRACT----*This paper evaluates EFL classroom practices at two Sudanese universities (**Gezira** and **Omdurman Islamic**) through the lens of constructivist theory. Using a mixed-methods approach with 60 students and 10 teachers, the study explores the extent to which constructivist principles—such as student-centered learning, reflective thinking, collaboration, and authentic assessment—are present in the classrooms. Findings reveal that instruction remains largely teacher-centered, with minimal adoption of constructivist strategies. The study concludes with recommendations for curriculum reform, teacher training, and authentic assessment to better align with global best practices.*

Keywords--- Constructivism, EFL, Sudanese Universities, Student-Centered Learning, Classroom Characteristics

1. INTRODUCTION

Lately, the objectives of education have undergone significant changes. Due to these changes, the field of education has encountered a transformation in both teaching and learning approaches. Memorization of facts is now considered less significant than cultivating skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and lifelong learning. Furthermore, these shifts have also encouraged a growing interest in understanding the very nature of learning.

Amid the ongoing shifts in educational theory, constructivism emerges as a learner-centered paradigm that challenges traditional approaches. This study explores the extent to which EFL classroom practices in Sudanese higher education align with constructivist principles, with a particular emphasis on instructional activities, assessment methods, and the evolving roles of teachers and students.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Constructivism posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment and prior experiences (Piaget, 1957; Vygotsky, 1978). Key classroom features under this paradigm include problem-solving, reflective thinking, collaboration, and authentic assessment.

Moreover, Constructivism defines learning as an active, contextualized process of constructing knowledge rather than acquiring it. Key features of constructivist classrooms include:

i.   Emphasis on learner autonomy
ii. Use of real-world problems and collaborative learning
iii. Teachers acting as facilitators
iv. Formative and authentic assessment practices

This is clear in Brooks, J. G., & Brooks, M. G. (1999) Key Concepts:

1. Constructivist Learning is Active and Student-Centered:
    i. Learning is a process of meaning-making, not information absorption.
    ii. Students construct knowledge based on their experiences and prior understanding.
2. Role of the Teacher as Facilitator:
    i. Teachers are not transmitters of knowledge but guides who support students' exploration.
    ii. They create environments rich in dialogue, collaboration, and challenge.
3. Curriculum Should Emerge from Students' Questions:
    i. Curriculum should be flexible, evolving from students' interests, curiosity, and real-world problems.
    ii. This approach fosters deeper engagement and relevance.
4. Assessment Must Be Authentic:
    i. Traditional tests are insufficient to measure deep understanding.
    ii. Assessments should include portfolios, journals, projects, and performances that reflect student learning over time.
5. Emphasis on Inquiry and Reflection:
    i. Encourages students to ask questions, test ideas, and reflect on their learning process.
    ii. Promotes metacognition and lifelong learning skills.
6. Constructivist Classrooms are Democratic:
    i. Power and responsibility are shared between teacher and students.
    ii. Students are encouraged to take ownership of their learning and participate in decision-making.

Constructivist learning theory is built on the foundational insights of Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. Piaget's theory of cognitive development emphasizes individual construction of knowledge through active engagement and developmental stages, wherein learners assimilate and accommodate new information. Vygotsky, on the other hand, underscores the importance of social interaction and cultural context, proposing that learning is mediated through tools and language within the learner's "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD). Together, these perspectives have shaped a rich pedagogical paradigm that sees learning as a constructive, social, and situated activity.

In educational settings, constructivism translates into a pedagogy that promotes discovery, inquiry, and exploration. Students are not passive recipients of information but co-constructors of knowledge, engaging in activities that foster critical thinking and meaningful application. Teachers play a crucial role not as sole transmitters of knowledge but as guides and facilitators who scaffold learning experiences, provide feedback, and encourage metacognition.

Furthermore, constructivist classrooms emphasize reflective practices, problem-based learning, cooperative work, and differentiated instruction tailored to individual learners' prior knowledge and interests. Assessment is not limited to summative tests but includes formative methods such as portfolios, peer evaluations, and performance-based tasks that reflect students' deeper understanding and real-world competencies.

This study utilizes both Piagetian and Vygotskian approaches to investigate how constructivist principles are reflected—or absent—in the current EFL practices in Sudanese universities, specifically with regard to classroom environment, teaching strategies, student engagement, and evaluation methods.

Table1: Framework of constructivist characteristics

Dimension	Characteristics	Indicators in Practice
Knowledge Construction	Learners actively construct meaning	Students link prior knowledge with new concepts; teachers use open-ended questions
Collaborative Learning	Social interaction is central	Group work, peer discussion, cooperative projects
Authentic Learning	Real-world relevance emphasized	Tasks connected to daily life, problem-solving in authentic contexts
Student-Centeredness	Learners' voices valued	Choice in activities, students reflect on learning, autonomy encouraged
Multiple Perspectives	Diverse viewpoints recognized	Discussions include different cultural/social views
Assessment for Learning	Ongoing, formative	Portfolios, reflective journals, performance tasks
Teacher Role	Facilitator and guide	Scaffolding, mentoring, encouraging inquiry

3. METHODOLOGY

A mixed-method approach was adopted. Quantitative data were collected via a student questionnaire (n=60), and qualitative insights were derived from teacher interviews (n=10). Participants were drawn from the Faculties of Education at Gezira and Omdurman Islamic Universities.

3.1 Instruments
Data were collected through two primary instruments: the *Constructivist Classroom Characteristics Questionnaire* administered to students, and a semi-structured interview schedule employed with teachers.

3.2 Analysis
Quantitative data were subjected to both descriptive and inferential statistical analyses using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis, which provided a structured framework for the interpretation of emerging patterns and meanings.

4. RESULTS

Results Section: Tables and Diagrams

Table 2: Classroom characteristics observed (Student Responses, n=60)

Classroom Characteristic		Agree (%)	Neutral (%)	Disagree (%)
Teacher dominates classroom talk		85	10	5
Students engage in group/pair work		20	15	65
Learning is based on real-world tasks		18	22	60
Students have choice in learning activities		12	18	70
Encouragement of critical thinking		25	30	45

Interpretation: Most classrooms are teacher-centered, with limited use of collaborative learning or real-life tasks. Students report minimal autonomy and low critical thinking engagement, indicating a gap from constructivist ideals.

Table 3: Conceptions of teaching and learning (Teachers & Students)

Statement	Traditional (%)	Constructivist (%)
Learning is the transmission of knowledge	78	22
The teacher is the main source of knowledge	83	17
Students construct knowledge through experience	35	65
Learning requires student inquiry and exploration	28	72

Interpretation: While some respondents acknowledge the constructivist view of learning, the dominant conception remains traditional, especially among teachers. This reflects a mismatch between theory and practice.

Table 4: Assessment practices in EFL classrooms

Type of Assessment	Frequently Used (%)	Rarely Used (%)	Not Used (%)
Written Exams	90	8	2
Portfolios	5	10	85
Peer Assessment	7	13	80
Projects & Presentations	10	20	70

Interpretation: Assessment remains heavily reliant on written exams, with minimal use of formative, authentic strategies like portfolios or project-based assessments. This contradicts constructivist principles that call for diverse evaluation forms.

Table 5: Influence of Demographics on Perceptions (No Significant Differences)

Variable	Significant Difference Found?
University	No
Gender	No

Interpretation: Perceptions of classroom practices and constructivist alignment did not vary based on gender or university affiliation, suggesting systemic challenges across institutions.

5. DISCUSSION

Findings suggest that EFL classrooms in these Sudanese universities remain anchored in traditional pedagogies. This is incongruent with global shifts toward constructivist education, which prioritizes critical thinking and learner autonomy.

Moreover, the findings underscore a significant gap between the theoretical ideals of constructivism and classroom realities in Sudanese EFL contexts. Several barriers were identified:

- Lack of awareness and training in constructivist pedagogy
- Institutional emphasis on rote memorization and standardized testing
- Overcrowded classrooms and resource limitations

Constructivist principles suggest that learning is most effective when students are engaged in meaningful, self-directed activities supported by teachers who guide rather than lecture.
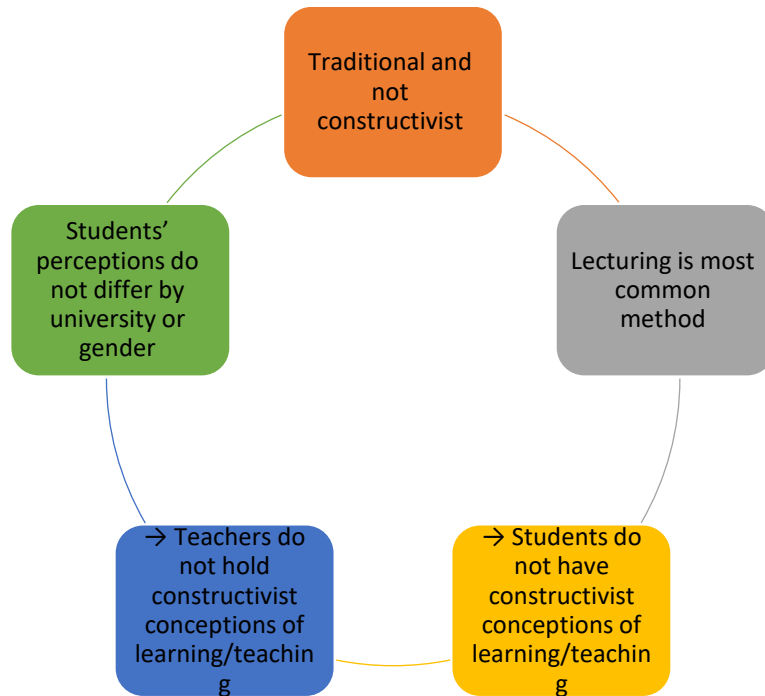

Figure1: Current EFL Classroom Characteristics in Sudanese Universities

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Curriculum Reform: Integrate problem-solving, case studies, and group work into EFL syllabi.
2. Teacher Training: Conduct professional development workshops focused on constructivist methodologies.
3. Assessment Overhaul: Replace or complement traditional exams with alternative assessments (e.g., portfolios, presentations, journals). Therefore, implementing formative, authentic assessments that evaluate applied knowledge rather than rote memorization.
4. Learning Environment: Encourage peer collaboration, student choice, and reflective practices in classroom activities.

7. CONCLUSION

The study highlights a critical need for pedagogical reform in Sudanese EFL contexts. Embracing constructivist approaches could improve not only student engagement but also the development of essential communicative competencies.

Obviously, EFL instruction in the sampled Sudanese universities remains heavily traditional, with minimal application of constructivist methods. Transitioning to constructivist classrooms can foster more meaningful language learning and equip students with the critical thinking and communication skills necessary in a globalized world.

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