EVALUATION OF AN ENGLISH COURSE AT AN ANATOLIAN HIGH SCHOOL WITH AN ECLECTIC POINT OF VIEW: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was mainly to explore how theories of learning applied at English classes at Anatolian High Schools. It has been prepared through the findings of a 9th class English course implemented at an Anatolia High School under the control of Ministry of National Education and it involves four parts: Firstly, some brief explanation about eclectic approach to teaching and the major theories are given and it is followed by the findings of the interviews, observation and analysis of the course. The participants consisted of three English language teachers and 9th class students at an Anatolian High School, Ankara, Turkey. In the spring semester of 2005-2006, the researcher carried out interviews and additionally made a five-hour-visit to one of the classes to determine students' attitudes towards the lesson and to observe how the teacher applies the teaching methodologies her classroom.

Keywords: Instructional Methodologies, Eclecticism, Behaviorism, Cognitivism, Constructivism, Humanism

INTRODUCTION

As usual, in almost every English teaching course and in our case, the syllabus is formed around the order of course book, since it is much easier to implement an English course through a course book. The Ministry of National Education has started to implement a new curriculum based on "Constructivist" principles and the current course book suggested by the Ministry of National Education has begun to be applied with the beginning of this implementation. The course book follows up the innovative strategies, which facilitates the workload of the teacher. The specific objective of this study was, to explore how theories of learning applied at English classes at Anatolian High Schools. The intended target group in this study consisted of English language learning students at a 9th class and the English language teachers at an Anatolian high School in Ankara, Turkey. As a case study, this research study focused on one 9th class and results of the study were prepared through the interviews made by English teachers and an observation of one 9th class English lesson at the school.

The Eclectic Approach to Teaching

Each learning theory to teaching is valid because there are vastly different learning environments which changes according to the level of learners (proficiency level of learners, their familiarity with the content), the type of the content (whether it is a fact, concept or problem-solving etc.), the task to be implemented (whether it requires a low degree of processing such as rote memorization; an increased level of processing such as classifications or a very high level of processing such as heuristic problem solving). The critical question should be not which theory is best but which theory effectively fosters the specific tasks by specific learners. (Ertmer & Newby, 1993) Although, the syllabus for a course is designed by taking into account these elements, often it is under teacher's responsibility to decide on which strategy or activity to apply in the classroom and when and where to put these specific tasks (strategies) into the instructional design process. Regarding this, some educational technologists assume that the decision-making about learning strategies must occur during instruction not ahead of time (Winn, 2003). Before or after, there should be an eclectic cognitive, behavioral or constructivist etc. approach to instructional design processes because each approach is valid concerning various learning environments and circumstances. It is not adequate for a designer to adhere completely to one theoretical perspective, concept or philosophy, say, behavioral orientation, which emphasizes the promotion of student's overt performance by strengthening stimulus-response associations; cognitive orientation, which promotes mental processing or constructivist approach for advanced knowledge acquisition. The existence of different perspectives in an instructional process is somehow an obligation to enrich the process of teaching and learning; for instance, cognitive theory is there for complex forms of learning requiring higher-level skills. It is believed that, behavioral approach can effectively help mastering the content of a profession (knowing what); cognitive strategies are good for problem-solving tactics (knowing how) and constructivism for dealing with ill-defined problems through reflection interaction. (Ertmer & Newby, 1993)

A class is full of mixed ability students with different mental abilities, learning habits and intelligences; therefore, the route the teacher follows should consist of various perspectives meeting the needs of the learners. Ertmer, P. & Newby T. (1993) suggest that an eclectic philosophy provides "sortness". A teacher should apply various methodologies and strategies to supply her students. Reigeluth states each theoretical perspective proves useful in facilitating a different kind of learning and one should prefer working out his own eclectic philosophy rather than adhering one of the theoretical principles. (1992, cited in Duffy and Jonassen, p.150) By concerning instructional designers, Snelbecker states "they cannot afford the luxury of restricting themselves to only one theoretical position" (cited in Ertmer and Newby, 1993). Similarly, concerning educational technologists Reigeluth states "…they need to be more pragmatic and eclectic, drawing from diverse theoretical perspectives

as each proves useful in facilitating different kinds of learning." (1992, cited in Duffy and Jonassen, p.150) That is, instructional designers had better work out eclectic philosophy changing in accordance with the circumstances instead of adhering to one of the theoretical perspectives. These changes might depend on some psychological, sociological or even technological (media) particulars. Bonner emphasizes eclecticism by claiming "Instructional design undoubtedly will remain an eclectic practice that will draw from cognitive psychology as well as other disciplines, and this selective variety will continue to be viewed as a strength...The technology of instructional design has an eclectic nature in that it integrates the ideas of a number of areas such as behavioral psychology, cognitive psychology, adult learning, systems theory, and media technology" (1998, p.3) In instructional design process, the events do not take place at one point in time, therefore, the teacher may come face to face with different circumstances requiring different strategies to be used and so different theories to be applied.

Because eclecticism covers all methodologies some brief explanation about major learning theories this study centers on is given below.

The Characterization of The Major Learning Theories

- *Behaviorist Theory*

The theory of behaviorism concentrates on the study of overt behaviors, which can be observed and measured. Essentially, behaviorism is the idea of stimulus-response, that is, if X occurs, Y will follow. We live our lives every day with this principle and do hundreds of things based on stimulus-response model. One of the most important contributions of behaviorism to the instructional design process is the identification and measurement of learning. The emphasis on producing observable and measurable outcomes led to the creation of performance objectives (Driscoll, 2000). In the instructional design process, performance objectives describe what the learner will accomplish, under what conditions, and how the learner will be measured.

Behavior Modification

Teachers spend a good deal of time dealing with inappropriate, disruptive behavior. Behavior modification techniques aim to manipulate the antecedents and consequences of behavior so that the likelihood of appropriate behavior is increased and inappropriate behavior is decreased. Intentionally or unintentionally teachers have been using behavior modification techniques in the classroom for ages to shape student behavior, to encourage more continuous study, to increase students' exceptional performances or to discourage behaviors that interfere with productive schoolwork. However, it is important to remember that it is the behavior, which is troublesome, not the student.

Behavior modification techniques fall into two group as strategies to create new behavior such as shaping, fading, chaining, modeling and strategies to increase or decrease behavior; reinforcements, awards (token economy) and punishments (reprimand, response cost, time out, overcorrection)

Using behaviorist theory in the classroom can be rewarding for both students and teachers. Behavioral change occurs for a reason: students work for things that bring them positive feelings, and for approval from people they admire. They generally avoid behaviors they associate with unpleasantness; and develop habitual behaviors from those that are repeated often (Parkay & Hass, 2000). The entire rationale of behavior modification is that most behavior is learned. If behaviors can be learned, then they can also be unlearned or relearned.

In Behaviorism, the entrance of input and exit of output is important; it ignores the mental process taking process in mind, therefore only deals with observable behavior. As it is known, Behaviorists treat the mind as a "black box". However, there are unobservable, covert behaviors or internal processes working in human brain.

- *Cognitivism*

Cognitivism focuses on conceptualization of the students learning process and address the issues of how information is received, organized, stored and retrieved by mind. In contrast to behaviorism, cognitive involves study of mental events rather than actual behaviors. (Ertmer&Newby, 1993, p.58)

For cognitive psychologists, learning is viewed as a constructive process where changes occur to the internal representation of knowledge (Wildman, 1981, cited in Bonner, 1998, p.5). Here, the emphasis is learning information rather than learning responses, which is the case in behaviorist learning theory. Learning is concerned not so much with what learners do but with what they know and how they come to acquire it (Jonassen, 1991 cited in Ertmer&Newby, 1993, p.70) In addition, because mental processing is the key point in cognitivisim, instead of simple procedural kinds of tasks, some more complex level learning skills such as reasoning, problem solving, classification and information processing skills can be gained through the use of it. (Bonner, 1998) In addition, cognitivism wants the active participation of learners in solving problems and some instructional techniques are used to help learners relate new information to their existing knowledge.

- *Constructivism*

Constructivism focuses on learner's interaction with real world to gain their own knowledge. Truths or facts change for each individual in that everyone interprets the gained knowledge differently. It is the learner's responsibility to search for knowledge and they create their own meaning through experiences. Instead of being provided a specified content, the students should search for knowledge from many different sources (Ertmer&Newby, 1993). By benefiting from different sources, the learner is able to have a variety of perspectives instead of having the fixed perspective of instructor. As understood, some high-level learning skills can be gained through the use of constructivism so it is better to use constructivism in ill-defined problems which needs high-level learning skills to be solved. The primary goal of constructivist environment is to help students learn how to learn, the emphasis is placed on the learner or the student rather than the teacher or the instructor. (Brooks & Brooks, 1993).

- *Humanism*

Humanism is based on the premise that students have a need to become adults, a term used by Maslow. Humanistic teaching strategies combine individual and small group instructional activities. Humanistic education looks more closely at what happens in the room. The teacher is the facilitator and believes that there should be no lesson plans or a standard curriculum. The role of a humanistic teacher is to organize her classroom so that students will be eager to learn, grow; seek to find out; hope to master and desire to create (Rogers, 1959).

METHODOLOGY

In this study, the researcher tried to find out the teachers' use of Instructional Applications in their daily practice, that is, this study focused on teachers' live experience. It is stated by Marshall and Rossman (1999), it is not possible to understand human actions without understanding the meaning that the participants attribute to those actions- their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds; therefore, researchers need to understand the deeper perspectives captured through face-to-face interaction. (p.57)

Also, in order to learn the real applications of the teachers, the researcher observed one class by establishing face-to-face interaction with the subjects via an observation. Morse and Richards (2002) clarified that "If the purpose is to learn from the participants in a setting or process the way they experience it, the meanings they put on it, and how they interpret what they experience, you need methods that will allow you to discover and do justice to their perceptions and the complexity of their interpretations" (p. 28) Consequently, by using qualitative methods, it is possible to reveal what kinds of instructional applications the teachers follow in their daily practices, therefore, the researcher decided to use a Qualitative Research Design. This is a Case Study as the researcher tried to describe the teachers' use of Instructional Applications. As stated by Berg (1989), "Case study methods involve systematically gathering enough information about a particular person, social setting, event or group to permit the researcher to effectively understand how the subject operates or functions (p.251)". Moreover, Yin (1989) suggested that case studies are eligible and respect wordy strategy in terms of offering chance to establish context and a model by acquiring knowledge or insight about a specific phenomenon or human experience." By using case study method, researcher will be able to "retain the holistic and meaningful characteristics of real-life events, including organizational and managerial processes". (Yin, 1989)

Regarding data collection, there were interviews with three teachers of English in order to gather information about their way of teaching and the researcher additionally made a five-hour-visit to one of the 9th classes to determine students' attitudes towards the lesson and to observe how the teacher applied the teaching methodologies in the classroom. The interviews lasted almost half-an hour. After collected, the data was transcribed, segmented and coded.

Sampling:

In the study three teachers have been interviewed and additionally one teacher has been observed while she was teaching. The participants in this study were all experienced English Language teachers who have been teaching more than 5 years at the same school. One of the teachers have been teaching at the school for 25 years. The researcher used convenience sampling by including the teachers who were available, volunteer and willing to participate in the sample of this study. (Johnson & Christensen, 2004)

RESULTS

The results below were written through the findings of the interviews carried out with the teachers and the observation of one English lesson.

Findings of the Interviews: Course Book Use in the Classroom

The interviewed teachers stated that they prepare their annual syllabus in a consortium and then every teacher prepares his

own daily plan based on this annual plan. The annual syllabus is completely based on the course book offered by the Ministry of National Education and 9th class course book covers 22 units for whole year. Teachers who decide on the syllabus have the tendency to divide the units into weeks or days in accordance with their length and content. As teachers stated there is a book-centered way of teaching which is mostly preferred at the school so the course book has great importance at their teaching.

The current book offered by the Ministry of National Education provides the students with many activities based on the innovative methods and techniques: It seems to be an eclectic course book since there are role plays, discussions, pair and group works with Constructivist and a Cooperative Learning approach with question and answer drills with the behavioristic approach and some others. And it could be regarded as one of those innovative language teaching course books in that it involves different types of activities apart from question and drill activities. However, as teachers declared they choose their own way of teaching upon the course book and supply their teaching with some other materials and activities. Concerning activity choice, one teacher stated that

"…we often prefer enriching the activities in the book with some other role-play, game, pair or group work activities and what activity one teacher will apply changes according to the subject or grammar point. For example, I prefer teaching present perfect tense with a game….or we find a song to teach some vocabulary…."

Another teacher supported this idea by saying that

"…Whenever a teacher finds an activity she shares it with the other teachers because we are often in need of new activities. The course book contains few exercises; therefore, we have to supply our teaching with some new exercises or activities. For example, last week I found a puzzle to revise the vocabulary we taught in the classroom. We applied it in our classes and students liked it."

They do not follow the units and exercises in the book through the lessons one by one in the same order; they use some other materials, methods and strategies as well. The course book as usual covers units, which consist of integrated Speaking, Reading, Listening, and activities. Their order changes in every unit; say, in one unit speaking-reading activity follows a listening-speaking activity but at another one it is different. The grammar point is given at "Let's practice" part in each unit. This hinders teachers' work since they have some challenges at following the order of the unit. Moreover, they prefer studying a grammar point at a presentation, practice, and production routine. This routine is neglected at some units of the course book. A teacher stated

"…Sometimes we have problems at following the teacher's book. According to the book, students are required to do practice on the grammar point before we teach them the rules of the grammar point. That is, students are made to do exercises before they are presented with the grammar item…besides we have to use other exercise books to provide students with some more exercises."

Though finding some other activities or exercises is exhausting for the teachers, they prefer it to simply following the course book.

Methodologies and Strategies Commonly Preferred

All interviewed teachers stated that they apply various techniques at their teaching. They apply role-plays, games, drill and practice, group and pair work activities besides the activities at the course book. One teacher stated that

"…I use an activity book. At other times we often decide on which activities to apply in the classroom together with other teachers. If one teacher finds an activity, she shares it with the others…"

Even though, they decide on the activities together, again the decision of when to apply or where to delay them changes depending on the atmosphere in the classroom. One teacher said

"…Sometimes students get bored even with the role-plays. Say, while four students are working there on the role-play, others are chatting so I delay the activity and go on with another activity…"

Besides exams, students get oral marks. These are given according to students' participation to activities during the lesson and submitted assignments. They give oral marks close to students' exam marks but not below it.

Findings of the Observation: The Teacher's way of Teaching

After the interviews, the researcher chose one of the interviewees and made a five-hour-visit to her class. In order to understand the teachers' way of teaching, their choice of instructional strategies and the methodologies behind them, one of the classes was observed. Again the researcher applied convenience sampling for choosing the teacher. The researcher expected an eclectic type of teaching regarding the interviews previously made by the teachers. However, the examined class was mainly taught by the tenets of Behaviorism and its practical applications. The findings of this observation is as follows:

On the observation day, the class focused on one unit and one grammatical item was studied. In the unit, there were various skills' activities and the class studied on them one by one and did the grammar exercises in the course book. Although the grammar point was easy to comprehend, students, as it often happens, seemed to have problems with the form and meaning of the grammar point. Students, therefore, should have been provided with much more exercises about these very problematic grammatical items. What the researcher experienced was that, while implementing the lesson, the teacher mainly applied the behavioristic approach. While doing the exercises in the course book, she often gave feedback to students and used positive reinforcement, token economy strategies and punishment (time out and reprimand) for the students to increase or decrease behavior. She positively reinforced the students by saying "well done", "good answer" and by smiling and gestures whenever they gave the right answers. She applied token economy by offering a glass of coke to the student who knew the answer of the question. She used reprimands many times by her gestures and also time out by warning an uninterested student by saying

"…If you make noise again, I will send you out of the class!…"

The exercises were implemented by a typical drill and practice method, however most of them could have been changed into a game or game like activity or they could have been encouraged to discover the principles for themselves by discovery learning. In fact, the course book offered various strategies, however, they were often ignored. Apart from question and answer drills, there were opportunities for her to perform cooperative-working activities either in pairs or groups; however, the teacher overlooked these activities.

DISCUSSION

The course teacher mainly implemented the characteristics of behaviorism; since, she determined clearly stated objectives at beginning of the lesson, she responded to behaviors of the learners to make them react in a predictable way under certain conditions and she merely preferred to teach in a asking and getting the answers routine. However, as the researcher observed, students seemed to be very bored with this kind of question and answer drill activities, very few of them were willing to answer the teacher's questions and the rest were either chatting at their places or dealing with something else. Even though their course book did not seem very boring, the way it was applied made the lesson very tedious for students. The activities in the book could have been enriched with some other activities, which would make learning more enjoyable. The teacher could have applied group activities or used other strategies to make the lesson more enjoyable and more efficient.

Briefly, as observed the teacher mainly applied the various techniques of Behaviorism in her classroom. Essentially, language learning should not only cover memorization of words, dialogues or grammatical patterns, since it is a natural process in which meaning should be constantly constructed by students while they are engaging with purposeful, real-life activities. Therefore, a foreign language teacher should bring the real-life experiences to class as much as possible. Scardamalia (2003) emphasizes the concept "knowledge creation" by stating that "education at all levels should equip students for life…" (p. 1). This might be possible by the use of cooperative learning, situated learning strategies or the lesson might be enriched with the use of humanistic and cognitive applications. Students might be provided with constructivist problem solving, discovery-learning strategies in order to let them construct their own knowledge by social interaction, motivation, experience.

CONCLUSION

The result of this study indicated the fact that though teachers state that they apply various learning theories or approaches and concerning strategies in their classrooms, when it comes to practice they choose their own way of teaching. When the researcher entered the classroom she expected to be exposed to an eclectic lesson as regards to the finding of the interviews, however she observed that the teacher preferred to apply almost all the principles of the Behaviorist theory, she was a perfect Behaviorist which is often called a traditional way of teaching. At this point, to prevent misunderstandings it is important to state that the researcher does not mean that a teacher should not use Behaviorist strategies in his classroom but it is suggested that to teach only with techniques of Behaviorism might make the course dull and boring since it ignores other kinds of learning apart from memorization, repetition etc., disregards the activities of the mind and it is very much teacher-centered that it prevents students' taking a more active part in their own mental development. (Scardamalia, 2003). A teacher might apply the strategies offered by Behaviorism to measure observable changes in the behavior.

A designer or a teacher might present information with various strategies focusing on cognitive processing, learners' characteristics and content. Behaviorism requires a low level of processing, whereas a cognitive approach requires an increased level of processing or a constructivist approach requires a rather high level of processing. They complete the missing part of each other; hence, all theories should be utilized together in educational settings to increase the level of learners' learning. It is the designer or teacher's task to determine the best approach or strategy to apply for specific circumstances.

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