

# The Application of Constructivism in Teaching High School English Vocabulary - Unit 2 Travelling Around as an Example

Xiaoju Lee

School of Foreign Language, Chongqing Normal University, Chongqing 401331, China

## Abstract

Vocabulary, as a part of language composition, plays a crucial role in teaching English. Although students spend a lot of time memorizing words, they have little success. To reduce students' vocabulary memorization burden, it is necessary for teachers to explore more vocabulary learning strategies. Constructivism emphasizes that learning is an active and constructive process. This provides some insights into high school English vocabulary teaching that can help students solve their English vocabulary learning dilemmas. Based on this theory, this paper explores how to create favorable learning contexts and link students' existing knowledge, so as to improve students' knowledge structure and vocabulary learning efficiency, taking the vocabulary teaching of Unit 2 Travelling around in the Compulsory Book 1 of the People's Education Press as an example. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part focuses on the basic ideas of the theory, the main teaching models and teaching strategies, etc.. The second part discusses the necessity and appropriateness of using constructivism to guide vocabulary teaching. The third part is based on constructivism and takes the teaching of Unit 2 Travelling around in Compulsory Book 1 of the People's Education Press as an example to explore the use of constructivism in teaching English vocabulary in high school.

## Keywords

Constructivism; High school English; Vocabulary teaching.

## 1. Introduction

Vocabulary is the basic constructive material of language. In high school English teaching, vocabulary is the basis for helping students to develop their language skills, and it is the basis for developing students' cultural character, thinking quality and learning ability. Only when students have sufficient vocabulary knowledge can they effectively listen, speak, read, watch, and write, broaden their cultural horizons, enrich their thinking, and communicate freely in the context of globalization.[1] However, the following problems are common in teaching English vocabulary in high school: on the one hand, students lack learning strategies and contexts and are accustomed to rote memorization, which leads to frequent forgetting; on the other hand, teachers often lack the use of textual contexts and teach vocabulary in isolation, etc.[2,3] Constructivism, with its emphasis on student-centeredness and the creation of learning contexts, can provide some guidance for teaching English vocabulary in high school.

## 2. Literature References

### 2.1. Constructivism

#### 2.1.1. Overview of Constructivism

One of the earliest proponents of Constructivism was J. Piaget, a Swiss philosopher and psychologist. The school he founded, known as the Piaget School or Geneva School, is the most

influential school in the field of cognitive development. He believed that children develop their cognitive structures by gradually constructing knowledge about the external world as they interact with their surroundings. And children's interaction with the environment involves two basic processes: "assimilation" and "accommodation".[4] According to constructivism, learning is an active, contextually linked, autonomous operational activity in which knowledge, content, and abilities cannot be trained or absorbed, but can only be constructed. Constructivism is represented by Kohlberg, Vygotsky, Wittrock, and others. Based on Piaget's theory, Kohlberg further researched the nature of cognitive structures and the conditions of their development. Vygotsky created the Theory of Cultural and Historical Development. He emphasized the role of the socio-cultural and historical context of the learner in the cognitive process and proposed the zone of proximal development. M. S. Wittrock proposed Generative Learning. These ideas have further enriched and improved the constructivist theory and laid the foundation for its practical application in teaching practice.[5,6] The basic ideas of constructivist learning theory are as follows.

(1) Constructivist view of knowledge.

First, knowledge is not a purely objective reflection of reality, but an interpretation or hypothesis that people make about the objective world. Therefore, knowledge is not the final answer to a question, but will be constantly changed, sublimated, and rewritten as people's understanding progresses. Secondly, knowledge does not summarize the laws of the world absolutely and accurately, nor does it provide a solution to all problems. Therefore, in specific problem solving, the original knowledge needs to be reprocessed and recreated for the specific problem situation.

(2) Constructivist view of learning.

Constructivism emphasizes the process of active construction of knowledge by the learner. Instead of passively accepting external information, learners actively select, process, and handle external information based on their own experiences. In the process of learning knowledge, learners will select, transform and process knowledge based on their own cognitive structure and cognitive style of knowledge experience, so as to construct an understanding of knowledge in their own minds.

(3) Constructivist view of teaching

Constructivism emphasizes that learners have already formed relevant knowledge experiences in their daily life and previous learning, so they have their own views on everything. This suggests that teachers should not forcefully "fill in" knowledge to students and ignore their existing knowledge experiences, but should take their original knowledge experiences as the growth point of new knowledge and guide students to grow new knowledge experiences on this basis.[6,7,8]

### 2.1.2. Constructivist Teaching Model

Constructivism advocates student-centeredness. Throughout the teaching process, teachers play the role of organizer, guide, helper and facilitator, using context and collaboration to mobilize students' initiative and enthusiasm, and eventually make students deeply understand the meaning of knowledge. At present, there are several mature teaching models as follows.

(1) Scaffolding Instruction. This model is derived from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, in which the teacher breaks down a complex learning task, then gradually achieves a deep and comprehensive understanding, and finally, removes the "scaffolding". Its advantage is that it is easy to understand and master.

(2) Anchored Instruction. It advocates that students learn in contexts that are similar to real situations. Constructivism believes that the best way for learners to achieve a deep understanding of that knowledge is to feel and experience it in a real-world context.

(3) Random Access Instruction. It means that the teacher should develop the same teaching content through different ways and for different purposes. This allows students to gain knowledge about the same issue or the same thing in many ways, and enables them to achieve a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of an issue.[5,6,9]

### **2.1.3. Constructivist Teaching Strategies**

Based on constructivism, scholars have summarized many vocabulary teaching strategies, such as using mind maps to consolidate memory, using context to guess or understand the meaning of words, and using multimedia to teach vocabulary to help students improve their memory efficiency. [8]Take mind mapping as an example, it is a graphic tool that uses a number of key words to memorize and learn knowledge, which was created by Tony Buzan in the 1960s.[10] The signature feature of mind mapping is "Radiant Thinking".[11] In the process of mind mapping, students are not only free to express their ideas, but also to expand their imagination. Thus, mind mapping embodies student-centered constructivist thinking and can help students take notes and learn collaboratively.([10,12])

## **2.2. The Significance of Teaching English Vocabulary in High School**

Vocabulary is the foundation for students to learn English well. English linguist Wilkins pointed out that without grammar very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary nothing can be conveyed. [13] Thus, vocabulary plays an important role in English learning.

### **2.2.1. Vocabulary Teaching in High School English**

The content of vocabulary teaching includes: word meaning, usage and other information.[11] The New Curriculum Standards emphasizes that English teaching should develop students' core literacies such as language ability, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning ability. [14] The standards clearly state that the standard for Level 8 vocabulary requires students to learn to use about 3,300 words and 400 to 500 idioms and fixed collocations. They can use vocabulary to understand and express different intentions and attitudes. The standard for Level 9 is even higher, requiring students to learn to use about 4,500 words and a certain number of idioms or fixed collocations. Students will be able to choose appropriate words to communicate or express according to the context. [2] It can be seen that the English subject is becoming more and more demanding for vocabulary learning, which requires students not only to understand the basic forms of vocabulary, but also to be able to use the vocabulary in daily communication. Therefore, teachers should pay attention to the teaching of vocabulary in high school.

### **2.2.2. The Appropriateness of Constructivism to Guide the Teaching of English Vocabulary in High School**

(1) Create a learning environment that is close to the real world.

Based on the constructivist view of learning, teachers should create authentic learning contexts for learners during the teaching process. By learning in real-life situations, learners are able to understand more deeply when and where to use the words they learn. Also, they will be able to easily cope with similar problems when they encounter them in the future.

(2) Tie what is about to be learned to what has been learned in the past and build a unique vocabulary web.

Research shows that learners need to be exposed to a word 5 - 16 times to truly master it. [15]Therefore, consolidation of vocabulary is essential. Constructivism emphasizes that when teachers teach unfamiliar knowledge, they should connect it to what learners have learned before. This requires that learners uncover previously learned knowledge from their minds when they encounter new problems, which increases the frequency of using previously learned knowledge, so that learners can consolidate what they have originally learned. In addition, when learners connect their newly learned knowledge with their previously learned knowledge, they gather related vocabulary together to create their own unique vocabulary web.

This reduces the learners' memory burden and also develops their ability to handle words flexibly.

(3) Mobilizing learners' motivation and initiative for learning.

Constructivist learning theory emphasizes that the learners' thirst for knowledge comes from the learners themselves. As we all know, interest is the best teacher, and active learning is when learners themselves actively participate in the classroom. For example, learners are willing to answer the teacher's questions and participate in group discussions. Curiosity is necessary for learners to maintain intrinsic motivation. Therefore, using constructivist learning theory to teach foreign languages can stimulate learners' curiosity and motivate them to learn English intrinsically. The teacher no longer dominates the teaching, but the learners become the center of the classroom.

(4) Develop learners' learning abilities.

Using constructivism to guide vocabulary teaching can develop learners' ability to integrate knowledge, apply knowledge flexibly, and learn cooperatively. First, learners can exercise their ability to process what they have learned by finding the similarities and differences between newly learned knowledge and past learned knowledge and making connections between them. Secondly, learners gain knowledge in real situations, which can also help them apply what they have learned in their daily communication. In addition, constructivism advocates cooperative learning, which can optimize the learning effect while developing learners' ability to communicate and collaborate in teams.[6,8,16]

### **3. The Practice of Teaching English Vocabulary in High School based on Constructivism**

In this paper, we will take the vocabulary teaching in the listening and speaking section of Unit 2 Travelling around of the Compulsory Book 1 of the People's Education Press as an example, focusing on the topic of the unit, which is travelling, and discussing how to design English vocabulary teaching in high school based on constructivism.

#### **3.1. Analysis of the Teaching Content**

The teaching content is the first lesson of Unit 2 travelling around of the Compulsory Book 1 of the People's Education Press, that is, listening and speaking. The theme of this unit is people and self, and the topics of the unit revolve around travel, mainly introducing domestic and international travel, traffic rules, pointing and asking for directions, consulting and booking accommodation and food, and describing the itinerary etc. Through these topics, students can learn about travel, develop a positive attitude towards life, and promote the development of their language skills, cultural awareness, thinking skills and learning abilities. There are 50 vocabulary words in this unit, and it is impossible for students to master the pronunciation, meaning and simple application of all the words in one lesson. Therefore, this paper selects the listening and speaking board to design teaching activities based on the topic of travel, so that students can grasp the meaning of words and the basic usage of vocabulary.

#### **3.2. Analysis of the Learners**

The target learners are senior students, who have weak English foundation and low vocabulary accumulation. Learners have some difficulties in understanding the content they are about to learn, so they need the teacher to simplify the complicated textbook content and make the knowledge clear so that students can easily understand and accept it. However, they are interested in travelling and have acquired basic knowledge about travelling in their lives. Although learners have a weak foundation in English, they are interested in learning English to a certain extent. Through the previous two units, learners have reviewed the basic sentence

structure of simple sentences and are able to express themselves in simple English orally and in writing.

### 3.3. Teaching Objectives

- (1) Students can follow the words, learn how to spell them and apply them in certain sentences according to their meanings.
- (2) Students can distinguish the form and meaning of vocabulary through the game.
- (3) Students can use the mind map to tell the preparation for a trip and develop the ability to use the mind map for planning.

### 3.4. Teaching Procedures

Step 1. Introduce the topic "travelling" directly, and interact with students.

(1) Do you like travelling?

(2) The summer vacation is coming. Could you make a travel plan for me?

In the introduction of travel plan, introduce the new word arrangement, which is a synonym of plan. The students are guided to guess the meaning of the words by the context and read the words aloud.

[Justification] Introduce the topic of this lesson, which is travel, by asking questions. It not only stimulates students' interest in learning, but also helps them to anticipate what they are going to learn in this lesson.

Step 2. Ask students the following three questions to encourage them to further think about what they should do to prepare for the trip and introduce three core vocabulary words — destination, transportation, preparation.

(1) Where should I go?

(2) How can I get there?

(3) What should I prepare?

[Justification] Asking students to provide help for the teacher's summer trip can give students real tasks, create a real context, make students feel that what they are learning is useful and meaningful, and stimulate their enthusiasm for learning. In addition, the three core vocabularies can provide students with directions for thinking and promote the teaching process.

Step 3. Introduce destination, transportation and preparation separately.

(1) Firstly, about destination, the teacher introduces the new phrases — get a passport, apply for a visa — and attaches pictures to help students understand them. Focus on explaining apply for, and provide example sentences to give students the opportunity to use the new words.

I \_\_\_\_\_ to the International school \_\_\_\_\_ a job as an English teacher.

(2) About transportation, introduce the phrases — rent a car and book tickets, and provide example sentences for students to fill in the blanks.

a. She agreed to \_\_\_\_\_ the room to me.

b. I have \_\_\_\_\_ two tickets to New York.

(3) About preparation, introduce the phrases — pack some clothes, research the local weather, buy a guidebook, book a hotel room, and attach pictures. Most of the vocabulary has been studied before, but pack and research are new words in this unit and need to be studied separately. In addition, when explaining book a hotel room, the phrase "accommodation" is introduced, which consolidates the previously learned word "arrange" and learns the new word "accommodation".

[Justification] Using the three core vocabulary words of destination, transportation and preparation as a scaffold, the teacher introduces the related vocabulary and phrases separately, which can help students easily connect the new vocabulary together. When introducing new words, pictures are attached to help understand the meaning of the new words and deepen their impression. Once students have mastered the basic sounds and meanings, timely practice is provided to create opportunities for students to use the new words.

Step 4. Students complete the game to deepen their impression of the vocabulary.

(1) Which two have the same meaning?

A. plan B. pack C. rent D. arrange

(2) Which one is true?

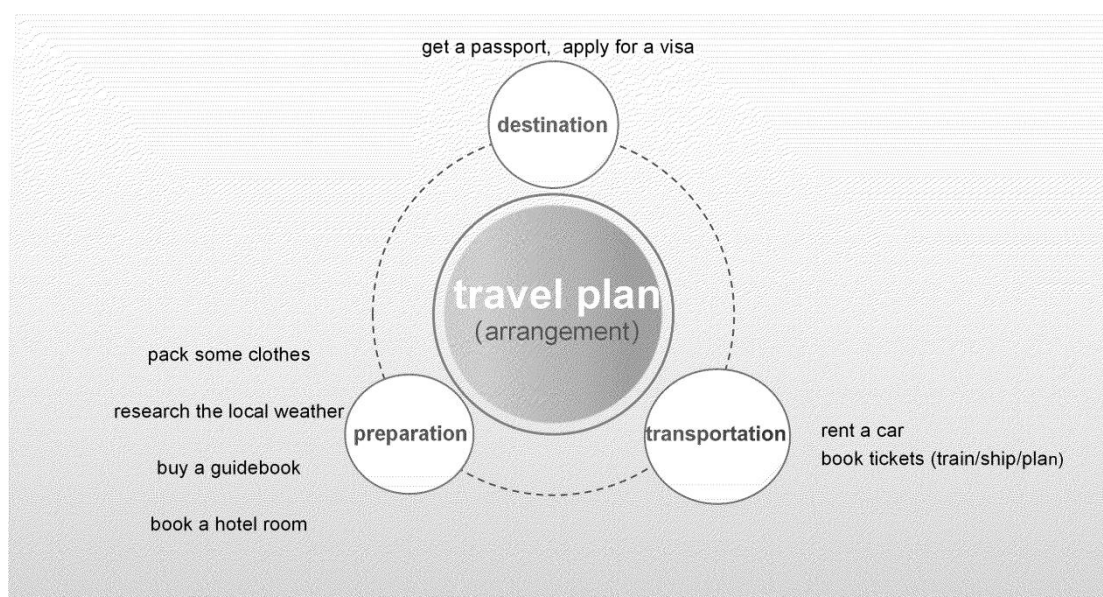
A. destination B. destination

(3) What are the three things we need to think about before traveling?

A. destination B. transportation C. population D. preparation

[Justification] The game can stimulate students' enthusiasm for learning, create more opportunities for them to use and practice new vocabulary through the game, help them consolidate their newly learned vocabulary in time, and remind them of the mistakes they tend to make when using the vocabulary to reduce the error rate.

Step 5. Group work. Encourage students to summarize the vocabulary they have learned in this lesson in the form of a mind map, as shown in Fig.1.



**Figure 1.**

[Justification] By developing a mind map, it can help students sort out the main contents learned in this lesson, and connect the words learned in series to reduce their memory burden. Group work reduces the difficulty of the task, while developing students' ability to learn cooperatively.

Step 6. Students use the vocabulary they have learned in this lesson to make a travel plan for their summer vacation from destination, transportation, preparation.

[Justification] Students making travel plans for themselves can increase the authenticity of the task and motivate students to learn. And students can use what they have learned to solve problems, which can give them a sense of accomplishment.

## 4. Conclusion

Above all, constructivism focuses on the learning process and the development of students' thinking, which is invaluable for English teaching in high school. In accordance with the core ideas of constructivism, teachers create as realistic a context as possible in relation to the English vocabulary to be learned, make students the protagonists of the classroom through various activities, establish connections between what they have learned and what they are about to learn, and motivate them to learn. This encourages students to accelerate the building and refinement of vocabulary structures and effectively promotes the development of students' thinking. In addition, teachers should teach students vocabulary learning strategies, such as mind maps to establish connections between knowledge, to help students reduce their memory burden and improve their learning efficiency.

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