INSTRUCTED VERSUS CONSTRUCTED KNOWLEDGE:
A REFLECTION FOR TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

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I think we all agree that the foreign dignitary committed a social blunder in the above anecdote because he was not able to speak English. Linguistically speaking, the fact that he hardly speaks English means he lacks communicative competence in English. If we agree that to be able to speak English one needs to have communicative competence in English stored in the mind, then it is our job as English teachers to help our students acquire the communicative competence in English. The question is: how do we achieve this?

INTRODUCTION

What does it mean when we say that someone knows or speaks a language? According to Canale and Swain (1980, cited in Johnson, 2008), a speaker of a language must have what they and many others call ‘communicative competence’ that is stored in the speaker’s mind. The communicative competence itself consists of three elements, namely grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and strategic competence. The grammatical competence refers to knowledge of sounds, grammar, and vocabulary of the language; the sociolinguistic competence refers to knowledge of how language is used for communication and how language is used in discourse; and the strategic competence refers to knowledge of how speakers use verbal and non-verbal communication strategies when experiencing breakdowns in communication. To summarize, whether or not one is considered a speaker of a language depends on whether one has or lacks communicative competence in the language.

As an illustration, consider the foreign dignitary described in the following anecdote. Would you say that he has or lacks communicative competence in English?

A foreign dignitary visited President Clinton in the White House. Because the dignitary hardly spoke English, he was carefully coached beforehand. “When you meet the President,” his coach explained, “simply shake hands and say, ‘How are you, Mr. President?’ After he replies, you say, ‘Me, too.’”

Unfortunately, when the time came, the dignitary asked, “Who are you, Mr. President?” Gracefully, Clinton smiled and answered lightly, “I’m Hillary’s husband.” The dignitary then also smiled, gave a slight bow, and said, “Me, too.”
I think we all agree that the foreign dignitary committed a social blunder in the above anecdote because he was not able to speak English. Linguistically speaking, the fact that he hardly speaks English means he lacks communicative competence in English. If we agree that to be able to speak English one needs to have communicative competence in English stored in the mind, then it is our job as English teachers to help our students acquire the communicative competence in English. The question is: how do we achieve this? There are two general approaches that are commonly used to help students acquire the communicative competence, namely (i) the instructed knowledge approach and (ii) the constructed knowledge approach. There has been a big debate on the relative merits of instructed knowledge versus constructed knowledge in the area of education. Let us first discuss these two general approaches in more detail.

**INSTRUCTED KNOWLEDGE APPROACH**

Almost all teachers are probably familiar with the Instructed Knowledge Approach (IKA). The IKA is based on the traditional definition of teaching, namely the giving of instruction or the imparting of knowledge or skill. In this approach learners are viewed metaphorically as receptacles.

The notion of learners as receptacles is related to the ‘jugs and mugs’ theory in which teachers are considered to possess a large jug of knowledge, which must be poured into learners’ mugs (Williams and Burden, 1997). To do this effectively, teachers focus on instruction and information-giving. That is, the main task of teachers is to ‘present information to learners in a form that they can easily access, understand, and master’ (Westwood, 2008: 9-10). According to Rosenshine (1986), a successful lesson that applies the IKA has six major components:

- daily review
- clear presentation of new material
- guided practice by students
- immediate correction and feedback from teacher
- independent practice
- weekly and monthly reviews

The IKA takes many forms. It ranges from highly-structured (or teacher-directed) ones, where students are mainly passive recipients of information, to less-structured ones, i.e., those that have
interactive classroom sessions even though they are still teacher-directed (Westwood, 2008). The traditional chalk-and-talk or modern Powerpoint lecture are typical examples of the highly-structured IKA. Teachers who begin their lessons with a brief introduction (amounting to a mini lecture rather than a full lecture) or teachers who circulate in the classroom to check students’ understanding or to provide students with feedback and encouragement represent examples of the less-structured IKA.

In English language teaching, the characteristics of the IKA can be clearly seen in grammar-based approaches to language learning. According to Norland and Pruett-Said (2006), an example of grammar-based approaches to language learning is the use of grammatical structures to guide the syllabus or lesson. In using this method, teachers begin by presenting and explaining the grammatical structure or rule. After the presentation, teachers assign students to do practice on the structure. Finally, teachers ask students to practice using the structure for communication. As an illustration, consider the following example taken from Norland and Pruett-Said (2006: 7-8). In this example, teachers are teaching their students the present perfect tense.

1. Students read a passage that makes use of the present perfect. Students are asked to recognize the present perfect. Students may also be asked why they think the present perfect is used in the reading.
2. The teacher then orally and visually explains the present perfect. One way to do this is to write the following on the board or overhead:

- **Form:** subject + has/have + past participle
  
  Example: *He has done his homework.*
  
  *They have visited Chicago several times.*

- **Use:**
  
  (a) For actions that began in the past and continue in the present
  
  Example: *I have lived in New York for five years.*
  
  (b) For repeated actions
  
  Example: *John has seen that movie five times.*
  
  (c) For an action that happened at an unspecified or unknown time
  
  Example: *She has already eaten lunch.*
  
  (d) For an action that was just completed
  
  Example: *Jane and George have just finished painting their house.*
3. Students then do exercises to practice the tense. These exercises may be spoken or written. Students may begin with exercises in which they only need to write in the correct form. Students may then do exercises practicing adverbs that often go with the present perfect such as recently, until now, and so far. In addition, they may practice exercises which ask them to recognize the difference between the simple present and the present perfect tense.

4. Students then do expansion and application exercises in which they practice writing or speaking about a topic that encourages them to make use of the present perfect. For example, students may write or speak about places they have visited or activities they have done.

CONSTRUCTED KNOWLEDGE APPROACH

The Constructed Knowledge Approach (CKA) is based on a theory about human learning called constructivism. According to constructivism, most of what we learn in everyday life comes from personal discovery and experience, not from instruction (Westwood, 2008). Therefore, in applying this underlying principle to the classroom, the main task of teachers is to make students construct their own knowledge through their own efforts, not from having predigested information and skills presented by a teacher and a textbook (Zevenbergen, 1995). Through the process of knowledge construction, students are hoped to become more inquisitive, inventive, and reflective. They are also hoped to be able to take the initiative, to think, to reason, and to explore and exchange ideas with others (Project Construct, 2004).

In using the CKA, teachers see themselves as facilitators and supporters, rather than instructors. Therefore, the CKA teachers favor teaching methods that require students to play the active and major role in acquiring information and developing skills (Westwood, 2008). Such methods include the following:

- Guided-discovery learning

This method “requires students to investigate a topic, issue, or problem by active means, obtain pertinent information, interpret causes and effects where relevant, and arrive at conclusions or solutions” (Westwood, 2008: 28; based on Ormrod, 2000). Students work individually or in small groups. The teacher and students work together to brainstorm
ideas for ways of investigating the topic. During the activities, the teacher may make
suggestions, raise questions, provide hints, clear up any misconceptions, summarize the
findings, and help students draw conclusions.

- **Problem-based learning**

  In this method, “students are presented with a real-life issue that requires a decision, or
  with a real-life problem that requires a solution. Students typically work in small
  collaborative groups. The teacher or tutor has the role of general facilitator of the group
discussion, but not direct or control the investigative process” (Westwood, 2008: 31).

- **Project-based learning**

  This method requires students to work individually or collaboratively to gather and
  present information on a chosen topic (Westwood, 2008). Students work individually or
  in small groups. The teacher and students work together to brainstorm ideas for a
  project.

- **Resource-based learning**

  In this method, the students are trained to process information actively by making use of
  a range of authentic resources such as books, reports, audio-video or internet material
  (Westwood, 2008). While the students are using the resources, the teacher can circulate
during the lesson to help or support individual students.

In English language teaching, the characteristics of the CKA can be clearly seen in task-based
learning. In this method, students are presented with a task they have to perform or a problem they
have to solve, instead of a language structure. According to Prabhu (1987), who popularized task-
based learning, students who think about a non-linguistic problem (i.e., performing a task or solving
a problem) will learn language as a result.

Willis (1994) suggests that task-based learning should be conducted in three stages, namely, the pre-
task, the task cycle, and language focus. In the pre-task, the teacher helps students understand the
task instructions and highlight useful words and phrases in doing the task. In this stage, the teacher
may also play for students a recording of other people doing the same task. After the students have
understood the task, they come into the task cycle. In this stage, they perform the task in pairs or
small groups while their teacher monitors from a distance. Afterwards, the students discuss in pairs
or small groups how they will make a report on the task to the class. In the language focus stage, the teacher directs students’ attention in examining specific language features the task has provoked and makes students do some practice on them. For example, if teachers assign their students a task to do a job interview in English, they may do the following task-based learning activities:

1. Pre-task:
   - The teacher and students discuss the task instructions.
   - The students listen to examples of job interviews.
2. Task cycle:
   - The students practice and role-play interviews in pairs or small groups.
   - The students discuss what to report about the task to the class.
3. Language focus
   - The students examine English language features used in a job interview.
   - The teacher makes students practice the features.

**WHICH ONE? THE IKA OR THE CKA**

Rather than seeing whether the IKA or the CKA is applicable to all types and levels of learning, we should view the IKA and the CKA as actually important at particular stage of learning (Westwood, 2008). In this respect, let us consider Jonassen’s (1992) three-stage model of acquisition, namely:

- Stage 1: Initial knowledge acquisition
- Stage 2: Advanced knowledge
- Stage 3: Expertise

Based on Jonassen’s model, we may speculate that when students are acquiring initial knowledge, the IKA may be more appropriate than the CKA. However, when students are acquiring advanced knowledge leading to expertise, the CKA may help students more optimally than the IKA. In other words, students who just begin to learn English may well be best served by teachers who use the IKA, but the advanced students of English may benefit most if taught by teachers who use the CKA.
References


Appendix

The following passage was taken from an article written by Rhenald Kasali published in the daily newspaper Seputar Indonesia on May 5, 2011. Read it carefully and try to relate what Rhenald Kasali calls Guru Kognitif and Guru Kreatif with the teachers who apply the IKA and CKA.

Dua Jenis Guru


Guru Kognitif


Guru Kreatif

Ini guru yang sering kali dianggap aneh di belantara guru-guru kognitif. Sudah jumlahnya sedikit, mereka sering kali kurang peduli dengan tupoksi dan silabus. Mereka biasanya juga sangat toleran terhadap perbedaan dan cara berpakaian siswa. Tetapi, mereka sebenarnya guru yang bisa mempersiapkan masa depan anak-anak
didiknya. Mereka bukan sibuk mengisi kepala anak-anaknya dengan rumus-rumus, melainkan membongkar anak-anak didik itu dari segala belenggu yang mengikat mereka.

Belenggu-belenggu itu bisa jadi ditanam oleh para guru, orang tua, dan tradisi seperti tampak jelas dalam membuat gambar (pemandangan, gunung dua buah, matahari di antara keduanya, awan, sawah, dan seterusnya). Atau belenggu-belenggu lain yang justru mengantarkan anak-anak pada perilaku-perilaku selfish, ego-centrism, merasa paling benar, sulit bergaul, mudah panik, mudah ter-singgung, kurang berbagi, dan seterusnya.

Guru-guru ini mengajarkan life skills, bukan sekadar soft skills, apalagi hard skill. Berbeda dengan guru kognitif yang tak punya waktu berbicara tentang kehidupan, mereka justru bercerita tentang kehidupan (context) yang didiami anak didik. Namun, lebih dari itu, mereka aktif menggunakan segala macam alat peraga. Bagi mereka, memori tak hanya ada di kepala, tapi juga ada di seluruh tubuh manusia.

Memori manusia yang kedua ini dalam biologi dikenal sebagai myelin dan para neuroscientist modern menemukan myelin adalah lokomotif penggerak (muscle memory). Di dalam ilmu manajemen, myelin adalah faktor pembentuk harta tak kelihatan (intangibles) yang sangat vital seperti gestures, bahasa tubuh, kepercayaan, empati, keterampilan, disiplin diri, dan seterusnya.


Selamat merayakan Hari Pendidikan dan jadilah guru yang mengantarkan kaum muda ke jendela masa depan mereka.