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## *Constructivist Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners*

**Review by Bill Templer**

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Sharon Adelman Reyes and Trina Lynn Vallone. 2008. *Constructivist Strategies for Teaching English Language Learners*. Thousand Oaks/CA: Corwin Press. ISBN 978-1-4129-3687-3 (paperback). xvi, 191 pp. \$33.95

This innovative volume shows very concretely how teachers can develop a “critical constructivist practice” for teaching EFL in a variety of contexts. Adelman Reyes and Vallone introduce teachers to basic tenets of the collaborative, learner-centered classroom linking this with an approach to critical pedagogy and critical literacy that encourages ELLs from immigrant backgrounds to constructively critique their own experiences of oppression, cultural exclusion, and silencing. As linguist Jim Cummins says in his foreword, the book “represents a breath of fresh air,” helping to implement “instruction that creates contexts of empowerment not just for students but also for educators.”

The first five chapters lay out perspectives in second language acquisition, constructivism, and “culturally responsive” pedagogy—an “approach based on using students’ identities and backgrounds as meaningful sources of their education” (Nieto, 2004, p. 402). Social constructivism centers on the idea that students themselves build knowledge and their own learning itineraries in dynamic collaboration, with teachers providing flexible scaffolding and affirming student identity.

The presentation is geared in particular to learner-centered instruction for ELLs in the U.S. elementary public school context. A strong argument is developed, especially in Chapter 2, for inclusive bilingual classrooms<sup>1</sup> as opposed to monolingual immersion approaches, today a highly controversial policy issue in U.S. public schools. The book’s narrative core, 37 percent of total content (Chapters 6-8), consists of detailed descriptions of ESL teaching in three different elementary school classrooms (2nd, 5th and 8th grade), taught by Jill, Maria and Monica, with learners from a range of mainly lower-income backgrounds, primarily Latino and Iraqi.

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<sup>1</sup>See numerous papers by Jim Cummins, <http://www.iteachilearn.com/cummins/>

These windows into actual practice in the form of extended visitations to classrooms attempt to bring home to teachers “just how powerful constructivist approaches can be in engaging learners actively in knowledge building” (Cummins). And you hear many diverse students’ voices shaping curriculum and engaging in authentic dialogue as description of class activity is coupled with repeated teacher reflection on what is happening. There is regular inclusion of explanation of key constructivist principles as applied in the concrete instance. Chapter 9 outlines an engaged “Critical Constructivist Education for ELLs.”

A glossary provides definitions of 51 terms in SLA and constructivist pedagogy along with a useful appended questionnaire for oral history projects in ESL by Irma Olmedo. The bibliography of 101 references is a springboard to further exploration including a key volume on learning theory that substantiates constructivist, collaborative pedagogies (National Research Council, 2005).

In developing a culturally responsive ESL pedagogy, Adelman Reyes and Vallone are keen to stress the need for validating home language and heritage by bringing in students worlds and native languages and affirming their identity and self-esteem. There is also ample illustration in all three classroom narratives of “context-embedded instruction,” a constructivist cornerstone: aspects of the external world—like “insects” as a hands-on class project in Jill’s 2nd-grade class—provide a basis for collaborative, student-shaped, “fun” acquisition of ESL skills, often grounded on problem-solving. Monica’s 8th-grade class centers on students engaged in a project of exploring their own experiences as Latino immigrant kids tapping their own cultural funds of knowledge, narratives, biographies, and problems. Maria’s classroom of Iraqi youngsters offers special insight into the problems of working with heavily traumatized learners as we come to meet students like Zainab and Beyar.

The downside of this book may be its concentration on teaching immigrant ELLs in a highly specific North American context. But much can be extrapolated to wherever teachers work. The book can help turn you into critical literacy educators, teaching students to read the word and world between the lines, while seeking to build a more open and democratic learning environment in solidarity with your students and their communities.

## References

- National Research Council (2005). *How people learn: Brain, mind, experience, school*. Washington, D.C: National Academy Press.
- Nieto, S. (2004). *Affirming diversity: The sociopolitical context of multicultural education*. New York: Pearson Education.

### About the Reviewer

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