

Literature Review

# The Role of Constructivist Theories in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL)

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**Abstract:** Constructivist theories have long influenced the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) education, highlighting learners' active engagement, social interaction, and contextualized meaning-making. Unlike behaviorist or transmission-oriented methods, constructivism views language learning as a dynamic process of constructing knowledge through experience, association, and reflection. This article therefore synthesizes recent research on the role of constructivist theories in ESL teaching, exploring pedagogical models, classroom practices, and outcomes across various contexts. Following the PRISMA methodology, a comprehensive search was conducted through databases including Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar. Through an analysis of empirical and theoretical studies from 2010 to 2025. Results reveal that constructivist-inspired pedagogies, such as task-based learning, project-based instruction, collaborative learning, and scaffolding. These enhance communicative competence, learner autonomy, and critical thinking. Nevertheless, challenges persist in teacher preparedness, curriculum alignment, and assessment standardization. This paper concludes with recommendations for educators and policymakers to integrate constructivist frameworks systematically into ESL curricula, emphasizing teacher training, reflective practice, and culturally responsive methodologies.

**Keywords:** constructivism; ESL; language learning; pedagogical strategy; learning outcomes

## 1. Introduction

Constructivism, grounded in the works of Piaget (1954) and Vygotsky (1978), posits that learners actively construct knowledge through interaction with their environment rather than passively receiving information. In the context of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL), constructivist principles suggest that students develop language competence more effectively when learning experiences are meaningful, collaborative, and reflective. This systematic literature review aims to synthesize research on the application of constructivist theories in ESL classrooms, exploring pedagogical strategies, learning outcomes, and challenges.

Moreover, it is widely touted as an approach to probe for children's level of understanding and the ways in which that understanding can be taken to higher level thinking. Constructivism is a way of learning and thinking. It is how students make sense of the material and how they can be taught most effectively (Deng, 2025). Constructivism as an educational theory holds that teachers should consider what students know. Teachers then build on this knowledge and allow students to put their knowledge into practice. There is no universal definition of constructivism. For some it is a theory of learning, for others it is a theory of knowledge, and for others still it is a pedagogical theory.

Additional views include theory of science, educational theory or an all-encompassing worldview. Phillips (2000) writes about a number of constructivist traditions. The theoretical framework for this article is educational constructivism. This theory has a number of variations. The two most popular are the following: personal constructivism attributed to Jean Piaget and social constructivism associated with Lev Vygotsky.

Piaget and Inhelder (1969) believed that the fundamental basis of learning was discovery.

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Vygotsky (1978) believed that Piaget's emphasis was centered too closely on the internal processes of individuals. Vygotsky viewed cognitive development primarily as a function of cultural, historical and social interaction rather than of individual construction. He suggested that people create psychological tools to master their behavior, the most important being language. Whether knowledge is viewed as socially situated or whether it is considered to be an individual construction has implications for the ways in which learning is conceptualized. Such question like "how can the constructivist theory encompass both the collective activity and the individual experience to take into account the important classroom social interactions that are so much a part of the entire educational process?" underlie the complexities involved in translating the diversity of perspectives on constructivism into a common set of principles that can be operationalized.

Two important notions encompass the simple idea of constructed knowledge (Terwel, 1999). The first is that learners construct new understandings using what they already know. They come to learning situations with knowledge gained from previous experiences. That prior knowledge influences what new or modified knowledge they will construct from the new learning experiences.

The second notion is that learning is active rather than passive (Terwel, 1999). Learners negotiate their understanding in light of what they encounter in the new learning situation. If what learners encounter is inconsistent with their current understanding, their understanding can change to accommodate new experience. Learners remain active throughout this process.

Constructivism, consequently, has important implications for teaching (Terwel, 1999). First, teaching cannot be viewed as the transmission of knowledge from the enlightened to the unenlightened; constructivist teachers do not take the role of the "sage on the stage". Rather, teachers act as "guides on the side", who provide students with opportunities to test the adequacy of their current understandings.

Second, if learning is based on prior knowledge, then teachers must take note of that knowledge and provide learning environments that exploit inconsistencies between learners' current understandings and the new experiences before them (Ivanovska, 2022; Terwel, 1999). This presents a challenge for teachers as they cannot assume that all children understand something in the same way. Furthermore, children may need different experiences to advance to different levels of understanding.

Third, if students must apply their current understandings in new situations in order to build new knowledge, then teachers must engage students in learning, bringing students' current understandings to the forefront (Terwel, 1999). Teachers can ensure that learning experiences incorporate problems that are important to students, not those that are primarily important to teachers and the educational system. Teachers can also encourage group interaction, where the interplay among participants helps individual students become explicit about their own understanding by comparing it to that of their peers.

Fourth, if new knowledge is actively built, then time is needed to build it. Ample time provides opportunities for student reflection about new experiences, how those experiences line up against current understandings, and how a different understanding might provide students with an improved (not "correct") view of the world.

The field of second language acquisition has increasingly emphasized learner-centered pedagogies. Constructivist theories propose that learners actively construct knowledge through experience, interaction, and reflection rather than passively absorbing information (Piaget, 1954; Vygotsky, 1978). In ESL contexts, constructivist principles suggest that meaningful and collaborative learning activities facilitate language acquisition more effectively than traditional teacher-centered methods. This review investigates the application, effectiveness, and challenges of constructivist strategies in teaching ESL. This review follows a systematic approach based on established protocols for literature synthesis. This review is anchored on the following questions:

- (1) How have constructivist theories been applied in teaching ESL?
- (2) What pedagogical strategies derived from constructivist theories improve ESL learning outcomes?
- (3) What challenges and limitations are associated with implementing constructivist approaches in ESL contexts?

## 2. Materials and Methods

This study followed the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure methodological transparency and rigor. Four major

databases (Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and Google Scholar) were searched using keywords such as “constructivism in ESL”, “scaffolding in English language learning”, and “task-based learning theory”. The review focused on empirical and theoretical literature related to constructivist ESL instruction published between 2010 and 2025.

### 2.1. *Research Design*

A systematic literature review design was employed to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant studies on constructivist approaches in ESL teaching. This design enables a comprehensive and unbiased summary of existing research while identifying patterns, gaps, and implications for practice.

### 2.2. *Data Sources and Search Strategy*

Databases searched included Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science, and ERIC. Keywords included combinations of: “constructivism in ESL”, “constructivist theory”, “scaffolding in English language learning”, “task-based learning”, “English as a Second Language”, “ESL teaching”, “learner-centered approach”, “Piaget”, “Vygotsky”, “collaborative learning”, “project-based learning”. The search covered publications from 2010-2025 to capture recent developments in constructivist ESL pedagogy. Citation chaining and reference list reviews were conducted to identify additional studies.

### 2.3. *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria*

The selection of studies followed predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria to ensure methodological rigor and relevance. The review included studies published between 2010-2025, written in English, and focused on ESL or English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction using constructivist approaches. Eligible publications included peer-reviewed journal articles, conference papers, and scholarly books that presented empirical findings or substantial theoretical discussions related to constructivist pedagogy. Studies were excluded if they did not focus on language teaching, lacked a constructivist framework, were non-English publications, or consisted solely of opinion pieces without empirical or theoretical grounding.

### 2.4. *Data Collection Method*

The data selection process followed the PRISMA framework to ensure transparency and replicability. After records were identified through database searches and additional sources, duplicate entries were removed. The remaining records were screened based on titles and abstracts to determine relevance to constructivist approaches in ESL instruction. Full-text articles were then assessed for eligibility using the predefined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only studies that met all criteria were included in the final synthesis, resulting in a total of 20 studies. This multi-stage screening process ensured that the review focused on relevant and methodologically sound literature.

### 2.5. *Data Analysis*

A thematic synthesis approach was employed to analyze the extracted data. The findings were coded and grouped into recurring themes related to constructivist ESL pedagogy, including collaborative learning, project- and task-based learning, scaffolding and guided inquiry, reflective and student-led practices, technology-mediated instruction, and implementation challenges. Patterns across studies were examined to determine the effectiveness of these strategies in improving language proficiency, learner engagement, autonomy, and higher-order thinking skills. This analytical process enabled the identification of both the pedagogical benefits and the systemic barriers associated with constructivist approaches in ESL contexts.

Figure 1 illustrates the study selection process based on the PRISMA framework. During the identification stage, records were retrieved from four databases and additional sources. After removing duplicates and non-ESL studies, the remaining records were screened based on titles and abstracts. Full-text articles were then assessed for eligibility using the inclusion and exclusion criteria. This process resulted in a final set of 20 studies included in the systematic review. The diagram visually summarizes the filtering stages and ensures transparency in the selection process.

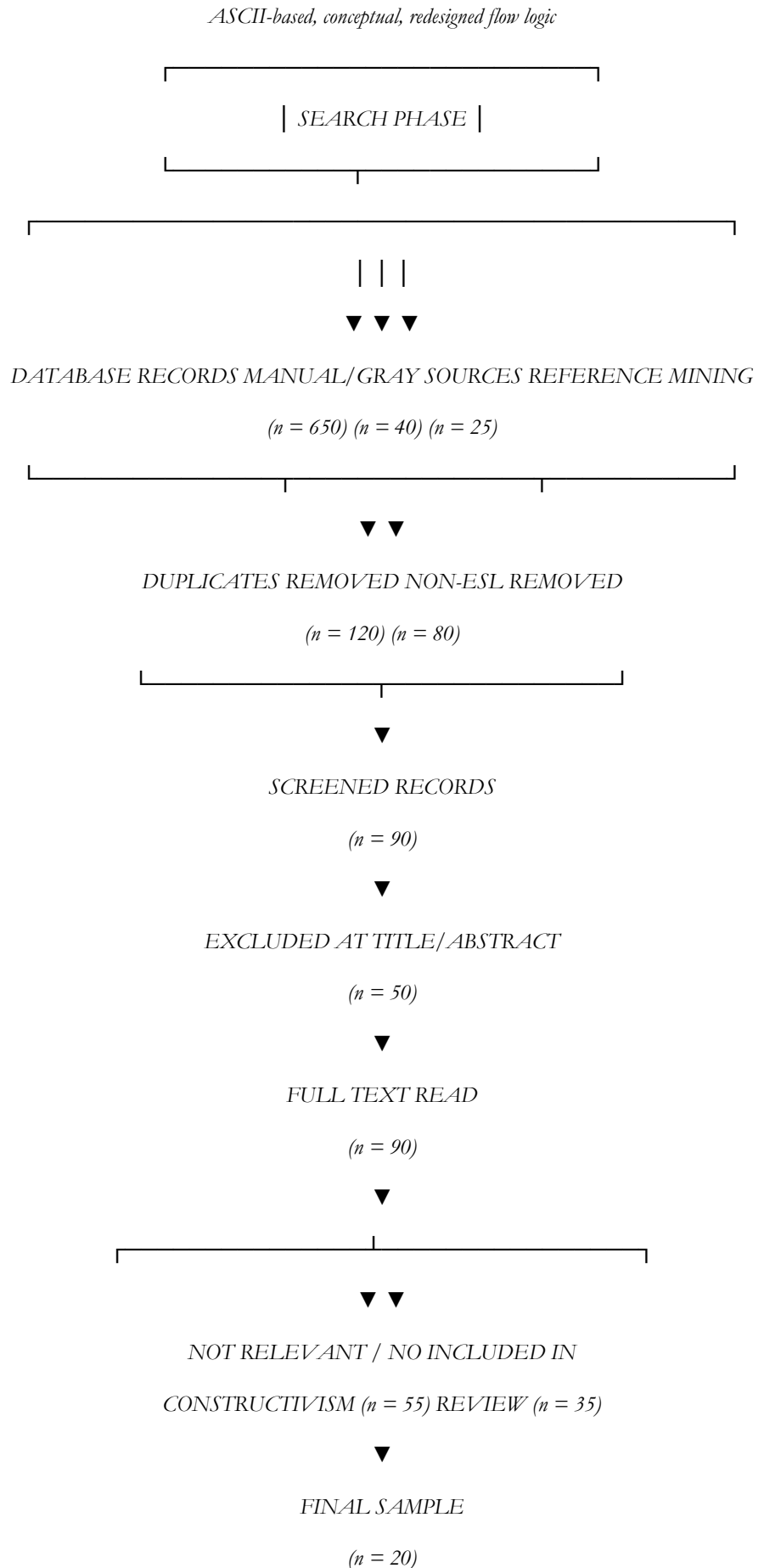


Figure 1. PRISMA flow diagram.

Table 1 presents the inclusion and exclusion criteria used to guide the study selection process. The criteria ensured that only relevant and methodologically sound studies were included in the review. Specifically, the table outlines the required publication period, language, and focus on constructivist approaches in ESL or EFL instruction, as well as acceptable publication types such as peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly works. It also details the exclusion parameters, including studies unrelated to language teaching, those lacking a constructivist framework, non-English publications, and opinion-based papers without empirical and theoretical grounding. These criteria helped maintain the rigor, relevance and consistency of the systematic review.

**Table 1.** Inclusion/exclusion criteria for study selection.

Criterion	Inclusion	Exclusion
Time period	Studies published between 2010–2025	Studies unrelated to ESL or language teaching
Language	English	Non-English publications
Type of article	Peer-reviewed articles, books, or conference papers	Article was not original
Focus	Focused on ESL teaching using constructivist approaches	Studies without clear constructivist framework or pedagogical focus

This systematic review followed the PRISMA framework to ensure methodological transparency, employing a multi-stage process of identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and thematic synthesis. Applying clearly defined inclusion and exclusion criteria and analyzing studies from 2010 to 2025, the review distilled a final sample of 20 studies that provide robust insights into constructivist approaches in ESL instruction. The thematic analysis of these studies highlights key pedagogical strategies, patterns, and challenges, ensuring that the review offers a comprehensive and reliable foundation for understanding and advancing constructivist ESL teaching practices.

### 3. Results

A total of 20 studies met the inclusion criteria after the screening process. These studies represent diverse educational settings, including K-12 education, higher education, adult learning, and online ESL environments.

#### 3.1. Overview of Included Studies

Table 2 provides a summary of the 20 studies included in the systematic review, highlighting key information such as authors, publication year, constructivist strategies employed, research contexts, and reported ESL learning outcomes. The table enables cross-study comparison by presenting how various constructivist approaches such as collaborative learning, project-based learning, scaffolding, reflective practices, and technology-mediated instruction were implemented across different educational settings. It also illustrates the range of outcomes reported, including improvements in communicative competence, learner autonomy, engagement, and higher-order thinking skills, thereby offering a consolidated view of the effectiveness of constructivist pedagogy in ESL education.

**Table 2.** Summary of included studies.

Author(s)	Year	Constructivist Strategy	Main Outcomes
Cleland Silva & de Tarso Fonseca Silva	2022	Collaborative Learning	Improved speaking fluency and learner autonomy.
Wang	2025	Problem-Based Learning	Enhanced critical thinking and vocabulary retention.
Rohmah et al.	2024	Project-Based Learning	Improved writing, engagement, and reading comprehension.
Liu et al.	2022	Scaffolding	Development on critical thinking, cooperative learning and quality control
Mendoza et al.	2020	Inquiry-Based Learning	Increased motivation and improved academic writing.
Tan & Chong	2023	Gamified Learning	Higher engagement and participation.
Heidari Darani et al.	2023	Student-Led Discussions	Improved writing performance in relation to the elements of content and vocabulary

Gull & Shehzad	2015	Cooperative Group Learning	Better conversational fluency.
Ali et al.	2025	Blended Learning	Improved English-Speaking skills and learner independence.
Zhang	2018	Reflective Journaling	Strengthens students' English writing skills and vocabulary.
Imbaquingo & Cárdenas	2023	Project-Based Learning	Improve reading and comprehension skills
Cleland Silva & de Tarso Fonseca Silva	2022	Collaborative Storytelling	Improved narrative ability.
Alkhalwaldeh and Omari	2025	Social Constructivist Workshops	Enhanced grammatical accuracy
Fulgueras & Bautista	2020	Flipped Classroom	Improvements in the critical thinking levels and the reading comprehension
Jiang & Eslami	2022	Tech-Mediated Collaboration	Improved writing fluency.
Bautista Díaz et al.	2025	Task-based learning	Evident progress in oral performance
Shooshtari & Mir	2014	Peer Scaffolding	remarkable progress in both writing quality and strategy application.
Raju et al.	2022	Cognitive Apprenticeship	Better reading strategies and vocabulary.
Ramírez Ortiz & Artunduaga Cuéllar	2018	Authentic Learning Tasks	Improved real-world communication.
Wu	2024	Multimodal Constructivism	Enhanced integrated language skills.

### 3.2. Constructivist Applications in ESL

The reviewed studies indicate that constructivist theories are operationalized in ESL classrooms through learner-centered, interactive pedagogies that position students as active participants in knowledge construction. Common applications include collaborative learning, cooperative group work, student-led discussions, scaffolding, and authentic task-based activities (Cleland Silva & de Tarso Fonseca Silva, 2025; Heidari Darani et al., 2023; Mendoza et al., 2020).

These approaches emphasize social interaction and contextualized learning, enabling learners to construct meaning through shared experiences rather than passive reception of information. Evidence from the included studies shows that collaborative and cooperative learning practices enhance speaking fluency, conversational competence, and classroom participation by promoting peer interaction and shared meaning-making (Gull & Shehzad, 2015; Tan & Chong, 2023).

Similarly, authentic learning tasks allow learners to apply English in real-world contexts, strengthening communicative competence and functional language use (Wang, 2025; Rohmah et al., 2024). Across diverse educational settings, these constructivist applications foster engagement and encourage learners to take ownership of their language development.

### 3.3. Effective Constructivist Strategies

The synthesis identified several constructivist strategies that significantly improve ESL learning outcomes across diverse educational contexts. Collaborative and cooperative learning approaches enhance speaking fluency, learner confidence, and autonomy by promoting peer interaction and social negotiation of meaning (Cleland Silva & de Tarso Fonseca Silva, 2022; Gull & Shehzad, 2015).

Similarly, project-based and problem-based learning strategies foster critical thinking, vocabulary retention, writing performance, and reading comprehension by engaging learners in authentic, goal-oriented tasks that integrate multiple language skills (Rohmah et al., 2024; Imbaquingo & Cárdenas, 2023). Scaffolding and guided inquiry further support language development by providing structured assistance within learners' zones of proximal development, enabling the gradual transition from supported practice to independent language use (Liu, 2022).

In addition, reflective and student-led practices, such as journaling and peer discussions, promote metacognitive awareness, vocabulary growth, and improved organization of ideas, encouraging learners to take greater responsibility for their learning (Zhang, 2018; Heidari Darani et al., 2023). Technology-mediated constructivist approaches, including blended learning and digital collaboration tools, also contribute to enhance engagement, learner

independence, and integrated language skills by facilitating interactive and authentic learning experience (Ali et al., 2024; Fulgueras & Bautista, 2020). Collectively, these strategies demonstrate the effectiveness of constructivist pedagogy in fostering communicative competence, higher-order thinking, and learner autonomy in ESL instruction.

### 3.4. *Challenges and Limitations in Implementing Constructivist ESL*

Despite the documented benefits of constructivist approaches, the reviewed studies highlight several challenges and limitations associated with their implementation in ESL contexts. Common barriers include limited teacher preparedness, as educators who lack training in constructivist pedagogy may struggle to design and facilitate learner-centered activities effectively (Mendoza et al., 2020; Fulgueras & Bautista, 2020). Large class sizes further complicate implementation by reducing opportunities for individualized scaffolding, monitoring of group work, and meaningful interaction among learners. Time constraints within prescribed curricula also restrict the use of project-based and inquiry-driven tasks, which require extended periods for planning, collaboration and reflection (Tan & Chong, 2023). Resource limitations present another significant barrier. In under-resourced settings, inadequate access to digital tools and instructional materials hampers the integration of technology-mediated constructivist strategies, limiting opportunities for collaboration and authentic language use (Ali et al., 2024).

Additionally, some learners initially resist student-centered approaches due to prior exposure to teacher-directed instruction, leading to uncertainty, reduced participation, and dependence on teacher guidance. This transition challenge underscores the need for gradual implementation and explicit orientation to new learning roles. Assessment practices also pose constraints, as standardized testing systems often prioritize discrete language skills over collaborative problem-solving and higher-order thinking. This misalignment discourages teachers from fully adopting constructivist methods, despite their potential to enhance communicative competence and learner autonomy. Collectively, these limitations suggest that successful implementation of constructivist ESL approach requires institutional support, professional development, adequate resources, and assessment reforms that align with learner-centered pedagogies.

## 4. Discussion

This research accentuates that constructivist approaches continue to show substantive pedagogical value in ESL settings in 2025, with recent empirical and synthesis studies reporting improved communicative competence, learner engagement, and metacognitive gains when classrooms adopt project-based, problem-based, or scaffolded collaborative tasks. Large-scale field reports and mixed-methods investigations emphasize that technology-mediated project work and project-based learning can increase productive speaking time and support self-regulated learning for intermediate learners (Cao, 2024; Jelodari et al., 2025), while phenomenological and classroom-based studies document teachers' use of ICT to foster the 4Cs (critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, communication) within English language lessons (Persson & Nouri, 2018). Controlled classroom interventions and action research on integrated social-constructivist methods (e.g., project-based learning, cooperative learning, guided inquiry) demonstrate measurable gains in oral fluency and writing when scaffolds are deliberately sequenced and withdrawn (Alkhaldeh & Omari, 2025).

Research into assessment approaches aligned with constructivist pedagogy learning-oriented assessment and formative feedback cycles shows promising effects on argumentative writing and learner resilience, consistent with Vygotskian claims about mediated development (Imsa-ard, 2025). Several 2025 studies also highlight the importance of careful instructional design for digital resources: digital learning unless objects are reconfigured to support collaboration and inquiry, they can reproduce acquisition-oriented activity rather than participation-oriented learning (Lo, 2025). Cross-cultural and multilingual classroom studies further show that peer negotiation, translanguaging practices, and identity work mediate participation patterns and learning outcomes in ESL classrooms (Shaikh, 2025). Finally, broader syntheses and systematic reviews published in 2025 underscore persistent implementation barriers – teacher readiness, infrastructural limits, and system-level assessment constraints – that must be addressed for constructivist approaches to scale with fidelity.

In the same vein, constructivist theories have been applied in ESL teaching by fundamentally re-imagining the learning environment, shifting the central focus from the

teacher as information-giver to the learner as an active agent in knowledge creation. The core application is the adoption of learner-centered pedagogy, which emphasizes participation over passive reception of information. This is operationalized through a variety of interactive techniques. Instead of textbook drills, students engage in real-world communicative tasks like role-playing different social scenarios, engaging in structured debates on contemporary issues, and tackling complex problem-solving activities. This approach, supported by studies like (Wang, 2025) and Heidari Darani et al. (2023), fosters deeper language comprehension and enables learners to use the language practically and creatively. A significant application involves leveraging Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory to foster a collaborative learning environment. This means structuring classroom time to maximize meaningful interaction. Teachers facilitate activities such as pair work, group discussions, and guided peer scaffolding, where students help each other within their respective Zones of Proximal Development. This collaborative application moves the learning process beyond individual cognition, emphasizing that language acquisition is a social process. By talking through tasks, negotiating meaning, and correcting each other in a low-stakes environment, learners internalize language structures more effectively than through isolated study.

Furthermore, applications extend into the integration of authentic contexts and technology. Constructivism argues that learning is most effective when it is meaningful and relevant to the learner's life. Therefore, applications include content-based instruction and project-based learning, where the English language is the medium to achieve a tangible, real-world goal, as highlighted by (Villalobos, 2014; Imbaquingo & Cárdenas, 2023). The modern application also incorporates technology, with tools like interactive platforms and virtual classrooms providing dynamic, collaborative environments (Godwin-Jones, 2008). These technological applications allow learners to engage with authentic materials and collaborate across physical locations, further embedding the constructivist principle of learning through experience and interaction. The pedagogical strategies derived from constructivist theories that improve ESL outcomes primarily revolve around maximizing learner engagement and social interaction. Collaborative learning is arguably the most impactful strategy. By organizing learners into pairs and small groups for discussions and task completion, teachers facilitate a safe space for language experimentation. Research consistently shows that strategies involving peer interaction and scaffolding significantly enhance learners' speaking fluency, writing complexity, and critical thinking skills. This approach acknowledges that learners are resources for one another, and the act of teaching or explaining something to a peer solidifies one's own understanding.

Most essentially, another highly effective strategy is the use of authentic and contextualized learning experiences. This moves away from the artificial structure of traditional language drills. Strategies like project-based learning, where students must use English to research, plan, and execute a project (e.g., creating a tourist guide for their city), yield superior results in terms of retention and fluency. Case studies indicate improved learning outcomes when learners are immersed in real-world scenarios that demand genuine communication for a purpose. These experiences build not just linguistic competence, but also confidence in using the language functionally outside the classroom setting. Besides, strategies that emphasize learner autonomy and technology mediation demonstrably improve outcomes by personalizing the learning process. The integration of digital tools such as interactive whiteboards, language-learning apps, and online collaborative platforms provides dynamic and immediate feedback loops. This technology-mediated instruction allows for self-directed learning paths that cater to individual pace and interest. By giving learners control over their learning journey and providing diverse ways to interact with the target language be it through multimedia resources or global communication tools these strategies foster self-motivation and enduring language competence.

## 5. Conclusions

Constructivist theories are effective in promoting engagement, autonomy, and communicative competence in ESL learners. They provide a framework for designing learner-centered, collaborative, and contextually meaningful instruction. Effective implementation requires institutional support, teacher training, and alignment of assessment methods with constructivist principles. Furthermore, it provides a strong foundation for effective ESL instruction. The emphasis on learner-centeredness, interaction, and real-world engagement leads to measurable improvements in language proficiency, confidence, and autonomy. Successful implementation requires institutional support, teacher preparedness, and

assessment reforms. Based on the findings of this systematic literature review, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen the application of constructivist theories in ESL instruction. These recommendations are directed toward teachers, administrators, and researchers to ensure a holistic and sustainable integration of constructivist pedagogy across educational settings. For teachers, they are encouraged to adopt a more deliberate and consistent use of constructivist strategies by designing learner-centered activities that promote active engagement, collaboration, and real-world language use. This includes implementing group-based projects, inquiry-driven tasks, and scaffolded instruction that supports learners at varying proficiency levels. Teachers should integrate technology – such as interactive digital tools, collaborative platforms, and multimedia resources – to create dynamic and meaningful learning environments. Reflective practice is also essential; by continuously evaluating and refining their instructional methods, teachers can better align classroom activities with constructivist principles and improve learner outcomes.

For administrators, they play a critical role in supporting the successful implementation of constructivist approaches. School leaders should provide ongoing professional development and training focused on collaborative learning, problem-based instruction, and performance-based assessment. Allocating resources for modern technologies, flexible classroom layouts, and instructional materials is essential to creating environments conducive to constructivist learning. Administrators should also ensure that curricular frameworks and assessment policies align with constructivist principles, and promote a culture of professional collaboration by encouraging mentoring programs, peer observations, and teacher learning communities.

And for future researchers, it is encouraged to conduct further studies exploring the long-term effects of constructivist approaches in ESL settings across diverse cultural, institutional, and age-group contexts. More quantitative and mixed-method research is needed to assess the sustained impact of constructivist strategies on language proficiency, learner autonomy, motivation, and critical thinking. Investigating the practical challenges educators face including time limitations, assessment constraints, and differences in teacher readiness will also help refine implementation strategies. Additionally, researchers should examine the evolving role of technology in facilitating constructivist ESL instruction, particularly in hybrid and online learning environments. Expanding the body of evidence will inform more effective pedagogical frameworks and support continuous innovation in ESL teaching and learning.

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