

CONSTRUCTIVIST TEACHING TO FOSTER CRITICAL THINKING IN GRADE 5 ENGLISH: A CASE STUDY AT THANH PHU PRIMARY SCHOOL

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Abstract: *This study investigates the role of constructivist teaching approaches in developing critical thinking skills among students at Thanh Phu Primary School. Constructivism emphasizes active student engagement, problem-solving, and experiential learning, which are essential for nurturing critical thinking. Through a qualitative case study method, data were collected using classroom observations, teacher interviews, and student work analysis. The findings revealed that when constructivist strategies such as collaborative learning, questioning techniques, and project-based activities were implemented, students demonstrated enhanced reasoning, analytical thinking, and reflective abilities. Teachers played a pivotal role in facilitating discussions and guiding learners to construct their own understanding. However, challenges such as limited resources and time constraints were also identified. This study highlights the effectiveness of constructivist pedagogy in fostering essential 21st-century skills in young learners and provides practical implications for primary school educators.*

Keywords: *constructivism, critical thinking, primary education, teaching strategies, case study*

I. Introduction

In the 21st century, critical thinking has emerged as a key competency in education. With the shift from rote learning to student-centered approaches, educators are encouraged to adopt methods that promote analytical and independent thinking. Among these, constructivist teaching approaches are valued for engaging learners in meaningful, context-based experiences that foster reasoning.

Constructivism, grounded in Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner, holds that learners

construct knowledge through interaction with their environment rather than passively absorbing it. In primary education, where cognitive foundations are formed, constructivist methods are especially important. These emphasize student agency, inquiry, problem-solving, and reflection—all central to critical thinking.

Thanh Phu Primary School, in a rural district of Vietnam, has recently undertaken reforms to align with contemporary educational trends. However, gaps remain between curriculum

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goals and classroom practice, particularly in fostering higher-order thinking. Many schools, including Thanh Phu, still rely heavily on memorization and teacher-led instruction, which may hinder students' ability to think critically.

This study examines how constructivist approaches can be effectively implemented at Thanh Phu to enhance students' critical thinking. It explores teacher perceptions and practices, and assesses impacts on students' learning behaviors and cognitive development.

The research is guided by three questions:

1. What constructivist teaching strategies are applied at Thanh Phu Primary School?
2. How do these strategies influence students' critical thinking?
3. What challenges and opportunities do teachers face in implementing constructivist approaches?

By focusing on a rural context, this case study contributes to the literature on constructivist pedagogy in primary education and offers practical insights for similar settings in Vietnam and other developing countries.

II. Literature review

2.1. Theoretical foundations of constructivism

Constructivism views learners as active agents who build knowledge through experience and interaction. Its foundations lie in Piaget, Vygotsky, and Bruner. Piaget (1973) emphasized developmental stages and discovery learning. Vygotsky (1978) introduced the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), stressing social interaction and scaffolding. Bruner (1966) advocated the spiral curriculum and guided discovery, encouraging early introduction and gradual deepening of complex concepts. Collectively, these theorists

shaped a pedagogy valuing active learning, collaboration, and contextual relevance—principles central to 21st-century competencies such as critical thinking.

2.2. Defining critical thinking in education

Critical thinking involves evaluating, analyzing, and synthesizing information for sound decisions. Facione (1990) outlined five core elements: interpretation, analysis, inference, explanation, and self-regulation. Ennis (1985) defined it as “reasonable, reflective thinking focused on deciding what to believe or do,” stressing metacognition. In primary education, these skills appear in students' ability to question, justify, and reflect. In constructivist classrooms, critical thinking is not isolated but embedded in learning activities that demand reasoning and judgment, reinforcing the idea that reflection leads to meaningful learning.

2.3. Constructivist strategies that promote critical thinking

Several strategies nurture critical thinking. Inquiry-based learning encourages students to pose questions and explore with teachers as facilitators. Collaborative learning allows negotiation of meaning and multiple perspectives. Problem-based learning introduces authentic issues requiring analysis and decision-making. Socratic questioning deepens reasoning through justification and evaluation. Project-based learning develops autonomy and interdisciplinary thinking via extended tasks. Visual tools such as concept maps further support organization and reflection. Together, these strategies create interactive environments where critical thinking is continually developed.

2.4. Studies on constructivist approaches in primary education

Research supports the value of constructivist methods. DeVries &

Kohlberg (1987) and Brooks and Brooks (1999) emphasized that hands-on, socially mediated learning suits primary students. Vygotsky's ZPD highlights how scaffolding enables children to exceed current abilities (Hammond, 2001; Palincsar, 1998), while Bruner's spiral curriculum reinforces knowledge through increasing complexity.

Empirical evidence aligns with these theories. Marlowe and Page (2005) found constructivist environments strengthened problem-solving and ownership of learning. Richardson (2003) and Hein (1991) reported improved autonomy and motivation, while Tobin and Tippins (1993) stressed contextual relevance for engagement.

Assessment practices also reflect constructivist ideals, shifting from rote tests to portfolios, journals, and formative feedback that capture reasoning and growth (Wiggins, 1993). Teachers play a multifaceted role: designing tasks, guiding collaboration, and supporting reflection (Windschitl, 2002).

2.5. Challenges in implementing constructivist pedagogy

Despite its advantages, constructivist pedagogy faces implementation barriers. Teacher resistance is a primary challenge, often stemming from entrenched traditional practices and a lack of training (Windschitl, 2002). Structural limitations such as large class sizes, rigid curricula, and time constraints further complicate the application of inquiry-based methods (Tam, 2000).

In many educational contexts, including Vietnam, prevailing assessment systems emphasize factual recall over critical thinking (Pham & Renshaw, 2013). Teachers may also lack access to appropriate resources or institutional support, hindering the creation of authentic learning experiences (Richardson, 2003). Successful implementation thus requires systemic

reforms, ongoing professional development, and alignment between curriculum goals and pedagogical approaches.

Recent Vietnamese studies have also emphasized the role of constructivist pedagogy in fostering students' higher-order thinking. For example, Nguyen (2019) analyzed the implementation of critical thinking in primary moral education classes, highlighting both potentials and limitations in the local context. Building on this, Tran (2023) proposed creative thinking tasks aligned with constructivist roles for primary students, while Le (2024) designed theme-based lessons to cultivate creativity competencies. These studies demonstrate that constructivist approaches are feasible and relevant within Vietnam's general education reform, and they resonate with international findings on the benefits of active, student-centered learning.

2.6. Gaps in the literature and rationale for this study

Although the effectiveness of constructivist pedagogy is well-supported in global literature, research specific to its application in Vietnamese rural primary schools remains scarce. Most studies focus on urban or international contexts where teachers are better resourced and trained. There is a limited understanding of how constructivist principles are interpreted and adapted in less privileged settings.

This study seeks to address that gap by examining Thanh Phu Primary School, a public institution in a rural Vietnamese community. It aims to explore how teachers implement constructivist strategies to foster critical thinking, the challenges they face, and the responses of young learners. By connecting theoretical frameworks with practical realities, the study contributes context-sensitive insights that may inform future pedagogical reforms in similar settings.

As Vietnam's educational policies shift towards competency-based learning and 21st-century skills (MOET, 2018), constructivist approaches offer a promising avenue for reform. However, their success depends on adapting global pedagogical ideals to local realities—a process that this study aims to illuminate.

III. Methodology

3.1. Research design

This study adopts a mixed-methods case study approach to examine the implementation of constructivist teaching approaches in fostering critical thinking skills at Thanh Phu Primary School. The case study method allows for an in-depth exploration of teaching practices, student responses, and contextual factors within a real educational setting.

3.2. Participants

The study involved a total of 32 participants. For the quantitative strand, purposive sampling was used to select 30 Grade 5 students ($N = 30$), who met the inclusion criteria of being regularly enrolled, maintaining consistent English performance (at least average level), and obtaining parental consent. These students completed both the pre- and post-tests. For the qualitative strand, two English teachers ($N = 2$) participated in semi-structured interviews and classroom observations. This separation of samples ensured that the statistical analysis reflected only student data, while teacher data provided complementary insights into instructional practices and perceptions.

3.3. Instructional intervention and data collection

The instructional intervention took place over six weeks, during which two participating teachers implemented constructivist strategies in their English lessons. These included problem-based learning, group discussions, reflective

journals, and project-based tasks aimed at fostering critical thinking. Lesson plans were co-designed by the researcher and teachers to ensure alignment with the curriculum and constructivist principles.

To ensure triangulation and rich insights, data were collected from multiple sources. Classroom observations were conducted using a structured checklist focusing on teacher behaviors, student engagement, and signs of critical thinking. Additionally, semi-structured interviews with teachers and selected students explored their experiences and perceptions. Student artifacts—learning journals, project outputs, and written reflections—were also analyzed to assess the development of critical thinking over time.

To measure students' critical thinking skills, a rubric-based Critical Thinking Test was administered before and after the intervention. The instrument was adapted from Facione (1990) and Ennis (1985), including tasks on interpretation, analysis, inference, and evaluation. Sample items required students to analyze short texts, justify their answers, and reflect on problem-solving steps. Responses were scored with a four-level rubric. The test was reviewed by two experts and piloted with 10 students outside the sample. Reliability analysis indicated acceptable internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$). All items were translated into Vietnamese and back-translated to ensure accuracy.

3.4. Data analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the qualitative data collected. All interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software. Codes were generated inductively and organized into themes related to instructional practices, student engagement, and manifestations of critical thinking. Observational notes and student

artifacts were analyzed concurrently to support and validate the emerging themes. Trustworthiness was ensured through member checking, peer debriefing, and maintaining an audit trail throughout the research process.

IV. Results and discussions

4.1. Impact of constructivist approaches on students' critical thinking skills

To evaluate the impact of constructivist teaching approaches on critical thinking skills among Grade 5 students at Thanh Phu Primary School, SPSS version 26 was employed to analyze both pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group. The sample consisted of 32 participants, including 30 students and two teachers.

Descriptive Statistics

For the quantitative analysis, the sample consisted of 30 Grade 5 students ($N = 30$) who completed both the pre-test and post-test. The paired-samples t-test was therefore based on $df = 29$. In addition, qualitative data were collected from two English teachers ($N = 2$) through interviews and classroom observations, which provided supporting evidence to triangulate the statistical results.

Table 1 presents the mean scores and standard deviations for the students' performance on the critical thinking test before and after the implementation of the constructivist approach.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of pre-test and post-test scores

Test	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Pre-test	30	5.87	1.21
Post-test	30	8.43	1.09

As shown in the table above, the post-test mean score ($M = 8.43$) was significantly higher than the pre-test mean score ($M = 5.87$), indicating an improvement in students' critical thinking

skills after applying constructivist teaching methods.

Paired Samples T-Test

To determine whether the difference between pre- and post-test scores was statistically significant, a paired samples t-test was conducted.

Table 2. Paired Samples T-Test

Pair	Mean Difference	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Post-test - Pre-test	2.56	9.02	29	.000

In addition to statistical significance, the effect size was calculated. The paired-samples Cohen's d_z was 1.65, indicating a large effect size. The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference (2.56) ranged from 2.00 to 3.12, confirming the robustness of the observed improvement.

The t-test result shows that there was a statistically significant increase in students' critical thinking scores after the intervention, $t(29) = 9.02$, $p < .001$. This suggests that the constructivist teaching approaches had a positive impact on students' critical thinking development.

Qualitative Support from Teachers

In addition to the statistical data, feedback from two participating teachers was analyzed thematically. Both teachers reported that students demonstrated noticeable improvements in reasoning, problem-solving, and reflection. One teacher stated:

"Students were more active in asking questions and discussing open-ended problems. Their responses became more thoughtful and grounded."

These qualitative insights triangulate the quantitative findings and reinforce the effectiveness of constructivist strategies in enhancing critical thinking among primary school students.

4.2. Students' perceptions of the constructivist classroom environment

Data from student interviews and reflection logs indicated that most students viewed the constructivist learning environment positively. Thematic analysis revealed three main themes: (1) collaborative learning as a motivator, (2) enhanced engagement through real-life applications, and (3) a shift toward learner autonomy.

Collaborative learning significantly boosted motivation and enjoyment. Students valued group-based tasks, noting that working with peers improved understanding and made learning more enjoyable. One student remarked, "When

we worked together, we learned faster and helped each other."

Authentic learning also shaped their perceptions. Many said applying knowledge to real-life situations made lessons "more meaningful" and "easier to remember." For instance, during a task on local environmental issues, students showed greater enthusiasm and creativity.

Learner autonomy emerged as another strong theme. Students felt more in control of their learning and freer to express ideas without fear of mistakes. One student described it as "different from regular lessons where we just listen and copy."

These findings are summarized in Table 3 below:

Table 3. Emerging themes from student perceptions (N = 30)

Theme	Description	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Collaborative learning	Group work improved motivation and comprehension	25	83.3%
Real-life application	Lessons connected to real-life contexts increased engagement	22	73.3%
Learner autonomy and expression	Students felt free to express opinions and take ownership of learning	18	60.0%
Classroom atmosphere	Described as fun, interactive, and different from traditional lessons	20	66.7%

These data indicate that the constructivist teaching approach created a learning environment perceived as active, inclusive, and engaging by students. Such perceptions are aligned with the core principles of constructivist pedagogy, which emphasize meaningful learning through collaboration, contextualization, and learner empowerment.

4.3. Teachers' perceptions and challenges in implementing constructivist methods

Interviews with two English teachers at Thanh Phu Primary School revealed both benefits and obstacles in applying constructivist strategies. Teachers highlighted increased student engagement, motivation, and critical

thinking, noting that learners became more proactive during collaborative and real-world tasks. Constructivist practices were seen as promoting active knowledge construction rather than passive reception.

Nevertheless, several constraints were identified: a crowded curriculum that limited interactive activities, large class sizes that complicated classroom management, and uneven student readiness that hindered equal participation. In addition, inadequate professional development and scarce resources—particularly in rural contexts—posed significant barriers to sustained implementation.

The table below summarizes the responses of the two participants.

Table 4. Teachers' perceptions of constructivist teaching approaches (N = 2)

Themes	Teacher 1	Teacher 2
Benefits perceived	Encouraged student engagement and collaboration	Promoted critical thinking and creativity
Major challenges	Lack of time, large class size	Uneven student readiness, limited resources
Support needed	Training in designing interactive tasks	Peer-sharing sessions, ongoing mentorship

In summary, while constructivist teaching approaches are welcomed by teachers and show promising outcomes, practical challenges must be addressed to ensure their sustainable implementation. Adequate training, institutional support, and contextual adaptation are necessary for teachers to fully integrate constructivist methods into primary English classrooms.

4.4. Limitations and future research

While the findings are promising, several limitations should be noted. First, the small sample size (n=30) and short duration (six weeks) limit the generalizability of the results. Second, no control group was included, which restricts causal inference. Third, classroom observations and interviews may be influenced by social desirability and teacher expectations. Future research should include larger samples, control groups, and longitudinal designs. The integration of digital learning tools also deserves further exploration.

4.5. Discussions

4.5.1. Enhancing critical thinking through constructivist pedagogy

This study reinforces prior literature on the positive link between constructivist teaching and critical thinking. Consistent with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978), findings show that student-centered environments foster higher-order skills, especially through collaboration and real-world problem solving. The observed gains in students' ability to analyze, evaluate, and reflect (Table 1) indicate that inquiry-based strategies are more effective than traditional instruction.

4.5.2. Student engagement and perception of constructivist learning

Student reflections and interviews confirm that constructivist classrooms were perceived as engaging and supportive, echoing Brooks and Brooks (1993). Positive feedback—describing lessons as “fun,” “challenging,” and “different”—illustrates greater motivation and ownership. These results suggest that encouraging students to voice ideas and collaborate meaningfully enhances cognitive engagement.

4.5.3. Teacher beliefs and implementation challenges

Teachers recognized the value of constructivist practices in developing critical thinking, but cited challenges such as limited time, diverse abilities, and large class sizes, all common in Vietnamese primary schools. Table 2 summarizes these perspectives, showing that while pedagogical shifts were welcomed, practical barriers persisted. These findings align with Fang (2020), who emphasized the need for systemic support and teacher training.

4.5.4. Pedagogical and policy implications

The study highlights key implications. Teachers require ongoing professional development in constructivist pedagogy and differentiated instruction. Schools should reduce class sizes or reorganize spaces to support group work. Curriculum planners are encouraged to integrate project-based tasks and formative assessment, allowing inquiry and reflection. Such measures are critical for sustainable and impactful constructivist teaching.

V. Conclusion

This study demonstrates the potential of constructivist teaching to enhance English learning among Vietnamese primary students. By integrating student-centered practices, collaboration, and real-world tasks, constructivist pedagogy fostered greater engagement, autonomy, and reflective thinking. Students reported higher motivation, while teachers observed more participatory learning.

Nonetheless, systemic barriers remain: time-constrained curricula, large class sizes, and uneven student readiness limit the full application of constructivist methods. The findings highlight the need for sustained professional development and institutional support to equip teachers with the tools and resources necessary for effective practice.

This research adds to the growing evidence for active, contextualized learning environments in language education. It calls on policymakers and school leaders to prioritize teacher training and supportive infrastructure. Future studies should examine long-term impacts, larger and more diverse samples, and the role of digital technologies in strengthening constructivist approaches.

In sum, while challenges persist, adopting constructivist principles represents a promising direction for improving teaching and learning in Vietnam's primary English classrooms.

VI. Implications and recommendations

The study offers several implications for key stakeholders:

Teachers: Ongoing professional development should strengthen knowledge of constructivist principles and provide practical strategies for diverse classrooms. Reflective practice and collaborative lesson planning are essential for addressing large classes and mixed-ability groups.

School Leaders: Administrators should allocate time for lesson preparation, ensure access to resources, and promote a culture of innovation. Regular workshops and peer mentoring can build collective expertise.

Policymakers: National curriculum guidelines and training frameworks should embed constructivist pedagogy, emphasizing autonomy, critical thinking, and communicative competence. Reforms must address structural needs such as class size, facilities, and technology integration.

To sustain implementation, teacher education should incorporate constructivist modules tailored to primary contexts, promote action research, and integrate technology-enhanced learning tools. Assessment practices should move toward performance-based and formative approaches aligned with constructivist values. Stronger partnerships between universities, training institutions, and schools are needed to bridge theory and practice. Overall, constructivist teaching offers clear benefits, but its success depends on coordinated efforts across the classroom, school, and policy levels.

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CẢI THIỆN KỸ NĂNG TƯ DUY PHÊ PHÁN BẰNG PHƯƠNG PHÁP GIẢNG DẠY CONSTRUCTIVIST TRONG MÔN TIẾNG ANH LỚP 5: NGHIÊN CỨU TRƯỜNG HỢP TẠI TRƯỜNG TIỂU HỌC THANH PHÚ

Nguyễn Thị Loan²

Tóm tắt: Nghiên cứu này tìm hiểu vai trò của các phương pháp dạy học kiến tạo trong việc phát triển kỹ năng tư duy phản biện của học sinh tại Trường Tiểu học Thanh Phú. Chủ nghĩa kiến tạo nhấn mạnh sự tham gia tích cực của học sinh, giải quyết vấn đề và học tập qua trải nghiệm - những yếu tố then chốt để nuôi dưỡng tư duy phản biện. Thông qua phương pháp nghiên cứu tình huống định tính, dữ liệu được thu thập bằng quan sát lớp học, phỏng vấn giáo viên và phân tích sản phẩm học tập của học sinh. Kết quả cho thấy khi các chiến lược kiến tạo như học tập hợp tác, kỹ thuật đặt câu hỏi và hoạt động dự án được áp dụng, học sinh thể hiện khả năng lập luận, tư duy phân tích và tư duy phản tỉnh tốt hơn. Giáo viên đóng vai trò then chốt trong việc điều phối thảo luận và định hướng người học tự xây dựng kiến thức của mình. Tuy nhiên, nghiên cứu cũng chỉ ra một số thách thức như hạn chế về nguồn lực và quỹ thời gian. Nghiên cứu này nhấn mạnh hiệu quả của phương pháp sư phạm kiến tạo trong việc bồi dưỡng các kỹ năng thiết yếu của thế kỷ 21 cho học sinh tiểu học và đưa ra những gợi ý thực tiễn cho giáo viên tiểu học.

Từ khóa: chủ nghĩa kiến tạo, tư duy phản biện, giáo dục tiểu học, chiến lược giảng dạy, nghiên cứu tình huống

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