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Developing constructivist-action approach in foreign language teaching and learning in vietnam

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Résumé

L'Approche Constructiviste-Actionnelle en didactiques des langues étrangères a été étudiée et appliquée par un groupe d'enseignants de l'Université de Langues et d'Études internationales de Hanoi. À travers cet article, l'auteur souhaite présenter les principes fondamentaux de l'Approche, qui serviraient de bases pour un éventuel développement de celle-ci au Vietnam, ce qui améliorerait grandement la situation de l'enseignement-apprentissage des langues étrangères du pays, répondant ainsi aux besoins des enseignants et apprenants dans le nouveau contexte d'intégration du pays à l'échelle mondiale.

Mots-clés : constructiviste-actionnelle, processus cognitif, apprenant individuel, utilisateur en groupe, acteur social

Développer l'Approche Constructiviste-Actionnelle en didactiques des langues étrangères au Vietnam

Abstract

Constructivist - Action Approach in Foreign Language Education has been researched and applied by the group of ULIS-VNU's lecturers. Through this paper, the author would like to preliminarily introduce the perspective as well as the fundamental principles of the Approach in order to develop a Foreign Language Teaching - Learning Technology in Vietnam, satisfying the increasingly high demands of teachers and learners in the context of today's country's development and integration.

Keywords: constructivist-action, cognitive processes, mind, individual learner, learner in learning group, learner in community

Throughout the development history of education renovation in Vietnam, foreign language teaching and learning remain the frequent concern of national education, ranging from establishing a stable foreign language strategy to continuously enhancing the quality of foreign language training. Many opportunities and challenges have arisen; various fruitful achievements have been gained; numerous concerns have been raised as well.

During the past years, the reality of foreign language teaching and learning implementation at central and provincial units of all levels has become substantially vibrant. The teaching staff has significantly changed; officers and managers at different levels have also gradually changed their awareness, strongly support this process. Multi level learners have paid greater concern and been aware of the demands of foreign language learning. Other forces in the whole society also contribute to this success in various forms and ways.

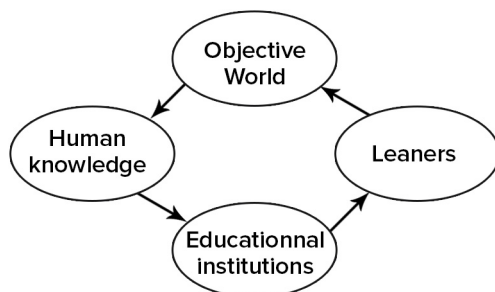
It can be said that, at the moment, the whole context and conditions are ripe enough for the professionals (scientists, teachers, technical specialists) to share with each others and utmostly establish a foreign language teaching approach. Such approach should not only inherit the essence of teaching - learning methods in the world but also match the conditions of Vietnam and satisfy the demands.

I. Constructivist - Action approach in foreign language teaching and learning: basic orientations

1.1. Nature of learning and cognitive processes of learners

Constructivism appeared in the late nineteenth century and flourished in the twentieth century. This is the work of a group of authors from many countries in the world, including the two most prominent names, the Swiss psychologist J. Piaget (1896 - 1980) and Russian psychologist L. Vygosky (1896 - 1934). J. Piaget laid the foundation on the theory of constructivism, then L. Vygosky developed it into the theory of social constructivism. J. Piaget argues that knowledge is the product of activities created by the subject through personal experience, and knowledge is gained through the subject's self-structuring into the inner system(1). In other words, for an individual, the outside knowledge when receiving is "ambiguous". Only through "experiencing", the knowledge becomes the actual "knowledge" of the individual. J. Piaget's theory of constructivism focuses on the knowledge construction process of each individual as well as heightens the role and the proactiveness of an individual. L. Vygosky indicates that knowledge should be understood as something that arises in social interactions, under certain conditions. Knowledge is formed through interaction, debate, and exchange in community(2). Combining the viewpoints of J. Piaget and L. Vygosky, it can be seen that *an individual perceives things, concepts from his/ her own experiences and accomplishes the knowledge from "colliding", "rubbing", "interacting" with "community" in certain "situations"*. Basically, each individual has his/ her own "model of objective world". As humans exist and operate in interaction with society and community, the objective world model of individuals should be compatible with the outside world.

From the aforementioned authors' justifications, we can visualize the diagram of the elements that constitutes the individual's processes of perceiving the external objective world and exerting impacts on the world as follows:



The objective world (the material and spiritual world) is the research object of scientists and the whole society. Researching and exploring would enrich the treasure of *human knowledge*. Humans are born, grow and need to access the knowledge treasure to “grow”, to survive and to exert reverse impacts to the world. There are many “channels” to access the knowledge, either directly or through family and social institutions, in which *education is the most important institution* in the cycle of forming personal knowledge. Education would select, arrange knowledge, and apply the conveying methods considered the most effective to assist learners in easily accessing, remembering in-depth the selected knowledge content in the long run to transfer into personal knowledge (restructuring in each individual's way). *Individuals* need to undergo the process of reflecting, experiencing new things based on the “old ones” to create the so-called *first level knowledge (individual learners)*, but such knowledge remains still relatively “vague” and “one-sided”. In order to perfect this personal understanding, learners need to interact with the surrounding individuals in the *group and social community*. The “interaction” through the process of “sharing experience”, “experiencing community”, “acting together” will gradually make the “first level knowledge” of the individuals less ambiguous and become more adequate, more complete, more systematic, and more truth-approaching, which is named as *intermediate level knowledge (learners in learning group) and second level knowledge (learners in community)*. The second level knowledge of individuals serves as the “foundation”, “motivation” so that learners can build on “critical thinking”, “action spirit” to become a factor having reverse impacts on the outside objective world.

Therefore, the nature of “learning” and cognitive processes of learners should be understood on the basis of the following main ideas:

- The learning subject learns in and through the activities, constructs knowledge and skills from his or her own activities.
- The learning process is the process of personal reflection, the individual process of experiencing in learning group and interacting in community and society.
- The acquisition of a language is mainly psychological processes; hence, it is necessary to find contents and solutions from the psychological aspect rather than just “struggle” with the knowledge of linguistics (following a relatively popular conception).

1.2. Core values of Constructivist - Action in foreign language teaching - learning

Regardless of the differences of this approach as compared with other approaches, methods, and viewpoints, Constructivist - Action approach puts strong emphasis on the following core values in its principle system:

1.2.1. Notion of constructivist in foreign language teaching - learning

Psychology

Learning is a psychological process. Thus, from Constructivist - Action perspective, the purpose of learning is primarily finding out effective impacts on learners' psychological processes so that they can gain favorable conditions to construct knowledge and build their own skills (Linguistic, cultural and social issues are obvious elements that accompany this process). Constructivist - Action approach, therefore, focuses on psychological solutions, conducts research, and figures out psychological solutions to assist learners in constructing knowledge, building skills and taking action by language.

Mind

As learning is a psychological process, the starting point should be consciousness. While Western viewpoints emphasize on consciousness, Oriental viewpoints stress on spirit. In contrast, Constructivist - Action approach highlights the mind. Constructing is made from not only the head but also the heart. Hence, fundamental education principle is how to « maximize the proactiveness, positiveness, activeness of learners ». Learners should prepare themselves with the mind to be ready for constructing knowledge, building skills and taking action by language. On the one hand, learners should be positive, proactive, self-conscious, independent

and creative. On the other hand, learners should be emotionally ready to have interest and excitement in learning. Constructivist - Action approach indicates that the knowledge and skill preparation for learners is inadequate, it is necessary to pay sufficient attention to the psychology status of learners and ensure that learners have the excitement and the spirit to step into their learning processes. Constructivist - Action approach puts strong emphasis on the mind.

Subject

Who will be the knowledge constructor? It is the learning subject who will construct knowledge. The current foreign language teaching approaches focus on constructing knowledge and building skills, which is reasonable but methodologically inadequate. Constructivist - Action approach endeavors to investigate in-depth and pinpoint the different psychological processes of each learner psychology subject (individual learners, learners in learning groups, learners in community), the specific psychological processes that teachers should respect to build the process of organizing learning activities and specific impacts on each process. Constructivist - Action approach puts strong emphasis on the roles of personal reflection of individual learners, group experiences of learners in learning groups, and critical thinking of learners in community and learners as social actors).

1.2.2. Notion of action in foreign language teaching - learning

Activity and action

Although activity is the law of perception, activity only aims to build knowledge and language skills for learners. For example, communicative activities by foreign languages in classrooms only have the purpose of constructing language knowledge and building the expression skill by such language. Action is different from activity because action always aims to an ultimate goal. As for foreign language learning, the ultimate goal includes satisfying individuals' demands, desire, preferences and achieving the social impact purposes that is set by individuals through foreign language. The perspective of Constructivist - Action approach is that activity is the means, action is the ultimate goal. Specifically, foreign language teaching should guide learners to the ultimate goal of learning process, namely performing action by language to satisfy individuals' desire and achieve the social purposes.

Individuals and society

If "Constructivism" theory of Piaget stresses on the role of knowledge self-construction of individuals and "Social constructivism" theory of Vygotsky stresses on the role of social community in constructing knowledge of the individuals (external impacts into the constructing process), Constructivist - Action approach

focuses on the role of knowledge construction when individuals exert reverse impacts on the society through actions by their own language. Individuals undertake activities to construct knowledge from the objective outside world, and individuals take action to exert reverse impacts on society and the objective outside world. Therefore, “constructing action competence by language” should be the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching - learning.

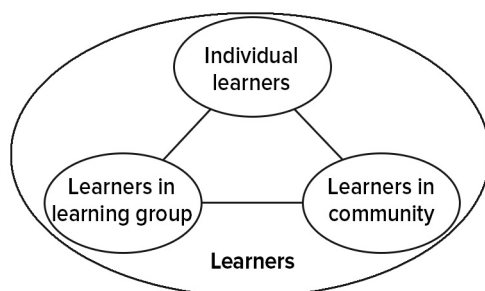
Classroom and community

Classroom is an educational institution, a space for the implementation of simulated situations of a foreign language learning process. Classroom is appropriate for two psychology subjects, namely individual learners and learners in learning groups. However, classroom is inappropriate for the third psychology subject (learners in community) and even becomes a big obstacle for learners to satisfy personal needs and achieve social purposes by language. Among the current learning modes, activities applied to this purpose are the most insufficient. Constructivist - Action approach focuses on researching and designing sample activities (for reference) for foreign language learners as social actors, which helps learners take action by foreign language, forget that they are learning a foreign language, and communicate by the foreign language as in actual social situations.

1.3. Three different psychological entities in foreign language teaching-learning

The direction of constructivist - action approach in foreign language teaching and learning has its own conceptual framework and principles, but the following basic orientations can be stated: *“The process that a foreign language learner self constructs, experiences and uses the knowledge and skills to take action by language, exerts reverse impacts on the outside world, and raises self perception at a higher level”*. Taking the starting point of *awareness*, the constructivist - action approach considers the key to success in acquiring and using a foreign language is *“the activeness in obtaining the learning object”* (learning the foreign language) of the subject (learner) to enhance competence and action spirit by language (foreign language). Therefore, the *basic principle* of the constructivist - action approach is to maximize the activeness of learners in all the steps during the learning process of a foreign language, in which the *three key steps towards three different psychological entities in a subject (learner)* is “individual learner psychology subject”, “learner psychology subject in learning group” and “learner psychology subject in society and community interaction”. Three subjects in three different psychological states could be named *“learners as recipient”*, *“learners as user”* and *“learner as social actor”* (the “boundary” between the three psychological subjects is not

always clear but it is successive and replaces each other in constructing knowledge, building skills and verbal action). Foreign language education is the interaction between learners and learning objects (the acquisition and use of foreign languages) through activities. As this process's starting point is *awareness* and its mode is activities, it requires learners the high level of the positiveness - self awareness - activeness - independence - creativity. In other words, this is the action process by language of the subject in and through learning group and community. The perception of "*humans has made themselves, their psychologies and languages*" is the key point throughout Constructivist - Action approach in foreign language teaching and learning.



Individual learners

Individual learners is basically understood as *learners as the recipient of knowledge*. This is the state in which learners acquire new knowledge based on the knowledge available to create first level knowledge. Learners receive new knowledge and understanding from *educational institutions* (school, teachers). Through the reflection process and personal experiences, *learners internalize knowledge as the basis to use in the next stages*. At this stage, active teaching methods, especially the learning method of learning how to learn plays a crucial role. Educational institutions are responsible for determining training content, training methods and organizing training. Learners need to be able to determine the proper contents with the language areas (phonetics, vocabulary, grammar) and cultural contents introduced, explained, instructed, acquired through the "samples" with the most appropriate and advanced method. According to Associated Psychology, learners can systematize knowledge. In Behavioral Psychology, learners practice creating reflex, language impetus, and personal expression competence. It is essential for the educational institutions to determine which activities to internalize knowledge and which exercises to create reflex and responses for individual learners.

Learners in learning group

Learners in learning group is basically understood as *learners as the user of knowledge*. This is the stage in which learners experience personal knowledge, experience *their own capital* with others in learning group to create *intermediate level knowledge*. Learners begin to share their original “book knowledge” with other individuals in learning group. Through “rubbing”, the knowledge is more complete, more “lively”, and more meaningful, clearly reflecting the functions of language as “the tool of thinking” and “the means of verbal communication”. Learners no longer withdraw into their own shells but join group experiences, share experiences with group members, work together through and by language and gradually become *language users*. These “group experiences”, “experiences sharing through the language”, “working together by verbal words” have assisted “learners in learning group” in forming “intermediate level knowledge”. It means that learners are able to form “skills of using knowledge to express in simulated situations in a foreign language class”. While the objective of forming “first level knowledge” is “knowing”, the objective of “forming intermediate level knowledge” is “knowing to do”.

Learners in community

Learners in community is basically understood as *learners as social actors*. This is the stage in which learners continue to develop their own expression competence through community interaction, implement real social communication purposes to create *second level knowledge*. Learners actively and independently build critical thinking and action spirit by language. Learners escape from simulated situations within the scope of school, education and training to *actually use language to solve problems, take action by/ through/ with language to achieve the targeted purposes*. From the set objective, the group of learners determines the format of the activities, then design activities and the programs of activities, implement tasks, projects as a real practical social activity with the aim of not only accurately using and expressing the language, but also primarily *achieving the targeted social purposes*. From the status of pure language users, *learners in interaction* have become the subject of language in daily life, *a social actor using language and accompanied actions to achieve targeted purposes*. When implementing tasks and projects, learners *forget* the fact that they are learning a foreign language and only assumes that they are acting (partly by language) to achieve targeted purposes. While the objective of forming “first level knowledge” is “knowing” and the objective of forming “intermediate level knowledge” is “knowing to do”, the objective of forming “second level knowledge” is “knowing to take action”. Not only stopping at *accumulating knowledge or building expression capacity*, “learners in community” take a further step towards the purpose of *constructing action competence*.

Roles of three learner psychology subjects

At school settings, two psychology subjects “individual learners” and “learners in learning group” are the most fundamental. At the end of the psychological processes of these two subjects, learners gain communication and interaction competence in classroom, which serves as the basis for learners to use these competences after school graduation. Normally, this is the end of a learning organizational process of a specific activity to move onto a new activity in classroom.

“The learner psychological process in community” prepares learners critical thinking and action spirit by language (but language is not the main purpose) in the learning process and school environment. This process helps learners “escape” from school environment attached with “the purpose is learning’ to become “social actor”, use language tool to “take action to satisfy personal needs and achieve social purposes”.

2. Developing “Technology process” for Constructivist - Action approach in foreign language teaching and learning

2.1. Basic principles

Principle on guaranteeing objective satisfactions

The basic requirement of Constructivist - Action approach in foreign language teaching and learning is creating appropriate and effective impacts on the processes of psychology and cognition of learners, which facilitates the process of constructing knowledge, building skills and taking action by language. The basic learning method is “exploratory learning method” that highly appreciates the processes of personal reflection, group experience, critical thinking and action spirit cultivation by/ through language. Thus, each psychological process has its own specific objectives. When organizing learning activities, it is important to strictly follow the targeted objectives of each process and each stage. The ultimate purpose for the whole process is not the knowledge absorbed, the language reflex built, but the action competence by/ through language to “satisfy hobbies, personal needs and achieve social purposes”. Satisfying the targeted objectives is both the basic principle of Constructivist - Action approach and the initial principle of developing the technology process of foreign language education.

Learner-centered principle

Recent educational perspectives have mentioned learner-centered principle. However, putting into practice, the connotation of this principle is not always understood similarly. In Constructivist - Action approach, learner-centered principle put strong emphasis on the following basic priorities:

- Only begin all the activities with learners when they are ready and start to get interested.

- Learners have the right to participate in selecting the learning content and form of learning activities.
- Learners decide their own learning pace.
- Learners have the privilege of deciding their partners.
- Learners have the opportunities and tools to self-assess and obtain their level of progress.

With the aforementioned content, learner-centered principle is considered the most important in shifting the activeness from teachers to learners.

Principle on transparency, rigor of the process

Knowledge construction process is the transforming process from the externality into internality because the human psychology comes from the outside. Thus, when occupying knowledge, it is necessary to be organized from the outside and organized transparently. The more transparent the externality is, the more transparent the internality is. As this is a technology process, there is no acceptance of subjective evaluation. The criteria are clear and unambiguous, creating a rigorous system and requiring its implementation and evaluation processes to be particularly rigid. This multi-level process system creates the so-called ISO quality. “Qualified means qualified”, there is no acceptance of “nearly qualified”, “approximately”, and “equivalent”. The transparency and clarity enable the whole system to be accurately and rigorously evaluated to create a fair process of operation and evaluation.

Principle on development and relevance

A sustainable and rigorous technology process does not totally entail invariability. This process has validate duration, specific adjustment scope with objects, contexts and certain conditions. Science and practice are constantly evolving, requiring the technological process to change at appropriate times. Studies of the same technology must be up to date as well as capture the world’s most advanced knowledge and practicality. Technology is always for a certain object and a certain purpose in a specific context, so it should have “appropriateness” and be the most effective for a whole process.

2.2. Develop the process system in foreign language teaching - learning according to Constructivist - Action approach

2.2.1. Basis for building the system of processes in foreign language teaching and learning

Analyzing psychological processes of the three learner subjects (individual learners, learners in learning group and learners in community), it is essential for foreign language teaching to address the following questions serving as the basis for developing the system of processes in foreign language teaching and learning.

- Questions about knowledge internalization processes, cognitive activities and monologue expression of individual learners:
 - What language and cultural elements in the system to be selected for learners to acquire in each stage, each learning situation?
 - How do learners acquire the elements of linguistic system and cultural factors?
 - What learning activity specific to effectively internalize new knowledge based on the old one?
 - How to organize and create reflection conditions, personal experiences for individual learners?
 - What solutions to overcome errors when transferring between two languages?
 - What learning activities to practice reflex and language impetus?
 - What learning activities to practice monologue expression capacity?
 - What activities to create excitement in learning?
 - How to evaluate the progress level of learners? and how can learners self-evaluate their own progress level as well as their weaknesses?

...

Answering these questions is to successfully develop steps of *Segment 1* in Foreign Language Education Technology that is constructing knowledge via internalization process and creating monologue expression capacity.

- Questions of establishing communication - interaction capacity, skills of using language of learners in learning group:
 - Which learning activities should be done to establish communication- interaction capacity of foreign language learners?
 - How to build and practice linguistic activities in simulated situations?
 - How to establish capacity to express and communicate in learning group, how to build Listening-Speaking-Reading-Writing skills?
 - How to build a system of activities in learning group to create the communication-interaction capacity for learners?
 - How to design and organize the implementation of tasks, projects to gain the highest efficiency?
 - How to gain effective experience in learning group, classroom (school environment)?
 - How to organize group warm-up activities, group integration, conflict resolution, etc. within the group?
 - How to organize the assessment and self-assessment effectively?

...

Answering these questions is to build up steps of the *Segment 2* in Foreign Language Education Technology: Creating communication-interaction capacity for learners through practicing verbal action.

- Questions regarding the process of building learners' action competence by and through language in community
 - Which learning activities to build up action competence by and through language?
 - How to design and organize the implementation of tasks, projects, social activities to achieve the highest efficiency?
 - How to build interaction competence by language, build action competence through verbal communication?
 - What challenges can be encountered during experiences in learning group, in classroom, outside school environment, in community and society? Which solutions can be come up with?
 - How to build and develop critical thinking, action spirit by language?
 - How to evaluate outside school environment activities?

...

Answering these questions, we have built steps of the *Segment 3* in Foreign Language Education Technology: Creating action competence by using and through language as a real social factor.

2.2.2. The system of the process of foreign language teaching - learning based on Construction - Action approach

Derived from theoretical perspectives in Psychology, Linguistics, Foreign Language Teaching Methodology and the Practical Training, the basic orientations of Constructivist - Action approach in foreign language teaching and learning, the principles of building the technological process of foreign language education, the system of issues encountered during the process of internalizing knowledge, building skills, experiencing in groups and taking verbal actions of learners, the authors of this approach are developing the system of processes applied to each area, each field, each skill, etc. in the whole process of acquisition and using foreign languages. Initially, the researchers present some processes (as an illustration). These recommendations are "open", and then the solutions of other researchers are welcome.

- Process of implementing an activity inside and outside the classroom (QT6)

In order to organize each activity in all three psychological subjects as individual learners, learners in learning group, and learners in community, the six following steps should be noted:

1. Define the target
2. Format the activity
3. Design activity
4. Prepare conditions
5. Organize activity
6. Evaluate activity

- Process of implementing the psychological process of learners (QT18)

Relevant to each psychological subject of learners, the process of construction cognition and specific action can be identified. There are many viewpoints, many different criteria to determine steps of these processes. The following steps can be considered:

- Process QT18a (Individual learners)

1. Detect problem
2. Consolidate statement
3. Assimilation
4. Engrave in mind, remember
5. Produce monologues
6. Increase mastery

- Process QT18b (Learners in learning group)

1. Warm-up group
2. Understand learning situations
3. Design tasks and projects
4. Implement communication strategies
5. Implement interactive strategies
6. Adjust behavior

- Process QT18c (Learner in community)

1. Define social purposes
2. Decide the format of activities
3. Develop the content of activities
4. Develop critical thinking
5. Develop action spirit
6. Consolidate awareness

An example of a process: The process QT18a

- Skills: Comprehensive reading
- Subject: Primary students, level A1
- Psychological subject: Individual learners

No	Steps	Content
1	Detect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Detect elements (vocabulary, grammar): link things, phenomena to language shell. - Detect grammatical meaning (morphology, syntax): meanings of patterns and word combinations - Detect the meaning of the sentence (sentence-statement): the overall meaning of the sentence and the meaning of the sentence in context. - The meaning of the subject (the communication intention of the text): the structure of the writing and its meaning
2	Make statement and strengthen statement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Contact with already known factors (word- phrase-sentence-topic): Compare features, draw similarities and differences from new elements - Define scope of meaning (word-phrase-sentence): meaning outside the language and meaning in the language - Strengthen the understanding of meaning, meaning (of word-phrase -sentence-topic): Putting these concepts into the existing system of the individual
3	Assimilate	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understand the general structure of the reading - Understand main ideas - Understand general assumption about the meaning of the reading - Grasp some factors, some sections - Memorize the whole text (if possible)
4	Engrave in mind, remember	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rewrite, repeat (word- phrase-sentence-text) many times according to capacity - Self-question and self-answer the ideas of the reading - Schematize concepts, meanings - Put into the individual's system
5	Produce	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Restate the main ideas of the reading - Retell the text (summary of the main ideas, full text) - Build and produce monologues (oral and written) that are similar to the learned readings
6	Increase the mastery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Increase in number (long / short sentences, number of sentences ...) - Increase in complexity (main idea, summary, whole reading) - Increase in quality (speaking, combining using learned knowledge, fluency ...)

What teacher should do to help learners to...

Others Processes:

- Process of applying Information Technology and Advanced Technology(QT10)
- Process of building and exploiting foreign language teaching materials (QT8)
- ...

Conclusion

It is commonly said that the center of education is to find new theories, new models helping learners to be active, creative and construct their own knowledge, turn into action serving their lives, the society and themselves. In the past century, foreign language education experienced various changes under the effects of psychology, education, linguistics and other science fields. The achievements gained in these science fields allow us to create fundamental and comprehensive changes in foreign language teaching - learning methods. Turning to the XXI century, along with the boom of information technology, foreign language teaching witnesses remarkable changes. All such changes require us to try our utmost to establish, to shape, to develop and complete a foreign language education technology suitable to the era and Vietnamese people.

Constructivist - Action Approach in foreign language education researched and applied by a group of ULIS-NVU's lecturers for the past years would not be out of this trend. There would be various theoretical researches, applications as well as experiments conducted in the coming time in order to highlight a new direction. On the one hand, it contributes to the treasure of general theories on foreign language teaching - learning. On the other hand, it produces specific works of foreign language teaching - learning recognized by the society with scientific quality as well as effectiveness. We would like to receive the feedbacks from other colleagues in order to create a Foreign Language Teaching - Learning Technology satisfying the increasingly high demands of teachers and learners in the context of today's country's development and integration.

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