
INSTRUCTIONAL EXPLANATION: The Misconceived Technique of Teaching

Elias Nasir*

Introduction

Techniques of teaching are the day to day activities which the teacher may design for a particular lesson. They constitute certain aspects of teaching behaviour that facilitate learning. Dhand (1990) mentions that teaching techniques can be thought of as specific steps, and procedures which may affect the learner's encoding process, that is, how the student will learn the desired concepts and skills. Thus, techniques of teaching are developed with the intention of providing practising-teachers with opportunities of selecting, adapting, developing, experimenting and improving specific steps and procedures in the teaching-learning process.

One of the commonly used techniques of teaching at different levels of instructional settings is explanation technique. The extent to which the teacher explains concepts, ideas, rules, relationships, etc. would undoubtedly affect students' learning in particular classroom. In line with this point, Callahan et.al (1986:177) state that, of all available teaching techniques, probably the most commonly used in schools is explanation technique.

In spite of its innumerable effects on student-learning, instructional explanation is differently conceived even among educators. Some may consider explanation synonymous with direct teacher instruction without involving student participation. And still some others conceive instructional explanation as the teacher talk-approach which doesn't

have a place in a problem-centred teaching. In other words, they limit explanation in teaching only to a teacher-centred strategy.

The paper, therefore, tries to address the right meaning of instructional explanation on the basis of theoretical perspectives which are developed from classroom research activities. Conceptual framework of instructional explanation, purposes and types of instructional explanation are briefly indicated. Finally, a concluding remark is forwarded.

2.Explanation: A brief conceptual framework.

The term 'explanation' from instructional or teaching context has been used in different ways. Explanation is stated by Cooper (1986:121) refers to a planned teacher talk designed to clarify any idea or procedure not understood by students. He further states that it is one of the critical techniques which has paramount effect on student learning. Regarding this point Cole and Chan (1994:126) said:

Explanation is a verbal, diagrammatic or symbolic interpretation of something. It usually involves "telling why" rather than just showing. It also involves, filling gaps in understanding through question and answer, and reason giving.

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2.Explanation: A brief conceptual framework.

The term 'explanation' from instructional or teaching context has been viewed by different writers in the area of teaching in all most similar ways. Explanation as stated by Cooper (1986:121) refers to a planned teacher talk designed to clarify any idea or procedure not understood by students. He further states that it is one of the critical techniques which has paramount effect on student learning. Regarding this point Cole and Chan (1994:126) said:

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Explaining is facilitating understanding to another. It is a creation of new connections between facts, between ideas, and between facts and ideas. It is creating a relationship between state of affairs so that it facilitates understanding that may lead to generalization (Brown, 1978:7; Berrott, 1981:33 Brown and Atkins, 1988:19).

Moreover, Duffy et.al. (1986:198) contend that learning occurs when a pupil encounters experiences which can cause a new desire for learning. A teacher's function is, therefore, to orchestrate instructional situation to ensure that students encounter experiences that may create new thinking in ways specified by the curriculum. To this end, one of the major teaching techniques to orchestrate instructional situations so as to create new thinking in students is giving explanation.

That is, teachers communicate to students about curricular outcomes in the belief that their explanation will clarify the academic experiences and expedite learning.

Here, one has to note that explanation is not confined to a mere teacher talk or one way instructional process. With this regard Bellon et.al. (1992:24) argue that teachers often give explanation as part of the development of new content or in response to student questions. A good explanation is much more interactive than a mere presentation. Teachers must elicit and respond to students' efforts to comprehend new phenomena. This means that both the teacher and students have active roles to play in constructing explanation that will help students comprehend new concepts. These roles are presented in the table below.

Table 1.
Teacher and students roles in interactive explanation.

EXPLANATION	
TEACHER	STUDENTS
Gives explicit information	Forward their thinking
Provides factual and procedural knowledge	Delineate their reasoning process
Presents information that is conceptually accurate and meaningful	Restructure their knowledge to accommodate new learning
Model the reasoning process	Apply new process in real situation

Adapted from Bellon et-al (1992:249)

From what is contained in figure 1, one can realize that the knowledge that students bring to a lesson and their thinking determine to a large extent what

they learn. That is, students play an active role in learning, mediating, and restructuring

information so that it will fit into their own personal knowledge. With regard to this point Berliner (1987:290) Says:

... Good explanation occurs when teachers help students generate personal meaning, carefully communicate what to focus on, are explicit about how students should think, and emphasize the most salient ideas of content to be explained.

All the preceding discussions may reveal that explanation refers to those actions or behaviour designed by teachers so as to bring a lesson presentation to an appropriate understanding by learners. This means that explanation is used to help students bring things together in their own mind to make sense out of what has been going on during the course of presentation.

Many research works in the area of psychology of learning show that learning increases when teachers make conscious effort to help students organize the information presented to them and to perceive relationships based on that information. Explanation is among the teaching techniques by which much of teacher's effort is realized in facilitating learning (Cooper, 1986:128; Gage and Berliner, 1975:524).

3. Purpose of Explanation

It is clear that teachers spend a great deal of talking, whether it is lecturing, explaining, giving instruction, asking questions or directing whole class discussion. Of all these teaching acts, giving explanation is considered to be the most important quality of effective teaching. Teachers' activity to explain points clearly fosters greater educational

attainment than any other teacher characteristics (Kyriacou, 1991:35).

Teacher explanation promotes the development of thinking skills of pupils by developing their ability to interact and reason out, and by developing their accuracy in observing the learning world. It certainly enhances all other teaching activities that guide student towards attainment of lesson objectives (Salem, 1995:127; kyriacou, 1991:35).

Explanation, moreover, serves a number of functions at any instance it may be used in lesson presentation. For instance, explanation at the start of the lesson elicits and sustains pupil's attention and interest in the lesson. Establishing such positive attitude at the beginning of the lesson provides a good spring-board for what follows. In other words, to create a positive mental set seems important to explain the 'why' and 'how' of that particular lesson. It is due to such multifaceted purposes of explanation that Waterhouse (1983:62) says " teacher explanation is the most central stock-in-trade of teaching and serves a number of functions and purposes which are often interrelated."

To sum up, explanation serves a number of significant purposes in classroom teaching. As many scholars claim, "it is the very purpose of teaching itself." Hence, a number of research on the area of teaching strongly suggest to assign explanation a prominent place in classroom instruction and advise that teachers should be careful to accurately reflect their character in giving explanation (Dagher and Cossman, 1992:361).

4. Types of Instructional Explanation

Researchers on the area of teaching remark several ways of classifying instructional explanation. Brown (1978) for instance, identified three main types of explanation: These are:

a. Interpretive explanation:- Explanation of this type Specifies the central meaning of a term or statement or it clarifies an issue.

b. Descriptive explanation:- This type of explanation describes factual contents and pinpoints structural schemes.

c. Rational or reason giving explanation:- This explanation involves principles or generalizations, motives, or values that may give answer to the 'why' questions. Reason giving explanation also involves giving support to a claim that has been made to compel others to accept that claim (Dagher and Cossman, 1992: 364). Brown and Atkins (1988: 20) pointed out that this type of explanation approximate to the questions of 'what?' 'how?' and 'why?' respectively.

In addition to the above mentioned ones, Dagher and Cossman (1992: 364-6) added some more types of explanations which are described as follows.

a) Analogical explanation: It is the type of explanation by which unfamiliar phenomenon is explained in relations to the familiar one.

b) • Functional explanation:- a phenomenon is explained interms of its immediate function (consequence).

c) Practical explanation:- It is an explanation that involves instructions as to how to perform physical or mental operations.

d) Cause-effect explanation:- This involves brief statements that may implicitly or explicitly indicate cause - effect relationship.

5. Conclusion

The intent of explanation in one way or another is to facilitate understanding of learners. Even in the highly student-centred teaching learning process, explanation serves variety of purposes. So as to engage students in independent learning activities, it seems essential that explanation of certain steps and procedures should be made by the teacher. The teacher should also clearly define and explain an issue to promote classroom discussion.

However, it has to be noted that explanations are unequally differ depending on the context in which they occur. The properties of explanations are also interrelated and resourceful teachers can combine and recombine them in various ways. Therefore, interested researchers (particularly teachers and teacher educators) can take up this issue and investigate it so that the practices of classroom teachers in employing instructional explanation can be analysed.

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