

Learners' reflections and the Reflective Learning Experience in Linguistics

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Abstract :

Effective learning is no more based on teacher centredness; however, it is the outcome of a learner centred approach which values learners' contribution in their learning. For more committed learners who feel responsibility towards their learning, the reflective learning experience can be the clue. Learners will be involved in their learning inside and outside the classroom and the reflective journal will be of a great help to evidence their reflections on their learning. Furthermore, through their reflections on the reflective learning experience they have been involved in; first year learners of English have explained how it affected their learning of Linguistics. However, the implementation of a reflective learning experience is not easy and needs time.

المخلص:

التعلم الفعال هو نتاج نهج يركز على المتعلمين ويقدر مساهمتهم في تعلمهم. لمتعلمين أكثر التزاما يشعرون بالمسؤولية تجاه تعلمهم، يمكن للتجربة التفكيرية أن تكون الحل. مشاركة المتعلمين في التعلم داخل وخارج القسم و المجلة التفكيرية ستكون عوناً كبيراً من أجل إثبات تفكيرهم في تعلمهم. وعلاوة على ذلك، فقد أوضح متعلمين السنة الأولى في اللغة الإنجليزية من خلال تأملاتهم الكتابية كيف تأثر تعلمهم في اللغويات بالتجربة التفكيرية

Introduction

Success in foreign language learning is dependent on learners' ability to take charge of their own learning; that is, learner autonomy. However, developing learners' autonomy is highly coupled with adopting a reflective approach to one's learning experiences. This last guides the learners to the active deep learning in opposition to the surface learning they get used to. In this article, we are interested in finding out whether involving first year university learners of English in reflection about their learning through the use of the reflective journal will have some positive effect on their learning of linguistics. Therefore, by the end of an experimental study that lasted for ten sessions, learners were required to reflect on their reflective experiment through a questionnaire of open ended questions.

1. Constructive Theory

For the Constructivists, learning is founded on the premise that, by reflecting on experiences, learners construct their own understanding of the world they live in. Therefore, learners' use their previous knowledge as and information base for new knowledge. Learners generate their own rules and mental models, which they use to make sense of their experiences. As a result, learning is the process of adjusting our mental models to accommodate new experiences; that is, learning is an active construction of meaning. Carlson (2003) [1] and Campoy (2004) [2] assume that effective learning occurs when the learners actively process the information in a way that is meaningful to them; not simply as passively assimilate knowledge unchanged from its original form.

Moreover, Brockbank and McGill (2007) [3] (2007: 42) distinguish between deep learning and surface learning. They see reflection as a token of deep learning and its absence from the teaching and learning activities as an indicative of surface learning. Scales (2008) [4] further explains that deep learning is the result of active learning while surface learning is the result of passive learning. He clarifies that active learners are involved in making meaning rather than being given the information; whereas, passive learners are reactive rather than proactive. Therefore, learning does not only refer to the knowledge transmitted by the teacher and received by the

learner, more than that learning refers to learners' skills in getting the knowledge by themselves. Robles (1998: 43) [5] highlights that learning a language involves learning the content in addition to a set of skills to use this content.

2. Reflective Learning

Schrimms (1999) [6] argues that the origin of the idea of 'reflective thought' was introduced by John Dewey in his book *How to Think* [7]. Dewey's defines reflective thinking as: "Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusion to which it tends" (1910:6). In other words, reflection is a dynamic, constant, and cautious process concerning any assumption and knowledge that underlie any conclusion. By analyzing Dewey's writings on reflection, Rodgers (2002) [8] found out four criteria that he attributes to reflection: 1) it is a meaning making process out of experiences, 2) it is a rigorous way of thinking that includes scientific spirit, 3) it develops through interaction in supportive community and 4) it includes a set of positive attitudes towards oneself: whole-heartedness, open-mindedness and responsibility which all develop readiness to engage in reflection. Furthermore, Fade (2008: 4) clarifies that reflection involves describing, analyzing, and evaluating one's thoughts, assumptions, beliefs, theory base and actions [9].

3. Experiential Learning Cycle

Grady (2003) sees Dewey's book *Experience and Education* (1938) as a basic work when dealing with experiential learning. For Dewey, knowledge is constructed through experience in a social context. He claims that all human experience is social and involves contact and communication. He affirms that knowledge is not a readymade predetermined and controlled body of information and skill. Knowledge is what learners get from experiences, and these last should be within the abilities and readiness of learners. The quality of experience is the central aspect of the theory. By completing the experiences, learners transfer the new knowledge to different situations. [10]

Likewise, Kolb [in 11] has developed the experimental learning model which involves four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. Consequently, to learn something learners have to observe it and to be

motivated to do something about it through a conscious effort. Completing this cycle leads to new experience with a new cycle- a recursive process. The duration of the cycle depends on the learner and the learning experience. Consequently, Bartlett (1997) [12] pinpoints that the best means of reflection would involve some form of writing.

4. Situation Analysis:

In the first semester of the academic year 2009/2010, learners' results were the source of disappointment for major first year teachers of linguistics in the department of English, Badji Mokhtar University – Annaba. The problem lies in the fact that learners don't show any problem of comprehension in the classroom, however, when they are involved in a written assessment, the picture is not so positive! Therefore, by the beginning of the second semester, an experimental study has been designed to find out whether involving a group of first year learners in reflection on their learning through the use of the reflective journal in the linguistics session would have some positive effect on their learning? We have administered a questionnaire in order to detect learners' weaknesses and strengths in the linguistics module. Learners' answers have shown that though (78.26%) of students assure that the exam was easy (86.96%) are not satisfied with their marks in linguistics, their low results are due to the lack of concentration and self-confidence, anxiety, memorization problem and more importantly lack of study skills in this module- they do not know how to revise it. (91.30%) affirm that they have revised for the exam and the majority have begun the revision a week before the exam, which is not a sufficient time to revise a content module with all the terminology that every lesson has brought. The overwhelming majority of the students have revised their lessons via oral memorization; the written memorization is ignored.

Then, learners were involved in the experiment by using the reflective journal for ten sessions. Learners were given the lessons handouts a week in advance for preparation. In a gradual way, learners were involved in using the reflective journal in three different occasions during the session: at the beginning of the lesson, during the lesson and at the end of the lesson. The first moment represents reflection for learning when learners for five minutes will use their reflective journal to write down what they have understood from their lesson preparation or sometimes the key words they can recall; then,

they express their feelings about the lesson. The second moments, reflection in learning, learners are requested for five minutes to express in their reflective journal what they have learned so far and what they feel about the lesson then. By the last ten to fifteen minutes in the session, learners are involved in reflection on their learning considering the following questions: what have they learned? How they feel about it? What difficulties they still have? How they plan to solve them? What are the probable questions about the lesson?

Moreover, in this experimental study, learners were involved in different classroom groupings: individual, pair or group activities. They were also involved in a peer review activity of the reflective journal and provide each other with certain comments for better written entries. Besides, the teacher is no more the fount of knowledge during the linguistics session, learners are guided through some questions to explain the lesson themselves, no matter its difficulty; then, the teacher will provide further clarifications.

5. Learners' reflections

By the end of the experiment, a final questionnaire has been administered to assess the experiment through engaging learners in reflection about the reflective learning experience by answering three main open ended questions. The first was about the old method of teaching linguistics and their feelings towards it, the second about the new method and their feelings towards it, and finally about the outcome of the new method on their learning as follows:

Q1: How was the old method of teaching linguistics? Describe it and express your feelings towards it?

Q2: How is the new method of teaching linguistics? Describe it and express your feelings towards it?

Q3: What have you learned from the new method (the reflective diary)?

Here are samples of some student's comments in their own words:

Student #1:

I think that the old method of teaching linguistics was difficult and boring because at that time I could not do the summary and keep (memorise) all the key words. I think the new method is better than the first one, I can understand better. Now we prepare our lesson before we meet in the classroom and when the teacher explains it we understand more in addition to

highlighting all the key words. In conclusion, I like the new method .From the new method, I learned more than the first: more new words and key words; now I can do the summary by keeping the important ideas and let the rest

For this student, linguistics was a hard module and a boring session because s/he could neither recall the terms nor do the summary. S/he suffers from problems of concentration and study skill. With the new method, s/he can understand better by highlighting the key words and preparing the lessons in advance; this student' learning has gained more quality. In fact, the reflective journal has developed her/his study skill especially summarizing and s/he is more concentrated during the session.

Student #2:

At the first time when we dealt with the linguistics module, I felt that I can't understand and remember the lesson by heart, because lessons are very long and they seem very difficult to understand. Now I feel very good in linguistics because the new method of teaching this module became very easy and clear one. It is a good idea to give us the lesson to prepare, and also the diary is a good idea to express our feelings and predict questions of the exam. Now we are able to make a summary alone without any difficulties.

In the first semester, this student had negative feelings towards linguistics and found the lessons too difficult to understand or memorize; in addition, the lessons were very long. However, the new method has developed positive feelings towards linguistics and makes it easy to understand. S/he liked lesson preparation and finds the reflective journal a useful means of expressing one's feelings and learning. Also, s/he can make a lesson summary besides predicting the probable questions that could be asked about the lesson. Then, the reflective journal experiment has changed this student's attitudes towards the module of linguistics and helped her/him in developing certain study skill.

Student#3:

I was normal, but I really hate linguistics. When I came back home I don't revise my lessons of linguistics. The new method is very

fun and very useful method especially the diary. Now, I feel shame for my feelings for linguistics, because I like it, and better with the diary method. When you write in your diary you feel that you speak from your heart and you feel that you are relaxed; I wait for the linguistic session all the week to attend it. The diary has big advantage. It helps me to revise and the same time control myself by the promises, the questions of the lesson and the specially (especially) to write my feelings about it before and after revising. I feel relaxed when I write it. In my future life when I will be a teacher I will follow the method of the diary because it is a useful method.

This student had a very negative feeling towards linguistics (hate it), and s/he did not even revise the lessons. With the new method, s/he feels shame for the previous negative feeling and s/he likes the module of linguistics with the reflective journal. This last represents the zone of honesty and relaxation. S/he finds that the reflective diary is very beneficial in developing her/his learning skills and self management- through the promises (learning plans) written in the diary to solve the learning difficulties. Writing relaxed her/him from all the stress and doubts related to the lesson, and it seems that getting rid of those feelings before and after the lesson is very important. S/he likes very much the reflective journal since it developed the sense of responsibility, self awareness and self management skills.

Student # 4:

The old method was not interesting, I can't understand everything and I felt that it was difficult, we have also very long handouts and I can't revise them. I see that the diary was a good idea from the teacher because it helps me more in revising my lessons. I can summarize now and I take the key words and I write on it the most important information and with diary I can exchange the ways from (with) friends to summarize or revise. And when I write my feeling this helps me to know the difficulties and try to solve them. I have learned how to summarize and I use more the dictionary now. Also the diary helps me to find my difficulties and how to solve them. The reflective diary was an important step for me. It helped me in revising and summarizing and know my feelings”

For this student, in the first semester, s/he suffers from problem of motivation, assimilation and negative feelings towards linguistics, in addition to the lengthy handouts. S/he finds the use of the reflective journal in the linguistics session a good idea because it eases lessons' revision. This student is able now to summarize, highlight the key words, take notes, and even discover other learning strategies through peer review. It really helps to concretize one's feeling on a paper because it helps to find solutions. The reflective journal plays an important role in raising self awareness, developing certain capacities, and acknowledging certain feelings.

Students #5:

The old method was very bad, it does not oblige the student to research (make a research), the teacher works the activity of her and the activity of student, whereas the new method make student research and more understanding and clear. And I can express my feelings with the new method by the diary and we can understand by giving questions about the lesson on diary. The diary is useful in my study, it learn (teaches) me to revise my lessons every day, and it learn me to express my feeling about the lesson and ask questions when I have difficulties. And I research to solve the problem. When I have some difficulties I try to ask on the diary, the diary makes the teacher guided the student, not to learn (teach) them. It learn (teach) me the lesson of self-confidence about my information.

This student highlights that the first semester was teacher centred; the teacher is the source of knowledge and learners are mere receivers of knowledge with no active role. However, the new method handled learners with some responsibilities towards their learning, in and outside the classroom. S/he understands better since everything is clear. Expressing one's feelings and asking questions about the lessons are very important innovations for this student. S/he thinks that the reflective journal is very beneficial because by using it, the teacher is guiding the learner to learning instead of teaching her/him what to learn. S/he is more confident about her/his knowledge in linguistics because whenever there is trouble s/he will work to solve it.

Students #6 has provides a very detailed and thoughtful reflection about the experiment:

Q1: The teacher explains the lesson every séance (session) and we were paying attention to the explanations after that she dictate the

lesson sometimes and gave us policopies (handouts) in other times. Each student revise the lesson when he want....

My feelings: I felt that time that the module of linguistics is difficult especially in the first séance. But when I adopted (get used) to the method of the explanation of the lesson things become easier. I do a lot of effort at home to understand the lesson better. So my feelings with time changed but I still not sure that I understand the lessons well and I feel stress all the time until the first exam when I got a good mark, I relaxed.

Q2: It is a very practical method that gives solution to all the difficulties that can be confronted in studying linguistics.

Feelings: In each lesson when I start prepare it at home I feel stress. Sometimes I feel that the lesson is difficult and I spent a lot of time to prepare it - waste of time, and other times I found the verse (inverse), but after I finish I feel very happy and relaxation because I have done a very important step in my revision which will help me later on. When I come class, I know at least what the teacher speaks about and I feel that I didn't do a lot of effort to understand the explanation of the teacher".

Q3: " I have learnt from this experience how to revise my lessons well and I learnt that the tiredness brings success and happiness, nothing come easily, the student should work hard, I liked the idea of the diary very much, it is helpful and practical for the student who really want to succeed.

For this student, linguistics was a difficult stressful module; s/he makes an effortful revision with a doubtful result! It was a teacher centered session. Conversely, s/he finds that the new method offers solutions to all the learning problems. This student too has learned the lesson of responsibility for one's learning; he also learned that efforts are essentials for comprehension and success. S/he approves that the new method is stressful but beneficial at the same time.

6. Experiment Findings

Learners' reflections analysis have highlighted certain negative and positive classroom behaviours that can either hinder or enhance learners' level in linguistics. It has also drawn attention to the effect of involving learners in written reflections about their learning in different moment of the lessons.

The old method was highly teacher centered classroom situation where the teacher is the only source of knowledge and students are mere recipients; they are there to receive knowledge of a module that they found difficult, hard to understand and to memorize. The linguistics session was a source of constant high stress. This method impedes the development of any constructive learning since learners are not part of any learning experience; they are just the audience. However, the new method puts the learner in the center with an active involvement in their learning (lesson preparation) and develops their learning skills (summaries, highlighting, and dictionary use). It has also developed their self confidence and self-reliance with a new relaxing relation with the teacher and the module; besides, they developed awareness of their weaknesses and how to solve them. Thus, the new method has a high positive effect on learners' affect and cognition. Thus, the new method has involved learners in a cyclic reflection about their learning which helped them to discover themselves and enhance their capacities in learning linguistics.

Considering the third question, students attribute the following positive effect of the reflective journal on their learning:

- Leads to serious work and more concentration before, during and after the lesson.
- Facilitates revision and memorization.
- Develops the learning skill (note taking, summaries, asking and answering questions about every lesson).
- Promotes self-reliance, self- control, and self-confidence ie, pro- active learning
- Provides an opportunity to be aware of one's learning strategies and exchange them with the class-mates.
- Develops awareness of one's learning difficulties and how to plan to solve them; i.e, develops learners' metacognitive skills.
- Develops awareness of one's feelings and presents a safe place to express them.

Conclusion

Involving learners in reflection on the reflective learning experience they have been involved in has highlighted the very positive effect of the reflective approach in the linguistics session. The reflective journal was an efficient tool that guided learners in the discovery of their own strengths and weaknesses. Besides, the

reflective approach presupposes a learner centredness learning environment where learners are in a constant construction of their knowledge while the teacher plays the role of a facilitator. Learners, through their reflections, have emphasized the importance of revealing their feelings towards the lessons in their journals and how this frees them from their doubts, stress and confusion. Furthermore, they have developed their self- awareness, self management, study skills and even their writings. Through the reflective learning, learners have developed new relationship with themselves, classmates, the teacher and the subject of linguistics.

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