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Inducing Self-Awareness into ESL Learners: Some Interactional Techniques

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Abstract

To ensure effective language learning, it is imperative that the language teachers as well as the learners are aware of the language learning process. This knowledge will help particularly the learners to become perceptive of their own purposes of language learning and subsequently realize their own ways and means to understand and process the information they receive in their language classes. An interactional process like this guarantees successful language learning especially in an Indian ESL classroom. This paper pronounces the need to make the language learners stay conscious of their learning modes, suggests some interactive strategies including Learning Style awareness and Group Portfolio Management that can be implemented by the language teachers, and substantiates the administration of the same with invigorating evidences.

Introduction

The rapidly growing demands of globalization make it imperative that all are English-literate, irrespective of their professional placements. In such a condition, it has become even more crucial for the teachers of English to impart the language education from a 'practically' communicative point of view. Plenty of teaching methodologies have been tried and testified. But it is still an intriguing matter of fact that one particular methodology that has been proven successful on one specific condition proves to be 'unworkable' elsewhere. This is the point of departure for the current paper, which tries to pronounce the hitherto least considered fact that the more autonomous the students are the better the language learning will be. Normally, in most of the Indian ESL classrooms, students are not autonomous in terms of their awareness of what and how they learn. It is relatively important for the students to be aware of their learning and be self-regulated in deciding the way that they find more

conducive and comfortable with.

Why should the Learners be taught Learning Strategies?

Learning strategies are the thoughts and actions we engage in, consciously or not, to learn new information. The goal of teaching learning strategies is to help students to consciously control how they learn so that they can be efficient, motivated, and independent language learners (Chamot, Barnhardt, El-Dinary, & Robbins, 1999). Teaching the students these learning strategies will help the teachers in the long run in that it helps the language learners to realize their actual goals of improving their knowledge and proficiency of the second language, in our case, English. An awareness of their own selves, how, what and why they learn will help the learners become conscious of their goals, so to say, self-directed goals. This awareness of their goals will enable them to devise and determine the means to achieve these goals. According to Zimmerman (1990), in

their metacognitive processes, "self-regulated learners set goals, self-monitor, and self-evaluate their learning processes which enable them to be self-aware and decisive in their learning approach".

As such, the earnest intention of teaching the learning strategies to the students is to help all of them become better language learners. When students begin to understand their own learning processes and can exert some control over these processes, they tend to take more responsibility for their own learning. This self-knowledge and skill in regulating one's own learning is a characteristic of successful learners, including successful language learners. Research with both first and second language learners is revealing some of the ways of thinking that guide and assist an individual's attempts to learn more effectively (Paris & Winograd, 1990).

Interactional Strategies

In the current globalized scenario, as days go by, it is becoming more pronounced that the language teachers expect students to work independently and be responsible for their own learning. Therefore, the learners are compelled to find out what and how they are learning and how comfortable they are in learning the language. This is where it becomes essential that the teachers should make them take that responsibility and reflect on their own thinking process as well. In other words, if the learners are aware of their learning practices they can monitor their own progress and evaluate their performance and achievement.

In the process of the learners' becoming aware of their learning, interactive techniques allow students the opportunity to engage with new material as they learn, allowing them to process the information and cement it into their knowledge banks. Teachers can use one or multiple interactive strategies to benefit students and create more engaging lessons. As a matter of fact, there are quite a lot of

language learning resources that have been made available to both the language teachers and learners. These resources range from language labs to multi-media enabled classrooms. Nevertheless, as far as the English teaching scenario in India is concerned, the language classrooms are dominated by a teacher-centered, text-book oriented, exam-driven climate that lead to nothing constructive or productive but mere rote-learning. In such a condition, creating self-awareness among the language learners can be best done through Learning Styles and Portfolios.

Self-Awareness through Learning Styles

Learning styles can be explained in different ways, depending upon one's understanding. According to Brown, it is "the manner in which individuals perceive and process information in learning situations", and he argues that learning style preference is one main aspect of learning style, referring to the choice of one learning situation over another. Kneefe (1979) defined a learning style as "Cognitive, affective, and physiological traits that are relatively stable indicators of how learners perceive, interact with, and respond to the learning environment".

One of the universally accepted ways of looking at learning styles is the four modalities of learning, as proposed by Bandler, R. and Grinder, J., in the field of Neuro-Linguistic Programming, students may prefer a Visual (seeing), Auditory (hearing), Kinesthetic (moving) or Tactile (touching) way of learning. According to their theory,

those who prefer a *visual* learning style,

- look at the teacher's face intently
- like looking at wall displays, books etc.
- often recognize words by sight
- use lists to organize their thoughts and
- recall information by remembering how it was set out on a page

By the same token, those who prefer an *auditory* learning style,

- like the teacher to provide verbal instructions
- like dialogues, discussions and plays
- solve problems by talking about them
- use rhythm and sound as memory aids.

People who prefer a *kinesthetic* learning style,

- learn best when they are involved or active
- find it difficult to sit still for long periods
- use movement as a memory aid

Those who prefer a *tactile way* of learning...

- use writing and drawing as memory aids
- learn well in hands-on activities like projects and demonstrations

The teachers should also realize that the students learn better and more quickly if the teaching methods used match their preferred learning styles.

Once the learners are made aware of their type of learning, they become confident and responsible for their learning. As learning improves, their self esteem also improves. This has a further positive effect on learning. Students who have become bored with learning may become interested once again. An added advantage of this realization is the obvious improvement in the student-teacher relationship since the student is more successful and is more interested in learning.

Self-Awareness through Portfolios

When there is an awareness of the learning styles, there should also be an awareness of the assessment modes. As far as education is concerned, a portfolio refers to a kind of student-oriented, student-centered assessment. For some teachers, portfolio is part of an alternative assessment can either include students' achievements or simply document their best work. For other

teachers, the portfolio documents the students' learning process, and still others use it as a means of promoting learner reflection (Nunes, 2004). Hamp-Lyons (1994) labels portfolio an excellent pedagogical tool interweaving assessment with instruction: it provides chances to integrate more forms of evaluation into teaching, such that evaluation will become "a less threatening and more supportive activity" to learners.

According to Kaptan and Korkmaz (2000), portfolio is the operation of recording the success and performance of the student during the learning process. Thus, with the portfolio, answers can be received to the questions such as

- how did the student think?
- what did he learn?
- what way did he follow while learning?
- which difficulties did he face while learning?
- how did he ask questions?
- how did he analyze?
- how did he configure the knowledge?
- how did he communicate with the other people?

So, to use portfolio which is based on cognitive and constructivist learning theory can be effective as a teaching method in a language classroom.

Types of Portfolios

According to Columba & Dolgos (1995, p. 174-175), there are basically three types of portfolios to consider for classroom use.

Showcase: This type of portfolio focuses on the student's best and most representative work. This type of portfolio is similar to an artist's portfolio where a variety of work is selected to reflect breadth of talent. Therefore, in this portfolio the student selects what he or she thinks is representative work. This folder is most often seen at open houses and parent visitations

Teacher-Student Portfolio: This type of portfolio is often called the "working portfolio" or a "working folder". This is an interactive teacher-student portfolio that aids in communication between teacher and student. The teacher and student conference to add or delete within the content of the show-case portfolio

Teacher Alternative Assessment Portfolio: All the items in this type of portfolio are scored, rated, ranked, or evaluated. Teachers can keep individual student portfolios that are solely for the teacher's use as an assessment tool. This is a focused type of portfolio and is a model of the holistic approach to assessment (p. 175).

Portfolio assessment provides a more authentic assessment of students' achievement and comprehensive views of students' performances in contexts, it encourages students to develop into independent and self-directed learners, and enhances communication among teacher and students. It can provide opportunities for learners to demonstrate his/ her weaknesses and strengths and for teachers to direct their teaching. It also can encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning, and enhance student-teacher communication. In addition, portfolio assessment has a potential to demonstrate students' learning process and learning product over time. As a result, portfolio gives detailed information about students' development in learning process to teacher, parents and students themselves. So, it can be recommended for assessment in EFL in Georgia than it is used today. Teacher awareness of what portfolio is needs to be increased.

Suggestions

Teachers should be stimulated to use new

teaching and assessment methods, including learning style awareness and portfolio management, especially taking into consideration students' positive attitude towards these methods. These can be tried in addition to the existing assessment methods, may be not as a mainstream assessment. In addition to trying style-alike groups for greatest efficiency, the teacher can also use style-varied groups for generating greatest flexibility of styles and behaviors.

Students who think and work strategically are more motivated to learn and have a higher sense of self-efficacy or confidence in their own learning ability. That is, strategic students possess a great self-esteem and they strongly believe that they are more able to succeed academically than those students who do not know how to use strategies effectively. It is this motivation of the students, to partake and become successful at all the learning tasks, which keeps them more alert and receptive in language classrooms. The value of this type of self-knowledge is that it leads to reflection, to planning how to proceed with a learning task, to monitoring one's own performance on an ongoing basis, and to self-evaluation upon task completion. In other words, it leads to self-regulation of one's learning. Students with greater metacognitive awareness understand the similarity between the current learning task and previous ones, know the strategies required for successful learning, and anticipate success as a result of knowing "how to learn." Therefore it becomes imperative on the part of the teachers to introduce the practice of making the language learners gain self-awareness through more feasible modes like Learning Styles and Portfolios.