

LEARNING TO LEARN :THE ROLE OF AUTONOMY IN BUILDING UP A LEARNING STRATEGY.

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ABSTRACT

Reinserting foreign language learning within the broader field of Learning appears today as a necessity. Research on cognitive development stresses natural phenomena we are bound to comply to if our aim is learning. One of the aspects, which I would like to develop in the present article, is the benefit of an autonomous attitude vis-à-vis learning, the rationale being that this will probably foster a feeling of responsibility in the learner about his own learning. As the academia is generally stressing and often frustrating, we believe that when feeling more responsible for his learning, that is in understanding what he is doing and how he is doing it, will increase in him self-confidence and security, and this often reduces stress and frustration. When we consider the needs of a learner, which are greatly emphasized as basic to his readiness to learn, it becomes obvious that if the teacher cooperates to reinforce and recognise the efforts attempted by the learner, the latter's feeling of competence and even mastery in the performed task will generate in him self-esteem. The autonomy potentially reached by the learner will certainly enable him to devise a strategy in which Learning to Learn will be as important as What to Learn.

RESUME

Le caractère inné de l'apprentissage nous oblige à aller au delà des barrières que nous avons, érigé, petit à petit autour de l'apprentissage des langues étrangères. Une vision plus complète des phénomènes qui sous tendent la notion même d'apprentissage est aujourd'hui nécessaire. Ces universaux qui nous permettent d'identifier certains facteurs, jusque là insuffisamment exploités, peuvent mener l'apprenant à retrouver le rôle actif, qui est naturellement le sien, et dont le contexte scolaire l'a spolié. Le but de cet article est d'exposer, un point de vue basé sur certaines données plus ou moins récentes concernant l'apprentissage et visant à faire retrouver à l'apprenant, dans le contexte institutionnel, cette disposition innée qu'il a à apprendre. Le rôle de l'enseignant de langue étrangère doit s'étendre à celui de guide dans le processus d'apprentissage de stratégies que l'apprenant s'efforcera

d'acquérir à partir du moment où le droit lui est accordé d'avoir une certaine autonomie. Cette autonomie le mènera , à développer une responsabilité par rapport à son propre apprentissage et de là même à satisfaire le besoin d'estime de soi par le biais de la compétence qu'il aura développé et aussi grace à une attitude valorisante de la part de l'enseignant.

Foreign language teaching is still today provoking wide debates in academic institutions, and the Algerian university is no exception. The present article, which emanates from a personal 'self-updating' process throughout my teaching career, does not claim to offer clear-cut answers to the ever-lasting questions about the subject.

It is widely agreed in our university circles today that the difficulties encountered both in the teaching and learning processes , are largely due to the regression of the learners' standards , to their failure to establish adequate links between the different 'modules' ,and also to their excessive reliance on the materials which the teachers provide, as they seldom try to make any extra-class efforts. Although teachers are convinced of the fact that they have tried their best, walls are erected between modules instead of bridges. The grammatical rules which the students learn in the module of grammar, for example, are not generally applied to their writings in other modules. Likewise, the rules of paragraph or essay writing acquired in the written expression module are not applied in the writing of essays in relation to literature or civilisation.

My concern about the matter grew as I went on teaching theories of Learning to the fourth year students. Among these, John Dewey's real pedagogical 'doctrine ' attracted my interest .This notable American philosopher who has co-founded the movement called 'Pragmatism' he was also a pioneer in educational theory and method . Out of his ideas developed the progressive education movement. Dewey's pragmatic theories resulted in the notion of 'Instrumentalism' that brought about a very activist pedagogy based on pedagogical sociological and psychological conceptions.

According to him Man has an active mind and is in constant adaptation to the environment; when he encounters a difficulty, he uses Thought and Observation as mere tools to solve problems in order to adapt to what surrounds him. In Dewey's own words: 'When faced with a problem, a person must logically examine the options open to him to find the best solution supported by the facts'. To him, this method of investigation could be equally applied not only to moral and social questions but also to technological and scientific ones. And in response to the criticism that said that this philosophy is suited to American life, he answered: 'I see that it refers closely enough to the intrinsic nature of Man to be universally valid.'

When we consider, the huge progress realised in research on education, it is greatly tempting to believe that we should be able to

overcome any difficulty by now. A glance at the hardship we are going through every day, together with the on-going struggle, sends us back to raw reality. Instead of having a feeling of self-confidence growing out of experience, the teacher cannot help but having a persistent feeling of frustration and uncertainty.

Foreign Language Teaching displayed an increasing focus on the specificities of language teaching and the notion of foreign researches dealing necessarily with precise samples, attributed to problems of interference from the M.T. or any pre-existing language, the occurrence of the learners' errors. On the other hand, low achievement in foreign language learning was attributed to negative attitudes, low aptitudes, lack of motivation as well as to questions of intelligence...

Between 1981 and 1984, I personally conducted a research on Lycée and College learners of E.F.L. My hypothesis was that most errors these learners made were due to interference either from Arabic or French. The one year survey and examination of three exam papers per learner (the sample consisted of fifteen learners per group and there were nine groups.), did not confirm the hypotheses. It revealed that these errors constituted a minority compared to errors caused by general learning difficulties. Other researches based on similar assumptions came out with converging results, John Norrish : 'Language learners and their errors', (1983).

Being too specific prevents us from adopting a comprehensive view of phenomena. We have isolated foreign language learning from learning in general, then from language learning.

Hélène Trocmé, in a video programme, realised by a pluridisciplinary team, and co-produced by the University of La Rochelle and the ENS of St Cloud (1994), shows that diverse sciences such as: Physics, Neurosciences, Cognitive Sciences and Biology sustain the idea that we are born to learn, discover, innovate, choose, exchange, create meaning, organise and recognise the laws of life. Life is viewed as plural and complex; our cerebral organisations are totally different; our body is organised into a cycle of perception and action; meaning is not external to us and there is no information existing for its own sake but an active coupling.

Claparède, in his theory of learning stemming from philosophical and psychological conceptions refers to five natural laws among which the 'functional autonomy law' and the 'functional adaptation law'. In his perspective, the child is said to act only if his needs push him to do so; 'an act not directly, or even indirectly linked to a need is an act against nature.' (Maslow's 'hierarchy of basic needs,' Motivation and Personality elicits the concept very well. This could apply to adults as well, with the restrictions however imposed by social dogma. School is an active agent of socialisation and deviates slowly the learner from natural learning to an artificial, arbitrary set of rules focussing

more on the future citizen than on the present individual with his psychological, social, and cognitive characteristics.

Where is then the innateness and ineluctability of learning?

Foreign language learning is viewed to occur via the acquisition of four skills Listening/Speaking and Reading/Writing. The trouble is that these skills are not inborn, it is the capacity to learn which is innate. It provides an 'infrastructure' supportive of these skills and a mass of potentialities is expected to be developed. The receptive and productive skills mentioned above, travelled a long way on board of the different methods, having the primacy upon each others depending on the approach they belonged to. Nowadays, approaches seek a more balanced combination of the skills, their complementarity being the key to language proficiency.

Communicative approaches focus on communicative competence

(Hymes's conception of the term), as the main aim to be achieved by foreign language learners. Hence, the grammatical, discourse, sociolinguistic, and strategic components forming communicative competence, appeal to a variety of capacities existing more or less in the learner's innate potential; the four skills alone are, however, not sufficient. The grammatical component is acquired through a set of rules and mechanisms which have already been acquired in the M.T. Although faced with problems of interference and transfer, this component is relatively directly learned through practice. Awareness of F.L social agreement is inevitable in developing the sociolinguistic component. The discourse component is achieved through a synthetic interpretation of these for an appropriate application. Finally, the strategic component which is not ephemeral but changes and adapts to different requirements, is highly individual and will complete the process leading to communicative competence.

The amazing progress in the research on cognitive development and potentialities has set forth new evidence greatly serving the comprehension of learning processes. As a result, the learner is today the source of investigation on the bases of which any decision is made about curriculum; objectives can be reached only if they go along the learner's profiles, that is if they are realistic and if they undergo a thorough evaluation before, during and at the end of the process. Learner centeredness as an up-to-date concept is often misleading, teachers may develop an erroneous conception of the notion and be convinced they are really focussing on the learner while they may simply be focussing on some subsidiary factors.

To what extent is the learner allowed to take decisions about the way he would like to do things. Where is that responsibility generated by an intrinsic or even an extrinsic motivation? What kind of effort can a learner make to reach something he doesn't feel the need to accomplish? Aren't we depriving the learner from a basic right nature has endowed him with.

Claparède's Functional Autonomy Law, refers to the child not as to an imperfect being, but rather as to an individual who is adapted to circumstances that are particular to him. His mental activity is appropriate to his needs and his mental life constitutes a unity.

Autonomy, as it is said, will generate a feeling of responsibility highly desirable for philosophical, pedagogical and practical reasons. (Cotterall). Responsibility is here meant to refer to the feeling developed by an individual whose power of decision about a task is real and this can be achieved only through a certain autonomy.

The teacher, to a certain extent, possesses this autonomy, and this is essential to enable him comply to reality and adapt the processes and techniques to the very learners he is concerned with. In his classroom, learners should not remain individuals grouped by age and level and sometimes sex; the strategy which he will develop is supposed to enable him have a more comprehensive approach; he will interact with the learner, who is the other human element in the pedagogical situation. This implies that the learner will also have to act and not merely react. This inborn potential of the mind is considered, by Dewey, as inherent in any learning process. The learner's ideas are active plans enabling him to build up techniques for learning. Once they are structured, these techniques will hopefully be organised into a strategy.

In the 'Functional Adaptation Law,' Claparède argues that '...the action starts when it has to satisfy the need or interest of the moment.' As a rule of practical application he suggests: 'to make an individual act we ought to place him in conditions which are appropriate to create the need that the action we want to arise must satisfy';

A strategy is defined by Bjorkhurnd 1990 as follows: 'It's a more or less complex integrated sequence of procedure selected in order to reach a goal making the performance optimal' But, can we be sure that every learner has a strategy in learning? Or are there conditions to this? Numerous examples of people, whose level of instruction is elementary, develop strategies when incited to do so for a challenge, need, curiosity, interest or any other incentive. The efforts developed to achieve the often self-assigned goal, are justified by the feeling of responsibility fostered by the autonomy inherent to a natural or authentic situation. Classroom environment being mainly artificial, a great deal has to be done to enable the learner perceive the assigned task as his own and, hence, start the autonomy/responsibility process.

In Learner Strategy For Learner Autonomy, Anita Wenden

develops a process about reasons for promoting learner autonomy and the characteristics of autonomous foreign language learner, focussing on the necessity of helping students learn How to learn just as much as they are helped What to learn. Learners must perceive the rationale of a strategy as essential to learning they should be able to have their own resources and solve their problems for the teacher may not always be available to assist.

In reality, however, this goal is not often reached, because it is subverted by classroom constraints such as syllabus, timing, pacing, number of learners...about which the learners have no decision to make. The classroom tasks they are required to perform do not necessarily lead them to develop the skills aimed at. The point being that learner's autonomy is not to be 'clipped' to existing learning syllabi, the whole curriculum must comply to that new element if we seek efficiency. Hammond and Collins, see that: 'An innovation needs to be incorporated into the structure and functioning of its host institution within a short time if it is to survive: it needs to be institutionalised. If it is not institutionalised but merely tolerated as a minor aberration, it is unlikely to be taken seriously by both learner and faculty, and may well fail completely.

Writings on second language learning and cognitive psychology argue, either implicitly or explicitly, for the educational importance of helping learners learn how to learn. Two kinds of learning strategies used by active and successful language learners are presented in table 7.4, Page 30 of Wenden's study. They insist on the fact that for students to use these strategies appropriately and flexibly, it is important that they have some basic knowledge about the nature of language and the language learning process. These strategies are Cognitive and Self-management. The first consists of:

- Selecting input;
- Comprehending input;
- Storing input
- Retrieving input.

And the second comprises:

- Planning;
- Monitoring
- Evaluation.

Cotterall's conclusions about the autonomy - based course which she has presented in 'Developing a Course Strategy for Learner Autonomy' are as follows:

- 1) Autonomy in language learning is desirable.
- 2) Dialogue is more important to autonomy than structures.
- 3) The relationship between the learner and the class teacher is central to the fostering of autonomy.
- 4) Autonomy has implications for the entire curriculum.

As a conclusion to this presentation of arguments, which is far from being exhaustive, it seems highly advisable to encourage autonomy and consider all factors intervening in constructing a real learner-centred process.

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