

ICLICE 2015 39 Gerald Kochappan

Introspection as a Language Learning Device:From the Language Learners' Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that introspection on language related issues are vital if the learners of a language want to learn the target language effectively while embedding culture and technology in the learning process. A quantitative analysis based on a survey as they reflect on their language learning is discussed. These learners will explain how they have improved in their command of English proficiency over a period of time. They have also learnt many other things they explain on reflecting about their involvement in the English Language training course over a period of time. Such reflection and talking protocols are necessary so that learners can, by talking, share their learning processes with their peers and lecturers. Both will benefit from this sharing process.

Importance of Reflection as a Learning Device

Reflection is an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, and evaluate it (Bond, Keogh and Walker,1985). It is this working with experience and previous knowledge that is important in learning. The capacity to reflect is developed to different stages in different people and it may be this ability which characterizes those who learn effectively from experience.

Reflection can be defined as the deliberate and purposeful act of thinking which centers on ways of responding to problem situations in language learning. It involves not simply a sequence of ideas, but a consecutive ordering in such a way that the learner leans back on, or refers to previous knowledge learnt. The successive portions of reflective thought flow out of one another and support one another. Each phase is a step from something to something. According to Dewey,1933 there is , in any reflective thought, definite units that are linked together so that there is a sustained movement to a common end.

Reflection is a way of helping learners to learn in meaningful ways, thus leading to genuine understanding. Three attitudes that are important in pre-disposing an individual to reflect are open-mindedness, whole-heartedness and responsibility (Dewey,1933).

For learners reflection is clearly purposeful because it aims at a conclusion. The purpose of reflecting is to untangle a problem or to make more sense of a puzzling situation; reflection involves working towards a better understanding of the problem and ways of solving it.

Reflection enables a learner not only to recall information but to think about the information unit. The learner can, on reflection unravel some difficult new information learnt. He can make links between new and old information while reflecting, he can compare how different teachers have imparted or dissemination the same information; he can come to some conclusions of what is difficult for him and why. He can determine what he has learnt or not mastered.

In short, reflection can be considered as the purposeful, deliberate act of inquiry into one's thoughts and actions through which a perceived problem is examined in order that a thoughtful reasoned response might be tested out. Reflection is to be seen as a learning experience because of the meaningful nature of the inquiry into that experience. It involves a number of steps in thinking which when organized and linked lead to a consequence. With reflection it is out of the darkness of student unknown comes the light of professional practical knowledge (Grimmet and Erickson, 1988).

In short, reflecting or looking back on experience offers opportunities to make better sense of past experiences and to develop a new or deeper understanding of that situation and to know where one stands with regards to one's own learning.

Aim and Methodology of this Study

This paper takes into account the reflections of 40 school leaders from secondary and primary schools in Malaysia who have served as English Language Panel Heads or teachers before being appointed in their current position as school leaders. They attended in August 2013, a 3 day in-service course in Effective Communication at Institut Aminuddin Baki, Ministry of Education Malaysia which includes components of language learning such as Presentation skills, Conducting meetings, Oral Skills and Writing skills. The researcher argue that reflection by the learners of what has been learnt encourage thinking and self-discovery and understanding.

The researcher interviewed the participants who at the end of the training course were asked to complete a Questionnaire on Reflection and Language Learning. They were also asked to speak freely of the learning experiences in the language course. The Questionnaire was based on 8 items:

1. Do you think that Reflection is important and have practiced Reflection during teaching and learning in the classroom?
2. Have you practiced Reflection in your Language Classroom?
3. Do the learners provide useful feedback after the Reflection activity in the classroom?
4. Is the Reflection activity beneficial for the teacher's future lesson planning?
5. Is the Reflection activity construed as a time consuming by the learners?
6. Briefly describing the learner's interpretation of Reflection in the language classroom?
7. How did the learner actually carry out the Reflection activity in the classroom?
8. Did the planning for teaching and learning of language improve after the Reflection activities?

Findings from the Questionnaire on Reflection and Language Learning

The feedback provided by the 40 experienced school leaders (Respondents) through the Questionnaire when analysed have the following findings:

For Item 1 – 100% of the respondents agreed that Reflection was important and need to be practiced during teaching and learning in the classroom. For Item 2- 100% of the respondents have practiced Reflection in the classroom when they were language teachers. As for Item 3 almost 99% of the respondents admitted they have practiced Reflection in their language classroom. For Item 4 about 98% of the respondents agreed that the feedback provided by the learners after the Reflection activity was useful for the follow up activities in the language classroom.

For Item 5 – 100% of the respondents agreed that Reflection was beneficial for future lesson planning by the language teachers. As for Item 6 – 85% of the respondents felt that Reflection was a time consuming activity in the language learning classroom. As for Item 6 –

majority of the participants described the role played by Reflection as important /effective role/useful/good/assist the teacher /reinforcement /recall /enhance /motivate /overcome /feedback /helpful.

For Item 7 on the different ways to carry out the Reflection in the classroom the respondents listed the following activities: oral exercises, writing activities, asking questions/conducting a simple quiz/providing written work/providing worksheets with exercises and setting tasks for the learners. For the Final Item 8 – 100% of the respondents wholly agreed that Reflection activities helped to improve the planning for teaching and learning of Language.

Limitations of the Study

Reflection on learning processes and outcomes must be regularly conducted to have meaning and to aid learning. A one off reflective class is not very useful for learners. However, it was hoped that some insight would be provided on the learning processes and what learners deemed important as they reflected and looked back on the teaching and learning that took place throughout the year.

As for the importance of the Study, we find that such reflection and talking protocols are necessary so that learners can , by talking share their learning processes with their peers and teachers. Both will benefit from this sharing process.

Analysis of the Data in the Questionnaire Shows the Following Findings:

About 38 of the respondents reported that they had improved on their speaking skills. They added that they were using grammatically correct structures when conversing. 15 of the respondents involved in the study explained how they had improved in their writing skills. Another 20 respondents felt that they were now able to pronounce certain words correctly.

10 respondents felt that they were now able to negotiate and use grammatically accurate English .On reflection they realized that they had mastered the skills of negotiation. The learners had also learnt subconsciously to use communicative strategies About 15 respondents explained how they used the strategy of falling back on non-verbal discourse and body language when faced with linguistic difficulties.

Some of the learning outcomes did not appear to have any relevance to linguistic skills perse. The learners as a result of their year long study believed that they were now able to analyse situations correctly. They were more confident when making decisions. They were able to handle stress by means of proper planning and also learnt to express dissatisfaction. The learners were able to do mind mapping. This in turn helped them to organize their life and plan their work effectively. The learners had become more independent simply because they had gained more knowledge. The learners also were able to plan well before they entered their class.

Pedagogical Applications

This paper supports the fact that Introspection on language related issues are vital if learners of a language want to learn the target language effectively. In order to make this happen teachers/ language trainers should also play their part to help the learners.

Certain contextual factors may influence the nature of the reflection. Young learners may be triggered to reflect in problem solving ways while the older learners may be asked to verbalise their learning and “unlearning” experiences or even to write in a diary or log.

Teachers/Language trainers should also be receptive towards feedback from the learners and must make efforts to act on it. Feedback from the learners could be using any form of media such as telephone, e-mail or even the use of diary. In this modern era of E-Technology learners may use the different tools available to provide feedback to the

teacher/Language trainers about the information learned by the individual thus making introspection as a language learning device more relevant.

If reflection is to be valued by the learners as a worthwhile attribute for their development, they must experience it as a logical consequence of learning and use it CONTINUOUSLY. It should be pointed out that a teacher/Language trainer must be brave teacher/trainer with a healthy self-esteem if he takes on reflection and reflective tasks as a learning tool in the language classroom.

He must be prepared to hear that learners did not understand some new information disseminated because he did not make clear links or used far too difficult lexical items. It is indeed a brave teacher/trainer who will be willing to use reflection as a learning strategy.

Conclusion

Reflection is a process that may be applied in learning situations in order to help not only the learner to make better sense of the information at hand, but also to enable the teacher/trainer to guide and direct learning in appropriate ways. The value of reflection in teaching and learning is that it encourages both the teacher and learner to view problems from different perspectives.

Reflection suggests a process of thinking after an activity; it does not mean that it is limited to a one off situation. Reflection can occur before, during and after an experience, and in each case which is recognized as a problem situation and may vary as will the reflective thinking and the subsequent learning.

In conclusion it is important to emphasise that reflection should be constantly conducted and not be a one-off end of the year activity.

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