

Learning Experiences to Enhance Language Acquisition

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Abstract

The new holistic paradigm in education views learners as creators of the learning process. They are constantly involved in activities for interrelation, exchange of knowledge, dialogue and reflection. In fact, they take part of learning experiences which awaken their senses and pleasure to feel as active participants of their own learning. These learning experiences transform the learners' reality in order to develop the feeling of achievement in acquiring the language, discovery of interests and freedom in using their own learning styles. Learning experiences as all the moments in which the learners process new information through their own organization in order to learn.

Resumen

Experiencias de aprendizaje en la adquisición de una lengua

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El nuevo paradigma holista en educación ve a los estudiantes como creadores del proceso de enseñanza-aprendizaje. Estos están constantemente involucrados en actividades de interrelación, intercambio de conocimiento, diálogo y reflexión. De hecho, los estudiantes participan en experiencias de aprendizaje, las cuales despiertan sus sentidos y placer al sentirse partícipes activos de su propio aprendizaje. Estas experiencias de aprendizaje transforman la realidad de los estudiantes quienes desarrollan un sentimiento de logro en la adquisición del idioma. Las experiencias de aprendizaje son todos los momentos en que los estudiantes procesan nueva información a través de su propia manera para aprender.

PALABRAS CLAVE:

Learning experiences, mediator, effective teaching, effective learning, motivation, collaborative learning.

KEY WORDS:

experiencias de aprendizaje, mediador, enseñanza y aprendizaje efectivo, motivación, aprendizaje colaborativo.

The issue on how to awaken learners' interests and motivation in order to improve the quality of learning outcomes continues to be the focus of research in higher education. In the humanistic paradigm, educators have found and implemented learning experiences for students to feel involved and enthusiastic in order to improve language acquisition.

The holistic paradigm in education views learners as creators of the learning process who are constantly participating in activities for interrelation, exchange of knowledge, dialogue and reflection. In fact, students take part in learning experiences which stimulate their senses and pleasure to feel as active participants of their own learning.

According to Maturana (2003), learning experiences are those moments in which the learner processes new information through his/her own organization in order to learn. In language teaching, they are all those activities students participate in to develop language skills by practicing and internalizing the content studied. Students find these kinds of activities challenging, entertaining, and enjoyable since they actively work with classmates and teachers. These activities aim to promote learning for living and to transform learners into holistic individuals who view life with excitement, curiosity and love. As stated by Gutiérrez (2003:45), "*learners must value all experiences of life as an opportunity for learning.*"

Students need to create their own learning together with their emotions, passions and inspirations in order to generate

and regenerate ideas. They learn from the acts of auto organization and auto construction of knowledge which help them develop the feeling of achievement in acquiring a foreign language, discovery of interests and freedom in using their own learning styles.

Learning is a continual process that should allow students to develop their potential for success. They should be considered creative and critical thinkers who use a variety of metacognitive skills and a mind to create a world to respond to their questions and deal with challenges.

These principles of learning go along with constructivist teaching practices that help learners internalize and reshape or transform new information (Brooks and Brooks, 1993). Moreover, Honebein (1996:11) claims that within this constructivist view of teaching, an organized environment in the classroom should:

- Provide experience with the knowledge construction process;
- Provide experience in and appreciation for multiple perspectives;
- Embed learning in realistic and relevant contexts;
- Encourage ownership and voice in the learning process;
- Embed learning in social experience;
- Encourage self-awareness in the knowledge construction process.

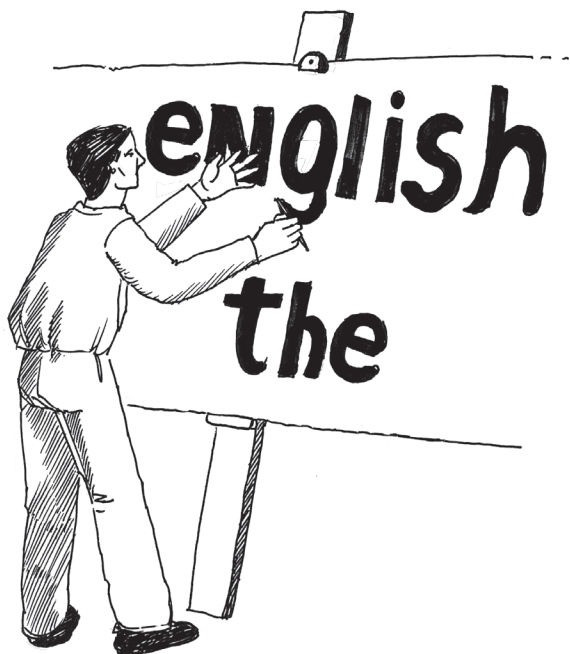
Indeed, positive learning outcomes result from the implementation of effective learning experiences that students enjoy and carry out creatively in the classroom.

EFFECTIVE TEACHING AND LEARNING

Learning experiences become successful when effective teaching leads to a higher language proficiency level. Papandreou (2002:23) points out that "*effective teaching is defined as the implementation of instructional techniques leading to maximum results within minimum time.*" Consequently, mediators should organize the process with a variety of motivating activities to effectively promote and accomplish intended learning outcomes.

Moreover, facilitators, as a role models, have to allow interactive encounters and dialogue to share knowledge; by this means, students become active participants of the pedagogical process of learning. As stated by (Assmann, 2002:62) "*Learning is always a discovery of something new: it fortifies self-organizing processes that emerge from the chaos as new levels of organization of surviving conditions.*"

Also, effective teaching includes activities for experiential learning as stated by Rogers and Freiberg (1994) such as:



- personal involvement
- learner-initiation
- evaluation by learner
- positive effects on learners
- personal change and growth
- autonomous learning
- real-life concerns

Moreover, mediators should use teaching strategies to promote effective learning. Some of the paramount principles for this kind of learning are the following:

- **Learning is an individual experience**

Learners acquire a language using different styles and learning strategies, independently from instruction. They are accountable for their own success when they study and practice the language.

- **Prior knowledge influences learning**

Students construct their own meaning by connecting new information and concepts to what they already know. Those students who have had positive prior experiences learn faster and with less pressure.

- **Students learn through practice**

Students learn by doing. As learners use the language, complete tasks and interact in cooperative activities, they internalize the language. They can apply ideas, create understanding and make use of it to solve problems or confront new situations. Students learn to think critically, analyze information, communicate ideas, work as part of a team, and acquire other skills when they are permitted and encouraged to practice what they know over and over in many activities and contexts.

- **Students need constant feedback and support**

Learning often takes place best when students have opportunities to express ideas and get constructive feedback from both the facilitator and their peers. Feedback must be helpful, analytical and encouraging to motivate students to continue improving. In this way, students feel more confident and interested in striving on a better performance.

- **Expectations affect student outcomes**

Self-assured learners develop their skills effectively and succeed in their pursuits. If they believe they are able to accomplish their goals, they would achieve proficiency, fluency and good communication strategies. Also, facilitators should always set higher expectations for students' achieve-

ment. They are the ones who encourage students to do better and to give the best they can.

To summarize, effective teaching and learning promote meaningful experiences which definitively help students achieve their language goals.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING CLASSROOMS

Collaborative learning is an instructional method that makes use of small, heterogeneous groups of students who work together to achieve common learning goals (Johnson, Johnson, and Stanne, 2001). Within group learning, students benefit from sharing ideas and developing relationships. In this environment, students help one another to learn better and use the language.

Student collaboration in the EFL/ESL classroom has been a very valuable instruction method since pair and group work immediately increase the amount of student-talking time, and it provides the students with the opportunity to communicate with each other to share suggestions, proposals, insights, feedback, successes and doubts.

In today's educational environment, students take responsibility for their own learning to help each other acquire the language. Learners work in groups, mutually constructing understanding, solutions, meanings, applications or creations in a variety of collaborative activities. Educators agree that cooperative learning makes students retain more information than if working individually, and at the same time promotes critical thinking, respect and tolerance toward different points of view. According to Richards and Rodgers (2001), cooperative language learning is based on the following principles:

- Learning is dependent on the socially structural exchange of information between learners in groups.
- Students are motivated and, as a result, they help others increase learning.
- The learner is held accountable for his or her own learning.
- There is cooperation, not competition. Learners learn teamwork skills.
- Learners are taught to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning.
- The learning environment raises the achievement of all students.
- The learning environment builds positive relationships. It enhances learner motivation, reduces stress and builds group spirit and trust.

- Learners experience healthy social, physiological and cognitive development.
- It is a learner-centered approach. Learners feel enthusiastic and encouraged to use their own learning styles to learn how to learn.
- Learners develop learning and communication strategies.
- Learners develop communicative competence in a language by conversing in socially and pedagogically structured situations in order to foster the development of critical thinking skills.

Students benefit more through authentic and motivating group activities since they feel challenged to use the language to accomplish their goals.

MOTIVATION

Motivation has been considered a paramount factor involved in learning a second language. Motivated students expand efforts, want to achieve a goal and enjoy the task of using the language. Students show two different kinds of motivation which are necessary to achieve the desired levels of second language competence: (a) The intrinsic motivation comes from inside an individual and from the pleasure he or she gets from the task itself or from the sense of satisfaction in completing or working on a task. (b) Extrinsic motivation comes from outside an individual, such as the rewards of good grades, job enrichment or traveling. These incentives provide satisfaction and pleasure that the task itself may not provide.

These are some of the factors that serve as sources of motivation for adult learning:

- Social relationships: students have the opportunities to meet and interact with different social and cultural backgrounds and to construct a bond among themselves
- External expectations: students enroll in a program in which they have to achieve the objectives and the language proficiency level required
- Personal advancement: students want to achieve personal goals and satisfaction as well as to have a higher status in a job and secure professional advancement
- Cognitive interest: students develop their language skills by using cognitive and metacognitive strategies

Also, Gardner (2002) suggests a model of the role of aptitude and motivation in second language learning which includes a genuine interest, attitudes and other support such as innovative instructional techniques and a warm educational environment to achieve language goals.

When talking about motivation in the classroom, it is fundamental that the facilitators establish rapport with students and prepare them for learning. They can motivate students via several means such as:

- **Set a feeling or tone for the lesson.** Instructors should try to establish a friendly, open atmosphere that shows the participants they will help them learn.
- **Set an appropriate level of concern.** The level of tension must be adjusted to meet the level of importance of the objective. If the material has a high level of importance, a higher level of tension/stress should be established in the class. However, people learn best under low to moderate stress; if the stress is too high, it becomes a barrier to learning.
- **Set an appropriate level of difficulty.** The degree of difficulty should be set high enough to challenge participants but not so high that they become frustrated by information overload. The instruction should predict and reward participation, culminating in success.

In addition, students need specific knowledge of their learning results. Feedback must be specific, not too general. They must also see a *reward* for learning. The reward can be simply a demonstration of benefits to be realized from learning the topics. Moreover, the students must be interested in the subject. Interest is directly related to reward. Adults must see the benefit of learning in order to motivate themselves to learn English.

Another aspect related to motivation is reinforcement. It is a very important part of the teaching/learning process; through it, teachers encourage correct modes of behavior and performance. There are mainly two types of reinforcement:

- *Positive reinforcement* is normally used by instructors who are teaching new skills. As the name implies, positive reinforcement is good and reinforces positive behavior.
- *Negative reinforcement* is normally used by instructors teaching a new skill or new information. It is useful in trying to change modes of behavior. The result of negative reinforcement is *extinction* -- that is, the instructor uses this type of reinforcement until the bad behavior disappears, or it becomes extinct.

When instructors are trying to change behaviors, they should apply both positive and negative reinforcement. Reinforcement should be part of the teaching-learning process to ensure correct behavior. Instructors need to use it on a regular basis early in the process to help the students retain what they have learned. Then, they should use reinforcement only to maintain consistent, positive behavior.



Summarizing, professors who use a constructivist methodology plan activities and learning experiences which are motivating, participative and communicative. Students who are motivated take active participation in the teaching-learning process having a role that directly involves them as the core of the process. Besides, the teacher has the role of facilitator making the involvement of the students and their access to learning possible.

SOME EXAMPLES OF DIFFERENT LANGUAGE ENCOUNTERS

As an illustration, the following are activities designed by professors to enrich the learning process. First, teachers organize drama activities. Within this group of techniques, students participate in activities related to music, creation and

invention, role-plays, group and pair work, debates, oral presentations, and games. They have to plan these activities by including costumes, rehearsals, power point presentations, food demonstrations and others. Students usually express their feelings of satisfaction since they really share in groups and contribute to make their performance the best.

Also, cognitive techniques such as problem-solving and critical thinking develop learners' skills in vocabulary building, reading and listening comprehension, writing and grammar analysis. Through the use of these techniques, students expand their knowledge and interest in other areas. In this way, they would be able to become proactive and responsible learners who can apply this knowledge in other personal and professional experiences in life. During class, students

participate actively in discussions related to the topics studied. They use strategies such as role-play, questions, problem solving, brainstorming, debate and cooperative learning. Using these strategies, students express their opinions, analyze and evaluate the topics studied, respecting different points of view. Also, they analyze interviews, movies and TV programs related to the contents of the course. Besides, interaction with other course participants through teamwork generates respect for other people's opinions, critical evaluation of ideas, and self and peer evaluation to improve argumentation skills, negotiation and cooperative teamwork.

In addition, virtual learning provides students the opportunity to enhance their language skills while participating in discussion forums, chatting, reading additional materials, and internet activities. These tools help to expand their knowledge, creativity and critical thinking to educate them as competent professionals for the demands of this global society.

Outside the classroom, students do homework and prepare oral presentations. They have the opportunity to do research through the different tasks assigned and they have access to a big data base, EBSCO, which has information about a large variety of subjects. They develop strategies to evaluate, select, and integrate bibliographic references in their academic work. Also, the university organizes different extracurricular activities for students to participate. For example, once a year they celebrate the "English Week" which is a festival where students participate in different activities such as oral presentations, art shows, role-plays, singing or dancing. These are also meaningful learning experiences in which students have the chance to be creative and use the language to learn in real situations.

In summary, with these kinds of activities students demonstrate their attitudes and skills in language learning which help them communicate effectively in real-life situations.

CONCLUSION

In this new paradigm, professors and students have different roles, such as creators of their own knowledge and initiators of the new learning experiences to become proactive, dynamic and independent promoters of continual learning.

An enjoyable environment of social and emotional bonds of relationships strengthens students' attitudes and dispositions toward the language. Those students who feel more motivated and who explore different strategies in order to learn English are the ones who succeed in acquiring the language faster and easier.

Students learn best when they are actively involved in the process and this results in a more satisfaction towards the class. To guarantee interesting and fun classes, teachers should prepare activities in which students are responsible for each other's learning as well as their own. Encouragement of active participation, exploration, reflection, and the individual construction of meaning is vital for learner's enjoyment. Moreover, teachers' willingness to accommodate learners' needs in different kinds of tasks promote a rich environment filled with activities, materials and aids necessary to achieve the goals of the program.

In this modern society, learners feel that their needs are met when they are given opportunities to express themselves freely and creatively in English. They expect to form part of a community of learners who enjoy participating in a great variety of activities from theatre, music, poetry and creative writing. Educators cannot overestimate learners' potential since nowadays students come to the classroom with pre-conceived ideas of enriching their world through dynamic learning experiences that excel their language skills.

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