

EFFECTS OF GUIDED SELF-REFLECTION ON STUDENTS WITH ESL LEARNING DIFFICULTIES

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to investigate the effect of guided self-reflection on students with ESL learning difficulties. The data was obtained from a total of eight respondents who were asked to voluntarily undergo a series of guided self-reflection sessions by a student counsellor. The respondents were selected after administering a teacher made test for English among 57 students who enrolled for courses in an institution of higher learning in Malaysia. The analysis of the responses to the interviews was done using the process of topic ordering to describe the process of preparing qualitative data for analysis. Using this process the transcripts were analyzed inductively. It was found that students benefited from the counselling sessions based on the improvement in the test scores. The study also highlighted certain perceptions low achieving students have of themselves which could influence the strategies they used to learn English. The home and social environments could also play a significant role in this.

KEYWORDS

Guided self-reflection, ESL learning strategies, English as a Second Language

BACKGROUND

There is a concern among teachers of English as a second language of the difficulties students experience when learning the language. According to Panggabean (2007), one of the learning difficulties faced by language learners especially when learning English as a second language is their inability to sort out individual words especially when listening to the language being spoken. This difficulty might trigger misguided assumptions that the language is difficult to learn. Another problem is that the sounds of words are modified by their environment, that is, by the person speaking the language (Pike, 1968). Added to this the anxieties experienced by learners when listening to English could also contribute to language learning difficulties. According to Chang (2008), students experience difficulties in learning when they had low self-confidence about learning English especially when listening to the language. Choy and Troudi (2006) found that students became more confident of speaking English when they went to college. One of the reasons for this is the greater exposure to the language.

Barrera (2006) cautioned that many students have not been properly diagnosed with language learning difficulties. These students have been allowed to pass through school and are often left without any help for their problems. The process for learning a second language is one that takes place in phases, initially for basic communication and subsequently for academic learning proficiency after several years (Baca and Cervantes, 1991). According to Barrera (2006), this process is expected to take place at a certain pace – 1 to 2 years for basic communication, and 5 to 7 years for academic language. However, such progress is dependent on a strongly literate background in the learner's first language (Krashen, 1998). If a learner is without strong literacy of their first language, it may be expected that an even longer period is required before developing the ability to use English for

academic learning. This is the rate of learning expected for learners without learning difficulties; for those with learning difficulties it may take an even longer time to acquire the skill or perhaps they may not be able to achieve adequate mastery for academic learning.

According to Pally (2007), a learner often unconsciously predicts what is most likely to happen and set in motion perceptions and behaviours that are best adapted to what is expected before the events occur. This means that a learner will use past experiences and learning as a guide to what will happen in the future. Therefore, what learners perceive and how they receive new learning will determine how much they can learn. Pally also notes that unless learners are aware of how they learn they will tend to use the same strategies regardless of whether they are effective or not. This is similar to findings by Cheah et al. (2008). Further to this Choy and Troudi (2006), notes that students perceived that learning English is difficult and it was something that was beyond their control and extra effort would not help them master the language. Cheah et al. (2008) noted that most students who have language learning difficulties were also reluctant speakers of the language and were dependent on their teachers to teach them. They were not motivated to learn on their own.

As such the success of students in most programmes to help students with language learning difficulties specifically reading has been limited. In order to enable such programmes to be more successful, a sense of self-efficacy must be given to students by the teachers guiding them. In order to bring this about students need to be taught to self-reflect on what they are learning as well as how they are learning.

THE PRESENT STUDY

This study is carried out to determine the effectiveness of a series of guided self-reflection sessions to help students become more aware of their perceptions of themselves and their learning difficulties. The students chosen to participate in the study have done poorly in their SPM examinations (the Malaysian equivalent of the Cambridge 'O'-Levels) and are enrolled in certificate courses. These courses are designed to be skill based rather than a course for the accumulation and cognition of facts. However, many of these students still have difficulties completing and understanding the tasks they have been assigned. The research questions underpinning this study are:

1. What did the guided self-reflection sessions reveal about how students perceive and deal with their ESL learning difficulties?
2. How did the counselling sessions help students?

The investigation was carried out on a sample of post secondary students enrolled in courses in a Malaysian institute of higher learning. Out of the initial sample of 57 students, we finally selected 8 to take part in the study based on their scores on a teacher made English test which consisted of comprehension and grammar questions. An additional test called the *Myself as a Learner (MALS)* (Burden, 2000), was also administered before and after the guided reflective sessions by the counsellor. The students were selected because they scored poorly in the English test.

METHOD, DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

The research questions led us to use the interpretive approach. The aim of this approach is to view reality as being socially constructed where the behaviours of individuals are being continuously interpreted and reinterpreted to give a meaningful explanation to behaviours usually within a particular context (Holliday, 2002; Radnor, 2002). The meanings obtained in this manner are actually conceptualized, temporary knowledge (Greene, 2000). Therefore, interpretivist knowledge is contestable precisely because it is contextualized and multiplistic and also because it represents an intertwining of facts and values.

The 8 students were given the MALS and an English test at the beginning and the end of the study. The study was for one semester (14 weeks) and during the semester the students were asked to see the student counsellor for 45 minutes to an hour every two weeks in order to help them with their self-reflection about learning English. At the same time they were expected to attend their regular English classes and put into practice some of the insights they gained from the counselling sessions. The sessions were recorded with the students' consent for analysis. All the sessions were conducted in Mandarin or Cantonese and translated into English. In order to maintain the integrity of the translation to the original text an independent translator was asked to review and comment on the translation.

The aim of the counselling sessions were to help the students get an in-depth look into the way they felt about learning English and the way they thought about themselves as learners. They were also given a chance to look into their self limiting beliefs and their self concepts. The analysis of the conversations during the sessions were done using the process of topic ordering, a term used by Radnor (2002) to describe the process of preparing qualitative data for analysis. Using this process the transcripts were analyzed inductively. The main categories were allowed to emerge from the data through repeated reading of the data.

RESULTS

What did the guided self-reflection sessions reveal about how students perceive and deal with their ESL learning difficulties?

From the analysis of the counselling sessions, several salient points were found to be the perceptions of the students in the study. The points are grouped into the following categories:

Students' Perception of English as a Second Language

All 8 students perceived that learning English was difficult for them. All of the students were from Chinese medium schools and that made the learning and mastering of English even more difficult. Many of them were not using English to communicate while in school. This is reflected by the statement of Student KWx:

"I will use Mandarin to communicate with my family as my parents cannot speak English. In school I used Malay and seldom would use English. Although I feel that English and Malay are important languages for me to know but I feel more comfortable communicating in Mandarin. I feel that English is more difficult and I do not seem to be able to master the skills needed to speak the language well."

Similar perceptions were reflected by Student GWW:

"Normally at home I will use Cantonese to communicate with my siblings and parents. I will use one or two words in English sometimes when I speak to my siblings but no more than that. When I was in school, I used to fool around and not study and when I was in secondary school it was too late for me to catch up with my studies and I did badly in my examinations. When I use English I often have to think in Chinese first then translate to English and that is very difficult for me."

Discussion

All the students perceived that English is a difficult language to learn and would not use it to communicate with others. Many also expressed regret that they wasted their time while in school and did not make use of the opportunities there. They have a difficult time with their studies in college because of their language difficulties. This finding seems to reflect the research by Pally (2007) that student's perceptions about English would determine their future behaviour toward the language. From the statements made by the students, they perceived that English was difficult since primary school and they could not master the language. This seems to reflect the findings of Choy and Troudi (2006), that students perceived learning English as difficult and they are not able to master it.

Student Home Environment

The home environments of all the students did not support the learning of and communicating in English. Most of the students had parents who did not know how to speak English. There was one parent who did speak English but did not use the language at home. As such the home environment was not conducive for learning English. Although the students were encouraged by their parents to stay in school, the students did not seem to know how to use effective learning strategies. For example Student KWX commented:

"My father is a lorry driver and my mother is a baby sitter. They cannot speak English therefore at home I will use Hokkien to speak to them. As for my siblings we sometimes speak one or two words of English but that is about all. I do not really have a chance to speak English although my mother encourages me to study it."

Student KZK related a similar situation at home:

"When I speak to my mother I never use English but I will speak a little English to my brothers and sisters. But this is usually mixed with Malay and Cantonese. Most of the time at home I will speak in Cantonese."

Discussion

The results show that the home environment of the students did not seem to support the speaking of English. Added to this the students did not have strong literacy in a first language that would help them be more proficient in a second language. This is shown by them when communicating in three languages where words from each language are used to form sentences. These students have difficulties mastering the language and it would seem that their first language literacy level was not strong as suggested by Krashen (1998). As such although these students had been studying English in their primary and secondary schools they had not mastered the language. According to Barrera (2006), more time may be needed for students to master the language because they take longer to master the various stages of learning the language from the communication level to being able to use the language in an academic setting. These results seem to support the research.

Student Experiences in School

All of the students expressed that they lacked the confidence to study on their own while they were in school. All of them needed their teachers to 'teach' them English and felt that they could not learn on their own. They commented that it was the same for all the subjects they took. For example Student TYS commented:

"I am very afraid to speak English as my English is not very good. I feel ashamed when I speak in English although no one has ever told me that I speak broken English. I do not have confidence to speak the language."

The experiences of Student KZK were somewhat different from the experiences of the other students in that although he was initially afraid to speak English he felt that after a while his English had improved. Student KZK commented:

"Previously when I was in primary school my English was not okay, and I used to fail it. When I went to secondary school, my English improved somewhat. I did not fail as much. I was able to speak it but not very fluently. Now that I am in college I think I have improved in my English but then I still cannot answer the questions that my lecturer asks me. I know the answer but I cannot use English to answer. I think it is my grammar although I feel better after attending the English course."

Discussion

All the students seem to express that they lacked confidence when speaking English. They had the feeling that their peers will laugh at them when they make mistakes with the language. The results are reflective of the finding by Chang (2008), that students experience difficulty in learning English when they lacked self-confidence and also when they had difficulty listening to English. However, student listening skills were not covered in this study and therefore it could not be established if this was a contributing factor to the students' lack of confidence.

Student Perceptions of Themselves

Most of the students had low self-concepts. Many felt they had let their families down because they had not performed well in school. Three of them felt that being enrolled in college gave them a chance to redeem themselves. The rest felt that they were not performing well because they had chosen a course that they did not like because their poor results did not allow them other choices. For instance Student GWW said:

"I study because my family encouraged me to continue to study as I was too young to work. I do not like the course that I am studying and I have decided not to continue after talking to you. I realize that I am not suited for studies. I want to work."

All of the students blamed themselves for failing in school. They felt they had disappointed their families and wasted the money given to them for education. For instance CHY said:

"I blame myself for the situation I am in. My parents gave me money to study but I can't study well. But I have to learn to face it. When I got my results and found that I did very badly in school I know that I would not be able to pursue what I liked. I had to change my course of study. I blamed myself. I am now studying something that I do not really like."

Many of these students were also angry with themselves and had trust issues with people around; this had resulted in strained relationships with family members as well as with friends. For example Student NSG admitted that he had problems trusting others and felt he needed to win all the time. He would often get into arguments with friends and family. This was reflected when he said:

"I feel like I cannot trust others they have disappointed me. My parents tell me something then they will do the opposite of what they tell me. I feel I need to win all the time. I get angry when I lose. But sometimes I feel the harder I work to win to more I fail."

Discussion

All the students had low self-concepts and did not feel that they were successful in what they did especially in school. Many were angry with themselves and this had affected their ability to relate to their peers and caretakers. All these factors could influence the manner in which they view learning and the experiences they have in school. This is reflective of research by Pally (2007) which found that how students perceive themselves would determine what they experienced in school. It would also influence the strategies which they use to learn. Cheah et al. (2008) found that students who are low achievers would continue to use ineffective strategies to learn because they have used them in the past and were familiar with them.

How did the counselling sessions help students?

There were a total of three counselling sessions carried out for each of the students in the study. The results of the students' performance in the English test and MALS are shown on the table below

Table 1. Average English Test and MALS Scores

	Average English Test Score	Average MALS Scores									
		Factor									
		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Pre test	56	17	18	14	7	6	5	6	3	3	7
Post test	64	18	17	16	8	7	6	6	3	3	7

Factor 1: Enjoyment in problem solving

Factor 6: Access to and use of vocabulary in problem-solving

Factor 2: Confidence about schoolwork (Academic self-efficacy)

Factor 7: Confidence in dealing with new work

Factor 3: Confidence about learning ability (Learning self-efficacy)

Factor 8: Confidence in problem solving ability

Factor 4: Taking care with work

Factor 9: Verbal ability/fluency

Factor 5: Lack of Anxiety

Factor 10: Confidence in general ability

DISCUSSION

The English test scores on the pre and post tests showed that students on average had gained 8 points. However the MALS scores showed very few changes with the exception of Factor 3. The response of the students on questions in this factor group changed from feeling that the statements were not true for them to a more positive tone that the statements were now true for them. This could possibly be due to the insights they gained of themselves during the counselling sessions which honed on their learning strategies and perceptions of themselves in school. Added to this was a significant increase in their English test scores. It would seem that the counselling sessions helped them reflect on the problems they were having by looking at them from a different perspective and develop better strategies to deal with them. As discussed in the previous section the various problems that were looked at during the session together with the counsellor could have helped these students develop better ways of dealing with them. It would be prudent to surmise that further sessions focusing on the other factor groupings in the MALS could help students feel better about themselves as learners.

CONCLUSION

Overall the study revealed that students who did not do well in school tend to have low self-concepts and would often use ineffective strategies to learn. Added to this, many of them do not have the language skills or home and social environments to support them in their studies. Students seem to benefit from the counselling sessions that were given to them and it helped them with their self perceptions. There is a need for more research to be carried out into how counsellors in tandem with teachers, can work more effectively with low achieving students to help them reflect on their self-perceptions and help them develop more effective strategies to learn. There seems to be a sense of learned helplessness expressed by these students which is another area that needs further study.

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