

Orientation Literature Review:

**Self-Directed Learning as a Humanistic
Approach in the E.S.L. Classroom**

By

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Abstract

This paper reviews selected literature on the concept of self-directed learning as an approach within Teaching English as a Second Language (T.E.S.L.), its ethical dimensions, and the discrepancies between its theory and application. Self-directed learning is advocated as an alternative to the conventional, highly-structured, and restrictive classroom experience. It is hoped that teachers will strive to create a more inclusive, affirming and ultimately, humanistic experience for their students.

Introduction

The learning of English as a second language (E.S.L.) focuses on the acquisition of a skill with practical applications. For some, this skill may result in improved professional prospects, qualifying for higher academic standing, or entering a post-secondary institution. In E.S.L. programs at the pre-university level students typically comply with a rigorous standard that requires them to attain a minimum grade before moving on to a higher level. Activities in the E.S.L. classroom parallel those in other language-acquisition classes, including vocabulary acquisition; study of grammar and sentence structure; regular testing to monitor progress; and engaging in discussions based on prescribed topics. Because of the expectations and criteria involved in having students qualify to enter a degree-credit program, these variables often take precedence over such humanistic ones as the consideration of cultural and linguistic differences, and the myriad ways of learning. The question then arises: How can the teaching of E.S.L. at the pre-university level be approached from a humanistic perspective? One proposed method is self-directed learning. This paper reviews selected literature on the concept of self-directed learning as a feasible approach within the teaching of E.S.L., ethical dimensions of self-directed learning, and the discrepancies between the theory and practice of this approach.

A Feasible Approach

An exploration of self-directed learning raises questions about whether this is a feasible approach to teaching English as a second language in the classroom. Knowles (1975) acknowledges that he was a teacher utilizing conventional approaches before he implemented self-directed learning in his teaching. He has, therefore, first-hand experience and knowledge of its effectiveness. He describes

the characteristics of self-directed learning as an attempt to create a warm and respectful environment that is conducive to free dialogue between teacher and student and among students themselves. The traditional roles of teacher and student, which presume teachers as all-knowing and ready to impose their intellectual superiority over the passive, compliant students, have been re-defined to those of facilitator and learner. Specifically, the instructor provides the learner with information in a way that incites inquiry on the part of the learner, not as a way to impose his or her own view. On the other hand, the learner is an active participant seeking ways to find out more about the topic, utilizing the instructor, along with the other learners, as resources in the learning process (Knowles, 1975).

The conventional approach to the teaching of E.S.L. prescribes learning skills the instructor deems necessary for the student to comply with criteria predicated on an ultimate goal. At the pre-secondary level, this is usually in the form of a test or research paper. For example, in some programs, students need only memorize then regurgitate the information to do well on a test or to comply with the guidelines of writing a research paper to attain a moderately high mark. Students may also take a test that places them at a particular program level regardless of whether such a test is an accurate reflection of a student's linguistic ability. In essence, a standard is set, either by the individual instructor or institution, against which all students are compared and evaluated. Such standards, which pre-suppose the uniformity of individuals, reveal the need for a closer look at the experiences of students.

Intercultural theory examines the heritage of the individual: it augments the concept of multiculturalism by focusing on the way cultures interact and relate as they co-exist over time (Tanaka, 2002). Such a theory is relevant in North American classrooms, particularly at the post-secondary level, because new studies that look into the impact of power by the culturally dominant group—in this case defined as male, heterosexual, English-speaking, Christian, and Caucasian—are rare. International students are particularly vulnerable to the inequalities such a lack of consideration results in. These include assessments that do not consider linguistic differences which can place one at a disadvantage; that ignore cultural differences in writing styles; that overlook learning disabilities that may not have been diagnosed in the student's home country; and that are seemingly indifferent to the impact of making the transition into a foreign environment.

It is because of the rigidity of many E.S.L. programs that a more humanistic approach is needed. Knowles (1975), for example, argues that individuals who take a proactive approach, learn better than those who passively wait to be taught. “Self-directed learning is more in tune with our natural processes of psychological development. When we are born we are totally dependent personalities”. Therefore, “(A)n essential aspect of maturing is developing the ability to take increasing responsibility for our own lives—to become increasingly self-directing” (p. 14).

Vella (2002) corroborates taking a more autonomous stance to learning, referring to the theory of quantum physics, where all matter in the universe comprises expanding, all-inclusive energy. Mezirow (2002), too, when referring to Kegan (1994) postulates that “the two greatest yearnings in human experience are to be included and to have a sense of agency” (p.11). Such an analogy relates to a humanistic, learner-centered approach to teaching because it emphasizes the learner as participant in his or her own learning, capable of effecting changes in self-development.

When planning their programs, today’s educators need to consider the varied interpretations of self-directed learning. Fritschner (2000) discovered, for instance, that students defined in-class participation in diverse ways: for those comfortable engaging in conversation, participation constituted spontaneously speaking out. For those who are naturally quieter it is defined more broadly: listening attentively, consistent attendance, completing one’s assignments, and being prepared.

Ethical Implementation

According to many who favour a self-directed approach, assessing learners’ needs is crucial in upholding notions of ethics, justice, and equity. Indeed, Knowles (1975) believes that it is only in assessing their needs that a learner can ascertain the way he or she best learns. Vella (2002) uses “surveys, on-site visits, informal sessions such as pot-luck suppers, and telephone or e-mail interviewsto get a sense of the learners’ real situation” (p. 57). Many who enter pre-university E.S.L. programs are international students intending to attend a Canadian university. As most require a minimum level of language proficiency, non-native speakers are initially assessed on whether they qualify to enter the degree-credit programs, or take the pre-university E.S.L. (non-

credit) program offered within the continuing education division of the same university. A code of ethics that determines which students are accepted into a degree-credit program and which are not will be subject to the parameters within which a university operates. Who or what determines these ethical codes, and can they truly address individual student needs? Caffarella (2002) proposes that program planning, as one component of pre-university and degree-credit programs, should be designed using an interactive approach. The unique characteristic of the interactive approach is its non-linear and flexible schedule. As a result, “there are no real beginnings and ends. Persons responsible for planning programs for adults are encouraged to use the relevant parts of the model in any order and combination based on the planning situation (Caffarella, 2002, p. 21)”. With its focus on people, a collaborative ambience is cultivated. Finally, due to its flexibility, it can take into consideration the global nature of education today, accounting for the cultural differences amongst its participants (Caffarella, 2002). Such a model may be an effective alternative to traditional educational program planning.

Similarly, Merriam and Cafferella (1999) draw on the work of Connolly and Light (1991) who propose “five basic principles which could serve as a common ground for all adult educators: social responsibility, inclusive philosophy of education, pluralism, respect for learners and respect for educators” (p. 372). Using these guidelines could result in an ethical learning experience for all, one that considers individual needs, particularly those predicated on culture.

In pre-university E.S.L. programs, this would be welcome news to students because equal access, due process, and the promotion of equitable policies are highly important, especially when the E.S.L. program precedes a post-secondary program. Competition is fierce and students prefer to expedite the movement through the (non-credit) E.S.L. program, or do without it altogether. Students, therefore, continually monitor the progress of other students and are vehement in their outcry if there is the perception of preferential treatment.

Self-directed learning promotes that learning can—and should be—a lifelong process, hence the concept of completion is antithetical to the original idea. What many consider to be the completion of the learning process may simply be a natural transition to the next level of the process. For example, Collins (1998), corroborates not only the notion that self-directed learning is learner-centered, but also that its impetus—a genuine interest in a subject—sustains that idea. Genuine

interest also precludes any parameters imposed on the learning process confirming that life-long learning defies the formal setting of educational institutions, the compliance with credit-based program criteria, and time limitations. Faced with the reality of credit-based programs, however, an E.S.L. instructor may still employ a self-directed learning approach to facilitate a more humanistic experience. Clark (2001) writes of narrative learning as an alternative and compelling way to incite students to greater involvement in the classroom. This may involve journal writing or having students form small groups to engage in storytelling activities where the focus could be the self. Such activities are effective in numerous ways. Linguistically, it is an excellent way to practice writing, speaking, and pronunciation skills. In addition, because of the social nature of this approach, students who are self-conscious or who come from cultures that are group-orientated, may participate without feeling threatened or without feeling that they are breaching cultural boundaries. Finally, “[T]he reformulation of personal narratives has a social dimension, since they are shaped by the culture in which they are embedded and through which they are given meaning” (p. 88). In the field of E.S.L., this new way of perceiving the learning process underscores the belief that language acquisition, although requiring time to develop, should not be restricted by it. Indeed, learning a second—if not a first—language is often a lifelong pursuit.

Cross (1981) confirms that because learning is often motivated by the desire to solve a problem, there is also the added motivation to learn about the subject matter. Indeed, the conventional, teacher-centered approach to learning is arguably the poorest form of teaching because it presupposes students knowing little about the subject, thereby creating a dependency on the teacher. Inevitably, this creates an imbalance of power that impacts on the dynamics between teacher and student in any traditional, teacher-centered classroom. Cranton (2002) also argues when referring to Habermas (1971), that the communicative form of knowledge is the one that has the most impact on E.S.L. students because of its basis in self-awareness, awareness about others, and the awareness of societal norms within which the student lives (Cranton, 2002). Yet rather than recognize individual differences in ways to learn, many E.S.L. students regard their abilities—ergo, themselves—as being substandard and inadequate, creating feelings of inferiority, frustration, and guilt.

Theory and Practice

It is a common belief that ideas that seem noble in theory often fall short in practice. This is often the case in many instances when self-directed learning (SDL) approaches are attempted in traditional classroom settings. For one, since the basic premise of SDL is the self—implying autonomy, independence and free will—this precludes a part of the classroom experience, which, though teacher-centered, can be interactive (Chovanec, 1998). One of my most successful lessons, for instance, a discussion over a moral dilemma that, I believe, upholds the benefits of SDL, calls for an introduction so that students have a context within which to initiate arguments, and without which they would not be able to proceed. However, I do not believe that in providing this background I compromise my students' ability to self-direct because they may still engage in discourse and critical thinking. Brookfield (2005) corroborates this during a lecture he gave in January 19, 2005 when he asserted that in order for students to feel comfortable taking part in SDL activities, “it is important for instructors to model their lessons in front of their students, and to engage in peer and collaborative learning for students to get a general understanding” (S. Brookfield, Critical thinking in self-directed learning lecture, January 19, 2005) of the lesson and its purpose.

That said, there is the natural paradox that occurs when introducing the concept of self-directed learning to students accustomed to a more traditional approach to learning; since most are not familiar with it, they will need to be taught about it. In addition, many students, particularly within the E.S.L. context, may resist such an independent form of learning since it contradicts many of the pre-conceived notions of their role in the classroom. Many Asian students, for instance, accustomed to a teacher-centered approach to learning, are often unquestioningly and consistently deferential to teachers because in their culture, the teacher is considered not only the expert in the field being studied, but also one who should be respected and obeyed regardless of evident fallibility. For many of these students, taking a more passive stance in learning also absolves them of the responsibility for their own learning, resulting in the presumption that if they do not do well academically, the responsibility lies with the teacher. It is, therefore, necessary to take this into consideration when assessing student progress.

Conclusion

As the literature reviewed in this paper indicates, the concept of self-directed learning is one whose focus is on new, more humanistic ways to teach and learn. In a formal academic setting, its varied interpretations allow for flexible application thereby accommodating the student's individual circumstances. This is important as the teaching of adults becomes increasingly student-centered and interactive. In the field of E.S.L., cultural and linguistic differences, in addition to learning disabilities, can be taken into consideration, particularly when program planning or assessing a student's progress. The issue of equal access may also be addressed as institutional standards are changed to be more inclusive and reflective of the changing nature of education. Philosophically, SDL extends beyond institutional learning, advocating for a more open-ended, life-long desire to learn.

The apparent contradictions and paradoxes that distinguish self-directed learning as a concept from its practical application in a formal academic setting are numerous. Indeed, part of the challenge is its seeming contradictions with many of the traditional teaching methodologies currently practiced. Despite these perceived inhibitors, it is still worth making the effort to implement SDL as an approach. Its benefits are a form of knowledge that can be liberating as well as transformative.

Self-directed learning provides the student with skills in self-reflection as he or she observes the language-acquisition efforts of fellow students. Concurrently, a student also attains a level of self-confidence through the simultaneous evolution of his or her own linguistic skills. Finally, through mastering the language, a student becomes proficient at living within a culture that had previously been foreign and intimidating, making the transformation into a member of society who further contributes to its growth and development.

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