

Learner Readiness – Why and How Should They Be Ready?

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Abstract

This article aims to serve as a gentle reminder to all of us- English teachers - that there are other multifaceted factors that contribute to our learners' achievements besides curriculum and instruction. There are other significant facts and observations that should be noted and considered beyond those dictated in the Quality Assurance requirements. There are other issues that we must pay attention to in our class preparation besides what is prescribed on the policies by the schools, the Ministry of Education or the government agenda. Among these issues is learner readiness. While we stay focused on whether or not the learners are acquiring the target knowledge and skills, we should intently put in some thoughts and efforts on the development of our students' learning competency and intellectual character, if not to initiate and motivate them to become each an effective and self-regulated learner. Discussions the importance of learning readiness on learning outcomes and the approaches teachers may consider to tap into these notions and enhance our teaching practices and their learners' achievements are included.

Keywords: learner readiness, self-regulated learning

Introduction

In classrooms where the teacher does not adjust the learning tasks and teaching approaches to the students' levels of readiness and teaches only to the majority- the average students- some students will be bored from lack of challenge, and others may be placed under stress from too great a challenge. Therefore, we need to consider where our learners are in relation to the learning objectives and plan the learning experiences just beyond the skill level of each student. Learners are more likely to be actively engaged in the learning, rise to the challenge, and build up a sense of self-confidence as they approach the target tasks if they feel that they have a chance to succeed. So when the levels of readiness have been considered- of course it is next to impossible to say that we can consider each and every learner individually - learners of various levels of learning readiness can be identified and appropriately grouped. Then – the tasks and experiences can be designed to accommodate the learners at their levels of learning competency. Recent research and various studies have provided evidence that educational interventions work best when learner readiness is noted and learner readiness strategies if embedded within instruction can help enhance the capacities and skills of learners, including those with learning difficulties and language issues (Aguilar & Kim, 2019; Bozkurt & Arslan, 2018; Hsieh & Hsieh, 2019; Kartal & Balcikanh, 2019)

According to numerous advocates of learner readiness, a magnitude of terms and concepts are coined and deployed. Among these, some of those that predominate are learner autonomy, self-efficacy, self-regulation or self-directed learning, responsible learning, learner's attitudes and beliefs toward language acquisition, learner's intellectual character and learning strategies. The notions of learner readiness are often integrated and intertwined with learner autonomy and self-regulated learning when used to define the process in which learners are able to actively and effectively control and monitor their motivation, cognition and behaviors and successfully complete the target academic tasks (Blidi, 2017; Kuhn & Cavana, 2012; Palfreyman & Smith, 2003; Zimmerman, 2011).

Learner Readiness in Various Aspects

In general context, learner readiness is often used to define the ability of a learner to acquire knowledge and initiate in behavior change which lead to effective and successful learning outcomes. In terms of educational policies and implementation, learner readiness is closely related to early childhood education and school readiness as it refers the capacity to engage actively in the learning process. It suggests that for young learners to benefit from educational interventions at school, they must be constantly and always ready and at their fullest potential to learn. Factors that can and may pose as threats to successful learning outcomes include poor health, malnutrition, and emotional instability or distress as well as other physical, social, economic and environmental ills such as prenatal exposure to drugs and other toxic substance; child abuse and neglect; unsafe communities; and family instability and dysfunction (Copple, Deich, Brush, & Hofferth, 1993).

Another prominent proposition that cannot be neglected in any discussion of learner readiness is the disposition for learning- a characteristic that individuals should have or already acquired before the start of any learning situation if optimal benefits are expected for the time and effort invested. This includes some dominant constructs, namely: a desire to learn; a positive attitude toward the learning situation; a willingness to make the investment of time and effort that is necessary for learning, the ability to persevere, an understanding of the importance and value of learning (Buckingham Shum & Deakin Crick, 2012; Perkins & Tishman, 2001; Tishman & Perkins, 1993). Though Buckingham Shum & Deakin Crick (2012) contended that the term disposition may be “imprecise” when discussed in theory or practice, they agreed that it was indeed associated with the enduring tendency to behave in a particular way and the individual’s motivation, affect, valuing and cognitive resources.

Furthermore, there are those proponents of desirable characteristics of effective learners which overlap with the notions of learning readiness. They contend that there are four characteristics that a learner should possess in order to learn effectively- particularly in classroom setting: disposition for learning, adequate cognitive functioning, adequate knowledge base for the content being presented and adequate study skills and strategies (Falik & Feuerstein, 1993). However, there is no guarantee that learning will take place -even when these four characteristics are accessible. Meaningful learning is not likely to take place unless the circumstances in which the individual finds himself/herself make it possible for the individual to apply them. All these extraneous factors included in these "circumstances" could be personal situations –the learner’s emotional or physical state, geographic location, curriculum offerings, quality of instruction – just to name a few.

We cannot discuss learner readiness in the context of English language education without mentioning some of the significant propositions relevant to the analysis of language acquisition – language learning strategies (Oxford, 1990) and learner personality traits (Chamorro-Premuzic, Furnham, Dissou, & Heaven, 2005; Furnham, Chamorro-Premuzic, & McDougall, 2003; Oxford, 1990). The factors often included in language learning studies include such capacities on information processing, affective quality, learning experienced, and the learners’ philosophy of learning- how they view and approach the learning process. Oxford (1990) proposed the system for the classification of language learning strategies as direct and indirect with 6 subgroups including memory, cognitive, compensation, metacognitive, affective and social strategies. The direct strategies are concerned with how learners employ their mental linkages and sensory learning skills as well as how they apply their communication and critical thinking skills. For the indirect strategies, learners are supposed to stay focused and plan their learning while keeping their anxiety under control. In addition, they learn to respond and cooperate with others while staying encouraged themselves and showing empathy for others.

Based on these study findings, it is suggested that these important aspects of the factors can be identified effectively and timely when appropriate tools are employed to determine the mood or affective state of the learners. In addition, it is of great use to probe into their prior knowledge on the domain subject areas, their learning experiences and responses to the new information being introduced.

There is considerable evidence supporting the proposition that personality variables influence how learner effectively learn a second language. In these studies, personality traits, including extroversion, assertiveness, emotional stability, and combinations of personality tendencies, are identified and found to be correlated to successful language learning (Carrell, Prince & Astika, 1996; Costa & McCrae, 1985).

Certain warnings are pointed out in regards to the most common mistake we as teachers often make is "information overload." As we are usually concerned with the time constraints, curriculum coverage, extracurricular activities and assessment results, we often ignore the fact that the human capacity to process information is limited. Lesson planning and instruction should be made to fit the learner's capacity. Extensive and unrealistic challenges may instead cause unnecessary stress and demotivation. When teaching style is adjusted to better fit individual variations, teachers will then be able maximize their impact as educators. In their studies (Costa & McCrae, 1985; Furnham et al, 2003; Marcela, 2015), they reported that the use of surveys of learners- prior to the start of instruction will provide teachers with the directions to better design and plan teaching strategies, activities, pace and the development of teaching materials which in return ensure higher possibility of the learners achieving the learning objectives. These notions are confirmed to work with all types of learners – regardless of their age or developmental stages and the subject areas- including language learning.

Evidence from these study findings all suggests that language performance is related to language learning strategies and that strategies can be taught. Most confirm that there was a positive correlation between strategy use and academic proficiency. Findings in different studies may vary and prove that some strategies work better or are negatively correlated than others while others may present similar or contradictory results of the same strategies when employed by learners of varied competency. However, almost all of them agreed that there was a significant relationship between strategy use and language proficiency. The implication of these studies is that we can raise levels of proficiency by teaching these strategies. These studies may not have shown a clear causality in any direction between language proficiency and strategy use; however, it can be logically concluded that there are significant relationships between the two.

Self-regulated Learning for Learner Readiness

Zimmerman (1990) refers to self-regulated learning strategies as both actions and processes which are directed at the acquisition of target information or skills. These strategies are related to how the learners perceive the relevant agency, purpose and instrumentality involved in their learning processes. It is believed that most learners employ self-regulation to a certain degree. Zimmerman (1990) suggested that there are specific traits among self-regulated learners, namely: their awareness of strategic relations between regulatory processes or responses and learning outcomes and their use of the said strategies to reach their academic goals.

Numerous studies have been conducted to identify the degrees of self-regulated learning and readiness among the learners at various levels across majors, year, and even gender. With all study limitations taken into consideration, the findings vary – significantly in some areas and factors - but they do share some common ground findings. They confirm that regardless of the learning strategies employed, self-regulation can be taught which means that

learners can learn to control their behaviors and monitor their learning to improve their learning performance (Boekaerts & Corno, 2005; Cazan, 2013; Zimmerman, 1990).

How to Ensure Learner Readiness and Foster Self-regulated Learning

The following are some useful suggestions with detailed plans and points for considerations that may help to ensure learner readiness and foster self-regulated learning.

Before Teaching: Use of a survey questionnaire to collect data for learner profiling.

Prior to the start of any educational interventions, it is beneficial to employ a survey to gather information about the learners. With the use of a survey questionnaire, specifically designed for particular learning objectives and classroom context, necessary information about the learners -as individuals and a group- can be drawn to help in profiling and better understanding of the learners' needs, interests, preferences, perceptions on learning strategies and personal and professional goals. In addition, the questions which include items on how they approach language learning and they develop language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) can create the awareness and inform them of effective language learning strategies and suggestions on skill development. The collected data upon reflection can be used to improve the course contents, class activities, assessment criteria and adjust the instructional approaches to enhance their potential for success in the course and study goals. Moreover, this survey can serve as a substantial communication tool between and among learners, teachers and administrators on the importance of learner readiness and hidden curriculum objectives. Useful information can be used for curriculum development projects, discussion topics for teacher induction and training, input for textbook revision plans and assessment material development.

Special considerations should be taken on how to administer the survey with clear purposes and explanations for all concerned. Learners must be clear about what to expect and what is expected from their participation and teachers should take precautions in their interpretation of the data. The language used in the survey should be simple and pose no negative impression or suggest any biases on learner differences while adequate time should be provided for well-thought out responses.

While Teaching: Modeling, Explaining and Interacting

Every opportunity possible, directly or indirectly, learners should be exposed to effective learning strategies and encouraged to reflect on their own. If possible, open discussions and modeling of practical learning strategies with alternative approaches should be included in the introduction session before a new unit of learning is started. A case study approach can help learners adopt new and more constructive strategies and adapt them as their own. Explanation on the importance of learner readiness in relation to their learning strategies and autonomy should be clear and regularly explored. Interaction between and among learners with the focus on the learning processes and goals are also crucial in this stage. Plenty of opportunities should be created for peer interaction to help learners discuss, evaluate and reflect on their learning experiences and performance while they focus on the successful completion of the assigned tasks.

Special considerations should be taken on how and whether the learners are capable of self-reflection and self-assessment. They should have thorough understanding and clear guidance on how to reflect on the choices they make and the goals they set in their learning process. Without proper explanation on cognitive and affective factors contributing to their chosen learning strategies and the impact on their learning performance, it will be difficult for some to realize the correlation and benefit from the opportunities provided. For instance,

some learners may greatly benefit from the discussion on which reading strategies are more effective when they are looking for specific information in a text. Many learners should be made aware that they can work on their notes more effectively when they are physically fit and emotionally ready. In order to ensure that the time and efforts spent on peer interaction is well invested and yield satisfactory results, learners should be trained on how to effectively and constructively share information and debate on issues without causing conflicts among themselves.

After Teaching: Feedback

We often invest a tremendous amount of time, effort and valuable resources on assessment but pay little attention on the most beneficial part of all assessment activities – the feedback. Learners should be informed and given opportunities to investigate and improve their learning strategies, not just their grades. They can monitor and evaluate their own learning processes and develop self-regulation through their reflection and constructive feedback from both their teachers and peers. Unfortunately, the skills in conducting objective performance evaluation, communicating results from observation and providing useful feedback on strategy improvement are not innate or automatically developed over years of classroom experience. However, they can be taught and should be taught. Teachers are responsible for the training of these skills and creating the classroom environment where feedback is expected and deemed as an essential part of teaching and learning. Positive and constructive feedback- formal or informal- must be encouraged and supported.

Special considerations should be taken on the use of uniformed feedback due to large class size. Feedback that is vague and impersonal may not bring forth any improvement or learning opportunities for learners. Discussions on common misconceptions and how to correct them, particularly on the learning processes and not the outcomes, should be regularly conducted and meaningful conclusions should be made toward the end of the instruction session for further reflection and future improvement.

Conclusion

It is never too late to realize that we may not clearly understand what we have been doing or are doing. What is truly regretful is that we choose to do nothing once we realize it. Changes require courage and determination to yield meaningful outcomes. It is advisable to start making plans for any changes toward better learner readiness by taking a small step and aiming for a great leap in the future. As Zimmerman (1990) pointed out that self-regulated learners possess some distinctive qualities as these learners are capable of selecting, organizing and creating favorable learning environments for themselves and even make plans and gain control over their own academic success. Though the development of learner readiness, teachers are reaching out and paving way for their learner empowerment and autonomy.

About the Author

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