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SELF-REFLECTING JOURNALS AS A METACOGNITIVE TOOL TO ENCOURAGE GREATER LEARNER AUTONOMY – ON THE EXAMPLE OF EAP STUDENTS

By three methods we may learn wisdom: First, by reflection, which is noblest; second is by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

Confucius 孔子 (551 BC – 479 BC)

Abstract: This article focuses on the use of self-reflective journaling as a meta-cognitive tool for enhancing the learner's autonomy in pre-sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses. It begins by reviewing the literature on language learning strategies, with a particular focus on meta-cognitive strategies. Self-reflection is presented as one of those strategies, which should be implemented in the learning process. Later in the article, several fragments from authentic journal entries written by pre-sessional EAP students to illustrate how the practice of self-reflection can be used to improve learning outcomes.

The author advocates incorporating self-reflective journaling into the curriculum, as it provides students with opportunities to think critically, provides extra writing practice and enhances their learning experience. It also provides teachers with a valuable tool for tracking their students' progress and understanding of course material.

Keywords: self-reflective journaling, meta-cognitive strategies, language learning strategies, learner's autonomy, English for Academic Purposes (EAP), critical thinking

DZIENNIKI AUTOREFLEKSYJNE JAKO NARZĘDZIE METAKOGNITYWNE WSPIERAJĄCE WYŻSZĄ AUTONOMIĘ UCZENIA SIĘ – NA PRZYKŁADZIE STUDENTÓW JĘZYKA ANGIELSKIEGO DLA CELÓW AKADEMICKICH

Streszczenie: Celem artykułu jest ukazanie, jak pisemna autorefleksja, która należy do jednego z narzędzi metakognitywnych, może się przyczynić do poprawy autonomii ucznia języka

angielskiego na przykładzie studentów kursów akademickich w Szkocji. Artykuł rozpoczyna się od przeglądu literatury dotyczącej autonomii ucznia oraz strategii uczenia się języków obcych, ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem strategii metakognitywnych. Samorefleksja jest przedstawiona jako jedna ze strategii zalecanych do wprowadzenia do procesu uczenia się. W dalszej części zaprezentowano kilka fragmentów z autentycznych wpisów sporządzonych przez uczestników kursu języka angielskiego akademickiego na uniwersytecie Strathclyde w Szkocji.

Autorka artykułu zachęca do włączenia do programu nauczania praktyki autorefleksji, ponieważ zapewnia ona studentom możliwość krytycznego myślenia, rozwija umiejętności pisania, wzbogaca nadto ich doświadczenia związane z procesem uczenia się. Jest ona również wartościowym narzędziem dla nauczycieli, umożliwiającym śledzenie postępów studentów, a także ewaluację kursu.

Słowa kluczowe: autorefleksja, narzędzia metakognitywne, autonomia ucznia

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to illustrate how self-reflective journals kept by pre--sessional English for Academic Purposes (EAP) students, function as a useful metacognitive tool and help to develop learner autonomy. The article will begin with a section exploring the latter notion. Then, an overview of initial and more recent research into learning strategies will be presented. The subsequent part of the paper will focus on the theme of metacognition and metacognitive strategies, including self-reflective practice. Bridging presented theory and practice will be some excerpts from the students' journals, and finally, the paper will conclude with a proposal to introduce our JCJ students to self-reflective practice.

Initial research into learner autonomy

The word "autonomy" is derived from Ancient Greek; *auto* means "self" and *nomos*, which can be translated as "a rule" or "law, so the whole term refers to the independent decisions of a person and has been in use for centuries (Merriam--Webster, n.d.).

The concept of autonomy in language learning, however, has been present for much less longer.

According to Phil Benson (2011), its emergence is strongly connected with the socio-ideological context and the political climate of Europe at the end of the 1960s. He also relates that in 1971, the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project was established with its main aim of providing lifelong learning opportunities for adults across Europe. One of the documents in the project talks about: "the need to develop the individual's freedom by developing those abilities which will enable him to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society in which he lives" (Benson, 2011: 9). The project held that learners themselves

had the liberty to control the objectives, progress, and evaluation of the learning process.

The aforementioned project also involved establishing a research and practice center, which was created in France, and its founder, Yves Chalone is actually considered to be the father of autonomy in language learning. However, after his death, it has been Henri Holec who, until present, is among the most prominent authorities in the field of learner autonomy research and the one who advocated the shift from directed teaching to self-directed learning (Little, Dam, Legenhausen, 2017). According to Holec, an autonomous learner is one who has "the ability to take charge of his or her learning" (1981, as cited in: Little et al., 2017: 18). This was the initial definition that is probably well known to many teachers of English.

Contemporary perceptions

The notion of autonomy in language learning has been researched for over four decades; hence, it is only natural that the approach to it has evolved. It would be virtually impossible to summarise all the studies on the subject because they have been so vast and focused on its various aspects which included educational, psychological, and those in the field of applied linguistics. Yet, the following paragraph will mention the pieces of research which had the most impact on how language learner autonomy is viewed nowadays.

It is necessary to mention that the original definition of autonomy in language learning, formed by Holec, has been dissected and scrutinised over the years, which resulted in a number of modified or even contrasting views of the phenomenon.

One such is described by Little et al. (2017) in the work in which they present a case study, the results of which led the researchers to disagree with the statement that autonomy is not an innate condition and it is the teacher's task to present students with methods of becoming independent on their learning journey. The fore mentioned authors claim that choices, which can be described as autonomous are a part of human life since early childhood. At the same time, they sustain the original view that it is the responsibility of the teacher to "harness the students' pre-existing capacity for autonomous behaviour to the business of language learning" (Little et al., 2017: 34).

Another addition to the understanding of an autonomous language learner is advocated by a number of researchers (Ushioda, 2006; Benson, 2011; Little et al., 2017) who claim that only by interacting with other students and teachers, can the capacity for autonomous learning be increased. This notion is related to the theory of Higgs (1998, as cited in: Benson, 2011), who identified two further elements necessary in the process of becoming a successful independent learner, i.e. the environment and the task itself.

A cultural, or rather a socio-cultural perspective is yet another one discussed and researched over the years of examining the notion of language learning autonomy. Because of its origin, it has been perceived as possibly applicable only to the educational context of Western countries. It is not surprising because traditionally, students from certain regions such as China or the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) may not be familiar with the concept of taking responsibility for their own learning, owing to the societal norms of collectivism (Benson, 2011). Yet, a number of studies on language learner autonomy in those regions. demonstrated that students were very much attracted to the idea of being able to direct their own learning (Palfreyman, 2003). Naturally, the link between autonomy and culture is complex and multi-dimensional, but for the purpose of this article, only one aspect has been mentioned.

Also for the purpose of this article and moving forward with the discussion, it is necessary to mention that various scholars (Benson, 2011; Lamb, 2017; Little et al., 2017) agree that over the decades of research into the autonomy of a language learner, there become apparent strong connections with other themes present in the field of language education: teacher development, individual differences, motivation, and learning strategies.

Language learning strategies

The following part of this article will focus on the latter and will offer a brief summary of initial and more recent research on the concept.

In 1975, Joan Rubin published her article "What the 'Good Language Learner' Can Teach Us," and researchers in second language education agree that this might be the first time the term "language learning strategies" (LLS) was used. These were described as methods and techniques applied by a language learner in the process of studying (Rubin, 1975, as cited in: Oxford, 2017).

As much as the earliest research on LLS focused mainly on describing what specific behaviours characterised good learners, very soon the emphasis was put on the attempt to categorise the strategies. One of the taxonomies was offered by J. Michael O'Malley and Anna Uhl Chamot (1990) who distinguished among Metacognitive, Cognitive, and Social/Affective Strategies. The first ones include actions such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process, in other words controlling the process. Cognitive strategies can be defined as any mental processing of the new material, which helps to acquire, comprehend or retain it. The last category, according to the authors, is about collaborative learning, i.e. interacting with other learners in order to facilitate dealing with language tasks, and the affective aspect refers to minimising anxiety about the task or convincing oneself of future success (O'Malley, Chamot, 1990).

In the same year, a more detailed classification of LLS was that offered by Rebecca Oxford (1990). The author introduced new terms such as Compensation

Strategies, referring to the situations when despite the knowledge gaps, learners could still use the language. Another category called Memory (or Mnemonic) Strategies referred to any actions aiming at relating new and already possessed language knowledge, by the means of phrases, verses, or formulas. This technique is demonstrated by the author through this sentence: "Take CARE of your memory, and your memory will take CARE of you" – "CARE" functions here as an acronym for Creating Mental Linkages, Applying Images and sounds, Reviewing Well and Employing Actions, all of which are specific memory strategies.

When compared to O'Malley and Chamot (1990), Oxford also expands on the Affective Strategy using this charming phrase for one of the techniques, namely: "taking your emotional temperature" (Oxford, 1990: 17).

While mentioning the above publication, it is impossible not to give credit to the author for including in her book the Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL) a questionnaire devised to measure the application of LLS among language learners.

In almost half a century, a constantly growing number of research papers on LLS, have been exploring further both theoretical and practical facets of the phenomena. Mirosław Pawlak (2021) offers a very comprehensive account of the main findings over the years. There were discussions over the definition, and classification, and even there were critical voices promoting the view that the concept of LLS is erroneous. Their existence was actually doubted by Dörnyei (2005, as cited in: Pawlak, 2021) who detected several flaws in the construct, claiming that it was impossible to distinguish if a student was consciously applying certain techniques to facilitate the learning process, or simply working hard. Dörnyei (2005, as cited in: Pawlak, 2021) also talks about a paradigm shift and a change in terminology; the former including a focus on the process of using strategies rather than strategies themselves and the latter concerned with using the term "self-regulation" instead of "strategies." The above proposals were echoed in the more recent research on the topic and resulted in a new theory of Strategic Self-Regulation (Oxford, 2017, as cited in: Pawlak, 2021) which seems to be more inclusive than that of LLS.

Aside from the number of investigations concerned with the theoretical grounds of the concept, several scholars got interested in classroom-based research, testing various aspects of LLS being applied by students. Among many discoveries, one is particularly adequate to the further content of this article, namely that one variable influencing the choice of a given strategy or strategies by a language learner is his or her socio-cultural context (Chamot, 2005). In other words, a student from a society that values an individual will be more likely to pick those learning methods which will not include collaboration with other students.

While mentioning the major trends in LLS research, it is also necessary to mention that amidst the dispute over the definitions, classification, or effectiveness, scholars never seemed to question or doubt the role of the teacher in training students to be effective learners and users of the target language (Chamot, 2005;

Benson 2011; Lamb 2017). Although the degree to which a teacher should be involved, remains a topic of discussion.

As for the future of LLS research, a very interesting conclusion is drawn by Pawlak and Oxford (2018) who among the possible future lines on the inquiry into LLS, mention the use of strategies in technology-assisted learning as using new technologies may require new, revised repertoire of strategies. Another theme suggested for future exploration is the one that refers to the socioeconomic circumstances of learners which may determine the choice of strategies. Pawlak and Oxford also propose investigating LLS transferability in situations where more than one foreign language is learned. Ultimately the authors argue for the pedagogical orientation of future empirical studies; this is to say that they see value in any piece of research on LLS as long as its result will have some implications in the actual language classroom.

Metacognitive strategies and self-reflective practice

In order to advance to the clue of the article, it is necessary to devote now some space to metacognitive strategies, which have been but briefly mentioned in the previous section

Metacognition refers to "awareness of one's own cognitive processes, often involving a conscious attempt to control them" (APA, n.d.), and to put it more simply, it is thinking about one's thinking or learning. The definition of metacognitive strategies slightly varies among specialists in the field, and so Oxford (1990) suggests that these are actions aimed to coordinate the process of learning. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) draw attention to the necessity of distinguishing between metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive strategies and their definition of the latter notion talks about the pre-, during, and post-learning task actions, such as planning, monitoring, and self-evaluation respectively.

Throughout the years of research on LLS, metacognitive behaviours were given a considerable amount of attention, to the point when Anderson (2012: 172) asserted that "understanding and controlling cognitive processes may be one of the most essential skills that classroom teachers can develop in themselves and their students". With those words, he wished to underline the role of the teacher in raising metacognitive awareness. A similar view is expressed by Little et al. (2017) who stresses the fact that it is the primary goal of the teacher to be of assistance in helping his or her students to become efficient strategy users; he carries on by adding that prompting learners to reflect on their learning process important as it drives their motivation.

The value of reflection was known even to the ancient Chinese philosopher, Confucius, whose words have been chosen to begin this article. Many centuries later, the notion is still given a considerable amount of attention and remains being investigated, also as a tool for learners. There was even formulated

a Self-Regulated Learning theory (Zimmerman, 2011) which refers to three phases, namely Forethought, Performance, and Self-Reflection; all of which can be associated with a student's approach to a learning task.

The author of this theory describes the last phase as the moment when a student is contemplating his or her performance, also emotions associated with completing the learning task; this stage also includes reflection on the achieved learning goals (Zimmerman, 2011).

The importance of the ability to self-reflect has been also noticed by researchers in the field of Second or Foreign Language Acquisition (SLA/FLA). Several studies were carried out (Halbach, 2000; Platt, Brooks, 2002; Litzer, Bakieva, 2017, as cited in: Upton, Hirano, 2022) investigating the effectiveness of self-reflection. All the aforementioned academics associated this practice with an improved enjoyment of learning, boosted motivation, and better-developed learner confidence. Another study (Cavilla, 2017) also confirmed the link with students' motivation, but its author also commented on the importance of self-reflective practice as a transferable life skill that the student will take with him or her beyond his education period.

Practical applications

The final section of this article will focus on the actual examples of self-reflective journal entries produced by pre-sessional EAP students; however, this also requires a short theoretical introduction. Russell Rogers (2001) offers an exhaustive analysis of the concept of reflective practice in higher education, highlighting a number of benefits it can bring both to students and teachers. One of such is "promoting resiliency and resourcefulness in the face of life's dynamic challenges" (Rogers, 2001: 55). Therefore the author can see the value of self-reflection not only in the academic, but also professional and personal paths of students. This belief is also shared by David Nicol (2010) who distinguishes certain attributes which should be represented by graduate students. Academical excellence is one of them and within its descriptors, one can find critical thinking and an aptitude for self-regulated learning, both of which can be exercised through the practice of self-reflection. Another component of academic excellence is developing writing (Nicol, 2010) therefore, it is only fair that self-reflective journals have been included as an assignment on academic writing modules on pre-sessional courses.

For the readers who are unfamiliar with the term, it is necessary to include some explanation of what those courses are on the example of Strathclyde University, Glasgow, Scotland. Every year, a considerable number of international students wish to enroll in a number of degree courses offered by the institution, and one of the prerequisites, set not by the university, but by the UK Visa and Immigration Authority (n.d.), is a certain level of English language proficiency. Sometimes students do not meet the language requirements, yet it does not

disqualify them from entering the desired course and they are granted, what is called a conditional offer. A conditional offer issued by the university, guarantees the student a place on a programme, once the condition of improving the level of English language proficiency is met. Pre-sessional EAP courses have been designed with this type of student in mind. They vary in length from twelve to eight weeks. Shorter courses of four weeks are also offered, but only students with an unconditional offer from the university can attend them.

In the aforementioned university, throughout the module of Written Literacy, students work towards the final assignment of a 1500-word secondary research paper; they can choose any topic related to their future degree programme. As the course progresses, its attendees are offered a formative assessment of the elements of their writing portfolio; namely, an annotated bibliography, a synopsis, and the first draft of the research paper. When the course comes to its end, students have to submit the final version of their essay along with a minimum 250-word self--reflective journal entry which is not formally assessed, but obligatory.

Earlier in the article, I mentioned the results of studies that deal with a misconception of non-Western students rejecting the idea of being an autonomous language learner. These results are in fact well aligned with my own experience with pre-sessional EAP students, most of whom come from China and MENA regions and who successfully embrace the idea of becoming more autonomous learners. One element of facilitating this process is introducing the students to the idea of self-reflective journals. Now I will take the liberty of quoting some fragments of my students' entries.

> I have already been in the pre-sessional English course for more than two weeks, during this period, I learned many useful techniques that can bring me a lot of benefits when having an academic conversation with my teachers and colleagues, especially in academic writing field […]. I think that now I fully understand the importance of the class we are taking right now […]. To learn efficiently means we need to keep pace with the teaching process carried by our teachers, forging our own thinking towards the knowledge we have learned, being well prepared and forming a clear logic path before carrying any academic projects.

This is a fragment from a reflection of one of the best students in my group, written only two weeks into the programme. I believe it clearly illustrates that he fully embraced the idea of self-reflective practice.

> In this course, I learned the best ways to write a final project research. In general, this model contains details that help me develop all the required skills and critical analysis. In addition, I learned to focus and identify the important and required points in each skill, especially listening with taking notes. But I am slow in developing my reading skill and solving questions, especially with the long paragraphs and the new terms for me. […] I also note from my experience the need to apply all lessons on a daily basis, which helps in understanding the curriculum and the

development of our language. Anyways I need more daily exercises to develop my knowledge like making a group discussion with my classmates […].

My next steps are to maintain the methods and skills that I followed in this course by keep practicing regularly so I will improve my level in English skills.

This student was very ambitious and conscientious and even if his English is not flawless, the above fragment gives the evidence of meta-cognitive reflection, where the person analyses his own learning process.
Here is another extract:

When I started to prepare for my essay, I did four steps […]. I learned a lot during this vital process. I never paid more attention to sources than this time and I learned how to paraphrase and summarise these sources. What is more, I also learned how to use linking words to make my essay flow. However, how to make general to specific and how to correctly use the reference I found still need my practice. After I finished my essay, I knew that I should write a complete and specific thesis statement and use technique of paraphrasing, summarising, synthesising and try to use linking words to make the essay flow. […]

My next step is to review the techniques I learned during these days and try to polish my essay by using them and check if I am already able to use them.

This student followed relatively closely the Rolfe et al. (2001) reflection model, which I chose to present to the group, prior to the practice. Among other frameworks which emerged over the years, this one appears to be very basic, yet in reality, it can provide a lot of information. The model comes with three stages and three questions: the first question is "what?" and this stage requires that the situation subjected to the analysis be described – in this case, the experience of attending a pre-sessional EAP course. The next step is to provide an answer to "so what?": which embraces the meaning of that situation, perhaps the consequences, emotions associated with it, or steps taken in the process. In the final stage, a question of "now what?" needs to be asked and this section refers to the future steps which should be taken by the person, an action plan devised to improve the practice and learn from the initial experience. It is true that not all the students address all three questions or address them profoundly; nevertheless, I truly believe that it is still a really useful experience contributing to the achievement of higher learner autonomy.

Conclusion

To conclude, the purpose of this article was to present some examples of self-reflective journal entries, written by pre-sessional EAP students, as an example

of a meta-cognitive tool that can enhance the learner autonomy. Initial paragraphs offered a review of literature on the subject, yet the number of publications is truly profound; therefore only a limited number of authors was reviewed. The subsequent paragraphs discussed, also, in brief, the notion of language learning strategies, particularly those named as meta-cognitive. The practice of self-reflection is one representation of metacognitive strategies, thus it was the focus of subsequent sections. With all the theories supporting the application of self-reflective practice in HE, several fragments of authentic journal entries produced by my students were presented.

In my final words, I would like to encourage introducing our JCJ students to this self-evaluative tool. Apart from subtle writing practice, it creates more opportunities for them to think critically, and also enhances their learning experience.

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