

‘Multilingual Mindsets’ with learning diaries: a New Perspective for Student Transition into Higher Education

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Introduction

Transitions are under theorised (Gale and Parker, 2014), with research examination “relying on ‘taken-for-granted’ notions of transition” (Gale and Parker, 2014:734) and with ‘no agreed-upon definition of what constitutes a transition’ (Gale and Parker, 2014:736, citing Ecclestone, Biesta, and Hughes, 2009:5). But it is accepted that student transition into and through Higher Education (HE) is related to the enhancement of academic skills and the consolidation of teaching and learning (Jin and Cortazzi, 2013). Our project aimed to explore the metalinguistic awareness of students who were learning Spanish at Dundee University. We hoped to promote a new perspective for student transition, based on multilingual pedagogies (Canagarajah, 2011).

Aims and Objectives of the Study

Our study aimed to explore the metalinguistic awareness of students who learn Spanish as a part-time foreign language activity in a Scottish university. In order to analyse metalinguistic awareness, it is important to explore how students are experiencing the procedure of language learning and language analysis. Previous research by scholars (Simard et al., 2007) in the field demonstrated that journal writing activity promoted verbalisations about the target language and these verbalisations led to a further language awareness. Another study (Baiget et al., 1997) emphasised the importance of explicit reflection upon the target language as a source of increased proficiency and fluency. This struck us as the reflection which might take place in writing a learning diary. A large body of research has documented the value of reflective practices, and, especially, keeping a diary in the learning to teach process in teacher education (see Akbari, 2007) but little research has been done to explore the metalinguistic awareness of students themselves in their use of a learning diary as a tool, or to examine how they approach the development of their metalinguistic awareness, inside and outside the classroom, and how that might help them in their transition process.

Findings

In their learning diaries, students expressed language analytic ability by identifying common language errors that English speakers make in Spanish, describing how the language works in Spanish, as well as in English, and verbalizing grammatical rules that apply in both languages. They acknowledged increasing cultural awareness by reflecting on taught cultural topics.

In the focus group interview, students highlighted the importance of their learning diaries in improving both their knowledge and understanding of their mother tongue, either English or another and Spanish “comparing the languages and trying to find that, a specific translation, how to say in English, I think it is very good”. They highlighted the importance of having a learning diary as a tool for reflection on their learning. They considered the learning diary useful as “it is more about awareness, it makes you to notice things”. Students also mentioned the importance of ownership of their work, and strengthening of team spirit: “I like the fact that you are able to relax in class and write down what you have learnt, and it is quiet and everybody is doing the same thing, you can get peace of mind when you write it”.

What is Metalinguistic Awareness?

In universities, the student population is usually very diverse in terms of many things, including their language knowledge and use. Metalinguistic awareness is a first requirement for understanding how students are experiencing the procedure of language learning and language analysis (Farrell, 2007). Metalinguistic awareness is defined as the ability of language learners to base their knowledge of a second, or further language on prior language knowledge, and on learning experience gained from their contact with more or less sophisticated language learning input (Herdina and Jessner, 2002). Because of the dominance of the communicative approach in language classrooms metalinguistic awareness and reflection have, unfortunately, received limited attention until recently (Simard et al., 2007).

Methodology

Learning diaries were introduced to classroom practice as a task for the end of each language input. These learning diaries were used by students of Spanish in one evening class. They wrote about their own learning experiences and the similarities and differences between Spanish and their own mother tongue which they had seen. The class constituted 15 university students, learners of Spanish as a foreign language, with mixed language background.

Students were requested to fill in their learning diary for every class time at the end of each lesson. They had to answer two questions: what they had learnt in the lesson, and what were differences and similarities between their L1, if it is English, (or an L2 if English is not their L1) and Spanish. After the designated period with the learning diaries, a focus group interview was also arranged to follow. During the group interview semi-structured questions were asked in order to explore student opinions about the impact of a learning diary on their performance and language confidence.

Conclusion

The findings illustrated that writing about their own learning experiences helped students to enhance their academic skills, be more aware of their learning attitudes, and be more open to others. Those factors produce a more positive academic transition.

The study hopes to continue, providing a space where journaling can be used as a tool for facilitating university student transition. Focusing on metalinguistic awareness, no matter what the course, increases students’ sensitivity and attention to linguistic and cultural diversity, an important finding since both exist as factors in most HE transitions we can think about. The ‘multilingual mindset’ promoted by learning diaries can, we believe, a new and effective tool to theorise and manage all the student transitions around Higher Education.

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