

Learning Strategies in Foreign Language Departments at the University of Guilan in Iran

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Abstract

This research paper examined the learning strategies in the foreign language departments at the University of Guilan in Iran. Questionnaires were distributed among 125 foreign language students in the Faculty of Humanities. Also a semi-structured interview was inducted to obtain information about the deep and surface learning. Results revealed that students in foreign departments have considered 81% of learning strategy is surface learning, academic staff members with 59% have more effect on deep learning, English Language with 66% has more deep learning, Arab Language with 56% has more surface learning. The most important factor in deep learning is evaluation of the lesson content with 60%, and memorizing the lesson content with 46% in surface learning. Also, there were no significant differences between students learning strategies with respect to gender, age, and departments.

Keywords: deep learning, surface learning, learning strategies, foreign language

INTRODUCTION

Several definitions of the concepts of learning have been presented. According to Shabani (1997) learning is defined as gaining new intuitions or changing previous intuitions. Hillgard et al. (1975) also define learning as an almost permanent change of behavior which has been gained through previous experiences. Seif (1985) has introduced learning as some permanent change of learner's potential behaviors providing that this change has been affected by the means of experiencing not as a result of other factors such as exhaustion, narcotic drug usage and changes and effects due to maturity have been accented. Therefore, Learning isn't only the transference and presentation of subjects by the instructor and the learner receiving those subjects rather it is slightly a permanent flow that has the change of behavior as a result. Gorges and Kandler (2011) found that adults' learn differently because they relate differently to the learning tasks, depending on their goals, mediated by their beliefs and expectancies towards the learning environment, the institutional requirements and the perceived self-efficiency measurement.

Considering the quality improvement in learning requires the existence of a clear definition from the quality of learning. Gibbs (1992) defines the quality in a format of phrases such as growth of mental and intellectual Capabilities, growth in judgment strength, consolidating the case solving skills, the ability of considering matter's inner relations and understanding subjects in a vast prospect. These objectives must help to improve research morality, developing creative methods, logical judgment, criticizing point of view and self-consciousness in learners so by considering these instances a comparative level of assurance about realizing them is resulted. Of course, only considering the definition of quality doesn't assure learning since despite the definition of quality was proposed as an ambiguous problem in analyzing and reviewing in educational institutes, but practically this factor isn't that determinant. It sounds like that since through studying general methods of learning we can measure quality of learning's instances in a better way and more practical way, paying more attention to general methods of learning can certainly picture the position in learning.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are some definitions for the two different learning methods. In the surface learning, learners reduce the value of things that should be learned in the form of particular concepts and memorize them in the form of irrelevant concepts. Their duties in learning process are to increase and remember the course materials within the specific time in the future, for example in the examination time. In fact, the important problem in this method is, learners are permanently on the track of remembering that how they should remember this subject or that subject. But in the deep learning method, learners try to get through making concept, making meaning and finding the major ideas of context. In this process, thinking and finding the relations among the elements and their tasks are fundamental matters. In fact, the important point in this method is that learners are on the track of thinking and finding the new ideas, that is, they try to find the principles and bases of ideas, views and thinking about the generality of a phenomenon and the elements of its formation.

Surface and deep approaches to learning are not unalterable behaviors, though they may be influenced by personal characteristics such as ability (Biggs, 1987). However, using one or the other approach is also affected in part by the learning task itself and the conditions under which the task is performed (Ramsden, 2003). Thus, students may use both surface and deep approaches at different points in their studies. Although, students may adopt different approaches in different situations, the general tendency is to adopt a particular approach and stick with it (Entwistle, 1981). In addition, the learning context seems to have a substantial effect on how students approach learning tasks (Zeegers, 2001).

When the learners act their learning tasks, the methods of doing this task, are different. Probably every teacher has experiences that some of the learners suppose that everything which is presented during the teaching should be rendered very well in the

form of reports and particular activities or examination. But some teachers try to represent their analyses and perspectives from under studying subject and try to develop and improve those cases. As Safavi (1993) emphasized, when knowledge and skill are not used, gradually will be forgotten and teacher should provide conditions that learners could apply their learned materials. In the first step, this point might draws attention that these two groups of learners are different with regard to mental abilities and capabilities. For this reason deal differently with learning tasks, in principles and in purposes is very important.

Deep learning implies the demonstration of higher order thinking skills such as synthesis and evaluation, and a personal commitment to learn the material, not merely learning for the sake of a passing grade (Ramsden, 2003; Tagg, 2003). Surface learning, on the other hand, is associated more with rote learning and the desire to earn a passing grade (Draper, 2009). Students who use a surface learning strategy are trying to avoid failure with the minimum amount of effort and involvement (Cano, 2007). Draper (2009) expanded upon this idea by concluding that shallow learners understand the material correctly, but simply do not possess the connections between concepts that deep learners do. Deep learners can transfer the learned concepts to a variety of situations thereby creating a denser matrix of connections within their knowledge and understanding. Therefore, the student's motive is integral to whether he or she engages in deep or surface learning strategies.

Quality of learning

Definition of quality is recognized as the task of assessing the nature quantity and quality of teaching is a highly complex activity. Having attention to the improvement of quality in learning requires the existence of a clear definition from quality of learning. Joyce and et al. (2005) believe that the quality of learning can be defined as a change in activities and pervasive interactions and as a result involving with a learning experience will be considered. Gibbs (1992) defines the quality in a format of phrases such as growth of mental and intellectual capabilities, growth in judgment strength, consolidating the case solving skills, the ability of considering matter's inner relations and understanding subjects in a vast prospect. These objectives must help to improve research morality, developing creative methods, logical judgment, criticizing point of view and self-consciousness in learners so by considering these instances a comparative level of assurance about realizing them is resulted. Of course, only considering the definition of quality doesn't assure learning since despite the definition of quality was proposed as an ambiguous problem in analyzing and reviewing in educational institutes, but practically this factor isn't that determinant. It sounds like that since through studying general methods of learning we can measure quality of learning's instances in a better way and more practical way, paying more attention to general methods of learning can certainly picture the position in learning.

According to the findings of Chang and Chang (2012), learning effectiveness and satisfaction appears strongly correlated with learning motivation, emphasizing the importance that teachers must place on the educational efforts that are aiming to meet the specific needs of learners. The recent approaches to student satisfaction relate to research on teamwork, team performance and collaborative learning (Ku, Wei Tseng & Akarasriworn, 2013).

Authors who have researched learning effectiveness (Khat, 2013) agree on the complex nature and multifaceted aspect of it, mentioning a number of factors that pertain to the construct. Although the number of factors involved in the measurement may vary, researchers focus on elements pertaining to the educational environment, services, providers, outcomes, facilities and individual variables. In a study conducted on the subject (Topal & Tomozi, 2014).

Surface and deep learning approaches

According to Joyce et al. (2005) Quality learning can be defined as changes in learners' actions and interactions that take place as a result of being fully engaged in a quality learning experience. While the learners are active taking out their duties, their methods used to do this are different. Probably every teacher has experienced that some learners are eager to deliver what they have learned throughout the teaching process in a report or a special activity format or even in exams but some others try to present their analysis and prospects of the studied subject and make effort in order to expand and extol them. Related to this, they start performing special activities such as presenting scientific discussions or preparing analytical and scientific reports which this is done with or without considering exam mark and result. As Safavi (1993) emphasizes on a skill and knowledge that isn't used starts to get forgotten throughout time and the teacher must accumulate situations where learners can use what they've learned.

In the first stage this point appears that these two groups of learners are different in intellectual abilities and capabilities and this is why they act differently towards their duties but actually the difference between objectives appears more, therefore these two groups of learners mentioned earlier have totally different objectives which are explained as learning surface and deep methods. Marten and Saljo (1976) have determined following definitions for this two learning methods: in the surface learning method, learners degrade the value of what has to be learned in a special intelligible format and memorize them in an intelligible irrelevant format. Their duty in the process of learning is increasing and remembering course subjects in particular time in the future for instance exam times. In fact the main problem here in this method is that learners must frequently remind themselves of which subject they should remember.

But in the deep learning method, learners try to begin conceptualizing and finding fundamental ideas of a text. In this process, thinking and finding relations between parts and tasks are an important issue. In fact, the important note in this method is that learners are after thinking and finding new ideas, therefore, they are trying to find the

principals and basis of the ideas and point of views and to think about the generality of a phenomenon and its constitutive parts. According to Kember and Xlyn (1994), these days the words “deep” and “surface” are used truly for describing learning methods. Because in the surface method, the learner tries to memorize the concepts and contents of the course which is probably related to the exam but in the deep learning method, the learner concentrates to understand the meaning and concepts with great attention and enthusiasm.

The Scotland University Committee (1992) believes that in the surface method, the goal is to increase the content value, the objective is to understand them, the ideas and information are transferred passive manner, a strong and serious interaction doesn't take place, the concentration is only on the exam's material and contents, the ideas don't relate to knowledge and scientific experience, the objectives and learning strategies are not considered, the fundamentals of an organization are not used for combining ideas and generally the concepts and methods are memorized and only the result of the exam is logically discussable. But in the deep method the understanding of the concepts is proposed, ideas and information are transferred actively.

A strong and serious interaction takes place, the concentration is not only on the exam's material and contents, the ideas relate to knowledge and scientific experience, the objectives and learning strategies are considered, the fundamentals of an organization are used for combining ideas and generally the concepts and methods are understood and the results of the exam are not logically discussable which means that the marks of the exam can be somewhat the effect of understanding. Routh and James (1984) began to propose a question about the surface and deep methods and categorized the results after analyzing the answers of the learners. Their question is that how do learners have to start reading a text.

The learners who considered the surface approach answered similar to the ones below:

- I start reading until I finish the text.
- I try to memorize the contents as far as I can.
- I continue reading rapidly.

The Learners who considered the deep approach answered similar to the ones below:

- I try to obtain the fundamentals and basis of the presented ideas.
- I try to find the main points of the text.
- I think about this issue that who has the writer divided the different aspects of the discussion.

So the learners who considered the deep approach tried to extract the main ideas and concepts of the studied text while the other group concentrated on the appearance of the text.

In the surface approach learners memorize the contents. This means that they his duty is to memorize this content for a particular time like an exam. But in the deep method the learner tries to conceptualize whatever he learns and analysis the concepts and ideas of a text. Through this he gets involved with particular activities such as thinking, finding relations between the parts of a whole and also studying ideas. Marten and Saljo (1984) categorize these two kinds as surface learning and deep learning.

The surface approach is possibly used in smaller educational institutions and is more usual in weaker learners or new learners. But in most of the educational systems especially high-grade education and nearly in all levels and sections it is presented as a fundamental issue and has been the reason of deviation from main objectives in some cases. As Ramsden (1983) emphasizes on, the surface approach is presented in all majors and educational institutes of Great Britain and Australia. Gibbs (1992) has mentioned the surface approach as a plague and doesn't recommend it as a successful method. He also believes that most of the students can adapt to both methods. Estwistle and Tait (1990) believe that considering surface and deep learning methods creates different view of an acceptable tuition. In a way that with the surface method they consider a close and non-interactive tuition as an acceptable method and students with a deep learning method tend to have more interest in open tuition with an interactive, discussing and associative approach. Current debates regarding learning optimization are increasingly focused on influence on performance. Namely on the attitude and motivational aspects involved in the learning process, which have a holistic and inter-determined approach, in the sense of teacher and student approaches (Ramsden, 2003).

Effective learning

Learning effectiveness and satisfaction can be defined as the level of joy a person experiences when learning, being placed first of the two goals adult students are trying to achieve by joining learning activities, the second pertaining to the learning outcomes (Chang & Chang, 2012). According to Brown's point of view (1998) teaching is a multidimensional effort including notifying, asking questions and finding answers, explaining, listening, encouraging and other sets of activities similar to the ones mentioned. Gage (1998) believes that tuition is the scientific usage of educational and tuition concepts and theories in the process of education in order to gain tuition skills and knowledge and adequacy and practical competency.

Biggs (1989) considers four key concepts which are learner's motive, activities and interactions and organized contents related to the effectiveness of tuition. Because of the effect of these factors in the surface and deep learning methods we will study them briefly. Deep learning has a close relation with the factors mentioned above. In fact, if a positive motive field like encouragement is provide, the learning will process will be deep and stress and doubt and mendacious external motives as a negative motive field can provide a surface learning.

A learner being active is one of the main points in the process of learning and an effective tuition. In fact, if a learner acts actively in a learning environment, a logical relation between past learning and a new concept begins appear. Creative feedbacks start to shape and the relation between learner and teacher gets more logical. It is necessary to point out that only taking out activities in the process of teaching is not enough but the activities should be with an objective and according a program.

Related to interaction, the importance of discussion in learning in tuition is considered. Especially in new tuition methods like discussion methods, learners have the chance to state their ideas and put them under judgment. Nevertheless, the interaction takes place in different figures such as using seminar method for tuition, grouping learners and providing a chance for them to ask questions and discuss their matters.

Finally, considering present knowledge and past experiences of the learners has an important role in the conceptualization of subjects and concepts. The relation between subjects and different contents is one of the issues that have been discussed in a horizontal and vertical format in study planning in the process of learning and teaching. It is obvious that if the course contents is taught visually and is broke down into different parts of a defined whole and is related to the contents of a previous course or its subjects presented in a section or a period, it will be more effective to the learning process and will deepen the teaching process. But the question is whether having knowledge of the importance or instances of the deep learning method is enough to make it practical or not? Don't we need to practically enter the deep learning method category? It seems like the answer to these questions has to consider the approaches to deep learning methods so that what is presented in the format of importance and instances will be more be more practical and tangible in the process of learning.

It seems that the incomplete understanding of some learners from the fundamentals of learning and tuition stops them from doing their learning tasks and duties in the deep learning method. Some of these learners imagine that the teacher has to do everything and make all the decisions. Select the course subject, present the course with full control on class, design the exam questions, direct the students towards what they should and shouldn't do, which means that all that has to be taught and the results of learning should be completely briefed by the teacher.

Some other learners think that despite having a teacher who controls all the learning processes, and provides all course contents, and supports the students throughout their problems, other duties such as thinking and planning in the learning activities, judging learning results and the processes being pleasing or not, taking part in the tuition process is more likely to be related to the students. This is an open concept of tuition, dividing the tasks between the teacher and the students and finally derives the tuition into a direction where tuition is done in an interactional manner.

So close tuition is nearly done exclusively by the teacher and is more comparison with this concept of tuition, increasing knowledge and memorizing. Whereas open tuition is

more close to this concept of learning which is using conceptualization and understanding the reality and using facts and methods. As a result we can say that in close tuition the teacher selects the contents of the courses and presents and evaluates the course, in this case the concept of learning is defined as increasing the knowledge and memorizing. But in the open tuition method the activities of the learner are independent and the teacher only supports and helps them in the learning process. In this method using facts and conceptualization methods and understanding the reality of the course are considered as learning.

One of the issues that have attracted the researcher's attention to it is that usually learners name both approaches used as a "good teaching". For instance, Estwistle and Tait, (1990), using a descriptive research with the use of a questionnaire among the students, reached to this point that showed both groups, one that used the surface method as their learning method, and the other group which used the deep learning method and open tuition, consider the method used as a good tuition method. Finally according to Stingins (2002) good teachers simplify the learning process by the means of presenting fundamental feedbacks to the students and helping them to determine the different aspects of learning.

THIS STUDY

The main aims of the study were comparison among foreign languages about learning strategies with respect to deep and surface learning and some demographic variables. The following research questions have been considered in the study:

1. Which one has more dominates on the foreign language departments, deep or surface learning?
2. Who has more effect on the deep or surface learning students, academic staffs or others?
3. Which department experience more deep learning?
4. Which department experiences more surface learning?
5. What is the most important factor in deep learning?
6. What is the most important factor in surface learning?
7. Are there any differences between students and academic staff members, students' age, gender and departments about learning strategies?

METHOD

Participants

The population of this study included the foreign language departments' students in the faculty of Humanities. There are over 850 foreign language students in the faculty. Participants were drawn from the same number of writing students through a random sampling technique. 125 students were selected through Krejcie and Morgan table (1970).

Instruments

The main instruments used for this study were a questionnaire and semi-structured interview. The researcher designed the questionnaire by generating a list of items which solicited students' responses on learning strategies used by the academic staff members. The items in the questionnaire were derived from literature and the researchers' experiences in the field. The range of data collection instruments employed increased the researchers' ability to examine the nature and frequency with certain variables occurred in the research setting. The specifics for each of the two data collection instruments used in the study are as follows:

Questionnaire: this instrument had sections dealing with demographic items such as gender, age, department and etc.

Interview: academic staff members in the departments above mentioned was interviewed about learning strategies.

The validity of the instrument was ascertained by presenting the questionnaire to some experts in behavioural sciences. The experts made some observations and modifications on the items. The reliability coefficient of the instrument was calculated by using coronach alpha and it was found to be 0.85. Also, the questionnaire had 30 different questions about learning strategies.

This is essentially a survey research utilizing a questionnaire based on the Likert type rating scale. The statistical tests used for the study were the mean and standard deviation. The means were used as statistical standard due to the conformity of standard deviation for all questionnaire items.

Since sections 2 and 3 of the questionnaire Likert scales comprise five response ratings of very agreement (5) agreement (4), not certain (3), no agreement (2), and very no agreement (1), respectively a theoretical mean value of 3.0 was determined as a criterion to judge the means of the items in these sections of the questionnaire.

Data collection procedures

All the 125 foreign language departments' students randomly selected for the study were given the questionnaire to examine their experiences with the learning strategies. All 125 questionnaires were returned properly filled, thus representing 100% return rate.

In addition to the questionnaire, semi-structured interview we also used as instrument for data collection from academic staff members in 3 different departments (Arab literature and language, English literature and language and Russian literature and language).

RESULTS

With regard to the first research question (Which one has more dominates on the foreign language departments, deep or surface learning?), the students considered 81% surface learning and 19% deep learning. And to the second one who has more effect on the deep or surface learning students, academic staffs or others?, The students considered for student 38%, for academic staff members 59% and others 3%. In third Research question, (Which department has more deep learning?), the students considered for English Language 66%, for Arab Language 19% and for Russian Language 15% and forth Research question, (Which department has more surface learning?). The students considered for Arab Language 56%, for Russian Language 33% and for English Language 11%. In related to fifth Research question, (What is the most important factor in deep learning?), the students considered for evaluation of the lesson content” 60%, for analysis of the lesson content 22% and for understanding of the lesson content 18% and the sixth Research question, (What is the most important factor in surface learning?), The students considered for memorizing the lesson content 46%, for preparing for examination 43% and for passing the course in any way 11%. Also, in last Research question, (Are there any differences between students split on age, gender and department about learning strategies?

Table 1. Learning strategies split on Gender Analysis of variance

Source	D.F	Sum of squares	Mean squares	F
Between	1	1.5435	1.12	3.86*
Within	124	47.7650	.29	
Total	125	49.3085		
Male with female			D.F=124	(P<0.036)*

*Significant $P < 0.05$

Table 2. Learning strategies split on age Analysis of variance

Source	D.F	Sum of squares	Mean squares	F
Between	1	1.1031	1.40	4.82*
Within	124	45.6665	.29	
Total	125	46.7696		
Under 20-25 with 26-Up			D.F=124	(P<0.036)*

*Significant $P < 0.05$

Table 1 and 2 shows that with respect to the students' gender and age, the observed F is not significant in the $P \leq 0.05$; there were not significance differences between students' viewpoints about learning strategies.

Table 3. Learning strategies Split on department

Power	Eta	Sig	F	(n=46 A)		(n=57 E)		(n=22 R)	
				S.D	mean	S.D	mean	S.D	mean
.230	.096	.32	1.16	.318	4.11	.441	4.22	.522	3.93

The table 3 shows that English students have the highest mean (4.22), Arab students the second (4.11) and Russia students the lowest mean (3.93). Because the observed F is not significant in the $P \leq 0.05$, there were not significance differences among students' viewpoints about learning strategies.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study has revealed the dominance of surface learning in the teaching and learning situation in foreign languages in the University of Guilan. These findings agree with Kolawole, (1998) who found that the teaching of English language is bedevilled with many problems such as inadequate period of teaching, method of teaching and lack of adequate and useful resources. What this means is that foreign languages academic staffs and students in the University of Guilan are not altering their learning strategies in spite of the coming of the new instructional technologies and learning strategies. Traditionally

According to Galliher, et al. (1995) teachers must assume the role of "resource brokers". The implication of this is that academic staffs should become familiar with a variety of teaching and learning methods rather than rely on one "best way". The findings in this study run contrary to the above assertion as the foreign languages academic staffs and students in the University of Guilan still depend heavily on the traditional teaching and learning methods. A possible justification for these results may reside in the fact that students are defined, in the teaching and learning process, as autonomous, independent and self-directed one (Gorges & Kandler, 2011).

In addition to the use of the teaching method, Cleve (1992) and Olukpe ,(1979) advocated the use of method such as guided controlled and free writing techniques in essay writing as the signals and symbols of deep learning. Also, this study has showed the deep learning strategy is not so weak but it has faced with some challenges. Our interview with academic staff members revealed the following difficulties:

- Many students just think about mark and grade as the symbols of quantitative view to their course.
- Many academic staffs have not enough motivation to plan academic activities for their students.
- Most of students do not welcome to the group or team work.
- Students' academic competitiveness are not so proper and most of the time it is about to the quantities and marks.

- Academic activities are not priority for many students. It means, they are looking for the other activities like being with their friends and etc.
- The busy classes create some problems for students and academics.
- Time management and academic planning are not so important for students and even academic staffs.
- Sometimes faculty and university authorities have not specific academic and research planning towards deep learning.

The foreign language departments' students in the University of Guilan are far behind time in offering multiple pathways to the deep learning. Little wonder that the system has been witnessing steady decline with the percentage of students who failed foreign language examinations fluctuating between 55% and 75% in the past ten years.

Foreign language should be provided with adequate and a variety of instructional media. If academic staffs are to assume new roles and use new technology supported instructional tools, they should become familiar with a variety of learning strategies particularly deep learning rather than relying on textbooks, black, green or whiteboard and traditional learning strategies. Technologies such as audio and video recordings language laboratories and computer can be more effective learning strategy for foreign language departments.

The high potential for deep learning through the provision of learning environment and academic staffs and students' academic activities can be attained inside the classes. It is strongly recommended that the learning environment should be given priority attention by university and faculty authorities so that students can experience deep learning. Both students and academics should try to create the specific situation for better motivation, better physical and psychological situation and also deep learning. Academics and students should try to think and act about deep learning in foreign languages departments.

One of the limitations the study was that the deep and surface learning were not so familiar for students and even for some colleagues. Second, students and colleagues did not cooperate due to the prediction of the research results which may take the department under questions and create some challenges.

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