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NURTURING SELF-LEARNING STRATEGIES AT CIEX LANGUAGE COURSES: THESIS DESIGN

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the design of a Master's thesis in Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics whose main research objective is to explore the students enrolled in the language courses at CIEX, self-study habits, their academic performance and the self-study practices recommended by the specialists in the areas of the thesis. In this paper, the elements of the design of the thesis are specified, being those the background of the study. The statement of the problem, the main research objective, the main research question, the subsidiary research questions, the specific research objectives, the justification, the delimitations, and the research strategy are presented in this work. The literature review, the research method, the results, and the conclusions of the thesis will be presented in other future research articles.

KEY WORDS

Motivation, metacognition, autonomous learning, self-regulated learning, self-directed learning, learning strategies, and learning habits.

RESUMEN

Este artículo presenta el diseño de una tesis de Maestría en la Enseñanza del Inglés y Lingüística Aplicada cuyo objetivo principal de investigación es explorar los hábitos de estudio y el desempeño académico de los estudiantes del CIEX que cursan el idioma inglés y las prácticas de auto estudio recomendadas por los especialistas en las áreas de la tesis. En este documento, los elementos del diseño de la tesis se especifican, constituyendo los antecedentes

del estudio. El establecimiento del problema, el objetivo principal de la investigación, la pregunta principal, las preguntas subsidiarias, los objetivos específicos, la justificación, las delimitaciones y la estrategia de la investigación son presentadas en este trabajo. La revisión literaria, la metodología de la investigación, los resultados y las conclusiones de la tesis serán presentados en otros futuros artículos.

PALABRAS CLAVE

Auto-estudio, estudio auto-enfocado, estrategias de aprendizaje, estilos de aprendizaje, hábitos de estudio.

Presentation

Nowadays, education lays a great load of work on students, within school time, as well as beyond the school grounds. The current competency-based learning and teaching approach in school requires students to evidence and demonstrate their mastering of knowledge and skills. Hence, students learn through a number of input resources, extend input by researching in additional materials, and take theory immediately into practice (Mendenhall, 2012). This demands time in students. In addition, high and higher education enrolment requirements, the limited spaces in higher education campuses, the emphasis of basic education on subjects such as mathematics and reading, etc., pose additional challenges in students to reinforce with after school courses in the matter. Then again, many parents, and students themselves, concerned about the growing world globalization and the need to learn a foreign language, in particular English, find the

way to cram English courses into their already busy agenda.

As it is also well known, learning a language is, in general, a challenge for a great number of learners. It is also of common sense that all students have strengths and weaknesses which they cope the process with. So, it is not a surprise that, even though considered an ideal goal to accomplish, learning a foreign language tends to fall back in the list of top priorities students must keep up with during a tight schedule. This is where pedagogy should assist students in making appropriate adjustments to successfully reach their goals.

This study focuses on the fact that a number of students do not meet in-course requirements to reinforce the language learning beyond class sessions. Research will be carried out at *Centro de Idiomas Extranjeros* (CIEX) “Ignacio Manuel Altamirano” language school in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, Mexico. People, there, can study English language courses from basic to advanced levels in either one or two-hour daily courses, or in special courses of up to 8 hours a session. The research will seek to provide evidence of this lack of students’ tracing of contents developed in class sessions; but also, to match the resulting issues to current theoretical findings to provide suggestions, and hopefully assist learners in successfully overcoming any limitations due to lack of strategies in learning under the conditions described above.

In order to set the theoretical grounds for the present research, it is essential to define the core terminology. Although competency-based learning is not the main issue, it is the approach through which learning currently takes place.

Considering students’ apparent motivation to proficiently develop the language –bearing in mind that they have accomplished reaching an advanced level English course–, it will help to understand motivational features in learning. Motivation, according to Staton (2013), is quite simply summarized into “having the wish to do something”. Schunk (2012) presents a more elaborated definition for motivation from a cognitive perspective, namely “the process of instigating and sustaining goal directed behavior”. From informal exchanges with the learners, it has been observed that many of them pursue developing the language for personal growth issues; hence, this research will, in part, consider Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory and concepts of motivation from a cognitive perspective (Brown, 2007 (a)) to try to understand and

explain learner’s behavior towards complying with their part of self-study in learning the language (Brown, 2007 (b)).

Thus, in understanding students’ share of learning responsibility, self-directed learning is also taken into account. According to O’Neill and McMahon (2015), self-directed learning has been termed as or related to student-centered learning, flexible learning, and experiential learning. In self-directed learning, teachers assist learners in taking responsibility and control over their own learning process. According to constructivism, learners build up to new knowledge using previous acquired information and experiences (Ertmer and Newby, 1993).

Learner autonomy is also of great relevance to understanding and fostering learner-centered environments. Holec (1981), considered a leading authority in the issue, describes autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (Benaissi, 2015). Benson (2001) defines autonomy as “the capacity to control one’s learning”. Undoubtedly, students must be strategic in performing autonomous learning. Learning strategies, according to Oxford (1990) are conceived as “specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferable to new situations.” Learning strategies are also considered “specific actions, behaviors, steps, or techniques used by students to enhance their own learning” (Scarcella and Oxford, 1992 in Celce-Murcia, 2001).

Other key concepts and terms will be defined in detail in chapter II. In the next section, the educational problem that has been identified will be presented and analyzed.

Statement of the Problem

It has been observed that a number of students in the language courses at CIEX seem to lack self-study strategies to further develop and learn the language on their own. When students are asked to carry out specific tasks before or after class to extend on or practice the language, some students successfully complete the tasks, but an important number of them tend to arrive to class without meeting such goals.

It has been observed that, for instance, some students sometimes fail to organize themselves after classes to do their homework. After going through the tight summer course schedule, some students feel overwhelmed with their extra activities, such as their jobs, other courses, and

personal responsibilities. For example, when students are asked to write an essay, to download practice material, to further work on a specific topic with follow-up material, etc., sometimes they have difficulties to organize their time, activities or ideas to complete all their errands. Also, when they are assigned homework, they fail to do it because they lack of the strategies to work at home in an autonomous environment. This impacts on their overall achievement of the language, on the progress of the class group as a whole, and therefore, on the reach of the course over their learning.

A possible cause to the above situation may be due to a lack of training, information, or experience in learning strategies to allow for adjustments to new or varied learning conditions. This thesis will research and assess students' performance according to a learner-centered approach and learning strategies insights to reach conclusions and eventual suggestions.

This paper will also assess the teachers' contributions in encouraging autonomous learning in students.

After having analyzed the background theoretical issues related to the thesis and the identified educational problem, the **main research question** emerged: How can CIEX students improve their self-study practices and outcomes from insights on autonomous learning?

The **main research objective** which is related to the main research question, that expresses the central goal of the study, is:

To learn about CIEX students' self-study practices and those suggested by theoretical approaches to improve their learning results.

Research will basically be carried out through the following guideline questions in order to offer an answer to the main research question. These are the **subsidiary research questions**:

1. What are the learners' and the teachers' beliefs about self-study strategies?
2. What self-study strategies are used by the learners and the teachers during the course?
3. What are the contributions of current literature on the grounds of self-study strategies?
4. What contributions, as a result of this research, may be made to the language center in terms of allowing for a better experience and outcome to learners?
5. What monitoring and induction processes are there

to allow for learning under intensive course periods?

The following **specific research objectives** are intended to guide on specific actions during research. They are closely related to the subsidiary research questions.

1. To find out about the learners' and the teachers' beliefs about self-study strategies.
2. To learn about the self-study strategies used by the learners and the teachers during the course.
3. To associate the contributions of current literature on the grounds of self-study strategies.
4. To build on contributions as a result of this research to make to the language center in terms of allowing for a better experience and outcome to learners.
5. To investigate if there is any induction and monitoring processes to allow for learning under intensive course periods.

Some arguments in favor of the **justification** of the importance of this study go along with the fact of a large number of people taking English language courses at CIEX, of the number of students successfully concluding their courses, and the small percentage of dropouts. Experience suggests that a number of students might be relying only on in-class language work as a fixed and daily practice to develop the language.

The importance of this research, on the one hand, lies on the attempt to land on suggestions which may help overcome difficulties in learning the language when it comes to autonomous tasks. On the other, these suggestions will search to stress on reinforcing learning strategies previous to and after class time to help learners succeed as self-learners (Hiemstra, 1994). Despite the limitation of the geographical coverage of this study, the problem under research is most likely the same throughout this and other language centers. This may contribute to further research and maybe encourage research in other contexts.

The research limitations are related to the context, since the study is developed at the language center in Chilpancingo, Guerrero, Mexico. However, CIEX has three other branches which may benefit from research and findings on the topic. In addition, this research will be carried out during only one course.

The main reason for the limitation is that the researcher is the teacher of the subject group. Besides, the students who will participate are taking an advanced level course. They were selected because it has been noticed that

even though they have been studying the language for a considerable number of years, they still have some difficulties to become autonomous learners.

The research strategy defines the research approach, the research method and instruments, and the data analysis. The research approach that will be used in this study is qualitative since the participants' perceptions, ideas and habits related to self-centered learning are going to be analyzed and discussed. The research method is action research since the problem detected will be analyzed deeply and then a proposal will be generated in order to find some possible solutions. A group of 5 students taking an advanced level course will participate in this study. The research instruments that will be designed and administered are the following: an interview guide for the teachers who have taught advanced courses before, a questionnaire for the students, and some language learning assessment charts (which record students' in-course work). The information and the data collected will be presented, interpreted, and supported in chapter IV.

Conclusion

As it was specified in the abstract of the article, in this paper the elements of the design of the thesis are presented. The main research question was perceived as a result of the reflections and facts observed by the researcher regarding the self-study habits and practices of the language students at CIEX. The main research objective was stated considering the main research question, and the context of the study. The subsidiary research questions were established to offer some support to the main research question. Next, the specific objectives represent the research tasks of the study. The justification is stated in relation to the importance of this study, regarding the benefits this research could bring to all the subjects who are involved in the research and in the language learning process. The limitations of this study are specified in terms of the characteristics of the context and the participants, the time of the implementation, and the role of the researcher. The theoretical fundamentals of this study will be presented in another future article as well as the research methodology, the main findings and the general conclusions of the research.

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