A study of the perception of a teaching strategy based on learning by teaching denominated "Learner-to-Learner Unit Review"

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Abstract

This study explored the perception of a teaching strategy designed to be implemented in English Pedagogy at Universidad Andres Bello, Viña del Mar, Chile. The strategy stemmed from a task based on learning by teaching which was devised to fulfil the need to encourage meta-cognition, collaborative group work, emotional competency, and to expose pedagogy students to an earlier than usual experience of teaching before undergoing their internships. It was assumed that the participants' perception of the strategy would be mostly positive based on theories sustaining similar teaching strategies, such as "Microteaching" and "Lernen durch Lehren" (German for "Learning by Teaching"), (Grzega, 2005). A survey was conducted during the experimental implementation of this strategy, which has taken place within a three year period. As a result, the task has been perceived by teachers and learners themselves to have had positive outcomes in the improvement of their competencies, involving EFL learning, group work, fostering meta-cognition, and developing teaching skills. Therefore, it may be suggested that the strategy favours overall competencies of future EFL teachers.

Keywords: perception, teaching strategy, learning by teaching, competencies, EFL teacher

Universidad Andrés Bello, as many other universities in Chile, promotes and applies a paradigm which adheres to a professional profile based on competencies. Therefore, throughout the EFL teacher-training programme, the teaching staff plans, creates, and applies the best possible tools to develop cognitive, procedural, and attitudinal competence in all the necessary areas to form a competent EFL teacher. However, there is a never-ending need to improve such competencies through tasks, methods and strategies. It was while planning the fifth level of the English language course at the university when we were challenged to propose a task which could fulfil some particular needs:

Firstly, there was the need to help trainees improve their English language skills by allowing them to take part in their own learning process. Secondly, there was the need to get trainees acquainted with their role as future EFL teachers at an early stage of their Pedagogy Major, by providing them with the opportunity to have a first encounter with a teaching experience.

Considering this, it was observed that a great variety of tasks used previously, had been devised to develop one aspect or the other, but not both. Besides, there was a third need connected to the emotional competence which was the ability to interact and work collaboratively with their peers, showing a positive demeanour at all times.

In order to achieve all this, the Learner-to-Learner Unit Review (Henceforth referred to as LTL Review) was devised, and then a qualitative, participative research was carried out in order to find out whether this task was perceived by experienced professors and teacher trainees as an effective strategy to fulfil the needs stated above.

Description of the task

Most language courses are organized into teaching units, and for each unit the professor usually plans a review to clarify doubts and make sure that learners acquired the skills taught to them during the unit. In the LTL review, however, the learners themselves are in charge of planning their own reviews, and the professor becomes a participant in the classroom.

How is it done?

The class is divided into groups, with one unit assigned to each group. This is not a typical presentation, it is an English language class; therefore, the students prepare a lesson plan to teach their classmates, according to the content of the unit or those parts of it which the professor suggests that need to be reviewed for clarification of doubts, further practice, or updating.

The acting teachers (reviewers)

Within the 90 period, reviewers should go over the content of the unit and sub-units intended for their task. In order to do this, they should condense the content of the unit and then, research for didactic ways of explaining it to their classmates (First year learners will usually tend to imitate their own professor's techniques). To get their explanations across, they should resort to clear examples already used in class by their professor, or they may use new or modified ones. Their lesson plan should include activities for their peers to apply grammar rules, vocabulary, and any other unit content under review. (See image 1)

Image 1

The reviewers may organize the class as they wish for didactical purposes. They may also arrange the classroom as they think fit to accomplish their teaching goals. When these acting teachers organize their LTL Review class, they may assign a specific part of the unit to each member of their group, who will be assisted by the collaboration of the other group members whenever necessary during the review class, as if they were a unified teaching entity. For example: One member of the group is in charge of the activities but the other members help to monitor and respond to any doubts the learners in their class may have. (See image 2)

Image 2

Finally, if possible, it is advisable that reviewers close with a reflective self assessment or a critical view of their work as a group, to share with their peers a brief account of their learning experience throughout the preparation of this task. The task is assessed using rubrics designed for the different levels of English classes based on Mertler's models (2001).

The Role of the Professor

The role of the professor is semi passive. He/she will act as just one more learner in the class. However, as a more "advanced" learner, the professor should collaborate with the reviewers if they find themselves in a difficult teaching situation due to their lack of experience, or if they do not realize that they are leading their peers into error. The professor should be regarded by learners as an active "backup" to clear up any doubts, correct mistakes, fine-tune explanations to clarify errors, and "polish up" basic teaching techniques. The professor must also observe and note down possible weaknesses and fossilized mistakes which need to be worked on, even if not included in the course plan or syllabus for that particular level.

The role of the Student as Learner in the Classroom

The learners in the classroom are encouraged to participate actively in the class, by asking questions, seeking clarification of doubts, sharing knowledge, participating in the activities designed by the reviewers, and so on; keeping a positive and collaborative demeanour at all times.

Referential Studies

The strategy proposed in this study was originally designed based on the concept of constructivism and on professional competency as explained by Bloom's taxonomy (Bloom, 1971), and a small dose our own intuitive creativity based on over fifteen years of teaching experience;

however, it was discovered through further research, that there were two teaching methods which had already been applied for similar purposes. These two methods are "Micro-teaching", and "Lernen durch Lehren" (LdL: German for "Learning by Teaching"). Therefore, it was decided to analyse both methods as reference to endorse the LTL Review strategy as it is based on similar theoretical frameworks, even though LTL Review places more emphasis on the concepts of "meta-cognition", "reconstruction of knowledge" and "attitude".

Microteaching

Microteaching is a method created at Stanford University in the early 70's. The main similarities with LTL Review may be summarized as follows: a) just as our new proposal, microteaching is still evolving to prove its value as an efficient method to develop cognitive structures within a constructivist paradigm (McGarvey and Swallow, 1986); b) according to Carretero (1993), microteaching is composed of tasks and activities to ensure meaningful learning, metacognition, modification and enrichment of knowledge, and so is the LTL Review task; c) another similarity is that microteaching exposes learners to a more realistic teaching environment, with the possibility of receiving feedback (Allen and Ryan, 1969). On the other hand, the main differences are the following: a) microteaching reduces the teaching situation or simplifies it in a systematic way to allow the professors to focus on the learners' development of a particular teaching skill (Essam, 2003), but even though LTL Review also considers teaching skills, it mainly focuses on language skills; b) Essam also points out that the duration of the rendering of a microteaching class may be shortened from 5 to 20 minutes or so, however, LTL Review uses the full 90-minute class; c) The same author states that the size of the class may be reduced to a number suitable to the goals of the task, however, LTL Reviews take place in front of the whole class.

The LDL model in Germany

This is an innovative method originally designed by a French teacher called Jean-Pol Martin in the early 1980s for secondary schools in Germany, and proposed as a model for German teachers to teach French as a reaction to the emphasis on communicative skills since the 1970s.

The main similarities with LTL Review based on Grzega (2005), are as follows: a) In the German model, students prepare a lesson or part of it and teach their peers using the highest possible degree of interactive activities, and group work instead of giving a presentation or a lecture on the topic to be taught, as well as in the LTL Review task; b) in LDL "The role of the teacher consists of preparing, supporting, moderating and supervising", a very similar role played by the professor during the LTL Review; c) "High School Students create their own teaching methodology", which is true for our first year students of English pedagogy; d) "learners develop ways of grasping knowledge in order understand it clearly before conveying it to their classmates" (Taken from http://www.ldl.de), in other words, it fosters metacognition, just as the LTL Review task.

On the other hand, also based on Grzega (2005), the main differences are: a) the LDL method was conceived to teach a foreign language at school level for communicative purposes, and it was German professor Joachim Grzega who pioneered the implementation of this model at university level in Germany, but to teach linguistics, not EFL for English pedagogy students; b) students prepare every language class throughout the school year and teach their peers, the LTL Review is used only at the end of a teaching unit rendered by the professor.

Theoretical considerations

Meta-cognition and the recovery of knowledge

Pozo (2008), reveals some principles that could help learners' meta-cognition process, by becoming conscious of their own learning process, and through the process of recovering or reviewing previously learnt knowledge:

1) Attend to relevant contextual elements to be recognized as indicators for recovery

2) Design learning tasks to recover knowledge as used in real contexts,

3) Recover the same knowledge through varied paths, and

4) Organize tasks to promote reflective thinking and conceptual comprehension.

These principles apply to the LTL review because it was designed so that before performing the task, the reviewers first "recuperate" previously learnt knowledge by reinterpreting it consciously and deliberately in order to use it to teach their peers. Therefore, once the information becomes more meaningful and the learner realizes through reflective thinking how he or she best recovers information, then hopefully, the "re-learning" of different English language contents would become "acquisition" (The concepts used by Pozo, were translated into English by the author of this article).

Once this meta-cognition or "re-learning" process is attained, reviewers may help their peers go through the same process of recovering knowledge. This review should be more meaningful than just a systematic association of memorised elements, thus, not only the group of learners who prepared the review may benefit from the task, but also their peers attending as regular learners.

In other words, the meta-cognition process manifests itself when the learner reviews information for self tutoring and especially to teach others. To support this idea Bruning, Schraw and Ronning (1999), state that learning increases when it is the learner who constructs a meaningful context, therefore, it may be assumed that reviews of recently obtained knowledge would facilitate guided cognitive reconstruction; the reason being, according to these authors, that students learn more and remember better when they are active learners who elaborate meaningful knowledge by taking it from previous one, and processing it at a deeper level.

Social Interaction and Collaborative Group Work

Vygotsky states that language is not innate. It is the product of activities practiced in the social institution (family) within the culture where the child grows up. This implies that internal developmental process will only occur when children are interacting with other people within their own environment (Vygotsky, 1978). According to this theory, individual internal process, such as learning a new language, will only take place in an environment which is easily associated to authentic situations and where the learners are interacting with others who are regarded as having similar interests or are in affinity with them. Ideally then, a new language should be learnt within a community of speakers of that language, but in our particular case in Chile, the nearest thing to such a community is the English class, therefore, the student-teachers (reviewers), and their

classmates, as well as the English professor become the natural setting, since they are all part of an English Pedagogy course.

Considering this, and the unique characteristics of a relaxed class environment fostered by the LTL review task, communicative interaction, and group work amongst all participants may be enhanced. This relates to Krashen´s affective filter hypothesis, which claims that if learners feel self-confident and motivated in a classroom environment due to low levels of anxiety, it would appear that these factors could take the learner from a learning stage of the second or foreign language form, to a stage of acquisition (Krashen, 1982).

The LTL Review task may be regarded as a teaching strategy that promotes not only cognitive and procedural development, but also seeks to instil attitudinal or emotional competencies in our learners.

Considering the above, learners are urged to become self-conscious of their overall attitude during their task; for example, during their group work they should adopt a collaborative sense of participation, respond efficiently and responsibly to the group's demands, take a democratic and fair stand when organizing their task, and merge into a relaxed atmosphere created by the group itself. When they carry out the task, they should maintain an enthusiastic, positive, respectful, and cordial demeanour at all times, trying to encourage and promote class participation, creating a relaxed environment, and if possible, use some humour to promote a pleasant atmosphere. This will, ideally, reduce the affective filter mentioned above. However, these emotional conducts are not easily and readily acquired; according to Bloom (1971) they require a continuum of activities where such emotional objectives are well defined, otherwise the subject will only achieve partial results such as learning to accept, admit and deal with certain correct behaviour for a definite context of ethical values sustained by society, a process known as "socialization". This supports the idea of proposing the LTL task as a teaching strategy to be repeated every semester during the pedagogy major so that not only the continuum factor is present, but also the fact that the learners get older, and enhance their personal internal growth or "internalization", which according to Bloom, happens when "the learners incorporate and adopt these required emotional factors as a part of themselves and react accordingly without having to reflect upon each value", in other words they become innate. Bloom also writes that there is evidence suggesting that emotional behaviour may only be developed when the learner has the opportunity to participate in a continuum of tasks or activities partly designed for that particular purpose, planned to fulfil three stages of emotional development within an appropriate span of time for such purpose: in the first stage, the learner becomes aware of the emotional factors needed for certain contexts and circumstances; secondly, the learner responds with an adequate attitude and emotional behaviour, but only when supervised by a recognized external authority; and in the third stage, the learner responds adequately in any circumstances when faced with obstacles or barriers, without any supervision.

Bloom considers that it is only at the third stage that emotional behaviour has been internalized. Bearing this theory in mind, the LTL review strategy may produce such attitudinal results so as to internalize the required emotional competency of a future EFL teacher if implemented as it being done currently at Universidad Andrés Bello, during every semester of the English pedagogy programme.

Research Method

This was a qualitative and participative study of an exploratory nature, carried out during the experimental implementation of the LTL task during a three-year period, from 2010 to 2013, seeking to show how learners and teachers had perceived this task in terms of a strategy to aid the improvement of learners' competencies in EFL-learning, EFL-teaching, collaborative group work, vocational awareness, self reflection, and an overall positive attitude towards self improvement, which could foster meta-cognition in EFL learning. Also, this study would show learners' and professors' opinion regarding the relevance of this task with the EFL Pedagogy Programme.

Location

The study was carried out at the Faculty of Education, Department of English Pedagogy, Universidad Andrés Bello, campus Viña del Mar, Chile.

Participants

Two groups of subjects were surveyed: A group of university professors, currently teaching English language at Universidad Andrés Bello, and a group of undergraduate students taking different courses from first to seventh level (semester), majoring in English Pedagogy.

Instrumentation

Written surveys included 2 questionnaires for teachers, 1 questionnaire for students, and 1 check list for students' self assessment.

Questionnaire 1 for professors provided the 6 main objectives of the strategy and 2 questions related to those objectives. Number of respondents: 6 professors currently implementing the task.

Questionnaire 2 for professors included 14 closed-ended questions related to their perception of the LTL review as a classroom task.

Number of respondents: The same 6 professors currently implementing the task

Questionnaire 3 for students above 3rd semester, and for students of 1st and 2nd semester, included closed-ended questions related to their perception of LTL Review as a classroom task. Some of those questions were in English and some in Spanish to ensure full comprehension of each.

Number of respondents: 84 students

Self-assessment check list for students of 1^{st,} 2nd and 3rd semester. The check list provides 6 indicators directly related to the objectives of this task as a teaching strategy.

Number of respondents: 68 students

5 individual professors were interviewed with open questions (Appendix 5);

Video recorded interviews

21 interviews of individual students using open questions

One videotaped interview of a group of learners in a classroom setting with open questions

Number of Respondents: 12 students

Findings

Professors and students perceive the experience as a positive one in terms of meta-cognition and self-reflection. Group work is mainly positive; however a minority would rather work individually. Most students regard the task as a positive teaching experience to become aware of their true vocational aptitudes. The total number of professors agree that the task fosters interaction. The students feel somewhat motivated to do the task for the first time. This may be due to lack of understanding of the task. The majority of 1st year students responded that they used their intuition and creativity to prepare the lesson plan and the activities; and had somewhat used a methodology similar to that of their professors. The task produces a somewhat relaxed classroom environment. The majority of professors interviewed feel that the following goals were fulfilled to a greater extent: Reinforcement of the English language structures and vocabulary, encouragement of learner's meta-cognition, promotion of collaborative group-work, and facilitation of learners' self-awareness of their vocational aptitudes.

Conclusions

Theory sustains that learning new content, and then re-learning it in order to teach it to their peers, may help to foster meta-cognition and self awareness of their own learning process and make their learning-by-teaching experience so meaningful that it may actually enhance their cognitive and procedural competencies as they move from one level to the next within the Pedagogy programme.

Regarding a first teaching experience, LTL review strategy has been perceived as a means to rationalise and reflect on the real perspective of undertaking a teaching career, specifically teaching EFL. Moreover, this teaching strategy may be considered as a means to make the learners aware of their own emotional capabilities to cope with the great diversity of challenges and complexities involved in teaching.

The outcome of this research shows beyond any doubt that the perception of the subjects involved in the study favours the implementation of LTL Review in an English Pedagogy programme.

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