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Helping Teachers Promote Self-Directed Language Learning: Report of a Fulbright Scholar in Ecuador

Ayudando a docentes de lenguas a promover el autoaprendizaje en el estudiante: reporte de una becaria de Fulbright en Ecuador

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Since Ecuador has determined that it wants to be fully bilingual in ten years, this paper describes the experience of a Fulbright Scholar at a university Language Center in Quito; one helping language teachers improve the language learning skills of their students. The theoretical framework for this work comes from Learner Self-Management (LSM) or Self-Regulation. The scholar details her experience teaching LSM concepts such as SMART goal setting, Task Analysis, Cognitive and Affective Strategies. She provides descriptions of what these language teachers consider the roles of the teacher and that of the learner to be and also what their most critical teaching issues were. She also briefly elaborates the history of the development of learner strategies and the value of metacognitive strategies and knowledge.

Key words: Goal Setting, Learner Self-Management, Learning Strategies, Task Analysis.

Ecuador se ha propuesto ser completamente bilingüe en diez años y, en este marco, este artículo describe la experiencia de una becaria de la comisión Fulbright en un Centro de Lenguas de una universidad ecuatoriana. En su trabajo, la becaria aplicó teoría derivada de lo que se conoce como la autogestión o autorregulación del aprendiz y hace una descripción de la enseñanza por medio de conceptos relacionados como el establecimiento de metas SMART, el análisis de tareas, y las estrategias cognitivas y afectivas. Además, la autora delinea las creencias de los maestros del Centro en cuanto al papel del maestro y del estudiante, así como los problemas más urgentes para la enseñanza de la lengua que se detectaron. La autora también presenta una historia breve del desarrollo de las estrategias de los aprendices y la importancia de las estrategias y conocimientos metacognitivos.

Palabras clave: análisis de tareas, autogestión del aprendiz, establecimiento de metas, estrategias de aprendizaje.

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Introduction

Given my experience helping teachers learn how to promote self-directed language learning in many countries around the world, I applied for and was granted a Fulbright Scholar Award in Ecuador. I was assigned to the Language Center at the Universidad Central del Ecuador in Quito, from September, 2016 to January, 2017. My objective was to make a meaningful contribution to teacher education that could result in the language teachers of the Language Center becoming more comfortable promoting more efficient and effective language learning. My approach, promoting Learner Self-Management (LSM),[1] involved introducing some 43 teachers to strategies that would help their students become more independent life-long language learners who know how to learn on their own.

I had already facilitated the use of several of these concepts in quite a few Masters' action research projects that I directed at the Universidad de La Sabana, Bogota, Colombia. There, the teachers found that when they helped their learners develop the skills of LSM, as part of teaching the target language, the result was that class time not only promoted faster and more satisfying language learning but also provided a stronger basis for independent language learning.

Growing Recognition of Importance of English Language Proficiency in Latin America

During the present decade, several Latin American countries (Ecuador and Colombia among others) have identified a need for a higher level of citizen proficiency in English (Cronquist & Fiszbein, 2017). As a result, each country has set a goal of becoming bilingual in Spanish and English within a decade. In Ecuador, the current government has determined that promoting better and more advanced English language proficiency can address several goals: first, as a means of enhancing the country's profile on the international stage and, second, providing citizen access to better employment opportunities resulting from more advanced English skills (British Council Education Intelligence, 2015). To accomplish these goals the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education (MOE) made English a mandatory language starting in Grade 8 with the eventual goal that students achieve the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) for Languages at the "B1" level upon graduation from high school. The MOE also set the CEFR B2 level as a requirement for graduation from university. And in 2016, the MOE required primary level students to study English three hours a week (educacion.gob.ec).

In order to achieve these goals, the MOE recognized the critical importance of improving teacher skills in both the English language and in language teaching. The MOE has been considering what the implications of these demands are. In particular, the British Council report (British Council Education Intelligence, 2015) noted that two of the biggest barriers for the MOE toward the achievement of this level of English language competence by high school graduation were cost and time. A large portion of the cost involved bringing the English language skills of so many teachers up to and beyond the required student levels given that English had not been mandatory up to the time of the regulation. Another cost would involve training in effective language teaching skills, especially for those teachers in the more remote parts of the country. In addition, the MOE recognized that it has an extensive shortage of English language teachers (education.gob.ec).

It would probably be helpful for the MOE to consider the amount of time it can take a student (and in some cases language teachers) to achieve these levels of proficiency at the high school and university levels.

1 The definition of LSM used here is: "The ability to deploy procedures and to access knowledge and beliefs in order to accomplish learning goals in a *dynamically* changing environment" (Rubin, 2001, p. 25). Rubin (2001) details how procedures, knowledge, and beliefs work together to enable language learners to become more self-directed and autonomous.

The curriculum of the United States Foreign Service Institute (FSI), based on many years of extensive training, may provide a useful basis for comparison. FSI provides intensive language training to United States diplomats and has determined the amount of time it takes to achieve Working Proficiency (CEFR C1) in different languages. In order to achieve Working Proficiency in Spanish, one of the easiest for native English speakers, it takes between 600 and 750 hours (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). It should be noted that the conditions at FSI are quite different from that of public education in Ecuador: FSI students are very motivated since they are professional diplomats who need to work hard and pass the exam to take up their overseas assignments; their students are not distracted by other courses—they spend the entire day studying the target language; teachers are native speakers who have permanent positions with the government; students have access to counseling on a regular basis, and the curriculum is routinely revised. This experience could provide some basis for the MOE in determining the appropriate number of hours needed to achieve B2. The MOE may want to take into consideration issues related to student and teacher motivation and how to increase it as well as quality of the curriculum and the preparation of their teachers, paying special attention to honing their skills in English since they are not native speakers.

Learner Self-Management as an Effective Language Learning Tool

The development of the concepts of "learning to learn languages" reaches back quite a few years and started with the identification of the strategies of good language learners (Rubin, 1975; Stern, 1975) and evolved into an impressive list of cognitive and affective strategies used by both expert and novice learners (see Cohen & Macaro, 2007; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990, for three of many summaries of findings).

Prior to these beginnings, teacher education focused mainly on how to be a good teacher and on the teaching process without considering the role of the learner and the process of learning (see Cohen, 2008, p. 7).

Following the recognition that effective language learners use strategies, scholars conducted a number of intervention studies to determine the effect of teaching these strategies to learners with the goal of improving their language skills. Hassan et al. (2005) have conducted the most scientific and extensive evaluation of strategy intervention studies to date. Their research focused on studies that considered the effect of teaching language learning strategies on the four skills, grammar, and pronunciation. Hassan et al. used strict evaluation criteria to evaluate methodology, populations, and results. The report concluded that instruction in learner strategies did improve some language skills but that the methodology of many studies was often not comparable. In a more recent review, Plonsky (2019) also notes the difficulty inherent in evaluating language learning strategy instruction (LLSI) due to methodological differences but also observes issues in comparing outcomes due to the multifaceted nature of effects in LLSI based on several variables. Nonetheless, he concludes "the results for subgroups are mixed but mostly very much in favor of LLSI" (p. 14).

Another step in understanding the "learning to learn" paradigm was that researchers began differentiating strategies into two major categories: cognitive/affective strategies and metacognitive strategies. This led to the recognition of the critical contribution of metacognitive strategies and knowledge, that is, "thinking about one's learning" to better the language learning process (Wenden, 1998, 1999). By now, the critical importance of metacognitive strategies in promoting effective language learning has been well-documented in both educational psychology and second language acquisition research (Anderson, 2002; Pintrich, 2000; Vandergrift & Goh, 2012). It should be noted that the role metacognition plays in managing learning is often described as "Self-Regulation" or Learner Self-Management (Oxford, 2017; Rubin, 2001).

Success in promoting LSM appears not to be tied to culture, language proficiency, task, or class. Examples of the range of situations include successful transmission of LSM strategies in a wide range of contexts. One example involved the introduction of LSM to "entitled" university students who paid little or no attention while attending any of their classes. From the LSM strategies gained in my graduate course in Second Language Acquisition at the Universidad de las Americas, Cholula, Mexico, their teacher (a student in my course) introduced both the concepts and strategies for raising awareness of language learning. The gratifying result was that his students' attitude, motivation, and involvement completely changed because they knew what to do and how to do it. They were able to work on their own. This example illustrates that university level, highly educated students when provided with the tools to succeed experience clear changes occurring in their motivation to learn English.

A different example comes from students living in a working class area of Bogota, Colombia. Here the teacher introduced LSM to high school English language students (Jaramillo, Castrillón, & López, 2013). Before learning about Goal Setting and Task Analysis (part of LSM), López's students never spoke English in class. But once he introduced them to how to conduct a conversation (instead of just memorizing it) and facilitated the planning strategies of Goal Setting and Task Analysis, his students began to use English, not only in class but also with each other outside of class. Upon seeing this kind of interaction, other teachers reported to López that they were amazed by his success. This example illustrates the potential for LSM with high school students where their context did not provide examples of the value of English in improving their employment situation.

Lately, some teacher educators have come to understand the critical importance of introducing this new paradigm, "Promoting learning to learn skills" to teachers as well as to their students. The outcome of empowering teachers to promote LSM helps students coming from a wide variety of socio-economic backgrounds, with proficiency levels at a variety of school grade levels, and years at university become better language learners. For an example of how teacher educators can use LSM to promote teacher skills in promoting student use of LSM strategies see Rubin and Acero (2019).

English Language Teaching at the Language Center

During my Fulbright sojourn in Ecuador, I was attached to the Language Center at the Universidad Central del Ecuador. This university was founded in 1826 and is the oldest and largest university in Ecuador and one of the oldest in the Americas. It has an enrollment of approximately 35,000 students. As a public higher education institution, only students who qualify for admission do not pay any tuition.

Students study English at the Language Center in their third and fourth years.[2] The task of the English teachers at the Language Center is to teach these students sufficient English so that they can pass the required English exam at the CEFR B1/B2 level in all four skills in order to graduate. Each semester, 43 English teachers, whose own knowledge of English was not always that strong, worked with 3,400 students. The Language Center administration divided the students into separate classes according to their proficiency level and appropriate class size. Generally, each class has about 30 students and meets with teachers about 7.5 hours per week. Each teacher works with a total of 120 students in several different classes. Some of the teachers are full-time tenured teachers who teach 22 hours a week. Other teachers are contract employees and not tenured; some teach 30 hours a week; still others teach a few classes at the Center but also have teaching assignments at other institutions.

2 Students need to wait until their third year because the demand is so great the Center cannot accommodate students from earlier years.

Working With Language Teachers at the Language Center, Universidad Central del Ecuador

Before going to Ecuador, I asked all 43 language teachers to respond to a questionnaire in order to facilitate my assessment of their understanding of the learning process. The answers to these questions especially helped in ascertaining their background knowledge about LSM and helped determine my teaching foci. Their responses to two questions were particularly helpful: (1) What their language teaching challenges, issues, and concerns were and (2) What the appropriate roles for the teachers and for the students were.

Among the language teaching concerns were the following: Students did not see the utility of learning English and expressed some anger that although there was no credit given for the English courses, they were required to pass an English exam to meet graduation requirements. The language teachers also noted that given the graduation requirement, the number of class hours was insufficient to enable students to pass the exam. Teachers added that some students began their English studies at the university with little or no knowledge of English and that some students had little knowledge of how to learn a language.

The second section of the questionnaire dealt with these teachers' views of what the roles of the teacher and the learner were. Their responses describing the *role of the teacher* elaborated two different approaches to teaching. Some focused mainly on the task of teaching the "language" while others also dealt with facilitating "learning to learn."

During the first week, I conducted workshops every day for all 43 teachers, all of whom were on break from classes. We first discussed their responses to the question of a teacher's role in presenting the language. We considered how to include the learning process as well as the language. For example, some answers included "making lessons more relevant by creating appropriate situations and providing meaningful tasks." Given this answer, we further talked about how the teachers could determine what was *appropriate and meaningful*. One approach suggested was to allow the learner to *learn to make their own choices* as to materials, approach, and tasks; ones that were relevant to their lives and appropriate for their interests and learning styles.

Another issue involved what the teacher's role in helping students with their difficulties was. In order to clarify their responses, I asked questions to help them consider how to do more than teach the language. I invited them to think about the learning process and the teacher's role in facilitating it. If "helping students with difficulties" only meant that the teacher provided answers to address learner's difficulties, then that would constitute focusing only on the language. I proposed that students also needed *to learn how to identify and solve problems by themselves*. If teachers provided strategies and activities to help students practice identifying their difficulties and possible solutions, their students would then acquire critical tools to work on their own (thus increasing their skills to manage their own learning).

Some teachers noted that, in addition to helping students with the language, they also saw the teacher's role as someone who would guide or facilitate *the learning process* and help students become more independent learners. Given these responses, it was noted that my presentations over the next three months would help them consider some teaching LSM strategies to guide understanding and skill in developing student ability to examine their own learning process.

Other teachers suggested that their role included motivating and encouraging students. A consideration of how to do this highlighted the importance of helping students recognize and use what they already knew and determine how what they wanted to learn would be relevant to their education and future professions. Some noted that they did bring up the importance of English and some of the domains in which it might be helpful in their first classes. I advised that to further emphasize how English might be useful in their lives, they

ask students to specify why a particular task or exercise might be useful for their future use of the language (see Rubin & McCoy, 2008 for an example of how to set *purpose*[3] and SMART goals).

Another teacher suggested that it was important to respect learner differences. In order to do this, I suggested that offering choices as to materials, topics, speed of work, and collaborative style would be one way to begin to do this (see Chamot & Genovese, 2009 for some positive and creative ways to offer choices and the positive outcomes of so doing).

Answers to the question about *the role of the learner* revealed two distinct views: some described the learner as a *recipient of knowledge* while others saw the learner's role as one of *active participants* in the learning process.

Examples of learners as *recipients of knowledge* included the following teacher statements: Learners should get involved with the language, do their best, work hard, be on time, want to learn, and demonstrate their knowledge and understanding through exercises, tests, and exams.

Teacher responses that viewed the learner as an *active participant* included: The learner constructs his/her own knowledge and the role of the learner is to be discovering, building, creating, analyzing, questioning, and challenging. I noted that learners can become more actively involved if teachers facilitate this by providing appropriate exercises or information. I indicated that it can also be very useful to remind learners of their own background knowledge and provide opportunities and exercises that demonstrate how useful background knowledge can be.

Concurrent with the concept of the learner as a constructor of knowledge was the recognition that *active learners* are aware of their responsibility for their own learning. In order to increase the process of learner awareness, it was suggested that teachers discuss with their students what the learning process consisted of and provide suggestions as to how to use this information to improve their learning (other teaching strategies to raise awareness of the learning process can be found in Clemente & Rubin, 2008).

Finally, one of the teachers noted that learners needed to be open to making mistakes and learning from them. It is clear that some students may need help with how to do this. I provided the teachers with some exercises they could use to help learners recognize their mistakes and consider how to address them. One helpful awareness-raising activity is to ask students to write journals to reflect on anything they do not understand or problems they might have with a class, an exercise or material presented (for suggestions on how to write a diary see Rubin, 2003). Once students notice their problems, they can be asked to identify solutions to these problems on their own. In addition, students can be invited to share their journals with their peers for suggestions of other solutions.

SMART goal setting is an acronym which stands for the following: S = specific, M = measurable, A = achievable, R = relevant, T = time-based. For something to be specific, the user must identify his/her specific goal; to be measurable, it must be something that the user can observe or measure by themselves, not by using outside measures like tests or grades; to be achievable, the goal must be one that the user believes he/she has the time, knowledge, and resources to accomplish; to be relevant, the goal must be important to some real life goal, beyond a pedagogical one; and to be time-based, the user needs to set a realistic time frame. Each of these elements interacts with and serves to balance each other. So, if the user cannot come up with a measure, it may be that the goal is not specific enough. Or, if the user determines that his/her goal requires too much time or requires too much unknown knowledge, then the user may choose to reduce or restate his/her goal.

3 It is critical to differentiate goal from purpose. Goal refers to what the user wants to learn, whereas purpose refers to why the user wants to learn something. That is, how will accomplishing this goal add to the user's future use of the language? Rubin and McCoy (2008) found this to be most useful in helping learners consider issues of relevance. By considering purpose, the task (or the what) becomes much more meaningful.

If the user cannot accomplish his/her goal within the time frame then the user either needs to change his/her goal or the strategies used to accomplish the goal. The values of facilitating the use of SMART goal setting are that learners set goals that are relevant to their own circumstances, come to recognize their strengths and weaknesses, and learn to recognize their successes as well as where more time and effort are needed. Since language learning usually takes much more time than what can be learned in a classroom, SMART goal setting prepares learners for learning on their own. Once the learner has clearly established SMART goals, considering the nature of the task and what its characteristics are can facilitate consideration of appropriate learning strategies (i.e., Task Analysis).

Task Analysis requires the student to consider what kind of task he/she is asked to work on, that is, what kind of skill the task requires, what kind of task it is, what kind of language the user could expect, and what purpose the task could address. This kind of analysis helps learners anticipate what they can expect and recognize what they know and do not know. Once learners have anticipated many aspects of the text, they are then asked to consider what learning strategies they could use given these characteristics of the text.

One important aspect of *motivation* is the concept of relevance. The adult education literature points to the critical importance of relevance and its effect on learning. They suggest it is basic to the learning process. Adult education (Dembo & Seli, 2016; Rutgers Online Degrees, n.d.; Shorlin, n.d.) repeatedly observed a more positive impact when learners understand *why or for what purpose* they are asked to do a task. Shorlin (n.d.) noted that learners learn best when they are given an opportunity to direct what they need to know, that is, when they might expect to use any aspect of the subject being taught. Rutgers Online Degrees (n.d.) observed that "to thrive in most learning environments, they [the learner] must be clear on how each lesson fits into their goals for self-advancement" ("The Principles of Adult Learning Theory", para. 3). The more closely related to the learner's specific purposes, the more motivating the task can be. The same task could serve several different purposes. Thompson and Rubin (1996) identified four major purposes: pedagogical, professional, social, and personal. Thus, for any task each learner may assign a different purpose to it.

I also encouraged teachers to practice what they preach. If they are to understand how to promote their students' skills in LSM, it can be helpful for teachers to start using LSM to plan their own lessons. Rubin and Acero (2019) provide examples of how to apply LSM in lesson planning.

Other activities in Quito

In addition to the classes at Universidad Central del Ecuador, the Municipality of Quito school district asked me to give a few workshops in LSM for high school students in the International Baccalaureate degree program at the Unidad Educativa Bicentenario to help improve their writing in English. Students were in two classes at two levels (CEFR A1 and A2). My focus was to introduce SMART goal setting for writing. The students began practicing SMART goal setting by writing what their career goals were. Initially, they were not very specific, so I asked them to consider how to make their goals more specific and appropriate (i.e., ones that they had the knowledge, time, and resources to accomplish). A lively discussion about how to do this ensued in English. Here are a couple of examples of goals that were not very specific and which would have taken a great deal of effort to accomplish. I do not think the students took these factors into account when they first wrote these goals. For example, one student wanted to study medicine in Poland but did not know a word of Polish. Another wanted to study in Korea because he knew someone from Korea despite the fact that he did not know any Korean! For those who had more appropriate goals we came to recognize that some of the goals were long term and needed to be broken down into smaller more achievable goals. We then went

on to practice ways the SMART goal setting strategy could be used to improve their English writing assignments.

Conclusions

Teachers at the Language Center who attended my workshops tried out many of the activities and teaching strategies that I presented to promote self-management: SMART goal setting, journal writing, and memory strategies in their classrooms. These teachers reported that using LSM teaching strategies allowed them to promote using a "learning how to learn" approach in their teaching and found that introducing them resulted in their students paying more attention to the learning process.

Nonetheless, my major conclusion from this 4-month experience was that in order for teachers to take class time to include attention to the process of learning, activities that promote learner self-management/self-regulation need to be incorporated into student textbooks, the curriculum, and teacher manuals. My impression is that very few of these currently do so and those that do introduce terms like *learning strategies* focus on cognitive strategies rather than on metacognitive ones. If language teachers are to understand the importance of and the techniques to promote autonomy, self-regulation, and learner self-management, teachers will need more experience in applying LSM to their lesson planning (Rubin & Acero, 2019) and opportunities to use action research to solve their teaching concerns to determine the most effective teaching strategies for their students. Although several Ministries of Education state their goals as Learner Autonomy, they will need to understand how much time and teacher education it will take to accomplish this important goal.

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About the Author

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