

SRL enhancing narratives: Testas' (Mis)adventures.

Abstract

Designed to promote students' learning self-regulation, "Testas' (Mis)adventures" is an intervention project consisting of five narrative books and one manual with the theoretical framework and working guidelines for teachers and parents. Testas' narratives introduce an embedded self-regulated learning model, which provides an opportunity to discuss a learning strategies repertoire. The ability of students to relate to Testas' study problems, enables them to understand the leading role of learning strategies in the achievement of academic goals. Some educational advantages of this tool are highlighted and discussed.

Introduction

There is now fresh evidence in support of the correlation between academic competence and self-regulation. Self-regulation can be defined as "self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions for attaining academic goals" (Zimmerman, 1998, p. 73). This complex and multidimensional process, subsuming cognitive and motivational variables, is no longer seen as a trait, but rather as a sample of contextual-specific processes strictly chosen to improve academic success. Self-regulated learning refers to the extent to which students metacognitively, motivationally and behaviorally engage with their own learning process (Rosario, 2004a). Students can self-regulate different dimensions of learning, for example, their motives for learning, the learning methods and strategies they use, and the social and environmental resources available (Weinstein et al., 2000). They develop an agent role by modifying or adjusting their learning strategies and behaviors to attain their goals. Agency is the core of self-regulation in as much as choice and control are the foundations of the process (Zimmerman, 2000). That is why promoting self-regulatory competences is not just being able to manage a couple of isolated learning strategies, taken out of context, but rather to discuss a framework that prepares and guides studying by strengthening its quality (Rosario, 2004a).

Self-regulated learning is an intentional process where students need to have three kinds of knowledge about strategies: declarative, procedural and conditional knowledge. In short, knowing a set of strategies and its nature (e.g., what is self-questioning?); knowing how to use these strategies (e.g., how to question while reading and studying?), and knowing when to use them. It is important to teach learning strategies, but it is even more important to promote opportunities for hands-on practice with these strategies, in order to learn how to use them in different learning situations and academic tasks (Canabach et al., 2002; Valle et al., 2005).

Students cannot self-regulate their learning unless they are provided with the right opportunities to do so, as only that will enable them to control certain essential dimensions of their learning. Promoting teaching efforts and designing intervention programs will help students learn study skills. Research shows that students require explicit instruction of learning strategies otherwise they tend to randomly choose unintentional tactics, rather than real learning strategies, in order to attain the established goals and achieve higher levels (Rosario, 2004a; Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998). Although research has clearly stressed how important self-regulatory processes can be to achieve success at school, few teachers currently prepare students to learn on their own (Zimmerman, Bonner & Kovach, 1996). Testas' (Mis)adventures, the innovative project presented in this paper, is an essay in addressing this challenge.

Testas' (Mis)adventures project

Testas' (Mis)adventures (Rosario, 2002a, 2002b, 2002c, 2003, 2004b), is an intervention program designed to promote strategic learning through stories where the self-regulation processes and learning strategies are made explicit. Research has extensively confirmed the important role of learning strategies in academic success, and the need to promote self-regulation processes throughout the curriculum (Zimmerman, 2000). This project was carried out by a research group of Portuguese teachers and educational psychologists at Nossa Senhora do Rosario School (Portugal). Anchored in the social-cognitive framework, Testas' (Mis)adventures were intentionally designed to develop fifth through ninth graders' self-regulated learning (students between 10 and 14 years old in Portuguese compulsory education) in the school setting. The project consists of 5 narrative books to be worked and explored in the classroom by teachers and psychologists. It is based on the conviction that all students are able to self-

regulate their motivation and learning whenever they decide to show effort and take control of their learning tasks.

Testas, the main character's nickname literally meaning forehead, tells his schoolmates about his successes, failures, adventures and misadventures in his learning and studying process. Testas, a student like many others, describes the way he handles learning contents and school challenges; helps his schoolmates with the learning tasks; and makes them think about and use an appropriate repertoire of learning strategies, essential enablers of their academic performance.

Learning strategies are routes to understanding, and "include any thoughts, behaviors, beliefs, or emotions that facilitate the acquisition, understanding, or later transfer of new knowledge and skills" (Weinstein, Husman & Dierking, 2000, p. 727). Students who understand the instrumentality of a learning strategy to achieve their academic goals are more likely to use it. Research illustrates the teachable nature of self-regulatory processes and also their contribution to high motivation levels and achievement success (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1998).

This tool is based on the conviction that self-regulated learning can be promoted through modeling. Schunk and Zimmerman (1998) state that at first, academic competence develops from social sources (e.g., parents, peers), and hopefully shifts to internal control. Research highlights the importance of practicing with students the why and how of learning strategies, preferably through vicarious learning, rather than just presenting them.

This intervention is not a conventional learning competences program. There is no established structure of the sessions or any exact amount of time prescribed to work through the activities suggested. The plastic nature of this tool allows for adaptation to the class or student's learning needs. The workbooks from Testas' (Mis)adventures collection can be read and discussed at school or even at home with parents, respecting the nature of the self-regulated learning process: each activity/task/problem solving/story should be planned, executed and evaluated regarding the self-regulation model that organizes this tool (Rosario, 2004a). Assimilating these three steps (planification, execution and evaluation) will assist students and educators in collaborating in the learning process and will empower their strategic options regarding each of the different learning tasks. Promoting self-regulatory competences is crucial for students' development, for one, and may be the main goal of learning and instruction is the development of life-long learning competences. If students know which, how, and when to use learning strategies in their study, this behavioral repertoire will increase their learning outcomes and promote their academic self-efficacy and self-esteem (Valle et al., 2003).

The use of narratives and the fact that Testas is a student like many others avoids the so severely censured de-contextualization of concrete learning experiences mentioned in literature. As Bruner (1990) suggested, narratives do not seek to make better readers, but rather better "authors". Testas' (Mis)adventures compile stories about learning and school life (e.g., establishing goals, procrastination, text anxiety, time management, memorizing). Written in a proximal way and using an intimate discourse, an ordinary student describes and reflects on his learning experiences. This methodology allows Testas readers to experience vicarious learning through his narrative and inductively learn a self-regulated model to approach learning and studying. Along the texts, self-regulated learning strategies are disseminated according to the self-regulation cyclical model proposed by Zimmerman (1998, 2000, 2002).

This intervention program suggests working with students "backwards", analyzing the texts and the stories and searching for the learning strategies hidden in the text. Students are encouraged to construct, based on Testas' narratives, their own self-regulated learning itinerary. The story presented, therefore, doesn't really have a full stop or an end; on the contrary, it is a starting point for personal self-regulation development.

Teaching learning strategies embedded in narratives is one of the innovations of Testas' project. Hands in hands with Testas, the students are given the opportunity to discuss personal problems and difficulties concerning their learning tasks. This familiar environment favors the contextualization and understanding of the self-regulated learning concepts. This can be illustrated by the quotation of a student who experienced the program: "Hi, Testas. I'm J. I've been reading your book. Thanks for the study tips. (...) I read about time management and the need to plan tasks as well as to anticipate consequences in one of your stories. That wasn't new! My mom and teachers are always telling me that. The "stones" story made me think of my learning goals and my responsibility ..., and that is good and bad, you know ..." (J., sixth

grade)

Furthermore the developed methodology is intended for promoting the transfer of knowledge and self-regulation competences to other educational settings and for encouraging students to view learning strategies as a set of tools in hand, available to use in different learning tasks and whenever it helps to achieve the learning goals. The following statement from a Science teacher who worked with some chapters of this tool illustrates this same idea: "(...) Testas' stories helped me as an appetizer, I mean, after reading the chapter my students started to talk about Testas' decisions and studying problems at once, and spontaneously turned to their own school life. (...) Now I'm more aware of my students' learning conceptions and able to teach them some useful learning strategies applied to "Science" as they are more receptive. (F, Science teacher, seventh grade).

This project has already been tested in the Portuguese educational system (Rosario, 2004a; Rosario et al., 2004). An intervention program carried out with 98 Portuguese students from fifth and sixth grades working with Testas for a year shows that, by the end of the school year, 70% of the students in the sample had improved their self-regulated study behaviors and 40% had attained higher grades in Portuguese and English as a Foreign Language compared with the 94 students who weren't part of the experience (Mourao, 2004). Another study from Rosario and colleagues (2004) found an association between attending Testas' intervention project and self-regulated behaviors ($F(3,113)=25,80; p<.000$) which suggests self-regulatory gains in learning behaviors. Personal improvement and eventual future increment in academic achievement can be inferred from the words of a student in the program: "(...) Testas made me think about what I do in classes, the way I take my notes, how I can deal with distractors. Now I'm a bit more conscious of my weaknesses and ready to face them." (P., eighth grade).

Five teachers who have used this tool with seventh and eighth graders highlight embedded self-regulated learning processes and strategies in the core of a narrative learning potential. This resource helped their fifty-two students understand the nature of learning strategies and their instrumentality in context (Costa, 2005). One teacher said: "(...) I didn't follow Testas script in History with this class but a colleague of mine did. However, my students, the same as his, without any clues, started to use some self-regulated learning concepts. They talked about proximal goals, procrastination, monitorization, self-consequences spontaneously ... and applied these concepts to the historical scenarios we were dealing with in the classroom." (D. History teacher, seventh and eighth grade)

Conclusion

We believe the focus of an intervention on learning strategies should not be addressed at compensating a deficit, but rather at implementing learning tactics to be used in any and every situation. Students need to be familiar with self-regulated learning strategies, they need to have an array of study strategies at their disposal and to practice their application in different learning situations and tasks. In spite of these findings, Scanlon, Deshler and Schumaker (1994) state that some teachers do not allocate time to teach learning strategies, arguing the need to cover the curriculum content. The potential effectiveness of this project lays on the development of the self-regulation processes and on this prevention message to school community: we are not born self-regulated, we become self-regulated, that is, we can all be more task centered, by improving and regulating our behaviors which can lead us to achieve more and in a better way. Using a student's words: "(...) What have I learned with Testas? I learned that I can do it! I still have some difficulties in Portuguese and Maths but my will is stronger. I believe I can ... See you around Testas." (C., fifth grade student).

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