Universal Aspects of the Learning Process:
Reflecting on the Past to Understand Present Practice

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Abstract

Reflecting on past experiences is one tool professionals use as a way to improve current and future practice. The authors’ experiences as learners have had an influence on the type of teachers we have become. Often, these effects are implicit, other times, we consciously choose to draw on or continue acquired techniques. This paper presents findings from the authors’ systematic self-reflection on past learning experiences. We consider the role that learning theory played in our own learning processes, extend these ideas into our current practice, and explore how experience and theory contribute to our present teaching of EFL. The article concludes with a discussion of how a pragmatic, pluralist approach to learning and teaching serves us as teachers of a foreign language in diverse contexts.

Key words: learning theory, reflective practice, pluralist approach

Introduction

In education research, the relationship between theory and practice is often clear. Theory informs practice and vice versa. In some teaching approaches, foundations in learning theory are clearly stated by those involved. Allen (2008), for example, discusses the benefits of developing critical thinking skills by using a

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constructivist approach. Her argument is that constructivist approaches, including problem solving, or learning by discovery, are the best fit for promoting critical thinking in learners. Teater (2011) is an example of research specifically designed to determine the extent to which learning theories can be applied in learning contexts. By following Biggs’s (2003) constructive alignment theory, Teater shows one way that student-centered learning can be successful. Although not always the case, in the field of education, whether researchers directly label theoretical bases or leave assumptions unnamed, their preferences of theoretical stance is often explicated, or can be deduced.

This paper reports a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) of the two authors’ reflections on past learning experiences; it draws from data that was collected as a requirement towards a doctorate in education (Ed.D.) degree. Each participant documented six past learning experiences (or vignettes), coded the vignettes, identified themes, and qualitatively investigated how learning theory can explain aspects of learning experiences. The research questions that guided the study are:

1. To what extent are learning theories able to explain the authors’ learning experiences?
2. Which themes identified in our past learning experiences are most relevant to our current professional practice as EFL instructors?
3. In what ways are the themes mentioned in (2) above significant in our professional contexts?

In this paper we will outline the process of identifying themes in narrative data, discuss the way in which theory applies to our past learning experiences, and provide examples of how learning theory and our learning experiences help inform our current professional practice. We conclude that in our own international contexts (where students and teachers often come from diverse cultural backgrounds and experiences), a plurality approach to theory and practice is most practical.

Method

Procedures

The vignettes data were produced within a reflective practice framework (Boud, 2001; Wilson, 2008). By reflecting on past experiences, our aim was to shed light on our perspectives as learners and how these influence our current practice as teachers. The authors individually wrote six vignettes each describing past learning experiences, three positive and three negative. We drew examples from various types of learning, including skills development, concepts or ideas, and affective learning. Table 1 lists the topics chosen. 1–3 are positive learning experiences,
whereas 4–6 are negative learning experiences.

After writing up our vignettes, we listed features and identified themes in our learning experiences independently. The qualitative technique employed was Braun and Clarke’s (2006) thematic analysis approach, which includes “a method for identifying, analyzing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (p.79). The authors both read the 12 vignettes and coded the learning experiences. Then, we each listed themes that applied to more than one vignette. The next step was to examine each other’s codes and themes, review the differences and similarities, re-reading the vignettes and further refining the themes (see Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.91). Because we had determined at the outset to write specifically about both positive and negative learning experiences, the most fitting way to express the themes found in our vignettes was by listing four themes that applied to positive and negative learning situations. The finalized themes are:

1) Teacher approaches  
2) Teaching method/material  
3) Learning environment  
4) Motivation to learn

The following section of the paper looks at the way in which learning theories can be applied to explain the themes identified in the authors’ positive learning experiences, while also addressing the difficulty that lies in trying to identify learning theories’ application to negative experiences.

Results

Learning Theory

The next step in analysis involved looking at the codes and identifying the instances in which learning theory explains the experiences of the authors. We used Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner’s (2007) conceptualization of learning theories as a framework to guide our assessment. Table 2 outlines the features describing our good-experience vignettes that are examples of certain learning
Theories in practice.

The above breakdown in which learning theories are applicable to our positive experiences shows how there is a relatively clear link between a certain learning theory and a good experience vignette. For example, a feature of theme 1 (Teacher approaches) is that learning was student-centered. This is a clear example of a constructivist approach to learning as an “active inquiry,” and an opportunity for the learner to exercise “individuality in a learning task” (Merriam et al., 2007, p.293 citing Candy, 1991). This is not to argue that the teacher at the time was consciously or actively operating within a constructivist approach. In analyzing the authors’ account of his experience, it can be determined that this is a clear example of constructivist theories in application.

In looking at the features of our negative learning experiences, it was much more difficult to pinpoint theories that apply. Because the negative features describe bad experiences, these vignettes by definition pertain to experiences when something was learned unsatisfactorily. Therefore, our six negative-experience vignettes are not examples of successful learning. For example, one feature we listed under theme 3 (Learning environment) was “conditions for learning not right.” This feature is a code for a learning experience where a university class was held in an auditorium with hundreds of students. The author was not able to learn in this environment. The teacher did not use any techniques other than explaining problems and their solutions in a lecture style. This feature could be coded as misuse of behaviorist learning theory because it appears to be a lack of the environment being beneficial for learning (Merriam et al., 2007). It could be argued that this is also a lack of applying constructivist theories of allowing learners to actively construct knowledge. In other words, when learning is unsatisfactory, there is a lack of clear application of learning theories.

To conclude this section, we would argue that when successful learning takes place, it is relatively easy to see how learning theory is applied. Aspects of learning that theorists in education or psychology have posited as being grounded in environmental, cognitive, or social factors that contribute to learning are clearly in evidence when looking at memorable and successful learning experiences. In

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contrast, when an attempt at learning proves unsuccessful or is a bad experience for the learner, it seems learning in these negative vignettes lacks any clear application of theory. Therefore, it was when theories of learning—including effects of the environment, human cognition, how experiences and other people play a role—were identifiable in the learning process, that the learning experience was positive and successful.

**Discussion**

In the previous section, we explain how the application of established learning theory can result in positive learning experiences, and how negative experiences or failure to learn was often the case where the application of theory was fuzzy at best. This section will focus on the positive vignettes that were not readily classifiable. Two features under discussion from theme 2 (Teaching method/material) are (1) ‘varied and appropriate methods and materials used,’ and (2) ‘able to facilitate different learning styles.’ Both descriptors are outside classification when it comes to applying a specific learning theory to learning experience. Both vignettes represent learning experiences in which the teacher or program allowed for variation of teaching approach and learning style. In this section, we will relate the theme of varied and personal learning styles to our own teaching contexts. By discussing individual differences and motivation in second language acquisition, as well as plurality of knowledge systems as an approach to learning in international settings, we will argue that being flexible and open-minded about practice and epistemological beliefs can result in positive and successful learning, especially in higher education.

**Individual Differences and Language Acquisition**

Our teaching specialty is the field of TESOL (teaching English to speakers of other languages), specifically EAP (English for academic purposes). EFL/ESL is a subject taught to non-native speakers of all ages all over the world. There are situations in Anglophone countries where immigrants or sojourners need to use English in daily life, or for work or school. However, there are many more cases in the world of learners studying English as a subject in school (see Crystal, 2003, p.112 for a discussion). Motivations people have to learn English are many, including being able to participate in an ever-increasing globalized world where, among many other mediums, much of the information on the Internet is in English (Altbach, 1998). In TESOL research and practice, one result of the incredible diversity that exists among students of English, is the individual learner differences approach to research and teaching. Ellis (2008, p.645) provides a representative list
of factors contributing to learning from an individual differences point of view, and includes the following:

- Intelligence
- Working memory
- Language aptitude
- Learning style
- Motivation
- Anxiety
- Personality
- Willingness to communicate
- Learner beliefs
- Learning strategies

Inherent in the rationale for this type of all-encompassing explanation of learning a second language is a belief that there are multiple, complex, and interacting factors involved in how quickly and how much language any specific learner will acquire. Researchers in this area typically focus on only one or two interacting factors and explore its effects on learning. For example, Yashima (2002) looks at the impact that willingness to communicate and anxiety can have on language proficiency gains. Her study does not address aspects of language such as grammar or vocabulary acquisition, but focuses specifically on individual’s attitude towards speaking in their foreign language. Nonetheless, the general idea is that any or all of the factors listed above can play a role in learning.

Learner autonomy (Holec, 1981) and self-directed learning are practical applications where individual differences are considered and utilized. An example from our own teaching is having a portion of the course assessment, often 20%, outside of class autonomous computer assisted learning through Internet resources such as www.englishcentral.com (listening and pronunciation practice using internet videos), www.wordengine.jp (vocabulary focused practice), or www.ello.o.org (listening practices using videos or conversations). For classes where we have students use these sites, students fill out simple journal entries each week recording a few facts about what they watched, their reaction to the content of material, and English (e.g. vocabulary) they learned. With learning a second language, all of the factors listed above can play a role at any point in the learning experience. In a class of 25 students for instance, there can be 25 different approaches being taken. Of course there are aspects of the course where students all complete the same task, but even when choosing tasks to be completed, many teachers give students options and they let them choose for themselves what material and skills to focus on.

Similar to providing students with options or variety of medium of instruction
in TESOL, as mentioned above, our vignettes that are coded with (1) ‘varied and appropriate methods and materials used,’ and (2) ‘able to facilitate different learning styles,’ are learning experiences where the program of study approached topics through multiple modes. Various aspects were included in the experience, such as reading about theory, accessing popular media online, examining case studies, taking quizzes, having discussions, and introducing topics by first sharing personal experiences in discussions with group members. Although he focuses on constructivism specifically, Perkins’s (2006) analogy of utilizing constructivist approaches as a “Swiss army knife” (p.45) could be applied to our learning experiences and our approaches to teaching. By approaching learning via a multitude of mediums, these programs are able to reach a more diverse group of students, and students are able to learn using individualized strategies.

**Motivation to Learn**

Features in this theme are related to learning that originated from the authors’ own interests. Therefore, locus of control would be on the learners. This learning was driven by our own interest, hence was not required by someone else. Humanist theory, as described in Merriam et al. (2007) considers learning from the viewpoint that there is a potential for human growth. Human beings have the ability to control their own destiny and behavior is the consequence of human choice. In addition, for Maslow (1970, as cited in Merriam et al., 2007), self-actualization is the goal of learning. Activities chosen by the authors or decisions made involving something that we wanted to achieve, and therefore were motivated to do so, enabled us to engage in learning and influenced the amount of hard work that was required for positive outcomes. Our choices of what and/or how we want to learn motivate us to achieve desired outcomes. Features in these vignettes clearly show that the authors wanted to improve and enrich their lives by learning about things they intrinsically value.

We have both worked at several universities teaching students who are not English or English-related majors. In an EFL, as opposed to ESL environment, it is not uncommon for students to lack feeling a need to be proficient in English. Likewise, they often cannot see its usefulness for their future. Life (2011) asserts that students need to feel that what they are learning is applicable in their lives, and that once they realize its importance, students are more likely to make efforts to learn. Without clear personal objectives or perceived relevance to their lives, most students attend class only because it is required and they need to pass in order to graduate.

One possible reason for students’ lack of motivation may be explained by referring to the types of orientations to studying upon and after entering higher
education (Clark & Trow, 1966, as cited in Beaty et al., 1997). Many (non-English major) university students we have taught fall under the typology of “collegiate,” which refers to students who put in the minimum effort required to gain a university degree. Other students we might classify as “non-conformist,” meaning that they detach themselves from college and expect to learn from off campus activities, such as from their part-time job workplace. Others we would classify under “vocational,” meaning their main reason for attending university is to gain employment after graduation. Japanese university students have taken/attended English for at least six years, and possibly more; it is not new to them. Therefore, it is unlikely that students are not prepared to study it. According to Ausbel’s (1967) views, which have been labeled assimilation theory, “most learning, especially in adulthood but in childhood as well, consists of assimilating new experience into one’s existing cognitive structure” (as cited in Hill, 2002, p.138). With their previous education experience, students should have the appropriate foundation to build on past learning; however, being de-motivated seems to narrow students’ outlook towards current learning possibilities. Candy (1991) writes that constructivist theory regards learning as compatible with “the notion of self-direction” (p.278). In addition, he writes that learning is an “active inquiry,” and an opportunity for the learner to exercise “individuality in a learning task” (p.278). This stance is a typical point of view inherent in constructivist learning theories, which count as essential the idea that learners need to be involved and active if they are to relate new knowledge to previously acquired knowledge.

Reaching advanced levels in a foreign language takes time. It especially requires constant practice and use. Research suggests that rewarding oneself and setting goals is a good way to enable habit formation. From the behaviorist point of view, Lally et al. (2010) write that reinforcement and rewards play key factors in the development of habits. They note, however, that overall the research is not definitive about sustainability of certain habits based on rewards over the longer term. The effects of rewards may wear off over time. Considering again our discussion of motivation, it has been proven that there is a direct correlation between goals and habits (Wood & Neal, 2007). People try to form a habit in anticipation of achieving a beneficial outcome. Verplanken (2006) suggests that complex behaviors involve more difficult processes to developing automaticity. For many Japanese high school students, passing entrance exams to enter university is one of their primary motivations for studying English. Consequently, students study English. Schunk (1991) writes that motivation is the process whereby goal-directed behavior is generated and maintained. Once their goal has been achieved, in this case, entering higher education, it is questionable how many students will still maintain their motivation to study English, especially when they are fairly confident
they will not need to use it after graduation.

Beliefs and Values Underlying Learning

Our teaching context in Kansai, Japan is that of adjunct English lecturers at the university level (see Whitsed & Wright, 2011, p.33–4 for a description of instructors in similar positions). The typical Japanese university employs both Japanese and foreign nationals (native English speakers; NS) to teach English classes. In primary and secondary education, NS teachers are not uncommon, but they are almost always assistant teachers, in other words, they are not licensed to teach in Japan (McConnell, 2000, p.211), so they team up with Japanese teachers in class. Higher education is different in this respect. In the classes taught by NSs, the instructors are often given autonomy to use whatever teaching style they prefer (Whitsed & Wright, 2011).

Based on our experiences teaching at multiple universities and working with many different Japanese and NS university instructors over the past six years, anecdotal evidence suggests that teachers operate within differing beliefs about how people learn. For example, some teachers in our context use mostly memorization of word lists or fill-in-the-blank type of grammar practice with tests of how well students can recall certain items, an application of utilizing fixed knowledge, where the authority figure holds the answers (Whitmire, 2004 p.100) Other teachers have students carry out group work and produce products such as posters or written essays as a team, an example of learners producing language while constructing knowledge (May & Etkina, 2002). Still others focus more on content that is based on certain humanistic principles such as equality or diversity (Merriam et al., 2007). Our vignettes that were categorized under the theme Teaching method/materials, and coded ‘able to facilitate different learning styles’ describe a similar experience, where student-centered approaches to learning meant that students were free to approach learning in their preferred style. We strive to maintain an approach to teaching that allows for negotiation of aspects of the curriculum (Cruickshank, 2004). Specific examples of this include accommodating students who request to not have group work, or open-ended tasks, but to do individual assignments that have clear outcomes and ‘correct’ answers.

Habituated culture-specific classroom behavior is another issue that many teachers in Japan face. In situations where students are reticent and reluctant to form and volunteer answers when this is what the teacher requests, either students or the teacher find themselves adjusting their style. The first author has more often than not attempted to acculturate to his students’ styles. Getting students to adapt and master the English conversation discourse style is one small example of the differences that exist, more often as implicit and outside of awareness, between
foreign teachers and Japanese students. Most successful foreign teachers in Japan develop an approach to education in which they are open to “pluralize understandings of knowledge systems, values and traditions” (Turner & Robson, 2008, p.126). By sometimes internalizing students’ approach to learning, and other times training their students in foreign learning styles, NS teachers strive to incorporate aspects of various knowledge systems that work best for the participants involved.

**Conclusion**

It has been argued that theory in SLA should be able to explain observable phenomena, and make predictions about what might happen in specific circumstances (VanPatten & Williams, 2007). Because the learning process is so encompassing and multi-faceted, no single theory can guide us as educators. However, when working within specific contexts and planning courses, for example, educators can organize material, activities, and interactions that are most likely to result in positive, successful learning. Instructors who are familiar with theory, or explanations of how people learn, are in an advantageous position to guide students.

In answering research question (1), we have shown how application of learning theory (even when implicit) can result in positive learning experiences. The analysis also shows how our negative and unsuccessful learning experiences point to a difficulty to specifically identify an application of theory. With regard to research questions (2) and (3), we have demonstrated how in applying a plurality approach, as well as keeping in mind factors that influence motivation, instructors can exercise maximum flexibility in international settings.

**References**


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