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Group tutorials: a Bologna-style solution to the learning-to-learn challenge?

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Abstract

The research presented in this paper is set in a Spanish University, and describes why and how group ‘learning to learn’ tutorials were introduced within an Action Research project designed to help students take greater control of their own learning. The paper shows how discoveries made during the project impacted on the implementation of the tutorials while discussing some of the perceived benefits of this approach.

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1. Introduction and background to the study

Despite constant references to autonomy in current educational legislation and curricula, research shows that ‘teaching for autonomy’ remains the exception rather than the rule in many institutions (Jimenez Raya et al., 2007). One explanation for this dichotomy is that such teaching requires fundamental changes in the behaviors and attitudes of both teachers and students (Little, 1991), changes which can take both parties outside their comfort zones (Broady, 2009). In order to ensure that responsibility is handed over from teacher to learners in a gradual and fluid process (Dam, 1995), the teacher needs to grow into his/her new role as facilitator/counsellor/advisor, and the students need to develop a willingness to change, while learning new skills and competences (Little, 1991; Scharle & Szabó, 2000).

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The research described in this paper represents an attempt to address these issues through the implementation of group tutorials focused specifically on the language learning process. These tutorials arose out of an Action Research project designed to help learners take control of their own learning. Based on the socio-constructivist principle that knowledge is built by the learner through social interaction, the project aimed to help learners make links between past experience, previously acquired knowledge and new learning (whether subject-specific or meta-cognitive) (Vygotsky, 1978; Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976). Within this theoretical framework, ‘autonomy’ does not imply individualism but rather interdependence, team-work and mutual support (Dam, 2008; Kohonen, 1992; Benson, 2001).

The Pilot Study of the Action Research project included a fairly classical barrage of ‘automizing activities: self-assessment and goal-setting, a learning portfolio and periodic reflective questionnaires. Learners chose and developed learning materials, presented grammar points and carried out peer evaluation and group work.

Students in the Pilot Study reacted positively to the intervention, and data analysis indicated a positive impact on students’ focus and effectiveness, as well as evidence of changing attitudes and behaviors (Wilkinson, 2010, 2012). Nonetheless, there were some concerns. Many students had difficulties with goal-setting: their goals were vague and not always relevant to their learning needs. A few found self-assessment threatening or de-motivating. Some disliked written reflection. Generally, feedback indicated that students did not see the relevance of this learning-to-learn work to other aspects of their lives and studies, which suggested they would be unlikely to transfer these life-skills to other areas.

In the main study, I therefore decided to capitalize on the greater emphasis on tutorial work recommended in ECTS guidelines in order to facilitate the transition from traditional methods to a more autonomous approach. By working in groups, I hoped to encourage students to help each other, hence building their autonomous skills.

2. Participants

The participants in the main study were all second-year students enrolled on the degree of English Philology at the University of Castile-La Mancha. There were sixteen participants, six male and ten female, aged 20-26. The activities were planned, delivered and analysed by myself, their English Language teacher, as participant observer.

3. Procedure – Phase 1

In preparation for my first experiment with group tutorials (referred to hereafter as Phase 1) students had all performed a self-assessment using the Common European Reference Framework and chosen individual learning goals to pursue alongside their traditional, course-book focussed classes. They had also received a detailed description of exactly what assessors would be looking for, and were now in the process of completing a ‘learning contract’, in which they planned what actions they could take to meet these criteria.

Phase 1 tutorials were 15-20 minutes long and took place in groups of 2-4 students in the ordinary classroom. We discussed students’ progress with their personal goals and advice was offered where appropriate as to the suitability of the methods chosen, strategies for overcoming obstacles, etc. Audio and video-recordings were made of the interviews in both phases.

4. Results - Phase 1

The recordings were transcribed and analysed to observe student-student interactions and to identify the benefits and problems of this approach. Tutorials were found to effectively meet their original goal: students and teachers together were able to evaluate progress and ensure goals and methods for achieving them were relevant and appropriate.

However, there was little student-student interaction: interviews were mostly made up of a series of dialogues between the teacher and one student at a time. I was also concerned that I had offered an excessive amount of directive advice which would tend to reinforce, rather than reduce, learners’ habitual teacher-dependence.

In addition, several students commented on emotional ‘blocks’ to their learning which they saw as insurmountable, because they were rooted in their personalities and therefore not amenable to change (all quotations are verbatim transcriptions of students’ own words):

“It’s my personality, I’m shy”

“I can’t organise myself. I’m a disaster. It’s my Mission Impossible.”

“I just can’t, it’s impossible for me.... I’m not able to do that.”

Reflection on the results of this first experience led me to plan a further phase of tutorials which I hoped would encourage a more interactive dynamic and allow students to ‘untie’ some of the affective ‘knots’ (Karlsson, Kjisik & Nordlund, 2007) they had identified.

5. Procedure – Phase 2

Phase 2 tutorials were 50 minutes long and took place in a small seminar room where 2-4 students plus the teacher sat around a central table. The questionnaires in the Appendix gave structure to the sessions, which focussed on learning strategies (especially emotional, reflective and organisational strategies) as well as goal-setting and evaluation. I deliberately tried to take on a more facilitative and less directive role.

6. Results – Phase 2

As intended, students discussed and developed their ideas regarding:

- practical and organizational strategies for language learning
- final self-assessment against personal and course objectives
- evaluation of the usefulness of techniques and resources used to achieve goals
- future plans
- as well as:
- recognizing and celebrating progress
- recognizing the transferability of this ‘Learning to Learn’ work to other areas of their experience

However, I was surprised by how deeply students entered into learning-related affective issues. The stimulus for these reflections was a questionnaire from the European Language Portfolio, which dedicates a section to emotional strategies. This proved to be a catalyst for very constructive discussions in which students tried, together, to find ways of overcoming their personal emotional ‘blocks’ with regard to language learning and learning in general. Affective issues discussed included:

- strategies for controlling anxiety
- the effects of mood on motivation, concentration and acquisition
- positive thinking and self-talk
- the vicious circle of avoiding doing things you don’t like and find difficult versus the positive outcomes of focusing on your weaknesses and overcoming them

As I had hoped, Phase 2 tutorials proved to be far more interactive than Phase 1. Two short extracts from the transcripts show how language learners ‘constructed’ their knowledge about the learning process as a group.

In the first extract, below, learners are discussing a problem common to most of the participants: the tendency to translate from mother tongue, rather than express themselves directly in the target language. (Students are represented by their initials, the interviewer by ‘Int’).

Int: I think this is one of the most difficult things for most of you, that [...] Spanish is interfering with your English. Is that true for all of you?

All: Mmm... yes. Yes.

Int: What can you do about it?

DM: Nothing!

Int: Nothing?

GR: Not think in Spanish. (i)

BRO: Think always in English. And think if this exists in English or not, or if this is Spanglish. (i)

Int: [...] Can you do it?

BRO: Yeah, I think so, yeah! (ii)

Int: Do you know how?

BRO: Studying a lot of English. And vocabulary, expressions, and forget the Spanish, think always in English. (i)

Int: Do you have a button in your head? Can you switch off the Spanish?

BRO: Yeah, I'm trying to do it. (ii)

When asked “What can you do about it?”, one student responds, categorically, “Nothing!”, hence consigning this problem to the realms of the insoluble. However, other students immediately provide their own suggestions (marked (i) in the extract), thus challenging DM’s blanket negative.

In the second extract (below), students ‘co-construct’ their knowledge about the impact of frustration and mood on learning.

LS: Sometimes I feel frustrated and I talk to her (IN). And well...she encourage me.

Int: Good. So you build each other up(i). And is that important, does it make a difference?(ii)

LS: Yes!!

Int: What happens when you feel frustrated? What effect does it have on you? (ii)

LS: I don't do anything. I don't do the homework or the compositions, because I don't feel like it. (iii)

FM: You can't concentrate.(iii) (*gathering pace*)

LS: Yeah.(iii)

FM: You are thinking about other things.(iii)

IN: You want to give up.(iii)

Int: So it's like a complete barrier. (i)

IN: Yes.

Int: Mmmm... there's a very famous educational psychologist, called Krashen, he calls this the affective barrier. When your emotions create an obstacle that prevents you learning.(iv) [...] E, what do *you* think about this?

EM: [...] When you are down, learning is more difficult to do anything, you don't want to do anything.(v)

Int: And when you are up? When you have positive emotions, what happens?(ii)

FM: If you feel good it's something important to your studying, you feel like you can stand studying for more hours. If you feel down you study five minutes, and you just want to give up because you cannot stand the situation.(v)

Int: Ok. Yes.. so it's the opposite, the vicious circle of negative emotion, which kind of ends up where you're going nowhere, [...] Or the virtuous circle where you feel motivated, excited, confident, you want to do more, more, more.(i) [...] And we can control that, it's something we can learn, but nobody talks about this at school, usually... did you discuss these things at school (vi)?

IN: Sometimes teachers say if you think you can't then you actually won't be able to do it.(vii)

Int: Yes.

The sentences underlined in this extract (identified by roman numerals), highlight the process which takes place during this discussion:

- Teacher clarifies, sums up, interprets
- Teacher probes, focuses the reflection and moves it forward
- Students appear to discover/work out, through the discussion, the full impact of frustration etc. on learning
- Teacher inputs relevant theoretical knowledge
- Student describes the problem in more detail
- Teacher encourages students to make connections with previous knowledge.
- Student makes a 'connection' with another area of learning.

In this dialogue, the 'discoveries' which are made arise from the contributions of all the students, although the teacher is still clearly playing a dominant role in pushing the conversation forward, and in giving direction to the development of the debate.

7. Discussion and conclusion

The Group Tutorials more than fulfilled my expectations in resolving some of the teething problems which can arise when we try to promote autonomy in the classroom (Little, 1991; Dam, 1995). They helped students to define relevant learning goals and methods for achieving them as well as to monitor and celebrate their progress. Reflection and analysis of the first group tutorials helped me adapt my discourse and take on a more facilitating role. This in turn led to a constructive 'self-help' dynamic in which students supported and advised each other. The interactions show students were able to build their metacognitive self-awareness, a key factor in developing learner autonomy (Dickinson, 1996). The tutorials also helped to smooth out difficulties and resistance associated with the process of change, while improving communication and relationships between teacher and students and between the students themselves.

The incorporation of life-skills across the curriculum is fundamental to the philosophy behind the Bologna process. Moreover, conducting learner-counselling in groups has obvious time-management advantages over individual sessions. Traditionally, group oral work in English has been built around topics of sometimes suspect learner interest. The question of how to learn best is relevant to any university student, and discussing this topic is as justifiable a use of the target language as any other. In addition, by supporting one another in this way a caring, relaxed group dynamic is established which in turn builds students' self-esteem and proves to be very motivating, two key factors in developing learner autonomy (Legenhausen, 2008; Ushioda, 1996).

For all the above reasons, I argue that this type of ‘learning-to-learn’ tutorial can help students assimilate challenging new learning styles, while allowing the teacher to grow into his/her role as facilitator-cum-counsellor.

Appendix A.

A.1. Emotional, Reflective and Organizational Strategies

Maybe you never thought about how important your feelings are to the way you learn, but research has shown that they make more difference than we sometimes realise. If we are to be great learners we need to learn how to manage our feelings as well as our notes!

Read each of the ideas in the sections below and tick the ones which (a) you already do or (b) you would like to try doing. Don't write anything in column (c) or (d).

	(a) I already do this	(b) I would like to try this	(c) I have started doing this	(d) Does it work for you? ☺ or ☹
Emotional strategies				
I try to keep my anxiety levels low when I am using the foreign language.				
Although I worry about making mistakes, I speak without worrying about looking ridiculous.				
I don't get stuck if I don't understand a word that I hear, I just keep listening and trying to work out what is being said.				
If I can't think of the word I need, I try to think of another way of saying the same thing				
I talk to other students about the way I feel about my learning.				
I have a learning diary where I write down how I feel when I'm studying.				
When I do something well, I congratulate myself or give myself a prize!				
Other ideas (yours or someone else's)				

Columns a & b were filled in in class before Phase 1 tutorials. Columns c & d were completed just before Phase 2 tutorials.

	I already do this	I would like to try this	I have started doing this	Does it work for you? ☺ or ☹
Reflective and organisational strategies				
I decide what I want to learn and set my own learning goals				
I organise my time taking into account what I have to get done and setting priorities				
I monitor my progress regularly, checking what I know				

and what I don't know				
I look for opportunities to use the language I'm learning (listening to the radio, using internet etc.)				
I take regular breaks when I'm studying, because I understand it better when I come back to it.				
I notice the mistakes I'm making and try to correct them.				
vii) I work out which is the way I personally learn best				
I make sure I have a good, tidy studying environment: with the appropriate place, time, lighting, etc.				
I keep a diary where I write down what I am learning				
Other strategies: (your ideas or someone else's)				

Appendix B.

B.1 Guideline questions for Phase 2 Group Tutorials

Warm-up/opening questions How do you feel about the year generally? Do you have a clear idea of what you need to achieve?
Learning strategies What new techniques have you tried for improving your learning? What advice can you share with each other to try to overcome your personal obstacles?
Learning contract/personal study plan Has the learning contract helped you? Why (not)? Are you clear about your goals/what you need to do/change/improve? What do you think about this way of working? Can it be applied to other areas of your life/studies?
Evaluation of the programme Generally, what has been different this year to other years? What have you NOT liked, felt comfortable with? What have you liked particularly?

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