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Promoting decompartmentalised learning through topical presentation and reflective diary writing

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Abstract

The intended learning objectives of *SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik* includes possessing a firm understanding of psycholinguistic knowledge and applying the knowledge in other linguistic disciplines. Unfortunately, learners have difficulties in achieving these goals. Thus, this paper presents the intervention the course instructor made through topical presentations and reflective diary writing to assist undergraduates recall what they learned previously and remember what they were learning in *SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik* longer. Results show that learners who scored high marks in the topical presentations and reflective diary writing eventually did well in their quiz – an indication that decompartmentalised learning have begun to place.

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1. Introduction

Most learners learn with one aim in mind – to pass their exams. Hence, rather than understanding what they learn, they tend to memorise information gathered from learning without fully understanding them because they believe they have to reproduce a large amount of what they have learned in a short period of time, i.e., during exams (Bagby & Sulak, 2009). In other words, learners "learn by rote" – a technique which requires learners to depend solely on their memorisation skills without taking comprehension into consideration (Li, 2004) so that they do well in exams.

By definition, *rote learning* means learning something in order to be able to repeat it from memory rather than learning it in order to understand it (Moore, 2000:1). For some young learners, the rote learning of factual information is done for examination purposes (Pell, Iqbal, & Sohail, 2010). The problem with such a learning technique is that the items the learners learn do not stay long in their memory. The learners tend to easily forget what they have learned and are not able to relate new information to known information. Although such a learning technique is useful in the mastery of basic knowledge such as multiplication tables in mathematics and phonics in reading, this type of learning is not effective in mastering complex subjects at any advanced level (Schunk, 2008).

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This is because learners are not only expected to "regurgitate" what they have memorised, but also, they are expected to be able to solve problems and transfer their knowledge to new contexts (Bagby & Sulak, 2009).

Rote learning is a form of compartmentalised learning, where information is stored individually in isolated sections like a filing system (Young, 2006). Because of this, the learning process has not become a meaningful process to learners which result in their inability to transfer what they have learned to different contexts. But how can instructors encourage learners not to compartmentalise their learning and understand what they are learning and make their learning a meaningful process?. According to Young (2006), instructors should enable learners to relate the topic they are learning to something that is already known. This kind of learning has to be done consciously. Such a learning process is what educationists call "holistic learning" – the kind of learning that turns every form of information into an important point that connects to other points (either within or across boundaries) in a way that is most comfortable to the learners.

Educationists have tried many ways to make learners' learning experience meaningful. They include diversifying teaching styles and making learning a fun experience. All these were introduced to augment learners' educational experience.

With regard to the current research, this paper describes the researchers' approach at augmenting learners' educational experience in learning *SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik* – a course that is taught in the Malay language at the Linguistics Program of the School of Language Studies and Linguistics, UKM. This is because, based on the researchers' observations and discussions on previous learners' performance in the course, most learners have negative perception towards psycholinguistics due to their inability to recall what they had previously learned in other linguistic subjects and relate what they were currently learning to what they had previously learned and what they will be learning in future. This paper presents two forms of interventions that the course coordinator took to augment learners' educational experience in learning *SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik*, i.e. through 1) Topical Presentation, and 2) Reflective Diary Writing. It aims to show that learners who did well in topical presentations and reflective diary writing were learners who decompartmentalise their learning and were those who eventually scored good percentage in their quiz.

2. Topical presentation

Learning materials for *SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik* were mostly presented to the learners in multiple representations. However, multiple representations usually impose high demands on the learners because of the multi-modal nature of input in the learning process. As a result, learners were usually not able to integrate the different representations because of the complexity of the tasks. Thus, one way to overcome the difficulties learners might encounter in understanding teaching materials with multiple representations is to get them to self-explain what they have learned followed by a support on the learners' self-explanation activity (Roy & Chi, 2005). According to Renkl (2005), self-explanation is the act of learners providing themselves with explanations that contain information that is usually not available in the teaching materials. They are proven to be particularly helpful to learners especially when learners are able to integrate visual and verbal knowledge in their explanation (Aleven & Koedinger, 2002). This is because the integration of verbal and visual knowledge in self-explanation actually reinforces learners' verbal declarative knowledge (Ainsworth & Loziou, 2003).

According to Chi et al. (1994), spontaneous self-explanation alone may not be effective if the self-explanation is not enhanced by prompting. This is because without prompts, learners are not able to process the kinds of items that need to be learned (cf. Vygotskian approaches to development, where learning can be successful if the right kind of support is given in the right kind of context) (Berthold, Eysink, & Renkl, 2008).

One of the ways for learners to get prompts in self-explanation is through topical presentation sessions. Topical presentation is very much like collaborative learning conducted in class. This is because, learners may be able to get useful prompts from their colleagues as well as from their instructors. Studies (e.g., Fischer & Mandl, 2005) have shown that individuals who are involved in collaborative learning benefit more than those who don't. Knowledge of learners with shared or unshared prior knowledge can influence on another (e.g., De Lisi & Goldbeck, 1999) and complement each other. Knowledge sharing can help learners accomplish a learning task more easily (Weinberger, Stegmann, & Fischer, 2007) because it allows learners to "construct knowledge by working on complex problems together, including individually contributing to solving the problem, partaking in discussion of the individual

contributions, and arriving at joint solutions" (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995, cited in Weinberger, Steggman, & Fisher, 2007, p. 416).

In collaborative learning, learners can apply "what they have heard, read, or seen (often through traditional methods), to a specific activity" (Doolen & Choomlucksana, 2009, p. 200). Thus, in-class collaborative learning activities via topical presentations often give opportunities to learners to discuss assigned work and key learning objectives in small groups.

3. Reflective Diary

Reflective diary writing is a form of "self-study" (Mozzon-McPherson, 1999) that requires learners to write the strategies they employ at improving the process of acquiring knowledge. Since understanding the process of learning happens when one reflects on it (Eliot, 1943, cited in Ash & Clayton, 2009), reflective diary can be considered as an avenue for learners to write about how they feel in the process of acquiring the knowledge in a non-threatening manner. Reflective diary writing promotes "significant learning, including problem-solving skills, higher order reasoning, integrative thinking, goal clarification, openness to new ideas, ability to adopt new perspectives, and systematic thinking (Ash & Clayton, 2009: 27). Learners are not the only ones who benefit from reflective diary writing. Since learners include in their diary the process of them acquiring knowledge, course instructors also benefit from this exercise as they can get feedback from learners on how they learn (Williams & Wessel, 2004; Rudge & Howe, 2009).

Effective reflective diary writing involves input from course instructors. Thus, the reflective diary will have to be submitted to the course instructors for comments in relation to the learners' self-study methods. The feedback given to the learners should encourage them to write more (Mozzon-McPherson, 1999), should show learners that their learning experience is emphasised by the instructors, and should not focus on the learners' limitations but should emphasise their strengths instead (Jordan, 2000). Because of the advancement of technology, today's reflective diary writing is not limited to hard copies, but also emails (Marttunen & Laurinen, 2001) and other forms of media (Lindström, et al., 2006).

4. Methodology

4.1.1. Participants

All 28 BA Linguistic (Hons.) final year undergraduates (24 females) who enrolled for *SKBL3113 Psikolinguistik* course participated in this qualitative study. They were those who had undergone other linguistic courses (Phonetics, Phonology, Syntax, Semantics, Discourse & Pragmatics) in previous semesters, and like other linguistic courses, they were taught Psycholinguistics in the Malay language in a two-hour lecture and a one-hour tutorial session each week. They were between 21 and 23 years of age and their cumulative grade point average (CGPA) is between 2.53 and 3.52. Twenty-seven participants were Malay and regarded the Malay language and their first language.

4.1.2. Materials

The materials used in the study were 1) assessment score sheet for topical presentations, and 2) reflective diary entries from the learners. A third material used for this study was learners' answer scripts for their quiz. The quiz was used as a benchmark to gauge the learners' performance in the course. The quiz had two questions; question one required them to relate what they were learning to their previous knowledge; question two required them to relate what they were learning to what they could do with the newly-acquired knowledge in the future.

4.1.3. Procedure

At the beginning of the semester, learners were informed that they were required to be involved in Topical Presentation and Reflective Diary Writing as part of the course assessment. They were informed that the purpose of these two tasks was to assist them in their acquisition of knowledge in psycholinguistics.

Topical presentation. For the topical presentation, learners worked in groups of five or six and on each week, one of the groups shared what they understood about the topic learned in that particular week with their fellow tutorial group mates. They presented their findings based on the specific tasks given to them. The task included matching key terms in Malay that were related to the topics learned that particular week to key terms in the English language. Once this was done, learners presented the definitions of the terms (5 terms per learner) to their tutorial mates together with relevant examples. The learners were strongly advised not to replicate the examples given in the lecture. All topical presentations were conducted during the one-hour tutorial session. Their performance was graded based on 1) accuracy of definitions (including relevant examples); 2) seriousness and sincerity in sharing the knowledge, and 3) creativity in disseminating the knowledge to the class. The total marks for Topical Presentation was 15.

Reflective diary writing. For the reflective diary writing, learners wrote diaries to reflect the learning of a particular subject matter. They were advised to include four components of reflective diary writing, i.e., 1) Pre-reflective Preparation; 2) Reflection; 3) Learning, and 4) Action as a Result of Learning. The learners were asked to submit their diaries by the end of the fifth week of the semester and that all of them should submit between two and five diary entries to the course instructors. The learners' diary writing was graded based on 1) their ability to summarise the knowledge gathered, 2) their ability to relate new knowledge to previous knowledge; and 3) their ability to relate new knowledge to their future. The total score for Reflective diary writing was 15.

5. Results

5.1.1. Topical presentation

By the end of the fifth week of the semester, twenty learners had already presented their topical presentation. Out of this number, seven scored at least eleven points (73.33%) in the topical presentation. Two scored a twelve, one scored a thirteen, while the rest scored an eleven. These learners provided almost accurate definitions of each of the five terms relevant to the respective assigned topics. All seven of them showed seriousness and sincerity in sharing the newly acquired knowledge and presented the topics creatively.

Learners who scored a perfect mark for definitions not only provided almost accurate definitions of each term relevant to topics; they also gave examples that were different from those given by the course coordinator. For example, in describing what "negative reinforcement" is (under the topic "The History of Learning Development & Learning Theories"), the course instructor used the act of one parent lifting her daughter's weekly chores of washing the bathroom for two weeks for getting an A for Science as an example of "negative reinforcement". The learner who scored a perfect mark for the same term used the act of a father excusing his son from washing the dishes as an example. Learners who did not score a perfect mark merely reiterated the course instructors' example to the particular term. One learner scored a perfect mark for all five terms she chose (total score 10) and five scored a perfect mark for three terms (total score 8).

Each learner was awarded three marks if they showed seriousness and sincerity in sharing the knowledge. Although seriousness and sincerity are two subjective concepts, their manifestations were easily observed in the learners' presentation. For example, one learner who was serious in presenting the topics she was assigned to conducted research regarding the terms she was investigating beyond what was presented by the course instructor. This learner presented alternative definitions to support the definitions of the terms. The learner also made connections between what she was currently learning with what she learned previously. On the other hand, one learner who was sincere in presenting the topics did not only present the definitions and gave examples to her tutorial mates; this learner, from time to time, actually interacted with her audience by asking her audience whether or not they understood what was presented to them. The learner also reminded her friends regarding the relationship between the terms they were acquiring to what they learned in previous linguistics subjects. Only one learner scored a perfect mark for this section; seven scored a two in this evaluation criterion.

Learners were awarded two marks if they showed creativity in disseminating the knowledge to the class. This included creativity the layout of their PowerPoint presentation and the choices of examples used. Only one scored two marks and seven of the learners scored one mark for this criterion.

Out of the seven learners who scored more than 11 marks for their presentation, five of them (71.43%) scored marks more than 69% in their quiz. One learner scored 76.67%, one scored 80%, one scored 86.67%, and two learners scored 90%.

5.1.2. Reflective diary writing

At the end of the fifth week of the semester, all learners submitted their reflective diary entries to the course instructor. Their diaries were read and labelled based on the quality of their diary entries. There were altogether three categories, namely, very good, good, and moderate diaries. Altogether, 93 diary entries by 28 learners were submitted to the course instructor (an average of 3.39 diary entries per learner). Seven (25%) of the diaries were very good diaries, 4 were good diaries and 17 were moderate diaries.

Very good diaries included learners' reflection on what they did prior to learning the subject matter. This includes the learners' feeling towards the topic they were about to learn and how the topic may relate to what they will encounter in the future (Learner 3 & Learner 9). One learner (learner 9) even wrote what he did during lectures so as not to fall asleep during lectures. ("*I sprinkle some water onto my face to freshen up*"). Another learner (Learner 7) made connections to the knowledge she was acquiring to her real life experience. ("*I notice my nephew's speech development is a lot similar to what I learn about child language development from my lecturer*").

Analysis shows that six of the learners whose reflective diary was classified as very good scored grades higher than 75%. Their performance in the quiz also showed an improvement from previous semester's linguistic courses (e.g., from a "B" to an "A").

6. Discussion and conclusion

With regard to using topical presentation as a means to augment learning experience, this study shows that topical presentation, to a certain extent, does help learners in getting them to obtain good results in their quiz. As mentioned in the results section above, learners who scored more than 69% in their quiz were those who obtained more than eleven marks in their presentations. They were learners who provided accurate definitions with novel examples for each of the terms they investigated, shared their findings seriously and sincerely, and presented their subject matter creatively.

As a form of in-class collaborative learning, topical presentations provide a platform for learners to get useful prompts both from their course mates and their course instructors. It is also a platform for course instructors to find out if the learners really understood the subject matter the manner the course instructors want the learners to understand them. Topical presentations by learners can also be a good venue for course instructors to immediately rectify learners' misconceptions towards certain concepts. Other learners who did not present during the topical presentation can also benefit from this exercise if they were willing to share their prior knowledge with the presenters and complement the items presented by the presenters. If the other learners were willing to participate and provide input in the discussion during topical presentation, their acquisition of knowledge will be much easier. This is because, their participation will help to construct knowledge by trying to solve problems that are complex together as a team (Weinberger, Stegmann, & Fischer, 2007).

As for Reflective Diary Writing, this study shows that to a certain extent, reflective diary writing does help in getting the learners obtain good results in their quiz. This is because, through reflective diary writing, learners can inform the course instructors how they feel about the way the course is taught, as well as write down what they have understood from the lesson. For course instructors, apart from being a platform to check learners' understanding on the subject matter, reflective diary is actually an avenue for them to listen to the unheard voices of learners (Boud, 2001). Course instructors can then make necessary adjustments to the teaching approaches and hence, any mismatch between learners' and teachers' agenda (Huang, 2006) can be avoided.

A similar study can be conducted quantitatively in the future to look into the effectiveness of topical presentations and reflective diary writing in helping learners to decompartmentalise their learning, and hence score good grades in the course. For this to take place, a larger number of learners will have to participate in the study. An experimental study can also be conducted in the future to compare and contrast which of these two activities will benefit learners better.

In conclusion, to a certain extent, this study shows that topical presentation and reflective diary writing are two possible ways to augment learners' process of knowledge acquisition, especially in the learning of psycholinguistics. This will not only make compartmentalized learning history, but also, it will eventually make learners' acquisition of knowledge more meaningful and help them to score good grades in their studies.

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