

Success or Failure of Learners in Selecting the Right Approach to Learning

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Abstract

There are various forms of learning, and different learners apply different learning processes to organize learning. Approaches to learning describe what learners do when they are learning and why they should do it. The basic distinction is between a Deep approach to learning (*Holistic way*) and a Surface approach to learning (*Atomistic way*). These concepts having been developed in the 1970s and 1980s are now well-established in the higher education literature. In the deep approach to learning (learning with understanding), learners aim towards understanding that allows them to use and reuse the information in a variety of situations. In a surface approach to learning (rote learning), learners primarily memorize material for the tests and exams so that they can pass assessment. There are some factors which influence student learning including perception of the learning situation, background, prior knowledge and experience, motivation, role of teachers and educational context. In this paper, the investigators have focused on the reasons as to why most of the learners apply the surface approach to learning rather than the deep approach. For this purpose, the undergraduate students of a university in Saudi Arabia were chosen as participants in carrying out the study. Some suggestions are there in this paper for both teachers and students focusing on the role of good teachers who understand teaching, what it takes to learn, how to encourage and support deep approaches to learning.

Keywords: Approaches to learning, Deep and Surface Approach, Holistic and Atomistic learning, Motivation, Teachers' role, Complexity of Teaching/Learning Factors

Introduction

Learning is dependent on a complex interaction of factors and hence there are different approaches to learning which are conditioned by concepts of learning. The surface and deep approaches to learning form a cognitive doctrine developed by language researchers Saljo (1976) and Biggs (1999). They were the innovators who began to study an apparent difference in learning outcome achieved by different individuals. According to them, the differences between surface and deep learning are as follows:

Surface and Deep Learning: Surface learning (as its name implies) involves simply 'scraping the surface' of the material being studied, without carrying out any deep processing of the material. There are many students who complete the minimum tasks, memorize what is needed for an exam and nothing more. In this approach, students see learning tasks as enforced work. These students are passive learners, working in isolation, and see learning as coping with tasks so they can pass assessment.

By contrast a student who adopts a deep approach to learning seeks to understand meaning. They have an intrinsic interest and enjoyment in carrying out the learning tasks, and have a genuine curiosity in the subject and connections with other subjects and with building on their current learning. These students may enjoy social learning, including discussing different points of view.

According to Saljo (1976), deep approach requires holistic learning. A learner should be able to decompose the knowledge and possess the ability to grasp new parts by relating to knowledge at hand. The holistic approach implies systematic organization. A holistic way is helpful in developing complex understanding. Students who see learning in an atomistic (limited) way are likely to be those who do not adopt deep approaches. In the opinion of Chalabine (2004), a transition from the atomistic to holistic approach is one of the most important improvements in one's learning experience.

Objectives of the study: In this paper, the investigators have focused on the reasons as to why most of the learners apply the surface approach to learning rather than the deep approach. For this purpose, the undergraduate students of a university in Saudi Arabia were chosen as participants in carrying out the study. The research paper aims to find out answers of the following research questions:

1. Are universities and administration responsible in any ways to make the learners choose the surface approach to learning rather than the deep approach to learning?
2. Are the learners solely responsible for their wrong choice of adopting the learning approaches?
3. Can teachers help the learners in following the right approach to learning?

Literature Review

There are a lot of studies on the approaches to learning, so a few of them have been reviewed here. Research by Marton and Saljo (1997) distinguished between two learning approaches which were the surface approach and deep approach to learning. The surface approach was characterized as 'reproducing' in tendency where the learners focused on memorization of segments of tasks rather than on meaningful relationships between parts. As a result, although they had concentrated on remembering facts and details, these students were less likely than another group in the study to remember the facts and ideas.

In contrast, the learners who followed the deep approach focused on 'actively making sense' of the task. These students looked for 'connections', 'underlying structure' and relationships to real world examples. Therefore, they both understood the task better overall and could recall ideas and evidence more successfully than the other group (Ramsden 2003:43). It is the linguist Ramsden who outlined the differences in how students organize information in the 'atomistic' way and the 'holistic' way. He stresses that both learning approaches are generic: 'everyone is capable of both deep and surface approaches, from early childhood onwards'. He adds that the approach adopted is highly dependent on the educational setting and its learning tasks.

The characteristics and factors that encourage deep and surface approaches to learning are compared by Houghton (2004) in his study compiled from Biggs (1999), Entwistle (1998) and Ramsden (1992). Houghton shows the role of teachers in helping students adopt the deep approach by engaging students in active learning as opposed to passive learning. Some researchers such as Naiman, et al.(1978), Rubin and Thompson (1982) found some broad strategies which were shared by learners adopting the deep approach to learning.

In summing up it can be said that learning approaches adopted by learners depend on their choice and preference. The deep approach (holistic way) is preferred by highly motivated learners who are unlike the poorly motivated learners preferring to adopt the surface approach to learning (the atomistic way). However, the crucial role of teachers is undeniable in making students go for the right approach to learning.

Methods

As the investigators work at the tertiary level, they have employed qualitative research adopting observational, descriptive and analytical approaches to come to the conclusion about the major factors affecting the variation in learning and the chosen approach of learning of EFL/ESL learners. They have used their own observations, experiences and interactions with their EFL learners. The tool of the present study included a structured interview in a formal setting in the form of a discussion (which lasted from 8-10 minutes) with the students of level 7(B.A. final year Honors) studying two Literature courses: Novel and Poetry. A total of 80 students participated in this study. The researchers recorded the key points of the discussion by taking notes.

Results and Discussion

Through observation and experience of the researchers, it is found that factors like lack of academic advising, studying under compulsion, employment of novice teachers in institutions, lack of knowledge of teachers about materials adaptation, inappropriate selection of materials for learners by untrained teachers, beliefs and attitudes of unmotivated learners, duration of the semester, etc., all contribute to make the learners see learning in an atomistic (limited) way. As a result, these learners do not adopt deep approaches to learning because they target their studies at simply passing the test rather than understanding the material in an aggregate way. The factors affecting the learners' choice of learning approaches are discussed below.

Lack of academic advising in some institutions

It is often observed that there are some institutions which do not provide academic advising in the right way. For instance, a student of level 2 or 3 takes courses of levels 5, 6 or 7 without having a clear idea about the courses. As a result, after a while these students cannot cope up with the materials of the courses for higher levels, and take recourse to the surface approach to learning.

Studying under compulsion

There are many cases of students who cannot get enrolled in the department of their choice, and hence they are sent to study a subject like English which they do not enjoy at all. In this case, those students have no motivation to study English Language or Literature, and that is why they are eager to complete their studies applying the wrong approach to learning which is rote learning.

No instrumental motivation

As some students choose a wrong subject as their major at the university, they do not have the instrumental motivation and prefer to be surface learners.

Inexperienced teachers

In some institutions, it is often found out that inexperienced teachers are asked to deal with courses which they themselves don't have a good knowledge on. For example, if the course is Novel, and if by chance, the course teacher/s of Novel has/have not read the particular text, then they opt for teaching their students only the summary of the novel rather than familiarizing the learners with the original language of the text. These teachers have the tendency to skip many parts of the original text due to their lack of knowledge of it. As a result, students don't bother to read the novel and do justice to the work of the great writers. It is these learners who accept information and ideas passively failing to reflect on underlying purpose or strategy.

Untrained teachers

There are many institutions which hire unskilled teachers paying low salaries to them. These teachers have no previous knowledge of teaching and training to deal with courses at the higher levels. They are ignorant about materials adaptation and are unsure about which items/materials need to be selected for the learners. For instance, if an untrained teacher of English Poetry is asked to deal with learners who have extreme low proficiency, s/he will not have the idea as to which aspects of poetry should be presented to those weak learners so that they can have a deep approach to the course. Many times, it has been seen that some teachers are eager to teach some difficult aspects of Poetry such as meter and types of meter of poetry to learners when the learners are unable to understand why the course Poetry is taught to them. In these cases, there is no doubt that many students target their studies at simply passing the test rather than understanding the material in an aggregate way.

Duration of a semester

Some universities in the Middle East have very short semesters having about just 14 -15 weeks in one semester. Teachers rush to cover too much material within such a short time, and hence the

learners are unable to learn the skills of analysis, synthesis and evaluation needed for deep learning. They concentrate purely on assessment requirements and memorize facts routinely.

Extremely negative attitude of the weak learners

Most of the time teachers find that it is the extremely weak learners in a course who concentrate on lower order cognitive skills such as memorizing facts. These learners see the course content simply as material to be learnt for the exam.

Recommendations/ Suggestions

Deep approaches to learning are related to high quality learning outcomes, while a surface approach is related to lower quality outcomes (Marton and Saljo 1984; Prosser and Millar 1989). There are some recommendations for both teachers and students which are given below:

Role of Teachers

All teachers need to help the learners become self-regulated, and encourage them to follow the holistic way of learning. In doing so, the teacher can help learners adopt '*SMART*' goals' (Doran, 1981), that stand for specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and relevant, and time bound. Once the learners have a good idea about the goals of their education, they will try to link the course content to real life and be deep learners.

Highly motivated and Self-regulated learners

Self-regulated learners are aware of their strengths and weaknesses, able to set goals to be achieved, and motivated to accomplish these goals, observe and evaluate themselves during the course of learning processes. These learners try to understand material for themselves interacting critically with content.

High quality teaching environment

If the teaching and learning environments are favorable for the learners, these will encourage deep approaches to facilitate higher quality learning than environments which encourage surface approaches.

Positive attitude of learners

It is extremely essential for learners to have a positive attitude towards learning and their academic environments to get their learning outcomes. They need to seek out the right conditions and materials for becoming deep learners.

Cognitive maturity of learners

Keeping in view the notion of Lightbown and Spada (2006), learners need to be advised that cognitive development is an important factor in determining the capability of them whether they are matured enough to handle courses which are designed for higher levels. For instance, learners of low levels like level 2 or 3 must not take courses of higher levels which need an appropriate background

knowledge for a sound foundation, otherwise those learners will have a cynical view of education and will see learning in an atomistic way.

Conclusion

Learning is the acquisition of new beliefs, and an assumption that is usually made is that these beliefs can be acquired one at a time. According to a linguist Tyler, (2013:284), ' If students are not able to transfer their teachings to their lives outside of school, then education is a failure.' Taba (1962), a curriculum theorist, a curriculum reformer, and a teacher educator, believes that educational curriculum should focus on teaching students to think rather than simply memorize facts. Therefore, all teachers should try to give their students the opportunity to become deep rather than surface learners by presenting clear goals and standards for what is to be learned. It is necessary for the deep learners to have both the study skill and the learning skill developed. Not only this, students can be motivated to use both deep and surface approaches to achieve their goals depending on what is required and the conditions under which they are learning.

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