

Teachers' Awareness of the Significance of Lifelong Learning: A Case Study of Secondary School Teachers of Batna – Algeria

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Abstract—This study is an attempt to raise the awareness of the stakeholders and the authorities on the sensitivity of Algerian secondary school teachers of English as a Foreign Language about the students' loss of English language skills learned during formal schooling with effort and at expense and the supposed measures to arrest that loss. Data was collected from secondary school teachers of EFL and analyzed quantitatively using a questionnaire containing open-ended and close-ended questions. The results advocate a consensus about the need for actions to be adopted to make assessment techniques outcome-oriented. Most of the participants were in favor of including curricular activities involving contextualized learning, problem-solving learning critical self-awareness, self and peer-assisted learning, use of computers and internet so as to make learners autonomous.

Keywords—Contextualized learning, EFL, Lifelong learning.

I. INTRODUCTION

EDUCATION in general and higher education in particular is meant to provide a foundation upon which skills necessary in life can be built. It continues throughout one's life in one form or another as many situations may arise where different sets of skills are needed to tackle them. Since the continual emergence of newer and different situations never ceases, the need for tackling them in novel and educated ways never subsides. It follows from this that education or learning is not a onetime phenomenon confined only to the period of childhood and adolescence, it spans the whole of one's lifetime. Lifelong learning has been defined variously by different authors, yet a reasonably standard definition, as given by [4], defines it in terms of its aims as "equipping people with skills and competencies required to continue their own "self-education" beyond the end formal schooling".

Lifelong learning can be said to the type of learning spread over not merely in formal educational setting but spans a lifetime of a learner. It is necessitated by the need to enable a person to adjust to the constantly changing dynamics of modern life where things tend to go awry if not adjusted intelligently and with professionalism. Those who keep themselves abreast of the changing nature of the academic as well as business affairs, think critically, evaluate choices and make informed decisions accordingly, usually lead the way. Though learning is commonly associated with practices

followed in a classroom in formal settings of educational institution, it has increasingly come to be a phenomenon which is neither age-nor domain-specific. It may be equated with the survival abilities that one needs to be able to survive in a largely competitive world. It follows from this that if one is taught keeping the goal of lifelong learning in mind and with the techniques that promote autonomous learning; one is likely to be better able to cope with the upcoming challenges. So a better way to accomplish this sort of learning is learning how to learn or the learning strategies. They enable a learner to construct a framework upon which future learning may be based. Just as the adage goes that if instead of giving one a fish, if you teach one how to fish, you do him a better turn; learners taught with this type of approach can be expected to fare better in twists and turns of life.

Though the need for such learning is felt throughout the lifetime of a person, it is all the more for a language particularly English that it is the language of science, literature, technology, media, communication, commerce, diplomacy and trade today. Most of the research around the world is being reported in this language. In a way it has become a sort of Lingua Franca for communication across widely distributed geographical locations. Learning this language amounts to processing a tool to unlock the treasure of knowledge. Though the mere ability to use a language proficiency does not guarantee mastery of all knowledge in that language, the proficiency and the ability to use it creatively and in multiple situations is certainly very important and can help those who mean business.

The concept of lifelong learning, though mainly economic in the current orientation, was not so previously. It was interpreted in terms of personal enrichment and emancipation. It is multidimensional in that it encapsulates other factors like social structures of the society, individual motivational and literacy levels, opportunities and choices available to individuals, cultural trends, government and organizational policies, and the availability or absence of incentives for such learning. In other words, learning of skills is socially constructed [5]. It is not a "thing" to be acquired and utilized.

Learning occurs in uncertainty, problematic situation and in the realization of not having enough knowledge and skills to deal with an arising challenge. In such a state of affairs, intelligent people take recourse to reflective practice, take stock of the available resources, seek assistance from other professionals in the field, discuss the nature of the problem

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with experts, and if no precedent exists, endeavor to come up with new understandings which contribute toward the body of knowledge. Learning in such a situation implies change which in turn, requires taking risks [3]. It progresses as a result of a process in which existing knowledge is critiqued e.g. reasoned opinion is expressed triggering reflective deliberations which extend the frontiers of knowledge. This action is taken by those who can take risks, accept challenges in contradictions, tolerate a level of uncertainty, feel curious in new and unclear situations, persist longer to find alternatives, are the learners who are better learners [9]. To equip learners with these characteristics, it is important to design course contents, classroom practices and assessment tools that encourage and infuse learners with confidence and the competence to tackle unusual situations and conflicts. One such concept is self-directed learning which amounts to moving on to a specific goal on one's own with as less assistance of teachers and other school-based infrastructure as possible. Learning in this situation is not in a linear fashion; it occurs in conjunction with a variety of other factors. Such multidimensional process in which many other components like previous knowledge, motivation, material conditions, emotions, the objective of learning and many other variables interact to construct what is called learning.

Reference [12] suggests that for making learners lifelong learners merely flooding them with content is not sufficient; they need to consider learning as personally relevant to their goals and interests, be sufficiently motivated, believe that they have the ability to accomplish those goals, be equipped with critical thinking skills, be able to effectively call into play and use the cognitive processes of encoding, processing and recalling informing, be able to control the feelings and emotions that facilitate or hinder learning, be in state where they can take responsibility for their own learning, and finally, be able to match performance with the goals. Knowledge thus gained is not for its own sake, but for the welfare of not only the person acquiring it as well as in the interest of the society at large. In this way, learning becomes a part of productive activity [19].

It has been equated with means that equip people with the skills and knowledge that are needed for success in a fast changing world. The philosophy that underpins this concept is that learners do not have to stop short of learning after leaving their school, college or university or any other institution of formal education; rather, they may continue to improve their skills, knowledge and proficiency in formal fashion throughout their life as and when compelled or desired by the exigencies of their work or profession [1]. Since socio-economic, technological and other factor have quickened the pace of change, people will not be expected to continue to hold on to the same profession all through their life. The demands of new professional skills to a level are necessary for the demands of the jobs. The rapid rate of change of life conditions will hopefully require people to hone their knowledge according to changed requirements of the time. The new imperative will go a long way in enabling the people

to adjust their learning in a 'variety of contexts' throughout their lifetime [1].

Lifelong learning particularly in language may be necessary in as diverse situations as work place (to solve a problem which cannot be solved in routine and which requires additional skills or knowledge), home (where situation demands a novel tackling), entertainment (where need may arise for innovative solution), play (may need to know rules of a new game), and for affective purposes (to show off). Lifelong learning not only helps adjust skills to changed professional requirements, it helps professionals keep current with the fast changing imperatives of the technological age [13]. The need for such learning is necessitated on another ground as well. The rate of curriculum change does not keep pace with requirements of the age of globalization necessitating a need among general public and particularly among business and technological professionals to be able to be equipped with the ability to adjust to new levels of learning to remain current.

II. HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

The concept of lifelong learning though not used in current terms dates back to the early twentieth century writings of Dewey, Lindeman and Yeaxlee[11]. The concept gained prominence in late 1960's International Conference on Adult Education where the term 'education permanente' was translated as 'permanent education' but later replaced by 'lifelong learning' [16]. From then onwards, this concept has continued to gain currency in the literature. The work in this period has its origin in adult and worker's education [6].

Since the 70's the concept has come to be seen as complementary to the traditional institution-based learning rather than its rival [14]. The concept characterized as transition from *modern* to *postmodern* by [15] emphasizes the need for relearning permanently throughout life.

The importance of this area of learning can be gauged from the realization that many developed countries felt as early as 1970's and enacted legislations, formed councils and bodies promoting lifelong education as policy matter. UNESCO, for instance, set up the International Commission on the Development of Education in 1972. The report of the commission underscored the need to make lifelong education as: the master concept of educational policies in the years to come for both developed and developing countries. This spirit of the concept has continued to be promoted through setting up of another commission called UNESCO Commission on Education for the Twenty-First Century in 1991 which in its report in 1996 underscored the importance of lifelong learning for any future education system [10] and an Institute called UNESCO Institute of Education in Hamburg. In its 2001 revised report, it added vocational education and training to the broader concept of lifelong learning. The organization continues to lay emphasis in the form of its recommendations, publications, and activities. Besides UNESCO, EU has adopted lifelong learning as one of the initiatives of its policy frameworks. In its attempt to make lifelong learning the

cornerstone of its policy, it celebrated 1996 as the European Year of Lifelong Learning and during this time it financed more than 500 projects pertaining to lifelong learning. The emphasis has continued to be laid on lifelong learning in one form or another since then. Even in 2002, the European Council and the Commission kept on making lifelong learning as the pivotal point of its agenda on education and training; it set the target that, by 2010, 'for the benefit of citizens and the Union as a whole... Europeans at all ages should have access to lifelong learning [8]. The peak was witnessed in 2006 by a decision of European Parliament and the Council to establish a program on lifelong learning with links from nursery to higher education. It invested more than 6.9 billion Euro from 2007 to 2013 on different programs relating to education [7].

Prominent among the other organizations active in the field of lifelong learning are the ILO and the World Bank. The World Bank is financing projects involving lifelong learning for developing countries [18].

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions this study attempts to answer are as follows:

- 1- Should the learning of English be a lifelong learning phenomenon?
- 2- What strategies can be adopted to realize the lifelong learning?
- 3- Which approaches can be preferred to make lifelong learning a reality keeping in view the conditions in this country?
- 4- What are the likely effects of not making it a habit to improve the language proficiency of secondary school students?

IV. METHODOLOGY

A. Methods

The methods used for this study were mainly qualitative, since a qualitative method of research lends authenticity and depth to a research. Though quantitative research method was also used, the focus was on the qualitative aspect of research. The purpose of using both types of methods was to identify discrete categories while at the same time gaining deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study.

B. Research Settings and Participants

The research was conducted among college teachers of English language. The respondents' perceptions were recorded using a questionnaire. Colleges in Algeria are a place where tertiary education is impaired and the edifice of education is built upon the basic understanding of English language developed in schools. English in Algeria has been made a compulsory subject for some time from class. Despite being a compulsory subject, it is the subject area I which a staggering number of students fail to get through the state examinations. Most of the time, English is learned merely to pass the examination. The ability to effectively communicate in

English is disappointingly low among the learners of English. The concept of lifelong learning is new not only to learners but also to many of the college teachers. Teachers of English as a Foreign Language are considered in a better position to throw light on the state of instruction and proficiency levels of college students. This is the reason why teachers instead of students were chosen for the purpose of this study.

C. Instruments

The instrument selected for this study was the questionnaire which is reliable, convenient, cost-effective and less intruding for the respondents. Another reason for choosing the questionnaire was that it is less time-consuming. The questionnaire is one of the most widely used educational research instruments [2]. The data collected with the questionnaire is easily convertible into quantifiable form as against the data obtained through other data collection instruments as field note, interviews, think aloud protocols etc. If constructed skillfully, it yields data in a form that lends itself easily to the purposes of the study [17]. As mentioned earlier, the questionnaire contains both open-ended and closed-ended questions to lend depth as precision to the data collected.

D. Data Collection Procedures

Since Algeria is geographically a vast country, it is not feasible to collect data from all over the country. The main source of data collection is Batna which is quite thickly populated. Questionnaires were personally delivered to respondents. They were asked to hand them back one day after for ease of understanding. Any ambiguities were sorted out before questionnaires were filled by the use of mobile phone. A total of 100 questionnaires were delivered, to respondents, out of which 60 were received thereby making up the return rate of 60%, a fairly good rate given the state of academic research prevailing here. Though most of the questions were open-ended, the responses were reduced to response categories for ease of analysis.

V. FINDINGS

The first three questions relate background and demographic information about the respondents. According to this information, the majority of the respondents teach at least three classes every day. The fourth question relates to whether the respondents consider the learning of English as a Foreign Language as helping students in any significant way. The majority (90%) of the respondents say they do. The next question is about whether the respondents feel that the learning of English should be a long-life phenomenon. All of them agree that it should be so. About the next question if respondents think students usually continue the process of learning English even after they have passed off, 85% of them say that they do not.

About the realization of the need for making lifelong learning an important part of educational policy, 85% of the respondents agreed that language skills loss is a big problem

and there is dire need to turn around and rectify the situation. Most (55%) of the respondents are of the opinion that educational authorities and policy makers are not doing enough to arrest language loss of our educated youth.

TABLE I
RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE (I)

| | |
|---|--|
| Do you think learning of English as a Foreign Language helps students in any significant way? | (90%) say they do |
| Do you feel the learning of English should be a lifelong phenomenon? | 100% |
| Do you think students usually continue the process of learning English even after they have passed off? | 85% say that they do not. |
| Should lifelong learning be made an important part of educational policy? | 85% agreed that language skills loss is a big problem and there is a need to turn around and rectify the situation |
| Are sufficient measures being taken by policy makers to arrest the loss of English language skills? | (55%) educational authorities and policy makers are not doing enough to arrest language loss of our educated youth. |

When asked whether the introduction of modern facilities like internet is needed to be part of assessment process, 62% of them agreed that this should be the case. The next question asks for strategies respondents would recommend at class, college, university, regional or national level to enable the graduating students continue to build on what learners learned in their colleges. Different responses were given like encouragement on the part of teachers to read books, introduction of oral tests and writing activities, maximum involvement in creative activities, and exposure to native speakers etc. Almost all the strategies as given by respondents confine to classroom practices to be initiated by the teacher. Only 7 respondents devise strategies to be followed by the school. None recommended any strategy which may be to do with the responsibility of regional and/or national government.

The following question relates to the benefits that may accrue to those interested in making the learning of English a lifelong experience. The majority (60%) of the respondents have ticked the first two opinions i.e. 'helps learners gain higher education' and 'help them enjoy life just for the pleasure of it' in addition to the first two options. Only 15% of them are of the opinion that lifelong learning makes learners better citizens in addition to other options. The next question asks if students think the purpose of learning English is merely to get through the exam, 97% of the respondents concur that this is the case. The following question relates to how students suffer for not making it a habit to continue to improve their English. The response categories included decrease in proficiency and expression, hesitation, decline in comprehension skills, failure and discouragement in practical life, lack of initiative and drive, inability to work out in unusual situations, over reliance on rote learning, poor academic achievement, and poor ability to communicate in interpersonal interactions.

TABLE II
RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE (II)

| | |
|---|---|
| Do you agree with the idea that modern communication facilities like the internet should be part of the assessment procedure? | 62% agreed that this should be the case. |
| What strategies will you recommend at class, college, University regional and national level to enable graduating students to continue to build on what they learned in their colleges? | - encouragement on the part of teachers to read books - introduction of oral tests and writing activities - maximum involvement in creative activities and exposure to native speakers |
| What benefits may accrue to those interested in making the learning of English a lifelong experience? | |
| Helps learners gain higher education | (60%) |
| Helps them in their professional life | (60%) |
| Helps them enjoy just for the pleasure of it | (60%) |
| Makes them better citizens | (15%) |
| Do you think students generally think it sufficient to learn English just to get through the exam? | 97% concur that this is the case |
| How do you think students suffer for not making it a habit to continue to improve their English? | decrease in proficiency and expression, hesitation, decline in comprehension skills, failure and discouragement in practical life, lack of initiative and drive, inability to work out in unusual situations, over reliance on rote learning, poor academic achievement, and poor ability to communicate in interpersonal interactions. |

The next question requires the respondents to prioritize the listed approaches according to their perceived level of effectiveness in achieving the goal of lifelong learning.

Highly contextualized learning is the most preferred category which received the maximum number of first preferences from the respondents. The second most preferred approach is task-oriented teaching. The third in rank is 'teaching the skill of learning to learn'. Then come in rank 'teacher's continuing learning of new research', 'process-oriented teaching', 'peer and self-assisted learning', 'student support services', 'learning through World Wide Web', 'promoting critical thinking', 'productive learning practice', and 'development of uncertainty management'.

Most of the research questions have been answered.

TABLE III
RESULTS OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE (III)

| How do you prioritize the approaches you think can effectively help in the achievement of the goal of lifelong learning in the order of their effectiveness? | |
|--|----|
| Student-regulated learning | / |
| Teacher-regulated learning | / |
| Process-oriented teaching | 5 |
| Task-oriented learning (problem-based learning) | 2 |
| Teachers' continuing learning of new research | 4 |
| Learning through World Wide Web | 8 |
| Teaching the skill of learning-to-learn (teaching learning strategies) | 3 |
| Peer-and self-assisted learning | 6 |
| Student support services like libraries and learning resource centers | 7 |
| Promoting critical thinking | 9 |
| Productive learning practice | 10 |
| Development of uncertainty management | 11 |
| Reflective practice | / |
| Critical self-awareness | / |
| Highly contextualized learning needed in practical life | 1 |

VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The main finding from this study stresses the need for incorporating the continuing education as part and parcel of the life rather than making it fixed in the early part of life as has been a trend the world over. It needs to be an integrative phenomenon where school, workplace, community combine to give effect to what is best in the interest of a modern, knowledge-intensive society. It should be an ideal mixture of learning and work. Knowledge has to be relevant, contextualized, open-ended, ongoing, work-related, reflective and self-directed to cater to emerging requirements of an evolving environment. The educational institutions need to design their course materials, instructional practices, and modes of assessment on patterns that encourage creativity, problem-solving, initiative and out-of-box solutions to complex issues likely to be confronted in real life outside of the classroom. It must endeavor to accomplish this by shared understanding, mutual cooperation, collaboration, engagement in meaningful activity, and innovative knowledge construction.

In this respect, teachers of English can play a pivotal role in making their students lifelong learners. Though course materials, modes of assessment are prescribed by educational authorities, teachers can still design their educational activities in meaningful ways. They can set up problematic situations in the class in which students may be required, to first, frame the problem and, second, to solve it by working out possible scenarios thereby helping learners become lifelong learners. But before they can do this, teachers themselves need to be aware of the imperatives of this relatively new concept of learning by cultivation professional development by forming communities of practice, coordinating their efforts, sharing their experiences, contextualizing learning, improving their skills and the sense of professional value. Apart from teachers, authorities at both college and higher level need to tailor their policies and efforts to make lifelong learning a worthwhile and attainable objective. They might be required to bring necessary changes in the frameworks regulating educational

set up, create congenial atmosphere for both teachers and students by providing incentives, facilities, opportunities, support, learning materials, learning support equipment to foster lifelong learning, and make assessment modes more friendly to the objective.

Teaching English as a Foreign Language, particularly at the secondary school level, may not be considered as something that is dispensed in the form of lessons taught to unknowing learners. Secondary school learners are generally reasonably mature, understanding, receptive and capable of understanding the difficulties of life situations and their abilities should be exploited to make them better learners by instilling among them the qualities of task achieving, innovation and critical thinking.

Lifelong learning requires a whole paradigm shift, a complete new orientation to a new set of thinking, habits, procedures, tools, assessments, practices and goals. The teachers as well as learners will need, first, to unlearn many other concepts of education and, second, to replace them with newer ones that are based on longer-term understanding of the concept.

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