The Learning Journal as an Agent of Attitude Change

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This paper is a report of a case study in which an interactive/reflective learner journal was used to encourage student English teachers at a National University in Korea to investigate their beliefs and attitudes regarding language learning. The goal of the research was to examine the extent to which increased awareness of these factors would promote positive modification of self-esteem, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to learning. Students were given a learning journal which consisted of in-class interactive activities focusing on various issues of foreign language learning and teaching, and out-of-class individual reflection pages. Having completed the journal, students were asked to report their perceptions of their learning abilities, study skills, confidence, motivation, independence and attitudes to self/peer-assessment. These reports were compared with identical pre-course questionnaires, and results over 5 semesters showed a significant increase in the use of positive keywords and in the length of responses. Given these results, it is suggested that awareness of the learning process, when discussed in an ongoing manner (as lesson content) and reinforced by individual reflection, leads to positive modification of the affective factors which drive learning, and hence promotes effective, autonomous learning.

Introduction

Attitudes to learning and the perceptions and beliefs which determine them, have "a profound influence on … learning behaviour" (Cotterall, 1995, p. 195) and on learning outcomes, since successful learners develop insightful beliefs about language learning processes, their own abilities and the use of effective learning strategies, which in total have a facilitative effect on learning. These students tend to develop a more active and autonomous attitude that allows them to take charge of their learning. Mistaken or uninformed beliefs about language learning, on the other hand, may lead to dependence on less effective strategies, resulting in indifference toward learning, poor cognitive performance, classroom anxiety and a negative attitude to autonomy

(Victori & Lockhart, 1995, p. 225). Teachers therefore need to acknowledge and respect students' attitudes, beliefs, and expectations and help them overcome any harmful perceptions and blocks, as well as enhancing students' awareness of their personal weaknesses and strengths and of their task/strategic knowledge, since beliefs differing from those of the teacher can lead to frustration, dissatisfaction with the course, unwillingness to perform communicative activities, and lack of confidence in the teacher, as well as affecting achievement (Mantle-Bromley 1995, pp. 381-383; Peacock, 1998, p. 125).

Adults and children form "self-schemata" concerning capabilities and limitations, degree of personal control over academic achievement, reasons for success and failure at different tasks, and expectancies for the future (Wenden, 1991, pp. 12-13). These schemata and other beliefs about language learning have various origins: i) the mother culture; ii) the family; iii) classroom/social peers; iv) repetitive experiences; and v) self-fulfilling (often negative) prophecies. Although usually related to past experiences, such schemata also contribute to future behaviour, supportive beliefs helping to overcome problems and thus sustaining motivation, and negative beliefs (including negative teacher beliefs) leading to decreased motivation. Students are also directly influenced by their perception of success in learning and by their levels of expectancy, realistically high levels helping to build confidence, and low (or unrealistically high) expectations helping to build incompetence (Puchta, 1999, p. 257).

In view of these considerations, this study set out to investigate students' perceptions of their language-learning skills, their affect (confidence, motivation, anxiety, etc.) and their attitudes to learning, with a view to modifying these positively and realistically, hence helping the students to become more successful learners in the short term, and more effective teachers in the long term.

Method

The study took place in Kyungpook National University, in the Republic of Korea, during the three academic semesters from March 2002 to June 2003. Participating students (n = 224 over 3 semesters) who ranged from Sophomores (2nd year students) to Seniors (4th year students) were mainly from the Department of English Education, were aged between 22 and 24, and were mostly studying to be secondary teachers of English. The research was conducted in two or three credit courses each semester (Table 1, below), using learning journals and pre/post-course questionnaires. Students were mostly different each semester, though there were a number who attended more than one of the classes, and who were able to offer impressions over a longer term than the others, typically showing heightened awareness and making observations of greater depth and extent.

The research was ongoing during each of the three semesters, and was integrated into course content. Since the research took place in the English Education Department, it was not difficult to include reflection on matters related to language learning, and this occurred in three main areas: i) the use of a learner journal; ii) attention to the learning environment; and iii) alternative assessment. Overall attitude change was monitored through a pre/post-course questionnaire, which examined students' *feelings* about their abilities and related affective factors.

Table 1. Courses selected for the research

Semester	Course title	Research instruments
2002/1	ELT Methodology (n = 37) Teaching Prose Writing (n = 30)	learner journal learner journal
2002/2:	Teaching English through Literature (n = 12) Comparative ELT Methodology (n = 23) Multimedia English (n = 17)	learner journal ,alternative assessment (AA) learner journal, (AA) learner journal, (AA)
2003/1	ELT Methodology (n = 27) Composition (n = 39) Textbook Design and Analysis (n = 39)	learner journal, (AA) personal diary, (AA) learner journal, (AA)

The learner journal

Students who attended selected courses (Table 1) were asked to work on a learner journal (Finch, 2001a) in one of the three, weekly, 50-minute class periods. The journal was both reflective and interactive, in that it contained group learning-to-learn activities in addition to individual diary-style pages. Students would discuss learning-related issues in class, and then write their personal reflections on these (or on any topics they wished to write about) at home. Group interaction served to "get the [cognitive] wheels turning," on the principle that group reflection on relevant topics would raise individual awareness and positively affect beliefs, perceptions and attitudes.

A number of relevant research instruments were adapted from the ELT literature and incorporated into this learning journal. Their purpose in this context was to stimulate discussion by stating the issues. It was stressed that there were no *correct* or *incorrect* answers, and that the process of exploring issues, ideas and preconceptions was most important. The original instruments are listed in Table 2 (below), while the adaptations used in the journal can be viewed online at www.finchpark.com/books/lj.

Activities based on the research instruments in Table 2 did not suddenly appear in class, to be completed, returned to the teacher and forgotten. Instead, exploration of the issues concerned was an ongoing part of normal classwork and students had time to discuss issues together, to come to individual and group decisions, and to record those in the journal. In view of this familiarity with the research materials, and because the researcher/teacher was not involved in data collection or analysis until the journal had been completed, it was hoped that students would not write comments which they

Table 2. Research Instruments adapted and used in the learner journal (Finch 2001a)

Title of questionnaires	Author(s)
A Measure of Autonomy and Self-Direction	Dickinson, 1978, p. 26
Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)	Horwitz, 1988, p.292
Classroom Environment Questionnaire (Actual) (CEQ)	Fraser, 1986
Classroom Environment Questionnaire (Preferred) (CEQ)	Fraser, 1986
Classroom Environment Scale (CES)	Fraser, 1986
Classroom Learning Environment (CLE)	Pine & Boy, 1977
Deficiency Analysis	Finch & Hyun, 2000b, p. 19
Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS)	Horwitz, 1986, p. 130
Language Learning Ideas	Hahn,. Stassen, & Reschke 1989, p. 250
Language Skills Self-assessment	Finch & Hyun, 2000b, p. 16
Learning Contract	Finch & Hyun, 2000b, p. 18
Learning Preferences	Finch & Hyun, 2000b, p. 19
Learning Style Inventory (LSI)	Martinez, 1997, p. 178
Multiple Intelligences Survey (MIS)	McKenzie, 1999
Self-assessment	Oscarsson, 1980
Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL)	Oxford, 1989, pp. 242-245
Student Perceptions About Language Learning	Willing, 1988, pp. 106-7
Students' Needs	Hills, 1976, pp. 31-32
Study Styles	Finch & Hyun, 2000a, pp. 22-23
Teachers' Needs	Hills, 1976, pp. 29-30

thought the teacher might want to read, and would become genuinely and meaningfully involved in the activities. Self-assessments, needs/deficiency analyses and pre/post-course questionnaires, though ostensibly individual activities, were carried out in interview format, and represented opinions that students were prepared to share with each other. Individual reflections were made out of class time, and were in diary format, and encouraged students to reflect on the issues they had discussed in class.

The learning environment

In view of the literature identifying the learning environment as a significant factor in language learning (e.g. Fraser, 1986; Finch, 2001b), it was assumed that positive attitude change would occur most notably in a learning environment which:

i) was non-threatening; ii) promoted confidence and self-esteem; iii) promoted intrinsic motivation; and iv) encouraged learners to take responsibility for achievement and assessment of learning. The learning environment of the courses in which the research occurred was therefore designed to promote positive affect and autonomy, and students were encouraged to reflect on this (cf. Table 2: CEQ, CES, CLE, FLCAS). There was a minimum of lecturing, and students were expected to access relevant literature and to be adequately informed when attending the classes, which rapidly took on the format of workshop sessions. Students variously worked on the journal, discussed teaching and learning issues, performed interactive work on given assignments, and gave sample (peer-assessed) language lessons. In this way, the classroom became a place in which students met to discuss and to work. Students adapted quickly to this (imposed) autonomy; they were happy to manage their learning and to be accountable for the result of that management, despite the novelty of the approach.

Alternative assessment

Alternative assessment was used from the second semester of 2002, based on the principle that student involvement in assessment would promote positive attitudes, in addition to helping them become skilled goal-setters, assessors, and more active language learners (Miller & Ng 1996, p. 134). The types of alternative assessment employed comprised: i) ongoing self assessment (participation, confidence, motivation, autonomy, language skills, achievement, etc.); ii) peer-assessment (presentations and sample lessons); iii) portfolios (also peer-assessed); and iv) student-designed tests. The typical end-of-semester test was transformed into a learner-centred activity in which groups were responsible for testing individual chapters of a reference text, using any testing format which they felt to be appropriate. Groups decided which chapter to focus on and were responsible for every part of the testing process, including the grading of the completed test papers (cf. McClean, 1995, p. 145). Feedback on this exercise was given on a sheet similar to the pre/post course questionnaire, and focused on affect and perceptions.

Pre/post-course questionnaire

The concept of a pre/post-course language proficiency test was replaced by a questionnaire (Table 3, below) in which students were asked how they *felt* about their confidence, motivation, independence, and learning beliefs:

Table 3. Pre/post-course questionnaire

1. How do you feel about your language skills (speaking, listening, reading, writing)?
2. How do you feel about your study skills (remembering, concentrating, note-taking)?
3. How do you feel about self-assessment and peer-assessment?
4. How do you feel about your confidence?
5. How do you feel about your motivation?
6. How do you feel about your independence as a learner?
7. How do you feel about your future?
8. How do you feel about taking part in this research?
9. (Post-course) Has self/peer-assessment helped your learning?

Students performed this activity in an interview format, asking the questions to each other (usually in pairs) and summarising the responses on the questionnaire form. By asking students to complete this questionnaire at the beginning and end of each course, it was hoped to be able to identify changes in perceived affect and attitudes.

Results

By the end of each semester, students' attention had been focused on educational issues for 15 weeks, and significant differences in pre/post-course responses appeared. Some sample responses from individual students are presented below (Table 4):

While presenting evidence of attitude change, such a small sample of responses cannot claim to be representative. It was therefore decided to examine the *language* used by the students in their responses, on the principle that attitude change would be reflected in the choice of vocabulary, and that positive attitude change would be shown by a shift in perspective; from the pessimist's "the glass is half-empty" to the optimist's "the glass is half full." This approach would focus on the student's perceptions of the situations, rather than on the situations themselves and would make it unnecessary to itemise every type of response. Instead of looking at *what* the students were saying, the research was to focus on *how* they were saying it. This approach resulted in a quantitative inspection of

Table 4. Sample responses from the pre/post-course questionnaires

Pre-course	Post-course
Q1: How do you feel about your language skills? *Poor. All of them are poor*.	Q1: How do you feel about your language skills? *Anxiety disappeared*.
Q3: How do you feel about self-assessment and peer-assessment? *This assessment is not objective*.	Q3: How do you feel about self-assessment and peer-assessment? *Self-assessment is useful to reflect my learning attitude and peer-assessment makes us critical*.
Q8: How do you feel about taking part in this research? *Doubtful about the result*.	Q8: How do you feel about taking part in this research? *This makes me think of the classes until now and how I have improved through the course. I learned of responsibilities. I have to go on and do my best.*

Note: Student responses are in italics.

qualitative data, as affective and comparative vocabulary was identified and recorded. At the end of this process, a table of word-frequencies was drawn up, the main features of which are presented in Table 5.

Of the 224 participants in the research, 170 completed and handed in the pre-course and 212 the post-course questionnaire. This was largely due to instances of students registering late, changing course (arriving in week 3), or losing their pre-course sheets (these were not collected till the final week). Because of this, percentages are shown and are referred to in discussion of the results. Items of vocabulary appearing in Table 5 are those which appeared more than 10 times in overall responses. Items such as "need" and "not bad" have been categorised as negative language, though they have possible positive associations, depending on context. However, the choice of "not bad" (double negative) rather than "good" is an example of a definite choice of language ("the glass is not empty"). "Never before" might also be placed in the "Positive" column, except that it demonstrates a "Not" perception in contrast to (for example) "First time". Negative words can also appear in the same sentence (e.g. "I *don't* have much *difficulty* listening"), functioning as double negatives and reducing the number of modifications of positive keywords.

Other problems with classification come from the possible juxtaposition of positive and negative items. Negative items such as "not" (71 pre, 52 post), "little" (71 pre, 44 post), "lack" (24 pre, 16 post), "low" (33 pre, 12 post) and "poor" (50 pre, 28 post) can modify positive concepts such as "confidence," "motivation," and "skill" a maximum of 249 (pre) and 152 (post) times. Compared with the 2218 (pre) and 3329 (post) total number of appearances of positive vocabulary, such possibilities leave room for 1870 (pre) and 3177 (post) non-modified appearances of positive expressions.

The number of negative modifiers shows a significant decline from the pre-course (249) to the post-course questionnaire (152), despite the extra number of post-course questionnaires completed and this trend is mirrored by negative keywords overall, which represent 28.49% (891, pre) and 16.40% (663, post) of the total keywords. The corresponding reverse trend in the positive keywords sees a shift from 68% (2218, pre) to 82.34% (3329, post). Thus it can be said that positive vocabulary has increased by 14.3% (a relative shift of 21%), and negative vocabulary has decreased by 12% (a relative shift of 57.5%).

Conclusion

The research methodology used in this case study recognised that attitudinal changes cannot be attributed to isolated factors, and that any factors examined must be viewed in context in order to have any meaning. There was no attempt to identify causal factors, since it was impossible to investigate the entire gamut of connectivities impacting upon the students, and there was also no attempt to compare results with any control groups, or to generalise the results. The case study investigated the application of educational theories in a specific school, at a specific time, and with specific participants. The learning environment of the study was constant and the participants responded to the research cooperatively, consistently, naturally, and over a significant period of time. Improved language learning was seen as a by-product of the main goal of positively influencing the factors which drive self-directed learning, and which produce positive attitude change.

Table 5. Frequency of key-words in the pre/post-course questionnaire

Positive Keywords	Pre, n = 170		Post, n = 212	
	2128*	%	3329	%
active	7	0.22	16	0.40
attitude	7	0.22	15	0.37
better	33	1.05	54	1.34
bright	42	1.34	27	0.67
can	77	2.46	165	4.08
chance	0	0	20	0.49
comfortable	2	0.06	11	0.27
concentration	24	0.77	2	0.05
confident(ce)	148	4.73	257	6.36
develop	8	0.26	16	0.40
do my best	40	1.28	49	1.21
easy	15	0.48	11	0.27
effort	6	0.19	20	0.49
enjoy/able	14	0.45	18	0.45
getting better	6	0.19	60	1.48
good	315	10.06	234	5.79
great	9	0.29	24	0.59
happy	10	0.32	19	0.47
help(ful)	32	1.02	106	2.62
high/er	45	1.44	38	0.94
hope(ful)	17	0.54	20	0.49
important	47	1.50	49	1.21
improve/d	61	1.95	214	5.29

Positive Keywords	Pre, n = 170		Post, n = 212	
	2128	%	3329	%
independent	80	2.56	92	2.28
learn/er	97	3.10	159	3.93
learning	66	2.11	146	3.61
like	69	2.20	35	0.87
more (than)	54	1.73	113	2.79
most	15	0.48	21	0.52
motivation	116	3.71	146	3.61
much	19	0.61	31	0.77
necessary	5	0.16	11	0.27
optimistic	14	0.45	9	0.22
positive	21	0.67	37	0.92
reflect	0	0	135	3.34
satisfied	18	0.58	34	0.84
skill	57	1.82	146	3.61
study	129	4.12	178	4.40
study hard(er)	39	1.25	59	1.46
try(ing)	37	1.18	69	1.71
useful	22	0.70	34	0.84
very	129	4.12	130	3.22
want	99	3.16	71	1.76
well	29	0.93	22	0.54
yes	0	0	88	2.18
	68%		82.34%	

Negative Keywords	Pre, n = 170		Post, n = 212	
	891	%	663	%
bad	14	0.45	8	0.20
cannot	29	0.93	27	0.67
dependent	42	1.34	28	0.69
difficult	74	2.36	75	1.86
don't (know)	95	3.04	80	1.98
fear (afraid)	19	0.61	20	0.49
lack	24	0.77	16	0.40
lazy	9	0.29	21	0.52
little	71	2.27	44	1.09
low	33	1.05	12	0.30
middle	34	1.09	17	0.42

Negative Keywords	Pre, n = 170		Post, n = 212	
	891	%	663	%
need (must)	107	3.42	91	2.25
nervous	15	0.48	17	0.42
never before	16	0.51	6	0.15
no change	19	0.61	25	0.62
not	71	2.27	52	1.29
not bad	36	1.15	22	0.54
not good	86	2.75	45	1.11
poor	50	1.60	28	0.69
sorry	10	0.32	1	0.02
uncertain	17	0.54	11	0.27
worry	20	0.64	17	0.42
	28.49%		16.40%	

Note: 2128, 3329, 891 and 663 refer to the total number of keyword appearances

The results show encouraging indications of such attitude change, which occurred within the context of: i) use of an interactive/reflective learner journal; ii) a non-threatening learning environment; and iii) alternative assessment.

Analysis of the pre/post-course questionnaires completed in interview format by the students, indicates an increase in the use of positive vocabulary, and a corresponding decrease in the use of negative vocabulary, suggesting that perceptions and perspectives had changed, along with the language used to describe them. It should also be noted that the length of individual entries in the journal was seen to increase, and the depth of topic discussion to become more profound as the semesters progressed. There is no space in this paper to discuss this aspect, but significant development of writing skills was noted during the research. When focusing on indicators such as confidence, motivation and independence, it was hypothesized that improvements in these areas would be long-lasting and self-directed, and that students would develop positive attitudes to learning (including problem-solving and assessment skills) which would be of beneficial in their future lives. To test this hypothesis, it will be necessary to contact these students in 5 or 10 years, by which time almost all the factors involved in this research will be irrelevant to its subjects. However, they

will still possess perceptions about the research and the courses in which it took place, and these will still represent reality for them. It is to be hoped that such contact can be made, and that a report on their perceptions at that time can be written

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