

Exploiting Memories to Inspire Learning

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Memories play a key role in language learning. Consciously or unconsciously, learners can be influenced by past (learning) experiences and encounters related in varying degrees to the target language, with recollections of these events helping to shape learners' goals, beliefs, and motivation for learning. Some students may already proactively draw from past learning experiences to guide and motivate their current engagement with the target language. However, in many cases learners lack these skills, and many more have difficulties with critically reflecting on negative learning experiences. In this paper, we introduce a series of simple and easily adaptable activities that can be used to help learners unlock and exploit memories to guide and inspire their language learning.

過去の記憶は語学学習において重要な役割を果たす。意識的にも無意識的にも学習者は過去の(学習)経験や出会いから影響を受け、その出来事を思い出すことで学習目標や信念、動機づけ等が形成される。刺激や鼓舞を受けて過去の経験を積極的に活かしながら現在の語学学習に取り組む学習者は確かにいる。しかし、経験に振り返り学ぶことがうまくできず、また否定的な学習経験から抜け出せない学習者の方が遥かに多い。本論文では、簡単に適応性のある、過去の経験を思い出すためのアクティビティやその思い出を活用し今後の語学学習を導き意欲を引き出すためのアクティビティを紹介する。

FOREIGN LANGUAGE learners experience events and encounters, both in and out of the classroom, that consciously and unconsciously influence their language learning. These experiences, in the form of positive and negative memories, are formative as contextual issues that shape learners' goals, learning styles, beliefs, attitudes, and motivation for learning the target language (Nakata, 2006).

This is something we have encountered firsthand, through a series of interviews conducted as part of a larger project investigating student reactions to a study resource designed to develop self-regulatory learning strategies in the context of an oral communication course at a university in Japan. One aim of these interviews was to investigate the processes behind learners' goal-setting behavior and to attempt to understand why our students choose certain goals and certain activities oriented toward achievement of these goals. We also had a more general interest in understanding how our learners have come to view English, and the learning of English, as we believe that this can also influence their reactions to the activities and resources we expect them to engage with in class. Interested readers are directed to Collett and Sullivan (2013) for an outline of the project and the methodology used to conduct the interviews and analyze the interview data.



These interviews revealed that in some cases our learners are extremely sophisticated in drawing on past learning experiences and encounters—both good and bad—to create learning goals and activities, and to motivate their own learning.

These findings suggest the potential for specifically encouraging learners to identify past learning experiences that they can use to establish future language learning goals. As theories of self-regulated learning show, goal setting is an important determinant of success or failure in academic tasks and in motivation in general (Zimmerman, 2008); developing the ability to set effective goals that can guide and motivate learning is crucial. Goal creation often involves building on reflections of past learning experiences, and we argue that this is a skill that needs to be developed, and that teachers can be actively involved in this endeavor.

In this paper, we present ideas for activities that have been developed based on our research and work in the classroom. These activities can be categorized into three main types: those designed to help learners reflect on past experiences; goal-setting activities; and opportunities for learners to share their experiences. Although we are introducing these as separate activities, they should be thought of as interconnected and ideally used in conjunction with one another. Furthermore, although these activities are important for developing fundamental goal-setting skills, we believe that in order to develop as self-regulated learners, students also need specific opportunities to put their learning goals into action.

Activities to Unlock Memories and Inspire Learning

In this section, we outline ideas for activities to help learners unlock memories of past learning experiences that they can then use to inspire their language learning. Depending on the nature of the ideas involved, in some cases we will introduce specific

activities, and in others we will instead suggest more general approaches teachers can take in class. To illustrate how this works in action, we will also introduce examples from students who took part in these activities and the subsequent interviews.

Remembering Activities for Identifying Potential Learning Goals

When we first introduced a formalized approach to goal setting in the classroom, we instructed students to set their learning goals for the semester in the first week of classes. Although this may at first glance seem like an obvious time to have students think about their goals, we have found that in many instances it is too soon. At this stage, students typically do not fully understand the course aims and thus have difficulty forming their own goals. Moreover, if students are also beginning a new phase in their lives, for example entering university, they might not yet be sure about their personal and academic goals in general, let alone the objectives they wish to set for their language learning. We now strongly believe that it is better to work with goal-setting activities later in the course and to devote the first weeks of class to recall-based activities that aim to help learners to identify what kind of goals they should be setting.

English History Timeline

One activity that can be used to assist with the recall of past learning experiences and encounters is an English history timeline. In this activity, students are given a vertical timeline and are asked to fill in their own history of learning and using English. By incorporating various prompts such as adding columns for positive and negative experiences, age or life period scale marks, and guiding questions, the depth and complexity of the recalled information can be varied. This kind of activity could also be done in the form of a line graph, on which learners

plot their English highs and lows over the course of their lives to date. It could also be carried out in survey form by simply having learners answer open-ended questions about their experiences with English (Nakata, 2006).

The purpose of this type of activity is to have learners remember events that were meaningful to them and, most importantly, to find connections between those events and their current feelings towards learning and using English, which include both their beliefs about learning English, as well as their goals for their future study and use of English. This extra step will most likely require additional reflection or discussion, which will be covered in the section on sharing activities below.

Identifying Strengths and Weaknesses

For some students, activities that ask them to identify strengths and weaknesses in their English language proficiency, their learning skills, or both may be an easier entry point to reflection on English histories. Here, what is important is that students provide evidence of these observations (i.e., they are required to also explain what specific past incidences have helped them to realize that they were strong or weak in the stated area). This will hopefully encourage learners to remember occasions where they were successful or unsuccessful in using the target language, and it is hoped that this memory will motivate them to maintain this strength or to overcome the identified weakness through creating and executing learning goals. Thus, a strength and weakness identification activity could be conducted in addition to, or as an alternative to, the English history timeline activity introduced above.

Imagining Future Selves

Encouraging students to develop images of their future English selves can easily be incorporated into the English history

timeline activity by simply ensuring that the timeline extends into the future. The use of the timeline has also been reported by Sampson (2012), who used it in a slightly different way to the above: Learners projected into the future to consider obstacles against and motivating factors for their “best possible English self.” Sampson reported this as something his research subjects found positive and motivating, providing them with new insights into ways of learning.

Making Learning Goals

The next stage is to have learners identify and record their learning goals, both for the class they are currently taking and for their own long-term engagement with English. We have found from reflection on our own use of these activities, and from feedback from our learners, that having learners create learning goals after completing recall activities, such as the English history timeline, makes it easier for them to identify goals.

After learners have identified their goals, asking them to explain where these goals come from and why they are important for them is crucial (i.e., getting them to clarify the link between their goals and the ideas and experiences they have recalled through the memory activities). This can be done in writing in the form of a journal or essay; as Ur (2013) pointed out, writing ideas down is a powerful way to clarify memories and formalize accumulated knowledge. Presenting these ideas verbally through presentations to the class, discussions with peers, or through one-on-one interviews with the class teacher are alternative approaches that should help strengthen endorsement of these goals. Again, tweaking a basic activity such as this to get students to think more deeply is easy to achieve and can be done in a way that fits into the language goals of the class.

Student Examples

Here we will introduce some student examples that illustrate the potential usefulness of conducting both remembering and goal-setting activities (see Table 1 for biographical details). Learner M was an interview subject who could clearly demonstrate how her memories of past experiences contributed to her self-image as an English learner and user and how these past experiences influenced the goals she set for herself in class. Learner M reported that she had encountered difficulties in communicating with foreign customers at her part-time job and had felt upset and frustrated by this. However, rather than letting this memory demotivate her, she drew from this experience to set a goal of being able to hear and understand native English speakers and to become able to respond quickly and smoothly in conversations with them. The learner drew from her experience to define what it means to “speak like a native speaker” (for her, this involved responding quickly and smoothly in conversations). This allowed her to plan what she needed to be doing to achieve her goal.

Table 1. Participating Student Details

Name	Sex	Year	Major
Learner M	Female	1st	International Commerce
Learner R	Female	2nd	International Commerce
Learner N	Female	1st	International Commerce
Learner A	Female	1st	International Commerce

Learner R was another keen and motivated learner of English. Her future vision of herself was as a global worker employed in the IT sphere, someone working overseas as a key part of her future career. She also created constructive learning goals based

on a negative experience. In her case, she had identified speaking, in particular the pronunciation of /r/ and /l/, as a weak point, and was specifically aiming at improving this over the semester. A face-challenging incident at a hotel abroad lay behind this learning goal. When on holiday in China she asked the front desk to “please lend me a hair dryer,” to which she was told, “I don’t know. Can you speak English?” (She was speaking English at the time.) She said that she was shocked and saddened by this experience, but was able to use this incident to inspire her current learning, rather than allow it to demotivate her. For Learner R also, recounting a recent experience allowed her to clearly identify her goal for the semester.

We hope these examples show how the combination of reflection activities and goal-setting activities can work to help learners identify learning action plans and develop attitudes towards learning the target language that work to sustain motivation.

Sharing Activities

As we have suggested above, the sharing of English histories, strengths and weaknesses, and goals is important for various reasons. For many people, the simple act of verbalizing internal thoughts can help to clarify ideas. It also provides an opportunity to learn from the experiences of others, which can be especially important for students who have limited past experiences from which to draw, or who have difficulty with identifying such experiences, perhaps feeling that their own experiences are insignificant. Hearing the experiences of a peer can show learners how much they have in common—that they are not alone in their struggles to learn English as a foreign language—and it may assist in the recall of other memories. Sympathizing with or being inspired by others’ experiences can also be motivational for some learners.

Some evidence from Sampson (2012) supports this. In his study, he found sharing past, negative learning experiences was identified as helpful for increasing student motivation. It helped learners understand they were not alone with perceived problems and that they were able to provide constructive support to one another to help overcome these negative memories. Based on his findings, Sampson made the point that exploiting memories may be a powerful motivator, and that it is worth looking at how to use memory to motivate students.

It is also important for the teacher to personally get involved in such activities, as it may be motivational for students to hear about teachers' experiences with either the target language or another foreign language they have learned. We all know that teachers can be a source of inspiration for students, so completing the aforementioned activities ourselves and sharing them with our students could be an interesting approach. Moreover, doing so may bring to our attention potential difficulties learners have with completing the activities that we set.

As noted in Thornbury (2013), we need to appreciate that memory is perhaps not the private concept some may regard it as, but rather something constructed through our daily encounters with others and our environment. In many cases, it is only through interaction with others that knowledge, past experiences, or lack thereof, are called into play, and we either recall something or realize the need to improve some aspect of our behavior through this interaction.

In some cases, others' memories serve as inspiration for students to choose to seriously engage with their language learning. Another interview participant, Learner N, reported that listening to her father's recollection of business trips overseas, where his English ability allowed him to communicate with others and enjoy himself, was a motivating factor for her own studies. This suggests the potential benefits of extending sharing activities outside of the classroom to have students interview parents, siblings, or university seniors about their English histories.

From the teacher's perspective, conducting sharing activities allows us to learn more about our students, which can help us to understand their actions and behavior in class, and thus better react to and engage with each learner as an individual (Nakata, 2006).

Sharing activities can also be beneficial in regard to critical reflection on negative learning experiences and learning beliefs. Memories of past learning experiences, if not critically reflected on, can lead to the strengthening of unhelpful learning beliefs that do not allow learners to positively engage with their learning. Helping learners understand that the memories they have may be similar to others'—or significantly different—could be useful to strengthen or reformulate beliefs students bring to the learning environment.

Thornton (2013) has suggested an activity that we believe could be particularly effective for initiating critical reflection on learning beliefs. In this activity, students firstly complete a language learning beliefs survey—the type of survey that teachers often conduct for their own research purposes to discover the beliefs their learners have toward the target language or toward language learning itself. Instead of handing the finished survey in to the teacher, class members then share their answers in pairs or groups. This activity could be useful, for example, to challenge the unhelpful beliefs learners may have towards learning languages, such as that the ability to successfully learn foreign languages is a gift that only certain people are born with, and that it is not an ability that can be developed through effort. Ultimately, it is the naive theories that students hold about language learning and learning in general that can impede their progress and dampen their enthusiasm toward language learning. Although we have not conducted this activity ourselves, we think it is another sharing activity that would complement the suite of activities suggested above.

Creating Opportunities for Independent, Self-Directed Learning

To truly help learners exploit their memories to inspire learning, we believe that teachers need to provide students with opportunities not only to reflect on their learning histories, think about their future selves, and set their own goals, but also to put these ideas into action. Learners need activities to unlock memories as well as opportunities to exploit these memories. Such opportunities could include self-designed homework activities and projects, or they might involve just offering learners options to choose from—in other words, offering opportunities to individualize and personalize learning. Offering one type of activity without the other will not help learners to develop the goal-setting, monitoring, and reflecting habits that will help them to continuously learn from and be inspired by any future experiences or encounters they have related to language learning.

Addressing Negative Experiences

Although we have introduced cases of students who we feel were inspired by past experiences to engage with their language learning, we also interviewed several students who, although able to identify negative learning experiences or encounters, were unable (or unprepared) to use these to set beneficial learning goals or to modify their attitudes towards learning. There are many possible examples of past learning experiences and learning beliefs that can negatively affect students' engagement with their learning. Here we will provide one case from our research.

Learner A stopped positively engaging with the classroom self-regulated learning activities in semester two of her first year in response to a negative experience with the assessment of these activities in semester one. After observing that her semester one teacher gave the same score to all students regardless of

the quality of work submitted, she formed the belief that there was no point in putting in effort to complete the task if this effort was not going to be recognized by the teacher.

When implementing projects to promote self-regulated learning strategies on a school-wide level that includes (part-time) teachers who are not necessarily involved in the development of these activities, differing levels of teacher investment and differing understandings of the purposes of these activities can be problematic. Especially when students are being introduced to a new concept, such as self-regulated learning, for the first time, their teacher's level of enthusiasm, degree of investment, and ability to effectively explain the concept to learners, among many other factors, can strongly influence students' own level of investment.

For students like Learner A, their classroom (or other) experiences appear to adversely affect their attitudes and commitment to coursework expectations. Without engaging in critical reflection through activities such as those suggested in the sharing activities section above, this kind of student may very well develop goals and mindsets oriented toward avoidance, or engage in self-handicapping behaviors that they can use to justify their failures while at the same time protecting their self-images (Dweck & Master, 2008; Zimmerman, 2008). In other words, without addressing negative learning beliefs, which have most probably developed from negative learning experiences, students will be unable to effectively engage with their learning of the target language.

This is an issue with which we feel working with memories can be particularly helpful. Although we can only speculate based on our classroom work with learners, we do believe that the activities introduced in this paper, if conducted with patience and sensitivity, can help all learners to develop the ability to critically reflect on past learning experiences and use the results of these reflections to inspire and motivate their learning.

Empirical research is necessary to show the connections between engagement with these activities and changes in learner strategies and beliefs.

Some Caveats

A number of potential issues arise in relation to working with learner memories. One is that memories are not necessarily accurate—they can become embellished or otherwise altered over time. A second issue is that they are very much context- and setting-dependent, and they may vary in their intensity and accuracy depending on these factors. Obviously, if one is trying to determine the veracity of learner recollections, these issues can present problems. However, we would argue that for the approaches that we are suggesting here it is not so much the accuracy of the memories that we are concerned with, but more the meaning and relevance of the memories for the learners and how they choose to act in relation to them.

An important point here relates to the nature of memories and their relationship to the self. Memories underpin our beliefs and help define our self-images and identities, and as such can be quite powerful. As with many situations in the foreign language classroom, an empathetic and supportive attitude is undoubtedly crucial when conducting the kinds of activities discussed above, and the teacher needs to be involved in creating a supportive atmosphere.

Closing Thoughts: Opening the Possibility for Future Collaboration Among Classroom Practitioners

Cohen (2011) made a strong point in saying,

Recollections have always been in students' minds, waiting to be tapped, buried under lessons, classroom processes

and teacher expectations. It would be useful to draw these recollections out into the light of day and understand what they say about learners and learning. (p. 92)

We have suggested a few ways to do this in the foregoing discussion; there are certainly many other activities that can be used to help positively expose learner memories. Moreover, there are undoubtedly various different ways to design and implement these activities that can be more or less effective in achieving the stated aims. Sharing our activities, resources, and experiences with trying to encourage learners to use effective self-regulatory strategies is crucial for creating a shared body of knowledge for practitioners to both draw from and contribute to. Increasingly more schools, departments, independent learning centers, and individual teachers are implementing activities, courses, and programs to get students to reflect on their learning and to use these reflections to motivate and sustain their current and future language learning. We hope others recognize the need to widely collect and disseminate examples of these activities and program modules in order to identify best practices for achieving this shared goal of helping our learners to learn.

Bio Data

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