

REFLECTION ON MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES THEORY AS A FRAMEWORK FOR ELT: MEETING ESP LEARNERS' SPECIFIC NEEDS

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Abstract

Promoting Moroccan educational system has been the subject of much debate recently. Most teachers' concern is how to face some unprecedented classroom dilemmas such as large classroom size and the increasing diversity among learners. Teaching theories contend that learners come into the classroom context with different sets of prior knowledge and experiences expecting the teaching styles to be multilayered matching their own individual inclinations. One of the challenges for ELT is to cater for this variety and come up with one particular teaching method that can pour in different baskets and meets a wide range of needs. Accordingly, this paper aims to highlight the merits of Multiple Intelligences theory (MI) in meeting learners' specific needs. Such an objective is achieved through the experiential learning cycle of Kolb and Fryer (1975) which situates the present study within the tenets of reflective practice research approach. The experience takes place in an ESP classroom, namely, in the High Institution of Tourism at the Faculty of Education in Rabat in Morocco with the participation of 64 learners. Two patterns of results are displayed; firstly, the teacher's reflection on the teaching experience reveals that learners' motivation and integration in classroom activities increase in comparison to the year before, and their proficiency in the English language improves as well. The second pattern of result which is related to students' reflection on their own learning experience shows that learners feel more autonomous and responsible for their learning; they contend that such a method touches everyone's need.

Keywords: ESP; Needs analysis; Multiple Intelligences Theory; Reflective Practice Research

THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

INTRODUCTION

Research on education at large and teaching in particular has a long history and multidisciplinary literature touching various classroom issues. Most studies assume that teacher's experiential knowledge is part of a revolutionary learning process that educators should engage in to come out with a relevant teaching method (Kolb, 1978; Boud et al., 1985; Schön, 1983; Moon, 2004; Bolton, 2010; Rolfe et al., 2011). Indeed teacher's reflection of practical experience can be beneficial for improving their own teaching method, on the one hand, and enhancing learners' competence and performance, on the other hand. In this paper, the researcher is reflecting on one line of research focusing on teachers' personal practical knowledge as it is developed and expressed in the literature landscape; Reflective practical research in the light of Multiple Intelligences theory (MI). Accordingly, the experience took part in an ESP classroom, namely, at the High Institution of Tourism in Rabat, Morocco where MI was used as a framework to meet the 64 students'

specific needs. Before presenting the conceptual framework underpinning this study, it is deemed significant to locate this research work, briefly, within its theoretical framework where key concepts have been defined and tackled.

ESP

Language for Specific Purposes (LSP) is a multifaceted concept that has attracted the interest of applied linguistic scholars and practitioners whose main concern has been to find out a specific style, particular content to satisfy learners' specific needs, goals and purposes. Out of LSP, English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has sprang out as a subfield which encapsulates two streams: English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and English for Occupational Purposes (EOP). Such a field, that puts English language at the fore front, has been the focal point recently due to the widespread of globalization and the high status English enjoy in multilingual societies. In Morocco, teaching and learning English has become a must for all the social and academic strata; it is the lingua franca of today's world communication. However, the major worry for teachers is what English to teach given the various contexts where this language is taught and used; as stated by Hutchinson and Waters (1987) "Tell me what you need English for and I will tell you the English that you need" (p. 8). To build a critical reflection upon ESP, a batch of definitions would be outlined as they are processed and developed throughout the literature.

Mackay et al. (1978, p. 2), define ESP as the teaching of English for a "clearly utilitarian purpose"; such a definition attributes a functional perspective to language. Munby (1978, p. 2), in his turn, states that "ESP courses are those where the syllabus and materials are determined in all essentials by the prior analysis of the communication needs of the learners". Similarly, Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 9) conceive ESP as an "approach to language teaching in which all decisions as content and method are based on the learners' reason for learning". Interestingly, the last two definitions of ESP shed light on the analysis of learners' needs as the basic ground upon which all other decisions should be made; those needs must be carefully delineated and addressed with tailored-to-fit instruction. Basturkmen (2006, p. 18) also asserts that: "ESP is understood to be about preparing learners to use English within academic, professional, or workplace environments and a key feature of ESP course design is that the syllabus is based on an analysis of the needs of the students". In brief, numerous are the definitions related to ESP; all of them pour in the same basket perceiving ESP as a response to learners' needs in different contexts: academic, professional or vocational.

NEEDS ANALYSIS

ESP is guided by learners' needs, defined by Johns and Dudley-Evans (1991) as the "identifiable elements" of "students' target English situations" (p. 299). The importance of needs analysis lies on the facts that it defines the aspects of language that are essential for a specific area of teaching. Teachers should identify elements of students' target English situations and use them as the foundation of EAP/ ESP instruction so as to provide them with the specific language they need. Practitioners insist on the importance of conducting needs analysis, as Hutchinson and Waters (1987, p. 53) argue "any language course should be based on needs analysis". Dudley-Evans & St John (1998, p. 121) state that "needs analysis is the process of establishing what and how of a course". In this regard, the critical question that should be raised, what guides teacher' choice of content and related content-based tasks and activities? Most of the time, the need is likely guided by the curriculum at the instructor's hand, adding to his/her subjective perception of goals and objectives.

However, instructional decisions should have more to do with the learners themselves than with instructor's preference or beliefs because instructors are not always good judges/analysts of what will interest and motivate their own students; the latter should voice their own needs in content selection. The striking point about the process of needs analysis is that it disregards the unequal social positions of the parties involved and the impact of such inequality on missing learners' real need in the curriculum development. Accordingly, academic institutions, instructors, and learners are presented as occupants of "a level playing field rather than as players whose differing access to power must be considered" (Benesch, 1996, pp. 723-724). A learner-centered option to the content knowledge crisis has been presented by Dudley-Evans et al., (1998), who believe that it is essential for ESP teachers to learn how to learn from and with their students. In short, the focal element about needs analysis is that students should be offered the opportunity to have a say in the process of learning and play a vital integral role in the courses they study.

Methods of Needs Analysis

There are different methods for identifying, analyzing and assessing learners' needs (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). From the vast variety of available paradigms, this paper focuses on two field approaches

that are the core of the needs assessment investigation because they enable the practitioner to obtain data directly from the source. The first field approach is Trial and Error which is used with the aim of improving something in the institution's existing course offerings (Sava 2012, p.63). It is based on the researcher's/Instructor's feeling and observation that there is a new inclination on the part of learners; as a trial part, the instructor may introduce a new program that he/she believes may meet the need of the target group, then he/she has to wait to collect the initial feedback. Normally, when a new teaching way is presented for the first time, results are not always positive; the worry is whether the decision to run such a program was an error or not. Even if it turns to be an error, the program may be given a second or a third trial until the expectations are completely evaluated. The second needs analysis approach used in this study is a survey adopted from Armstrong MI survey (2009); the questionnaire is seen as a window into learners' own preferences of the learning and teaching process. It enables the teacher to have a concrete idea on students' inclinations and specific needs that should be achieved.

Multiple Intelligences Theory

As a reaction to traditional IQ testing that has been used to measure learners' intelligence faculties, neglecting learners' skill sets and inclinations, Multiple Intelligences Theory (MI) was developed by Gardener (1983) to provide another interpretation to the human Intelligence. The concept of intelligence is used as an alternative for competence or a learning style (Gardener 1983, 1985, 2011; Armstrong 2009); it refers to the way a student chooses to approach a particular task. This definition is different from intelligence, described as the capacity of an individual to carry out that task; the difference is strategy versus capacity (Gardner, 2011). Similarly, this study does not measure capacity for learning, but instead uses observable learning strategies as a tool to gain insight how students choose to learn. MI theory addresses teachers' assessment of learners' specific needs through the presentation of eight intelligences in individuals or learners. The first one, Linguistic intelligence which is related to skill and interest surrounding words, syntax, phonology, grammar and it involves one's competence to manipulate language to express oneself rhetorically or poetically. Logical/Mathematical Intelligence stands for the ability to detect patterns, reason deductively and think logically; this is defined by Armstrong as "the capacity to use numbers effectively...and reason well" (2009). Musical Intelligence refers to the ability to recognize and compose musical pitches, tones, and rhythm. Visual/Spatial Intelligence: concerns the ability to recognize form, space, color, line, and shape; it is the capacity to accurately understand and mentally navigate the surrounding world. Bodily/Kinesthetic Intelligence is the ability to use the body to express ideas feelings and to solve problems. Interpersonal Intelligence refers to the ability to understand another person's feelings, motivations, and intentions; people with this intelligence work more effectively in teams and social settings.

The seventh one is Intrapersonal Intelligence which focuses on the ability to know about and understand oneself and one's similarities to and differences from others; it is a deep sense of self, and the ability to self-regulate (Christison et al., 1999). The last one is Naturalist Intelligence which is concerned with the ability to recognize and classify plants, minerals and animals. Such intelligence relates specifically to skill and interest in nature and the natural world (Gardener 1983, 1985; Armstrong 2000, 2009). At the level of education, Armstrong (2009) discusses practical ways to test, identify, and foster learners' MI inclinations in the classroom; consequently, Multiple Intelligences can be used as a method to create a balance among classroom activities and instruction based on 8, or any number, of categories. Gardner does not assume this as an absolute set of how people learn, or that all eight categories must be memorized and used in each lesson, but some of them can be used as additional ways that cater for students' diversities and special needs. In short, the use of MI in this study does not aim to measure learners' intelligences and abilities; it is used as a learning and teaching strategy that meets ESP students' needs.

THE CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

METHODS

Statement of the Problem

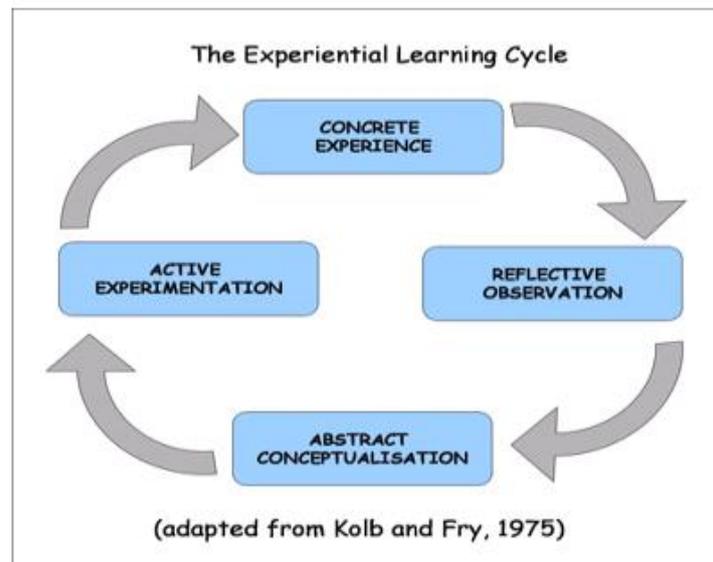
One may believe that ESP classrooms are networks where there is a sort of homogeneity among learners in the sense that all of them come with a prior general knowledge in the language that qualifies them to study the same content which meets every one's needs. Nevertheless, the social reality, based on the researcher's former personal experience, reveals that ESP classrooms are a melting pot where various needs intersect and where different teaching methods should be triggered. Students come to the classroom with unequal background knowledge; distinct levels in the English language, different learning styles adding to their mature age that make it impossible to incarnate one teaching method. For this reason, great strides had been made to go beyond this dilemma and come out with a multilayered method that could touch every learner's interest. In this regard Multiple Intelligences theory (MI) is assumed to cater for this diversity.

Objectives of the Study and Research Question

This paper purports to present the researcher's reflection on a personal experience with two groups of ESP learners, at the high Institution of Tourism, using the tenets of MI as a framework in teaching ESP students in particular. This study also aims to highlight the various merits of Multiple Intelligences theory as a solid ground for language teaching at large. In line with these affiliations one guided research question is raised to explore the extent to which the use of MI, as a framework for teaching ESP students, meet their needs and enhance their learning process.

Research Design

The present study is conducted under the tenets of reflective practice research. This learning process is attained through experience as a perpetual and ongoing aspect of professional development (Kolb, 1978; Boud et al., 1985; Schön, 1983, 1987; Moon, 2004; Bolton, 2010; Rolfe et al., 2011). Moon (2004), for instance, contends that the process of reflection is directly linked to "experiential learning"; he asserts that reflective learning process generates beneficial outcomes including the development of practice knowledge and understanding, the building of theory from observations, problem solving and professional development. Atkins et al., (1994) has described reflective practice as a complex and explicit way of thinking about and interpreting experience in order to learn from it. There is a vast amount of literature presenting the models of reflective practice research; yet, the present study advocates that of Kolb and Fryer (1975): "Experiential Learning Cycle".



The basis for this model is one's own experience, which should be reviewed, analyzed and evaluated systematically in four stages. Once this process has been utterly achieved, the new acquired experiences will form the starting point for another cycle. The first element is the **Concrete experience**; it refers to one's conscious and physical experience of a situation, which pushes them to reflect systematically in order to learn something new or improve one's existing skill and practice. At this stage the researcher or the practitioner makes notes of the specific situation and just describes what they see, how they feel and what they think; it is a sort of descriptive stage. The second phase is the **Reflective observation** where the researcher reflects more deeply on what has happened in that situation by raising a set of questions, for example: what worked? What failed? Why did the situation arise? Why did others and I behave the way we did? The third stage is the **Abstract conceptualization** which pushes the practitioner to raise some guiding questions such as: what could I have done better or differently? How can I improve? Initially, one starts thinking of different ways for dealing with the situation or other future similar situations. At this phase, the researcher should consult literature in order to get a better understanding and further ideas. The last phase of this cycle is the **Active experimentation** which concerns the practicing of the newly acquired theoretical knowledge; some of them will work, others won't. Consequently, this is then automatically the beginning of the new cycle in the sense that experiences within the active experimentation stage become the starting point for the new "concrete experiences".

THE STUDY

Concrete Experience (First Year)

My teaching experience took part at the faculty of Education within the High International Institute of Tourism for the academic years 2008-2011. As an English teacher, I was supposed to teach English for general and specific purposes to two groups of learners who had already been studying English for two years at the level of higher Education and, at least, three years at high school. Each group was exposed to three hours of instruction in English per week. There was a large discrepancy among students' competence and performance in the English language adding to their different learning styles. During the first year, I tried to abide by the administration syllabus, but at the same time, I infused it with teaching methods based on the Learner Centered Approach. My own belief, which was based on observation and experience with them, contended that the syllabus provided by the administration, neither did it match students' global needs nor their specific ones. Accordingly, with the Learner Centered Approach that places high emphasis on learners' engagement and interest I attempted to lighten from that dilemma. For example, I brought to the classroom context real scenarios relevant to the learners' field of study; tourism. Students were invited to engage in real life situation role plays and games. They were also asked to give talk by the end of the day to involve them in interaction; the topics of the presentations were matching the objectives already set in the syllabus. Such an approach yielded fascinating outcomes; learners were more motivated and more committed to classroom activities, but there was still a lot to be achieved.

Reflective Observation

By reflecting more deeply on the situation, there was a kind of controversy dominating my own feelings; on the part of learners they assumed that such a way of teaching stimulated their interest and touched their needs in a global way. Most of them asserted that they had never been exposed to that learning method; they felt more engaged and more autonomous depending on themselves to prepare and give presentations in English in front of other students. On my part, my concern was shed on those who did not catch up with this teaching method which failed to satisfy their needs and make noticeable change on them. Indeed, even if outstanding results were revealed at the global aspect in the sense that most learners' levels improved significantly, and their self confidence increased as well, at the level of individual cases, there were other disengaged, uninterested and "unexplored" students who were still lagging behind. My serious consciousness of that critical situation made me analyze the different factors that could be behind this partial failure of my teaching method. Some students' disengagement confirmed that classroom activities and the way of teaching did not meet their needs; there was a gap that should be investigated.

Abstract Conceptualization

It is a general truth in the field of research to consider the pitfalls of one method as the starting point of another; consequently, to deal with the previous situation, a number of questions were surrounding my thought. All of them were concerned with improving the situation and making the learner process better and more successful than before. In reviewing the literature, different teaching methods, teaching theories and approaches were exposed in studies that revealed their pertinence. I was attracted by Howard Gardener's theory of Multiple Intelligences (MI) which assumes the multiplicity of intelligences in people. The striking point about this theory, is that Gardener suggested the eight MI as a model that reacts against the traditional view of learning as the ability to solve equations, or read and write well. He asserted that such a limited view of human ability does not accurately reflect the capacity of the human mind. For him intelligence should not be viewed as a set measure of ability, but instead as the development of intellectual competences. Competences refer to a set of personal skills that enables learners to "resolve genuine problems or difficulties that he or she encounters and, when appropriate, to create an effective product..." (1985).

Consequently, the eight intelligences suggested by Gardner are indeed competences, defined as the way people take in new knowledge, and their capacity to re-represent that knowledge. Armstrong (1994) has, interestingly, argued that using MI directly with learners is a natural and logical step to correct undesirable behaviors that interfere during the learning process. A teacher or a researcher can observe student's behaviors and collect data which can then be used to better meet the classroom and learning needs of students. This is what has been done in the present study; to conduct needs analysis of learners, the trial error method was adopted, and then an MI survey was administered. The precepts of the trial error approach have already been explained in the section talking about needs analysis. I started initiating students to this theory by bringing, to classroom, activities that targeted most of the intelligences and then I observed their attitudes by taking notes. The second assessment method was a survey developed by Armstrong (2009) with the aim of assessing learners' inclinations and learning preferences based on Gardener's MI theory. Such a survey was administered to students by almost the end of the second semester of the first year to get

a better understanding of their own needs.

In fact, going back to students' MI survey and the teacher's observation notes, the analysis revealed that learners' displayed a variety of inclinations as far as their competences are concerned. For instance, the observation process showed that some students were better at some class activities compared to other ones. There were learners who excelled in reading and vocabulary exercises more than in listening or video watching tasks. Others would feel better if they were put in oral presentations. Similarly, the MI survey conveyed that learners' showed a couple of inclinations as far as classroom activities were concerned. There was no common consensus upon a single competence but a variety of preferences were declared to be relevant to their learning process. At this phase, the interest of the experience was not, mainly, to categorize students' intelligences but to have a global idea about their set of competences in order to implement a teaching method that would match their needs.

Active Experimentation (Second Year)

Data collection and data analysis for this study were conducted within the framework of Gardner's eight MI (1983) and Armstrong MI survey (2009), linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, naturalistic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal intelligences. Consequently, the active experimentation was based on this theory progressively given its merits that are mentioned in various studies in the literature (Walters, J., & Gardner, H. 1984; Wagner, R. K., & Stenberg, R. J. 1988; Wallace, J. D. 1998; Armstrong 2009) among a number of other ones. To initiate learners' to the new teaching method during the second year I handed out a reading comprehension text talking about Brit school in Britain where students learn academic school subjects and the performing arts as well. My students' reactions to Brit school curriculum were positive; they provided rich feedback and one of the text based questions was asking them about their own talents. Students asserted to possess various interesting talents such as, acting, cooking, singing, painting, film producing, poem writing, etc. The second step was to look for a way to implement such a variety of competences in the classroom activities in parallel with the academic curriculum presented by the administration. For this reason, we agreed that presentations topic would be freely chosen by students and presented in relation to every one's competences. Surprisingly, students brought to the classroom context activities and equipment that were beyond my own expectations; for instance, analyzing a story, writing a poem, writing and singing English songs and discussing their topics, reading a painting, watching a video in English with follow up discussion, cooking, acting, etc. Unlike the previous year when students were obliged to give a talk of 15 minutes, during the second year, learners started to ask for more time to exhibit their own talents using the English language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Related to the objectives set for this study, two patterns of result were displayed; the first one reported the teacher's reflection on the teaching experience and the second one revealed the learners' testimony of their own learning experience in the light of MI.

Teacher's Refection

Such a teaching experience yielded very interesting findings; firstly, learners' motivation and integration in classroom activities increased in comparison to the year before. Secondly, their proficiency in the English language improved as well. I can confirm that this teaching method stood as a response to students' needs; the concrete experimentation displayed that using MI as a framework for language teaching did not only enhance students' capacities at the level of speaking but they gained self confidence even in other skills. All learners started to make effort in other classroom activities, in writing, in reading, in grammar, etc. The conclusion that I have, personally, drawn from that experience is that when learners feel that they are at the central interest of the learning process and their needs are targeted they put the teachers' instructions as their priority and they become more responsible for their learning.

Learners' Reflection

Similarly, for experiential learning to be valid and reliable, it should include students' reflections on their own experiences as well; for this concern, it was deemed important to administer a post questionnaire to learners to make them reflect on their own learning. By almost the end of the second academic year, students were given a questionnaire that assessed their reactions vis-à-vis the MI theory as a framework for learning. The survey consisted of ten statements with which respondents can agree or disagree, in addition to two open questions where students can report any additional learning skills in reference to MI theory. Overall, the findings revealed that most learners were satisfied with the new teaching method and they asserted that they would like to expand this theory to other school subjects. For them, creating such an atmosphere in the classroom made students autonomous, serious and more responsible for their own learning.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is not the purpose of this study to prove the validity of MI theory, but the interest has been to use Gardner and Armstrong's categorization of intelligences as a framework for comparison and analysis between ideology and reality (what the theory says and what classroom practices reveal). Such an objective was achieved through the experiential practice approach developed by Kolb and Fryer (1975) which involved explicit teaching in the light of Gardner's MI theory (1983) and Armstrong's MI survey (2009). The active experimentation was carried out in an ESP classroom, namely, in the High Institution of Tourism in Rabat in Morocco with the participation of 64 students. Two patterns of results were displayed; firstly, the teacher's reflection on the teaching experience revealed that learners' motivation and integration in classroom activities increased in comparison to the year before, and their proficiency in the English language improved as well. The second pattern of result which is related to students' reflection on their own learning experience showed that they were highly satisfied with this teaching method and they felt more autonomous and responsible for their own learning process. Given the experiential nature of this study, the findings would stand as the starting point and the concrete experience for a future research adopting the same experiential learning cycle or as hypotheses for a forthcoming experimental study.

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