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Fostering student-centred pedagogy through the language learning support dimensions (LLSD)

1. Introduction

The Language Learning Support Dimensions (LLSD) are brought together as a reflective and diagnostic tool for individuals to assess their own attitudes and disposition towards language learning. With the aim this will assist in improving efficacy. self-confidence and their autonomy skills. The main aim of working with the LLSD is to increase the language awareness of the learners, in particular in relation to their knowledge, attitudes and skills in the process of language learning, and to enable change and transformation in their attitudes and skills regarding this endeavour. The pedagogical frame for the LLSD is the student-centred pedagogy closely related to the principles of the humanistic tradition.

The LLSD consists of five dimensions which are intrinsically connected with the way students approach language learning. These five dimensions have been developed drawing on second language acquisition research over the last thirty years and taking into account some of the more relevant factors that positively affect the efficiency in language learning. The LLSD draws on the Good Language Learner (GLL) studies developed in the 1970s and 1980s by Rubin (1975, Stern 1975, Naiman et al. 1978) and on further developments of these studies (O'Malley/Chamot 1990, Oxford 1990, Griffiths 2008). They also integrate the sociological factors that affect language learning (Norton/Toohey 2001)

The starting point of our engagement with the LLSD was within the context of adult language learners and in particular those studying at a distance, where the challenges of learning a language might be perceived as bigger than in other educational settings. The importance of making students'

thinking visible and the focus on metacognition has been stressed in a large number of educational research studies (Chick et al. 2009). Some studies were motivated by the idea that learning how to learn cannot be left to students, but must be taught (Gall et al. 1990). Some research studies have also shown how the absence of metacognition is related to failure to recognize one's own incompetence (Dunning et al. 2003). The LLSD were also inspired by work on the Effective Lifelong Learning Inventory, ELLI, and by the promising results of using the dimensions of learning power in different educational settings, in particular in secondary schools (Deakin Crick et al. 2004, Edwards/Hush 2009) but also to some degree in higher education (Small/Deakin Crick 2008).

There are two main differences between the ELLI and the Language Learning Support Dimensions, LLSD: the first and more obvious one is about the focus of the content. The LLSD work with specific language categories, instead of dimensions for learning in general. The second difference is about the focus of the pedagogical approach. The LLSD are based on a learner-centred approach, on the confidence of the capacity of learners to raise self-awareness and develop by themselves in the best possible way. In this sense this work draws from the classical learner-centred philosophy developed by Rogers, Dewey and many others and the humanistic tradition (Tangney 2014). Within the adult learning context it is particularly important that learners themselves assess their strengths and weaknesses and decide what dimensions they want to develop, and this affected the design of the LLSD.

Within this context the LLSD work with assumptions, attitudes and beliefs in relation to language learning that can be problematic. For example the willingness or unwillingness to communicate and – if necessary – to make mistakes, the tolerance or intolerance to the uncertainty involved in every communicative situation, the flexibility and disposition to change without feeling one's own identity is threatened.

The LLSD provide students with a metacognitive tool to support themselves in the process of reflecting, evaluating and changing or transforming their habits and assumptions in language learning: empowering them to take the control over their learning.

2. The Language Learning Support Dimensions

We described elsewhere (Edwards/Perez Cavana 2012, Perez Cavana/Edwards 2014) the five Language Learning Support Dimensions in detail. In

very quickly I learnt that instead, I had to use whatever strategies I had to communicate at the time and make sure that I learnt form the various situations. Also I decided to adopt the idea that learning a language was about gaining another identity and whilst I was building   this third new identity, I would need to accept that I would make a lot of mistakes."

"One's ego is constantly challenged (…) and it is necessary for a language learner to have a strong belief in one's own abilities to carry on with learning, particularly in situations where others are undermining your efforts due to their desire to practise their English."

5. Conclusion

The Language Learning Support Dimensions, LLSD, were developed conceptually from the last thirty years research findings into second language acquisition and tested in a small scale pilot study which collected and evaluated three streams of data: from an online activity using the LLSD, semistructured telephone/Skype interviews and from a feedback questionnaire. Although small scale, the participants were all studying, and training to teach Modern Foreign Language in schools. They were all proficient at least three languages and well placed to provide a critique of the LLSD. The results of the study, whilst clearly not definitive due to the size of the study, were informative and positive: using the LLSD as a reflective tool helped students to become more aware of their approaches to language learning, of their shortcommings and of the areas they want to develop. We have therefore been encouraged us to pursue the LLSD further. Our findings includ broadly agreed observations that the descriptions of the dimensions are complex and require greater clarity, and this may require the subdividing of one or more of the dimensions. The participants' responses to the LLSD in this study will enable the dimensions to be refined to improve accessibility and clarity, and that in this revised form, they could be manageable to use and lead to a real impact on the success of students as they learn a second language.

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