

Enhancing Students' Learning Motivation through Reflective Journal Writing

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Abstract

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The issue under study is topical and significant in modern pedagogics because it is related not only to the great role that motivation plays in the process of students' learning a foreign language, but also a shortage of efficient motivational techniques enhancing this process used in class. Researchers state that among other factors influencing acquisition of knowledge the one of motivation is the most significant. The technique of keeping a Reflective Journal (RJ) has been worldwide used in teaching practice; however, in Russia it hasn't been applied so widely. The article aims at studying the impact the use of RJ Writing has on enhancing students' learning motivation. The study was conducted in Kazan State University where 30 upper-intermediate students learning English took part in the experiment. The methods used to explore the problem were literature review, experiment conducted in Kazan Federal University, questionnaires administered to students and their analysis. Results of the post-study questionnaire administered at the end of the course demonstrated a high level of students' learning motivation. The findings showed that the RJ Writing, alongside with improving learning and increasing self-confidence, enhanced students' motivation. The article's materials could be useful for university teachers interested in ways of enhancement of their students' motivation, thus promoting their progress in studies.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Problem statement

It goes without saying that motivation has a great influence on any educational process. Cook stated that among three major factors influencing acquisition of knowledge, which are age, personality and motivation, the last one is the most significant (Cook, 2000a; Cook, 2000b).

Teachers can greatly influence their students' motivational level. Students come to them with low or, on the contrary, high level of motivation and it is the teacher who is not only to choose adequate styles

of teaching and behavior, the structure of the course, types of assignments and forms of interaction, but also use various techniques and methods which have large effect on students' motivation.

The problem educators face nowadays is search for efficient techniques and methods to be applied to enhance motivation in students learning English.

1.2 Research questions

The term motivation comes from the Latin verb "move" which is, to put it simply, the force that makes someone do something. Reeve defined it as something that "...gives behavior its energy and direction" (Reeve, 1993). Crookes and Schmidt based upon education-oriented theory of Keller to define motivation as the choices that are made by people about experiences and goals they approach or avoid, and the degree of effort they exert (Keller, 1983). According to Pintrich and Schunk (Pintrich & Schunk, 1996) and Williams (Williams & Burden, 1997), motivation is a process that involves goals, physical and mental activity, and is both instigated and sustained. If earlier researchers described motivation as needs for satisfaction (Maslow, 1987), (Owens, 1987), the more recent psychologists portray motivation as a product of conscious decision (Williams, 1997).

As for learning motivation, its understanding and definition do not always conform to psychological ones. Some researchers consider learning motivation to be the biggest simple factor that affects students' success (Harmer, 1991), as something producing "engagement in and persistence with the learning task". According to Crookes and Schmidt, a motivated student is the one who "becomes productively engaged in learning tasks and sustains that engagement, without the need for continual encouragement or direction" (Crookes & Schmidt, 1991). A conclusion can be drawn that motivation can be considered a process that greatly influences learner's success.

Researchers point out a motivation concept which differentiates between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations in learning.

Intrinsic motivation is defined as the enjoyment of the engaged task or a sense of fulfillment an individual acquires from engaging something (Ryan & Deci, 2000) and as something dealing with interest and curiosity. An intrinsically motivated person is the one who performs his behavior voluntarily and doesn't need material rewards. Extrinsic (outcome-focused) motivation deals with external benefits, or rewards, and is associated with achieving a goal. Many researchers looked at integrative and instrumental motivation as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. One should bear in mind that the different kinds of motivations can also sometimes be superposed or interleaved in the same activity.

One of the effective tools of developing learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations and reflection is a Reflective Journal writing (RJW). The technique has been worldwide used in teaching practice for many decades. Among its advantages RJW they mention development of motivation and clearly demonstrate the link between implementation of Reflective Journal (RJ) and motivation enhancement in learners (Farrak, 2012; Walker, 2006; Lear, 2013; Young, 2014).

A RJ is a form of diary which is used by learners to record their thoughts, experiences, ideas on a regular basis. The purpose of RJW is to establish the link between the present level of knowledge and the already obtained knowledge and to detect a personal connection with the material studied.

The problem for educators is to study the role RJW has in enhancing students' learning motivation and find out the conditions under which its implementation could be most effective.

1.3 Purpose of the study

Before stating that any technique is worth using in the process of teaching, it's necessary to find out the correlation between its implementation and its outcomes, its advantages and disadvantages. The objective of this study is to find out the role RJW has in enhancing students' learning motivation and find out the conditions under which its implementation could be most effective.

2. Research methods

The main objective of the experiment was to consider the technique of RJW as an effective instrument to improve language learning and enhance motivation in English language learners. In this study 30 upper-intermediate students of Kazan Federal University participated. The experiment was held within the frames of the Practical Grammar of the English language course.

During the experiment students were given the task to keep a structured RJ. It was previously explained and proved that the structured type of RJ is a more preferable than the unstructured one (Amirkhanova, 2014), so, the students were explained the aim of keeping the Journal and given instructions and questions to follow.

In our experiment, we implemented the scheme (which we consider to be mostly suitable) of making up questions for a Reflective Journal and implied it in teaching students of Foreign Languages department. Starting from the second lesson and throughout the whole course, which lasts for two semesters, the students were given three series of questions, the first one being 'description of the studied material', which contains 5 questions of the type: 'What new fact did I learn throughout this week?', 'What's my reaction to a particular topic in the lecture?', the second one dealing with 'evaluation of gained knowledge and understanding one's own level', containing questions of the type: 'Do I understand what I have learnt?', and the third series – 'own attitude and behavior' which can include such questions as: 'How can I make the strategy more effective?', 'What can I do to get a better understanding?'. Depending on the content of the course the questions can vary, but the principle of division into three series and their orientation onto the content of learning activity, its process and aims, in our opinion, should be basic. The maximum grade for keeping RJ was 30% from the final semester grade.

Two groups of upper intermediate students of approximately the same level took part in the experiment. 15 experimental group students were asked to write the RJ according to all instructions described above, while 15 students of the control group learned the same material without keeping the RJ.

To describe perceptions of students and their motivation regarding RJ writing we used a 6-item post-study questionnaires developed by M. Farrah (2012) based on a 5-point Likert test. The relative

agreement to the questionnaire items ranged from 1 (Strongly disagree) to 5 (Strongly agree). This post-study questionnaire was administered at the end of the course.

The post-study questionnaire contained 6 questions dealing with intrinsic learning motivation: 1. RJW helped me to talk about my experiences; 2. RJ writing helped me to express my ideas and opinions; 3. RJW helped me to respond to my thoughts and feelings; 4. RJ writing enhanced my communication skills; 5. Frequent JJW increased my creativity; 6. RJW motivated me to write more).

3. Findings

As the result, the students of experimental group demonstrated excellent results at the final test and the exam: 53.3% of students got grade 5 (compared to 40% of students of control group), 40% got grade 4 (compared to 40% of control group) and 6.6% got grade 3 (compared to 20% of control group). Grades for the exam which was taken at the end of the course generally corresponded to the grades which students got for the final test. The average score in the experimental group was 4.46, in the control group – 4.2.

The post-study questionnaire contained 6 questions answers to which were rated 4.65; 4.46; 4.39; 4.05; 4.05; 4.42 correspondingly. The results demonstrated a high level of motivation, which means that RJ writing helps enhance learner's intrinsic motivation.

4. Discussion

The study showed that RJW is successful in promoting students' intrinsic motivation on English writing, their self-confidence and initiative in English writing, which is consistent with previous studies (Estrada, 2014), (Liao, MT& Wong, CT. 2007). Moreover, we strongly believe that RJW develops not only intrinsic but also extrinsic motivation, because RJ contributes to students' goal-orientedness. All the above stated makes us assert the RJ technique enhances such main components of motivational teaching practice as creating initial motivation, maintaining and protection of motivation and encouraging positive self-evaluation because RJ technique provides increasing both the learners' expectancy of success and goal-orientedness, creating realistic learner beliefs, creating a pleasant and supportive atmosphere and establishing rapport with the students, promoting ideal forms of interaction between the teacher and learners, can help avoid stress and the level of anxiety, provides encouragement of learners and a constant feedback and personal attention from a teacher, makes learning stimulating, increases learners' self-esteem, creates learners' autonomy, increases learner's interest and involvement in tasks, stimulates motivationally appropriate feedback. All these show high motivational potential of RJ writing.

Alongside with the above stated, the findings are consistent with the researchers view that learning is enhanced through keeping a RJ, thus itself being a strong motivational factor. Dymont and O'Connell suggest that making sure that the expectations of a RJW are clear is an enabling factor. They state that in addition to making the purpose of the RJW transparent, it should also be made clear (a) how the journal fits into the overall program of study, (b) who will read the journal, (c) what the

assessment criteria are and how much the Journal will count, and (d) what the specific requirements are (Dymont & O'Connell, 2010).

5. Conclusion

RJW technique possesses great value for university teachers. It gives students a chance for deeper understanding of aims of their own learning activities, for analyzing and correcting the process of knowledge acquisition, good level of preparation for written works and tests; moreover, RJW has a positive impact on motivation, letting students distinctly realize why they need the material they are learning, and can be considered an important part of motivational strategies model. Besides, both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation types are engaged in this technique. To make the implementation of RJ efficient, a teacher should follow certain rules, as to choose the structured type of the Journal, check it up systematically, provide regular feedback to learners, state clearly the demands for its writing, establish trust-based relationships with students and carefully organize students' work in keeping a RJ.

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