FACTS AND CHALLENGES IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN ALGERIAN HIGHER EDUCATION

NAIMI AMARA

Department of English, Hassiba Benbouali University, Chlef, Algeria
Email: n.amara@univ-chlef.dz/naimsoul@live.fr

Abstract: This article tries to shed lights on the main differences between deep learning and surface learning at Higher Education (HE).In many Algerian English departments, surface learning characterises the tecahing-learning schene.Memorisation and little academic writing are preventing students from developing thier intellectual capacities. Deep learning is fostered by encouraging students to take a critical view of the subject and by giving them access to the tools to do this. Students often do not know what it is they do not know and therefore need to have a dialogue with their peers and with the tutor to help them understand. Teachers therefore, need to be plan well and need to try new ideas to cater for their students' needs and differences. Teaching is a highly complex task to be accomplishedas ; it necissitats a good management of students and teaching materilas. Reflection on one's teaching experience is more than required; as it enables teachers to improve the quality of thier courses and meet the students' increasing needs.Thus,deep learning should be encouraged by our institutions and surface learning should be fought by all means to put an end to old bad learning-teaching habbits.

Key Words: Collobarative Learning, Deep Learning, Higher Education, motivation. Surface learning

I. INTRODUCTION

The transition from school to university is often difficult to manage ; and Algerian students entering higher education (HE) are no exception. The demands of essay writing, a skill required in most subjects, can be particularly true. Academic writing constitues the most difficult task that our students in Algeria face especiaaly when they sit for an exam or write a report. Teachers at this level expect students to study independently and do not require regular supervision. Memorisation and non-academic writing characterise most Algerian students' learning habits. Algerian Higher Education sytem (LMD) is exam based; with its five (5) different types of exams for each semester, it makes it an assessment machine that produces students who can only memorise and regurgitate without talking or thinking. What is missing in our higher education is critical thinking, the growth of human intellect and the quest for knowledge. One more issue is that most exams are written and given in exam sheets which prevents teachers from checking the originality of the submitted works. Students often memorise from books , articles and websites and include passages from what have been memorised in their assingments or exam essays.

True academic writing is not really practised till the second year of the Master degree in which students are asked to write their disertations for gaduation. Those students are not obliged to acknowledge the sources of information in their works, are not encouraged to paraphrase and summarise what they read. These practices develop very bad habits in the students and risks thier intellectual ability in the future.So, to get a good mark, you only need to memorise well.

II. ENGLISH AS THE LANGUAGE OF GLOBALISATIOn

The teaching of English shifted many years ago from the teaching of literature to the teaching of English of technical, technological and occupational subjects; but of course in some contexts literature is still taught and is very relevant to the needs of learners. Globalization is still spreading, and English has clearly been chosen as its communication language. It also spreads to people who had never before needed English downwards and outwards. It is not only the politician, the business leader and the academic professor who need to speak in English to international colleagues and clients: it is also the receptionist of the hotel, the nurse and the site foreman. Increasing worldwide vocational learning and training as education becomes less academic and more practical and application-oriented. Students want to make their studies useful. Economics and markets want people with vocational skills to be employed... General English is taught with increasing success throughout the world in earlier ages. As this trend continues, students will leave their primary education having already covered the traditional syllabus of' 'General English,' and no matter how competent they have become, they will not want to repeat the same old courses ; their English studies need an application, a purpose.

III. ENGLISH TAUGHT IN ALGERIA

English language teachers in Algeria, as in any other non-English speaking countries, are facing the problem of teaching English to meet the increasing needs of the students in scientific disciplines such as Computing, Chemistry,and Biology. English is taught as a complementary subject but a compulsory one in almost all faculties in Algeria. However, while the English departments in Algeria are expected to train

teachers to teach English used in different specialisms (Eg.Business English) across the different faculties, they can not cope with the change and remain passive by training teachers in subjects such as literature, civilisation, and linguistics. Strevens (1976,p6) describes such similar teaching situation, a long time ago, as "*..informed by the values and symbols of literature*.". As a result, EFL teachers who were trained for 5 years at least, in these literary specialist areas are asked to teach ESP courses.Those EFL teachers often find themselves obliged to rely on their experience, if any, to teach those classes and develop teaching materials with respect to their students' needs. As a result, the English course contents delivered at the tertiary level is of little direct relevance to the students' needs in most faculties in Algeria. Again, English courses that are offered at most faculties are little related to the future needs of the students, as a result; those students lose motivation in studying English when they realise that those courses are not relevant to their subject area and do not meet their needs. Keith Harding (2007,p.7) describes such similar teaching situation where there is "*… a lack of training for newly-qualified teachers and with support materials hard to find, limited, and often too sector-specific.".* In this situation, the special needs of students, especially the needs of a practical application, cannot be satisfied.

IV. DEEP LEARNING VERSUS SURFACE LEARNING

Sometimes, for a number of reasons such as poor educational environment and policy, students avoid the hard work of deep learning and instead rely on surface learning practices. Identifying these practices makes it possible for educators to diagnose problems in organizing courses or curricula**.** Approaches to learning describe what students do when they go about learning and why they do it. The basic distinction is between a deep approach to learning and a surface approach to learning. In deep learning ,students aim towards understanding and in surface learning students aim to reproduce material in a test or exam rather than actually understand it. So, just memorizing the answer or knowing the material at a shallow level is not enough for students development. Learning should go beyond meorisation to understanding, applying, crtical thinking and even problem-solving. Most teachers would say they want their students to engage in this type of learning. Lack of motivation from the students part may result in surface learning too, since those students may not find time or enrgy to engage in such deep learning. They may not be motivated if they are facing personal problems or they want the course just fro the credit. Students might also turn to surface approaches because they are not motivated in your subject as they may be in others they are taking. Blaming them is not helpful as it deflects our effort away from teaching strategies that might have a positive effect on students. A deep approach requires a certain amount of time to think about and explore topics. An issue with our students is that time is likely to be taken up with part time work! , that the more the day is crammed with lectures and compulsory activities the less time is available for processing the information provided in the classes and the course material. High level outcomes would be critical thinking, logical argument, systematic problem solving, self-directive learning.Students who make their own choice of units are more likely to take a deep approach to learning as they are choosing an area in which they have interest (but how do they know they have an interest in it in the first place!!!).

V. PRINCIPLES OF LEARNING

A theoretical debate surrounds the subject of whether it is better to learn by small steps or large chunks. For the teacher, there is a time and place for both approaches.With some children especially the mentally dull, small steps are useful because with a limited 'channel capacity' there is more chance to that the information will be leid in mind. Part learning with small steps, however, might be a disadvantage where is the material is connected in some ways. Poetry, theories, and lawd of science , for example, really need to be presented in their entirety ; otherwise the reltionship between the parts is lost. Learning a poem line by line was a popular compulsory pastime for Algerian school children not so long ago, and it is surprising how difficult it was to put the whole poem together without a conscious effort to establish connections between the end of one line and the beginning of the next in order to preserve the continuity where the the total context is important. Whole learning is a disadvantage because taking parts of the contents out of the context may lead to the material being meaningless like poetry for example. When to use whole or part learning is a matter which the teacher must judge from his experience.We may read information several times to get an overall picture of its content and try to memorise it. We may also break the information down into parts and learn each part first before drawing it together again.This crudely distinguishes ' whole' from 'part' learning. The pros and cons the two approaches have been reserached and debated for several years without any resulting-clear cut advice about which is the best method. The compromise conclusion is that the nature of the material and the condition of the learner dictate the most suitable method. Th holystic apparoach however can be useful where the amount of information is sufficiently small to be absorbed at one time. Also, it is said to provide a better grasp of meaning and continuity between the elements of the material once the overall pattern of knowledge is understood. It is not always possible to treat chunks of onformation in this way, particularly

if the material is difficult and unfamiliar.Consequently , we must resort to breaking it down into manageable portions.

VI. LEARNING THEORIES

Behaviourism is primarily associated with Pavlov (classical conditioning) in Russia and with Thorndike, Watson and particularly Skinner in the United States (operant conditioning).Behaviourism is dominated by the constraints of its (naïve) attempts to emulate the physical sciences, which entails a refusal to speculate about what happens inside the organism. Anything which relaxes this requirement slips into the cognitive realm. Much behaviourist experimentation is undertaken with animals and generalised. Cognitive theory is interested in how people understand material, and thus in; aptitude and capacity to learn (thus fringing onto psychometrics and testing), and learning styles (the reference is to one of the few apparently valid styles. Humanist "theories" of learning tend to be highly value-driven and hence more like prescriptions (about what ought to happen) rather than descriptions (of what does happen).They emphasise the "natural desire" of everyone to learn. Whether this natural desire is to learn whatever it is you are teaching, however, is not clear. Constructivism is the label given to a set of theories about learning which fall somewhere between cognitive and humanistic views. If behaviourism treats the organism as a black box, cognitive theory recognises the importance of the mind in making sense of the material with which it is presented. Nevertheless, it still presupposes that the role of the learner is primarily to assimilate whatever the teacher presents.

Thoeries of teaching and learning focussing on student activity are based on tow main theories: phenomenography and constructivism. Phenomenography was a term coined by Marton (1981) and Saljo. – based on the idea that the learner's perspective defines what is learned not what the teacher intends should be learned.Constructivism emphasises what students do rather than how they represent knowledge – it is a label given to a set of theories about learning which fall somewhere between cognitive and humanistic views.Constructivist assumptions are also implicit in the notion of learning through reflection in professional practice.Vygostsky believed that childen learn more effectively when they are guided by an 'expert'. Talking and asking questions of the adult allows children to build or construct ideas. Teachers engage in a process of "scaffolding" in which they encourage students to discover principles by themselves rather than by telling them – dialogue between teacher and student and amongst students is central to the process. It is often questioned as to whether there really are theories of adult learning. On one hand it is debatable how far the learning of adults is sufficiently distinct from the learning of others. Many types of learning that are used in higher education including experiential learning, student autonomy in learning and self-directed learning belong in the tradition of adult education.

VII. STUDENTS RESPONSIBILITY

Teaching for quality learning in higher education should take into consideration number of recent changes : Greater proportion of School leavers now enter higher education with a considerable range of abilities.Students are paying more and therefore demand more for their money. A more diverse student population,such as age, experience, social groups and cultural background are found in the same class.Larger classes exist in most countries especially under developed ones. More courses are getting vocationally orientated as education becomes less academic and more practical.Dealing with the full range of differences and individual needs of students inorder to maximise their potential is very complicated task. It requires the recognition of individual differences and needs, familiarisation with their backgrounds and the identifictaion of appropriate teaching strategies and activities (Turner, 2000). Learner independence is quite important. Teachers should encourage learners to refclect on how they learn, practice and exploit new language. Students learn best when they are interacting with each other, with the tutor and with the materials.Motivation is high when the tutor helps the student to relate the learning to their own experience, and at its lowest when the student cannot make any connection with the learning.'Deep' learning is fostered by encouraging students to take a critical view of the subject and by giving them access to the tools to do this. Students often do not know what it is they do not know and therefore need to have a dialogue with their peers and with the tutor to help them understand.

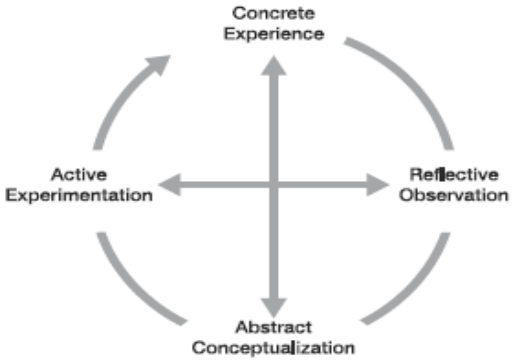
VIII. EFFECTIVE PRACTITIONER

The main aim of a language teacher is to make students able to communicate in the target language. An effective practitioner is likely to be one who reflects on his teaching, updates his skills and thinks of teaching from the perspective of its impact on learner rather than from the perspective of 'covering content'. The average University Teacher is now expected to be an excellent teacher, a man or woman who can expertly redesign courses and methods of teaching to suit different groups of students, deal with large mixed ability classes, apply information and communication technology appropriately and inspire students with zero tolerance for delay whose minds are probably on their next part-time job rather than on the pleasures of learning (Ramsden, 2003). Effective teaching means becoming a reflective practitioner and

for that you need a theory of teaching. Using that theory, and your experience and knowledge of the content you are teaching, you can ponder on how you are handling it and wonder at how you might handle it more effectively (Biggs 2003).

IX. REFLECTION MATTERS IN TEACHING

There exists a need to ensure that teachers should evaluate their teaching and students' learning effectively. All professional development courses related to teaching stress the importance of the development of reflective practice.It is not sufficient simply to have an experience in order to learn. Without reflecting upon this experience it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost. It is from the feelings and thoughts emerging from this reflection that generalisations or concepts can be generated. And it is generalisations that allow new situations to be tackled effectively (Gibbs 1988). Reflective writing provides an opportunity for teachers to gain further insights from their work through deeper reflection on their experiences, and through further consideration of other perspectives from people and theory. Through reflection we can deepen the learning from work. A recurrent finding of research into student learning is that we can never assume that the impact of teaching on student learning is what we expect it to be.Kolbs well-known diagram of effective single loop learning is at the heart of the postgraduate programme. This is single loop learning where assumptions are challenged and underlying values are changed.There is a straightforward set of stages we go through when we reflect effectively upon practice Kolb (1984). We experience something. After the event we bring it to the forefront of our mind, and think about all the feelings, ideas, behaviours associated with it (often with a peer or supervisor/tutor). This process of in-depth reflection will lead us to generalise from this one incident, and tease out or abstract general useful / insightful principles from it. We then test out these insights and abstractions in practice. Then the whole cycle begins again, because you reflect again on those new concrete practices and experiences.



The Kolb experiential learning cycle (Kolb 1984:42, also Klapper 2006:35)

Innovation is the test bed where changes are instituted in order to improve practice. This is done within a frame of feedback and evaluation and occasionally more formal research to monitor and evaluate the changes. Thus learning is facilitated through a cycle of reflection which is both active and scholarly. Talk about how the reflective statement that they prepared for the start of the programme could be developed into a statement of values.Schön (1987) describes two types of reflection: reflection in practice when you are working, and being aware of what you are doing at the same time and reflection on practice which is what we usually mean when we refer to reflective practice.Reflection-on-action, this is done later – after the event. Workers may write up recordings, talk things through with a supervisor and so on. The act of reflecting-on-action enables us to spend time exploring why we acted as we did, what was happening in a group and so on. In so doing we develop sets of questions and ideas about our activities and practice.The act of reflecting-on-action enables us to spend time exploring why we acted as we did, what was happening in a group and so on. In so doing we develop sets of questions and ideas about our activities and practice and an action plan based on those practices. But reflection alone is not sufficient for professional development to occur. The real test is developed practice. Reflection is the middle ground where theories are brought to bear on the analysis of past action: the really important stage comes after this and could be thought of as planning. To assess the significance of learning from experience we need to ask 'so what'? (Beaty and McGill 2001).Reflection can help us identify a need but it does not deliver the development by itself.

CONCLUSION

Teaching is noble but a complicated job. Therefore, teachers are invited to deal with the students' learning needs and differences.They have to make learning challenging and enjoyable; assess students' learning regularly and effectively and adapt to an eevr changing educational context. They need to update their courses to a maximum to ensure the quality of their courses. Reflecting on their teaching experiences is highly recommended. Meanwhile, students are also required to be responsible about thier learning with the help and guide of their tutors. Learning happens and therefore students need to play a vital role to devlop their own skills and capacities. The transition between school and college or university in Algeria is complicated and not smooth, thus, a great work is needed from teachers to accompany those students to resist old learning habbits and succeed to be good university students. Critical thinking and academic writing should be a priority in Algerian higher education as to cope with the developed world. Surface learning should disappear from our universities and deep learning has

to be encouraged by all stakeholders to meet the challnges of the new era.

REFERENCES

[1] Beaty,L.and McGill, I. (2001) 2nd Ed. Action Learning. Abingdon: Routledge

[2] Biggs, J. (2003).Teaching for Quality Learning at University (2nd edition). Buckingham: Society for Research into Higher Education /Open University Press.

[3] Gibbs, G. (1988) Learning by Doing, available at http://www2.glos.ac.uk/gdn/gibbs/

[4] Harding, H.(2007). English for Specific Purposes .Oxford: Oxford University Press.

[5] Kolb, D.A. (1984): Experiential learning: experience as the source of learning and development. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

[6] Ramsden, P. (2003). Learning to Teach in Higher Education. London: Routledge Falmer.

[7] Schön, D. (1983) The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action. New York: Basic Books

[8] Strevens, P. (1976). Problems of learning and teaching science through a foreign language. Studies in Science Education, 3. Leeds.

[9] Turner, T. (2000) 'Differentiation, progression and pupil grouping'. In Capel, S., Leask, M. and Turner, T. (eds) Learning to teach in the secondary school: a companion to school experience. London: Routledge, pp 134–50

★★★