



PROMOTING STUDENTS' AUTONOMY THROUGH MILADA BROUKAL'S STRATEGIES OF LEARNING: THE CASE OF ENGLISH 101 AND ENGLISH 102

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ABSTRACT

Promoting Students' Autonomy through Milada Broukal's Strategies of Learning: The Case of English 101 and English 102 endeavors to measure the students' autonomy and learning skills regarding two credit courses that I taught at Al Khawarizmi International College-University, Abu Dhabi, UAE. The two courses—English 101 and English 102—and their learning outcomes are based on Milada Broukal's book, *Weaving it Together: Connecting Reading and Writing*, which presents some considerable strategies to enhance and boost students' autonomy and learning skills in English language. More significantly, part from its well-organized and well-chosen content, the strategies are very inclusive and can be easily understood by non-native English speakers. These strategies encompass vocabulary in context, vocabulary in a new context, vocabulary building, looking for main ideas, looking for details, making inferences and drawing conclusions. Additionally, these strategies and their significance in terms of learners' autonomy have been tested through some individual and group assignments. Specifically, the aim of this article is to inspect students' ability to apply Broukal's strategies to improve their learning skills.

Introduction

The question of students' autonomy has become one of the most important and debated issues among language teachers nowadays and in the field of foreign language learning. This was an upshot of the fact that in modern teaching a student has to take responsibility for his/her own learning as an impetus towards the development of his/her learning aptitude. This idea has been backed up by Littlewood who argued that the strategy of learners' autonomy tries to achieve two major points. First, he argues that "students should take responsibility for their own learning. This is both because all learning can in any case only be carried out by the students themselves and also because they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education". Second, he believes that "taking responsibility" involves learners taking ownership (partial or total) of many processes which have traditionally belonged to the teacher, such as deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods, and evaluating process. (Littlewood, 1999, p.71)

Nurturing the strategy of learners' autonomy is usually seen in terms of strategies for independent and individual learning. This idea is shared by many researchers in the field of language teaching and Simon Borg is one of them. Additionally, David Little in his article, *Learner autonomy: drawing together the threads of self-assessment, goal-setting and reflection*, gave a very pertinent point to the scope of this study which is the idea of learners' autonomy, responsibility and motivation. He argues that: "autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning; and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation". (David, 1999, pp.77-88) As a result, learners' autonomy can lead to a sort of self-reliance and self-management in learning.

More specifically, the question that *Promoting Students' Autonomy through Milada Broukal's Strategies of Learning: The Case of English 101 and English 102* addresses is the following: To what extent do Broukal's strategies promote learners' autonomy; and more importantly what kind of assessments did this study adopt to measure the significance of Broukal's strategies in terms of learners' autonomy? Before inspecting the implications of Broukal's strategies, one needs to know about the aforementioned strategies. As it has been mentioned earlier, Broukal's methodology to enhance the idea of learners' autonomy was based on vocabulary in context, vocabulary in a new context, vocabulary building, looking for main ideas, looking for details, making inferences and drawing conclusions. Additionally, before looking at the effectiveness of these strategies, we will present an example from the book and later on we will present some of the students' samples and see if they really benefited from the method used by Broukal. The text that we are going to look at is entitled *Hop to It*:

"He's good enough for one thing, I should judge – he can out jump any frog in Calaveras County," said Smiley in Mark Twain's famous short story "The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.". This was the inspiration for the Calaveras County Jumping Frog Contest, which has taken place since 1982 in the village of Angels Camp in Calaveras County, California. The first year, 15,000 people attended this unusual event, more than the entire population of Calaveras County at the same time. The following year, the crowd doubled, and by 1931, the event was so popular that two additional jumping areas had to be added to accommodate entries from around the world. Today, more than 50,000 spectators attend this event and the frog entries number 1,000.

Although the Calaveras County Jumping Frog Contest has gained international attention, the majority of the competitors are still people from Calaveras County. Anyone who would like to enter goes to the registration table, fills out a form, and pays a modest entry fee. The fee includes the cost of renting a frog in case the entrant doesn't already own one. Many people who live in the area go out and catch their frogs the night before, so they are "fresh" and ready to go on the day of the contest.

After entering the contest, the competitors must decide who will be the "jockey". This is the person who places the frog on the launching pad and then encourages the frog to jump. The goals of the entrants and their "jockeys" are, first of all, to have fun, second, to win a prize; and third, to set a new world frog-jumping record.

The contest starts when the jockey positions his or her frog and then yells, screams, jumps up and down, puffs, blows, whistles, or does whatever else is necessary to incite the frog to jump. The one thing that is not allowed is any kind of physical contact with the frog. Each frog is given 15 seconds to jump three times. Once a frog has made its three jumps, an official measures the distance from the center of the pad to the spot where the frog landed on its third jump. Naturally, the winning frog is usually the one that jumped in the straightest line rather than zig-zagged around. Some frogs frustrate their jockeys by jumping back toward the launching pad after a spectacular first or second jump.

Like any of nature's creations, frogs are unpredictable – that is, unless they have been to Bill Steed's famous Croaker College. Steed's "students" are given a 240-hour frog training course to teach them the fundamentals of frog jumping under pressure. At Croaker College, the frogs work out in a pool, lift tiny weights, do chin-ups and high dives, eat centipede soup and ladybug salad, and generally prepare for the big day. Do graduates of Croaker College really win frog-jumping contests more often? That is a question Jim Steed prefers not to answer.

After the winners have been announced and the prizes given, the participants can take their frogs (or return their rentals) and go home, or they can stay and enjoy the rest of the Calaveras County Fair. They can listen to country music, view craft displays, attend a horse race, watch a farm animal auction, and more. For those people who think nothing quite compares to the excitement of the jumping frogs, however, there is the consolation of knowing there is always next year". (Broukal, 2010, pp. 42-3)

I. Broukal's Strategies to enhance Learners' Autonomy:

A-Vocabulary in Context:

Identify the letter of the best answers for the meanings of the bold words and phrases.

- The "jockey" places the frog on the launching pad.
 - winner's circle
 - take-off point
 - measuring place
 - finish line
- The "jockey" does whatever is necessary to incite the frog to jump.
 - excite
 - calm
 - demonstrate
 - frighten

3. Some frogs frustrate their "jockeys".
 - a. upset
 - b. satisfy
 - c. stop
 - d. reward
4. Frogs are unpredictable.
 - a. experienced
 - b. surprising
 - c. native
 - d. understandable
5. People can attend a farm animal auction at the fair.
 - a. show
 - b. contest
 - c. race
 - d. sale
6. The Calaveras County Jumping Frog Contest has gained international attention
 - a. festivity
 - b. competition
 - c. emancipation
 - d. celebration

B-Vocabulary Building:

Complete the following sentences with the correct form of the bold words:

1. ENTER

- a. You must pay an _____ fee if you want to take part in the competition.
- b. The _____ are not allowed to touch their frogs during the contest.

2. PREDICT

- a. It is not easy to _____ which way a frog will jump.
- b. Frogs do not always jump in a _____ direction.

3. COMPETITION

- a. The _____ try to make the frogs jump as far as possible.
- b. The contest can get very _____ when people start to yell and scream at their frogs.

4. COMPARE

- a. Could you _____ this picture with the one given earlier.
- b. Your _____ should be very clear.

C-Vocabulary in a New Context:

Write your own sentences using the bold words from Part A and Part B.

D-Looking for Main Ideas:

Circle the letter of the best

1. The Calaveras County Jumping Frog Contest _____
 - a. is an expensive but popular event
 - b. is a formal international event
 - c. is an unusual but popular event
 - d. is not a popular
2. The Jumping Frog Contest _____
 - a. is open to everyone, even those without frogs
 - b. is open only to graduates from Croaker College
 - c. is open only to people with frogs caught in the area
 - d. is open only to people from Calaveras County

E-Looking for Details:

Scan the reading quickly and find the answers to these questions. Write complete sentences.

- 1) Where did the idea for the Jumping Frog Contest come from?
- 2) How often does the Jumping Frog Contest take place?
- 3) What does the entry fee include?
- 4) What can people do if they don't have a frog?
- 5) List three things Bill Steed's students do in their training course.

F-Making Inferences and Drawing Conclusions

The answers to these questions are not directly stated in reading. Write complete sentences.

- 1) Why is the Calaveras County Jumping Frog Contest very popular?
- 2) Why does the Calaveras County Jumping Frog Contest impose a modest entry fee?

- 3) Why would a jockey be frustrated if his or her frog jumped back to the launching pad?
- 4) Why are frogs unpredictable?
- 5) How do people feel during this contest?

II. Analysis of the Strategies given by Broukal

To give some insights on the above strategies offered by Broukal, one can decipher the fact that they can all improve learners' autonomy in many ways. For instance, vocabulary in context and vocabulary building may enhance students' autonomy and help in creating a considerable vocabulary repertoire. Additionally, vocabulary in a new context is a very significant strategy in a sense that it targets the policy of working independently which is very important in terms of self-reliance.

Furthermore, Broukal includes two strategies that promote learners' comprehension and autonomy. These strategies which are looking for the main ideas and looking for details are used to boost learners' scanning and skimming ability in terms of reading which will in turn help in their autonomy.

Importantly, the last strategy offered by Broukal plays an important role in terms of learners' autonomy. This strategy encourages the students to apply analytical and critical thinking skills and help the students to develop independent and critical skills in reading, writing and thinking as they relate to social and cultural experience.

To assess these strategies proposed by Broukal, some individual and group assignments have been conducted to measure the significance of these strategies. Here, students' autonomy and comprehension skills have been tested via some intermediate texts. They have been given a text and asked to design their own reading comprehension where they should apply the five strategies proposed by Broukal to enhance learners' autonomy. The following text was given to the students to test their learning skills and autonomy along with their mastery for the strategies given by Broukal:

Male and Female Family Members

"In my family, there are three women and three men. The three women are my mother, my sister, and me. The men are my father and my two brothers. From my own experience and observations, there are similarities and differences in the behavior of males and females in my family in regard to how they communicate, what they communicate, and the way they shop.

When it comes to communicating, there are similarities and differences. Both the males and females go online to communicate with their friends. However, I noticed that the males are always looking at their messages and sending messages much more than the women. When communicating by phone, it seems the women like to talk on the phone more than men, especially my teenage sister. It's rare to find her not talking to her friends on the phone. Also, when men talk, they communicate more directly, almost like giving orders. Whereas, the women in the family we are much more indirect. Instead of "yes," my mother will write or say, "I think so."

The content of the conversations on the phone has similarities and differences too. Both the male and female members of my family talk to their friends on the phone. The women, I think, have a need to talk about how they feel and show understanding if their friends have a problem. The women talk about friends, their weight, food, clothes, and other women. On the other hand, my father or my brothers don't talk to their male friends for emotional support. When they have a conversation with a friend, they always joke a lot, about things like sports, work, or politics.

Males and females in our family shop differently too. When my father, sister, or I go shopping, it is like an outing; it's a fun thing to do just like for some men it is exciting and fun to go to a sports event. We, the females, love to shop. We go all around the stores and look and try everything, even if we don't buy anything. We go shopping not to buy, but just to look around as if it is a kind of entertainment, while the men in our family only go shopping when they need something. They go in the store, pick out the thing they need, and then leave right away". (Taken from Broukal's Weaving it Together, 2010, book 4, p. 102)

The Aim of the Above Text:

The aim of the above text was to inspect students' ability to apply Broukal's strategies of learning autonomy. The majority of students were able to apply Broukal strategies. For instance, 70% of the class got good, 20% very good and 10% excellent. However, and because the space given to this article, I cannot include all students' samples, as a result I will include one sample where the student got an excellent mark as a result of the fact that she understood the strategies very well. The choice of this sample is an upshot of the fact that this article is concerned with those students who were able to reach the stage of learning autonomy and master Broukal's strategies. The following is Khadija Mohamed's assignment. She got the highest mark:

How did Khadija Mohamed apply Broukal's Strategies? Vocabulary

A. Vocabulary in Context

What are the meanings of the colored bold words? Circle the letter of the best answer.

- The content of the conversations on the phone between men and women has its similarities and differences.
 - resemblance
 - agreements
 - equality
 - unlikeness
- Men feel excited when they go to a sports event.
 - nice
 - good
 - unexcited
 - enthusiastic
- We are going to buy a new television.
 - bribe
 - accept
 - purchase
 - sell
- Ladies go shopping not to buy, but just to look around as if it is a kind of entertainment.
 - game
 - enjoyment
 - relaxation
 - show

B. Vocabulary Building

Complete the sentences with the correct form of the colored bold words. You may use your dictionary.

1. Conclusion

- I would like to _____ my speech by thanking everyone for coming today.
- She _____ that they were the one to blame.

2. Communicate

- I used the sign language as a means of _____.
- I cannot _____ with her.

3. Experience

- She had four years _____ in nursing.
- I had just _____ the worst time of my life.

4. Rare

- It is _____ to find her not talking to others.
- Jane _____ goes out of her house.

A. Looking for the Main Ideas

Circle the letter of the best answer.

- There are _____ in the behavior of males and females.
 - similarities and differences
 - no similarities
 - huge differences
 - no similarities and differences
- The _____ on the phone has its similarities and differences too.
 - content of the conversations
 - way they talk
 - talking duration
 - way males and females converse to each other
- Ladies mostly go shopping not to buy but just to look around _____.
 - when they feel blue
 - for curiosity's sake
 - as if it's an entertainment
 - when they are tired
- For males, shopping is _____.
 - like an outing
 - boring
 - bothersome
 - a kind of entertainment

B. Looking for Details

Scan the reading quickly to find the answers to these questions. Write complete sentences.

- According to the writer, how are the male and female different when it comes to the way they communicate?

- Between the males and females, who communicates more directly?
- How is the content of the conversation different between the males and females in the writer's family?
- Do females go shopping only when they need something?

C. Making Inferences and Drawing Conclusions

The answers to these questions are not directly stated in the reading. Write complete sentences.

- Why do you think the women talk more indirectly in comparison to men?
- How is shopping a kind of entertainment for women?
- Do you think that it is good for the males and females to be different than each other?
- What do you think is the reason that the males don't talk to their friends for emotional support?

III. General Comments on the Students' Samples and the Strategies:

As an instructor, I was very impressed by some of the students' understanding of Broukal's strategies. Additionally, the strategies were useful for the students in a sense that they enhanced the students' aptitude to deal with any advanced text. The aforementioned strategies—vocabulary in context, vocabulary in a new context, vocabulary building, looking for main ideas, looking for details, making inferences and drawing conclusions—can help any non-native speaker to boost his or her learning autonomy and aptitude in English language.

More specifically, these two credit courses—English 101 and English 102—that I am teaching at Khawarizmi International College-University were very useful for my students in terms of learning autonomy and leaning skills. More importantly, some of my students argued that these courses and the strategies being used have helped them to be independent learners since they trigger their understanding, which is different from the traditional methods of absorbing lessons. Though, these strategies might be seen as very challenging in the beginning, they remain very inclusive strategies to nurture students' self-reliance and help them develop their critical thinking skills and more significantly to be very active learners.

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