Incorporating principles of Exploratory Practice for fostering learner Autonomy

Eskandar Bazan
Islamic Azad University, Amol, Iran
Eskandar.bazan2@gmail.com

Abstract.

This study embarks upon probing different ways of learning chosen by students, consciously or unconsciously, to proceed and improve their learning. The argument about the ambiguous taxonomies of learning strategies has been presented, and the need to make a clear distinction between "training" and "development", from learners' point of view, has been explained. Learners' phases of learner development should proceed in a similar way to teacher development. Consequently, it is crucial for this study to call for the need to be aware of the fact that learners do normally move on to learner development, whether or not teachers/researchers neglect this fact. This article also examined how researchers and teachers have tried to help learners to learn better by providing learner- or strategy training.

In addition, the review discussed the value, from a sociocultural viewpoint, of journal writing, group talk and making use of experiences. In addition, the relationship between writing, talking, learning and reflection has been linked to stress how learners advantage from it to create a better situation for learning for themselves and for others.

Key words: exploratory practice, reflective learning, learning strategy, collaborative learning, cooperative learning

1. Introduction.

The exploratory practice (EP) framework is based on a set of principles for practitioners research honed over 20 years of working with teachers, learners and researchers .EP was developed in the early 1990s by Allwright.

Reflective learning is as the core element in learning from experience and is the same as reflection in a mirror. It "gives back not what it is, but what it might be, an important on the original" (Biggs, 1999). It encourages learners to address "why" things happen.

Learning strategy is the discovering of the characteristics what could be learned from them. It is a set of the factors investigated by researchers that contribute to enhancing learners' effectiveness.

Cooperative Activity is a group learning activity organized so that learning is dependent on the socially structured exchange of information between learners in groups and in which each learner is held accountable for his or her own learning and is motivated to increase the learning of others (Olsen and Kagan 1992). It is an instructional strategy that addresses academic and social skill learning by students. Students work towards fulfilling academic and social skill goals. It is a team approach where the success of the group depends upon everyone pulling his or her weight.

Collaborative Activity is an activity that learners help each other to achieve a shared goal which is beneficial for themselves and other learners as well. They tend to work in small groups and lead the whole group to maximize learning through teacher-learner and learner-learner interaction (Rogers& Johnson 1998, p. 34). Collaborative learning is commonly illustrated when groups of students work together to search for understanding, meaning, or solutions or to create an artifact or product of their learning. Further, collaborative learning redefines *traditional student-teacher* relationship in the classroom because activities can include collaborative writing, group projects, joint problem solving, debates, study teams, and other activities in which students team together to explore a significant question or create a meaningful project.

The aim of this study is to find out what happens in learners' reflection and how learners make sense of their own learning. I am interested in the processes that take place when an opportunity is given to learners to reflect on their own learning – in whether they make use of these opportunities, and, if they do, how they do so. I will discover these research questions:

a) How do students make sense of their learning?
b) How do they monitor their progress?
c) How do they react to their own understanding when it occurs?
d) How do students show evidence of their ongoing development?
e) Are low-level learners in Iran capable of reflecting on their language learning in English?

The study was motivated by my observation of students' defeat with learning English, caused by their under-achievement in English proficiency tests or teacher evaluations. Students' English education in Iran is test-

oriented, especially during the years immediately before they go to university, so it is common for those who do not perform well in tests to feel frustrated, or even embarrassed. It seldom seems to happen to Iranian learners that tests are not the only way to judge their learning.

In order to discuss the importance of helping students find out the purpose of their learning, and how they can make their learning more enjoyable, this study investigates learners' English learning experience and reflection in an elective one-semester course for human students at Farhang school in Babol, which was designed to enhance and promote learners' reflection on their own language learning processes. The course also attempted to recover students' eagerness for learning, which had often been lost or weakened for the reasons given above. Without reflection, students tend to underestimate themselves and let their unsuccessful learning experiences take away their self-confidence. Students with negative self-attributions "may cause the learner to slip into helplessness, withdraw from learning opportunities and give up the attempt, feeling discouraged. The learner loses his interest and curiosity for learning and lowers his expectations accordingly" (Kohonen, 2001:33).

Traditionally, students in Babol have been educated to learn from mistakes as the principal means of enhancing their success in learning. Looking at some common Chinese proverbs about learning, there are few which encourage people to learn from positive experience. Typical ideas traditionally instilled into students in Chinese cultures are that they should "*stand up from where they fall*", and that "*failure is the mother of success*".

In the reflection-based course, Exploratory Practice for Reflective English Learners, on which this study is based, students were given opportunities to rethink their goals in learning English, keep weekly study journals, and regularly share their reflection with others in groups with the support of Exploratory Practice (EP). EP was established by Allwright and associates to promote quality of life and understanding in the foreign language classroom. Students' journals and recorded group talk sessions have been posted on the course website since 2008, with the aim of representing, on the one hand, and investigating, on the other, how students can help themselves by using their own strengths, and exploring their own ways of learning. What students reveal in their reflections can help teachers and researchers better understand the characteristics of learner development, an area that has been little discussed in the field of language teaching and learning.

It is an important priority in EP to encourage students (and teachers) to recall their successful learning experiences, as well as the unsuccessful ones. Over the past nine years of observation of classes doing EP with students, I have observed that in group talk most students can, at least at first, think of few successes in their English learning experience. Every semester in the EP-based course, only around two or three successful experiences are brought up. Perhaps it is because students are never encouraged to recall successful experiences of learning English. Perhaps their experiences mainly consist of unpleasant memories, so their frustrations and worries hide their successful experiences after they occur. Moreover, in the Iran context particularly, people are educated to learn from mistakes and also are encouraged to keep their successes quiet. In other words, if they have enjoyed successes, they feel it would be free to tell others about them.

The principles of EP make a distinction it from other research approaches in various ways. First, EP aims to bring learners, teachers and researchers together through cooperative and collaborative activities. Second, it aims to develop better understanding of teaching and learning without producing an extra burden of work. Third, it is not a one-shot, short-term experiment, but rather aims for supportable, long-term investigation. Fourth, it is probably the only approach which, apart from focusing on the effectiveness of teaching and learning, is also concerned with people's quality of life. Allwright has emphasized the issue of the quality of life for teachers and learners for more than two decades. As Gieve and Miller (2006) highlight, "life" should not be forgotten or suppressed when "work" dominates. These distinguishing features encouraged me to use EP with my students. In particular, the students in the Farhang school where I am working have to meet endless deadlines for practices, displays or performances. English appears to be a weakness for most of these students, who are often perfectionists in their specialized areas but have little time or energy for other things. Most of their time is devoted to their human training. Their language learning performance is generally characterized by consistent under-achievement, and they therefore tend to lack confidence in themselves when using English.

2. Different ways of learning.

The four kinds of learning proposed are: non-reflective learning, naturally reflective learning, experiential learning, and supported reflective learning. In order to focus on the relationship between reflection and learning, which is the main concern of this study, the discussion of learning in the article does not attempt to cover all possible categories of ways of learning. Instead, with the aim of looking for an understanding of how reflection relates to the process of learning. The study will focus on research that throws light on the characteristics of learning when students reflect, or when they do not reflect, and how that reflection affects learning.

3. Non-reflective learning.

First, It is going to be discussed how learners react to and understand the situation if their learning is non-reflective, and how a non-reflective approach tends to encourage low student self esteem, and a tendency to focus only on errors and problems. Ridley (1991) provides a detailed description of how learners accept unexamined one's self and external environments as "truth", and what happens in reality is not considered as a

question of the learner's own choice if there is no reflection. Non-reflective learners tend to take things for granted, and accept learning results without much questioning, so they allow a habitual learning style to become established easily (Habermas, 1976,p.16). For example, students who consistently get poor results in English may assume that they are simply destined to always be bad at this subject, rather than thinking that the situation might be changed through reflection, a change of attitude, or seeking new sources of motivation. The role of reflection in learning is an important and dynamic process that can engage learners in letting their thinking flow before they make judgments about their performance in learning. Kohonen (1992,p.17) considers reflection as a bridge between experience and theoretical conceptualization. He implies that non-reflective learning appears to miss the opportunity for "recycling the experience at deeper level of understanding and interpretation". Learners who are not reflective tend to be followers.

4. Naturally reflective learning.

Boyd and Fales (1983) see reflective learning as the "key element in learning from experience", saying that it is "the core difference between whether a person repeats the same experience several times... or learns from experience in such a way that he or she is cognitively changed or affectively changed." Some learners are naturally good at reflection. They naturally reflect on their learning. Unfortunately, and perhaps this is human nature, when people reflect they tend to look mainly at their weaknesses. For foreign language learners, this means the negative side of learning. According to my experience in Babol, at least, it seems that when learners are asked to reflect, they are encouraged and even educated to look for problems.

The three questions people are expected to ask themselves are "Have I completed the task asked by my employer or friends?", "Have I misled my friends?", "Have I practiced taught skills?" Tsen Tzu's ideas of reflection are to examine oneself and see what is in need of "improvement".

Through traditional school and cultural education, learners in Babol are convinced that learning from mistakes is the major rationale for reflection. When reflecting in this way, there is a desire for only problems and weakness to be taken into account.

Although it is true that people can sometimes learn from negative and unsuccessful experience, if learners exaggerate this kind of reflection, the danger is that they will blame themselves too much. Gradually, they might lose confidence in their ability to learn, if they continually focus on their experiences when things do not go well. Experiences without understanding do not produce further success, as Marsick stressed. "[...], for a variety of reasons, people do not learn from their experience, or if they learn, they may simply reinforce errors." (Marsick, 1991,p. 36).

For naturally reflective learners, their intra-personal intelligence is one of their strengths, and this can be an asset for language learning, especially for oral skills. Yet it is likely that they will neglect this asset if they only look at what they have done wrong in reflection.

5. Experiential learning.

Mezirow (1981) placed critical reflection of experience at the heart of all learning. Rogers (1996) interprets learning as a cycle that begins with experience, followed by reflection and later proceeding to action. Kolb (1984) provides a well-known learning cycle which starts with experience, continues with critical reflection and abstract conceptualization and moves on to active experiment.

In experiential learning, according to Kohonen (1992), personal experience and giving subjective personal meaning to abstract concepts is seen as the focal point for learning. In short, it is about learning from actual experience through reflection. Learners' own experiences have an important place in this kind of learning. According to Kohonen (1992,p.18), the rationale for experiential learning can be seen in the following arguments:

(1) it facilitates personal growth;
(2) it helps learners adapt to social change;
(3) it takes account of differences in learning ability; and
(4) it responds to learner needs and practical pedagogical considerations.

More specifically, learners are encouraged to learn from reflection. Though the role of reflection has been relatively little discussed, Kohonen proposes reflection as a component of co-operative learning.

Kohonen (1992) provides an experiential model for creating an atmosphere of shared partnership, common purpose and joint management of learning. "Learning requires an explicit awareness and understanding of what it is that needs to be learned (metalinguistic and metacognitive awareness), and why such learning is necessary" (Kohonen, 2004). Without sufficient understanding, learners might solve false problems or create new frustrations. Marsick also raises the risk of actions without understanding.

"Unfortunately, learning from experience can lead to repetition of mistakes" (Marsick, 1991,p.24). This is because under experiential learning, learners are encouraged to look at problems in their reflection, and then they are generally expected to make changes. In this respect, experiential learning is similar to the other approaches mentioned above.

The core of experiential learning lies in reflective learning. Boyd and Fales (1983) explain in their introduction: "Reflective learning is the process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern,

triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective. We suggest that this process is central to understanding the experiential learning process." Kohonen summarizes four characteristics of experiential learning as follows:

1. Learning takes place along a continuum of meaning, ranging from "meaningless" routine learning to "meaningful", experiential learning that involves the learner.

2. Learning is a continuous process that is grounded in experience. Thus knowledge and skill gained in one situation become instruments of understanding and dealing with situations that follow.

3. The process of learning requires the resolution of conflicts between dialectically opposed modes of grasping and transforming experience.

4. Learning is a holistic process of relating to the world. It involves feeling, observing, thinking and acting, as a cyclic process. (Kohonen, 2001,p.30)

Kohonen has moved reflective learning towards a larger learning community that arouses students' independent learning and at the same time actively allows students to socially involve in helping other practitioners. Kohonen's work (2004) with portfolio assessment in Finland combines experiential learning, collaborative learning and learner autonomy, and thus provides a way of helping learners engage in individual and mutual learning.

Experiential learning certainly offers a promising model for learning. However, it encourages change as well as understanding, which might lead to certain risks. For example, learners might expect, or feel they are expected, to make changes for change's sake. But in fact, not everyone needs to or wants to change after reflection.

6. Exploratory Practice.

In this kind of learning, learners' awareness of learning is treated as part of the thinking that belongs to every learner. Learners do not need any special training to acquire the skill of reflecting. All they need is opportunities for learning, reflection and encouragement from themselves, teacher and group members.

From the perspective of a psycholinguist, F. Smith states: Monitoring, reviewing, reflecting and revising are regarded as "metacognitive" skills, involving thinking about thinking, which is regarded as a higher kind of thinking than thinking about anything else. "Observing" and "controlling" one's own thought processes are supposed to be different and superior modes of thinking, not practiced by many people because they have not learned how. But once again these are all fictitious and prejudicial concepts, favored by people with vested interests in finding ways of categorizing individuals….. No one needs to learn how to think about the consequences of their own thought, although we all have differing propensities to become analytical (and self-critical) in particular circumstances. (Smith, 1992,P.26) According to F. Smith, nobody needs training to reflect. Though every learner has the ability to think and to reflect, not every learner is given opportunities to do so. Supported reflective learning can reduce the danger of reinforcing errors and can in this way contribute to building learners' confidence.

Reflection with the help of exploratory practice goes through a process that is similar to experiential learning. However, with EP, understanding is the first priority. Learners can start their reflective journey because they want to make their learning more enjoyable or pleasant, but not necessarily because they have problems. Besides, actions or changes are optional not absolute. After discussing about different ways of learning from the perspective of how learners treat their learning, the article examines learner and strategy training.

7. Learner training.

First, the study reviews what researchers and teachers have done to investigate how to improve the quality of learning in the field of learning English as a foreign language. Three decades ago, in order to help learners make good use of a self-access center in the hope of promoting learner autonomy, a school of thought emerged in which learners were expected to develop skills related to self-management, self-monitoring and self-assessment. Meanwhile, the "good language learner" described by Naiman's and associates (1978) became a model for learner training. Therefore, learner training started to play a growing role in language teaching (Dickinson and Carver, 1980; Holec, 1980). If learners focus on solving problems, learners' individual positive learning experience will not be discovered, understood or repeated.

There are two specific approaches to improving learning: learner training and autonomous learning. Learner training for independent learning was, in its origins, related to a sudden interest in setting up self-access centers. Interestingly, Holec (1980) thinks teaching learners how to carry out self-directed learning would be counterproductive, since the learning would by definition no longer be self-directed. However, Holec's advocacy of autonomous learning based on decisions made wholly by learners seems to mean that learners take all of the responsibility for learning and teaching. Dickinson (1992) also views learner training as a resource to help learners to engage more actively in classroom learning. That is to say, learner training began by encouraging and helping learners to use a self-access center well, and it gradually became a part of classroom teaching.

Sinclair (2006) describes two extreme positions on learner training in her review of learner training over two decades. One is a highly teacher-directed approach (e.g. what teachers typically do in "study skills" course), the other is a wholly learner-directed approach to learner training (Breen 1984).

Sinclair categorizes "strategy training" as a similar approach to learner training, though some researchers now also include encouraging students to reflect on the processes of learning (see Cohen, 1995; Oxford, 1990). This traditional "teacher-centered transmission position" (Kohonen, 2001) means that students miss out on the learning opportunities involved in decision-making.

The opposite "extreme" approach to learner training categorized by Sinclair is the wholly learner-directed approach. She sees this extreme version as having emerged from a background of critical theory and what has become known as the "process approach" to language learning (Breen, 1984). She further points out that only if learners find they need to discuss learning processes will there be a specific focus on these.

Sinclair argues that some students might be able to manage under a learner-directed way of teaching, but others might still need teachers' suggestions to improve their learning. She then proposes a "teacher guided/ student-centered" approach as a "middle" way for learner training. This version of training does not impose a set of strategies on learners, but it does offer them some guidance.

In her review, different researchers address learner training as "learner development", "learning to learn", and "promoting autonomy". Apparently, Sinclair does not see the need for distinguishing the different use of the terms. However, it should be pointed out that there is still a need to make a distinction between learner development and learner training.

8. Strategy training.

The initial focus in strategy research was on discovering the characteristics of "good language learners" (Naiman et al., 1978; Rubin, 1975) and what could be learned from them. Researchers addressed the question of how to teach the strategies used by good language learners to less successful learners, under the assumption that if weaker learners are taught "good" strategies, they will become more successful. However, there are problems with this assumption. Chamot mentions that the good language learner cannot be described in terms of a single set of strategies, but rather through the ability to understand and deploy a personal set of effective strategies (see Chamot, 2005 for an updated review). Larsen-Freeman (2001) highlights the fact that each piece of research on learner action in terms of learning strategies has tended to be studied in isolation from the social context. She also comments that much of the research on learning strategies continues to be descriptive. She gives two examples of contradictory findings in learning strategies research. One is from Green and Oxford (1995). They conclude from their research that more successful students use more strategies. The other example is from Huda (1998). She reports that good language learners use fewer strategies than less proficient learners. Thus, the findings from different researchers contradict each other. In Hassan et al's (2005) systematic review of strategy training, they conclude that it is evident that strategy training is effective, but it is not possible to say from the research evidence that the effect can be long-lasting. Hassan et al (2005,p.3) state that: There is sufficient research evidence to support claims that training language learners to use strategies is effective, but it is not possible to say from this evidence whether the effect of training is long-lasting or not.

One of the main critiques of strategy training, identified by Dornyei and Skehan (2003), is the absence of a theoretical basis for the concept. One of the most fundamental problem seems to Dornyei (2005) to be the ambiguity of the literature in explaining the difference between "engaging in an ordinary learning activity and a strategic learning activity".

The early development of strategy training started off by recording what most successful learners do. Further research in the 1980s and 1990s in the area continues to be largely descriptive. Cohen and Macaro (2007) comment that much of the research on strategy training so far has resulted in the development of taxonomies which have limited value for the development of the field. They argue that researchers into strategy use and training face an enormous challenge: on the one hand to identify how learners learn; on the other to throw a spotlight on the interrelationship between teaching and learning (Cohen and Macaro, 1997,P.27-8).

9. A broad view of "learner training" and "learner development".

If teachers are generally expected to move on to teacher development from teacher training, are learners also expected to move on to learner development at some point in their process of learning? Do learners have to rely on teachers to develop their learning indefinitely? It seems to some researchers that learners are unable to get to the stage of learner development if they are not trained first. Benson places a strong emphasis on strategy training. In his book "Teaching and Researching Autonomy in Language Learning", he mentions six approaches to learner development:

1. Direct advice on language-learning strategies.
2. Training based on "good language learner" research and insight.
3. Helping learners to consider the factors that affect their learning and to discover the learning strategies that suit them best.
4. Synthetic approaches drawing on a range of theoretical sources.

5. Integrated approaches treating learner training as a by-product of language learning.

6. Self-directed approaches in which learners are encouraged to train themselves through reflection on self-directed learning activities. (Benson, 2001,P.143)

Holec (1987) Esch (1997) have described self-directed programs of this kind.

Perhaps surprisingly, in writing that is supposedly about learner autonomy, each of the approaches advocates teacher-directed "training". Though points five and six above put less stress on direct training, they still seem to suggest first training learners to be self-directed, only after which they will become autonomous. Also, approaches three and six actually sound similar. The differences between learner training and learner development can be divided into three areas. First, learner training implies "imposition" from outside, while learner development happens without direction by others, and it is directed by learners' own choices. Second, learner training tends to be based on the expectation that it will produce effective learning outcomes, but learner development focuses on the learners' learning process. That is to say, learner training appears to be product-oriented but learner development is process-oriented as well. Thirdly, learner training implies a limited time scale, and teacher dependence, while learner development, because it comes from within the learner, is independent of the teacher and indefinitely sustainable.

10. A critical review of learner training.

Perhaps, in reality, learners do not necessarily need extra strategy training due to the rich existing learning experience they have had. Perhaps what learners need is better understanding of their background experience to enable them to choose and strive for their goals. Rees-Miller (1993) gives a critical appraisal of learner training. She cautions teachers/researchers to provide empirical evidence for a correlation between conscious strategy use and greater gains in language proficiency. She argues against making too much effort in strategy training because it is not likely to be cost-effective. She also questions whether the effects of promoting good learning strategies are long-lasting. In fact, Rees-Miller (1993, 1994) raises four major objections to the underlying assumptions of strategy training:

1. There is no empirical evidence for a causal relationship between awareness of strategies and success in learning.

2. Some of the characteristics associated with success in learning, such as being active in the learning process, cannot be defined as specific behaviors and may therefore be unteachable.

3. Case studies of unsuccessful learners suggest that the adoption of strategies employed by successful learners is insufficient in itself to lead to more effective learning.

4. Successful learners do not necessarily use recommended strategies and often use non-recommended strategies.

Rees-Miller's criticisms directly question the need for strategy training. Teachers who would like to introduce strategy training presume that transferring successful strategies to students can alter their philosophy and approach to learning. Macaro (2001), for example, hopes to train students to think through adapting strategies provided by the teacher. However, some researchers have expressed concerns about this approach. It also appears that attempts to characterize good and poor language learners according to the strategies they use are over simplistic. A number of studies indicate that unsuccessful learners actually employ the same strategies as those used by successful learners. In this case, the reasons for their lack of success may be far more complex, and the teaching of more learning strategies may not be the answer (Williams and Burden, 1997,P.161-162).

Allwright (1996,p.1) also raises major concerns about learning strategy training in three questions: Firstly, do we actually know what language learning strategies are *typically* productive? Secondly, do we have reason to believe that these strategies will be productive for the *particular* learners we are trying to help? And, thirdly, do we know *how* to teach them? All three are serious questions that need further investigation.

11. Are strategies teachable?

Claxton (1990) presents a different view of how and why learning takes place. He proposes that strategies are definitely learnable, but equally definitely not teachable. The fact that they can be identified does not mean that they can be deliberately acquired through practice. This is because an essential aspect of intelligence is knowing intuitively the power and limitations of each of the For example, in conversations, what might be involved in "real" choice and uncertainty could include students' word choice and the uncertainty of a fellow-speaker's reactions.

At best, strategy training might thus appear to be unnecessary, while at worst it could be counterproductive. Claxton notices that the teaching practice of many teachers does not reflect what/how they were trained in the teaching course, but instead reflects how they were themselves taught as learners. This is an interesting reflection, which suggests again that what learners are taught may not determine what they learn, nor the way in which they learn if it differs from their previously acquired habits, beliefs and attitudes (Allwright, 1991 & 1984).

12. Strategy training and autonomy.

Some researchers seem to suggest that strategy training is the key to leading learners to being autonomous. Most of the research about strategy training aims to measure the effectiveness of the use of certain

strategies, which have usually been selected by teachers or researchers. Some researchers seem to suggest that learners cannot learn better or be autonomous without training. This is ironic in view of the fact that learner/strategy training has been closely associated with the concept of learner autonomy (Ellis and Sinclair, 1989; Dickinson, 1992). Cohen (1998), for example, views autonomy as the aim of strategy training. However, when Benson (2001) talks about strategies and autonomy, he recognizes that inviting learners to explore their reasons for language learning might be more conducive to autonomy development than a focus on awareness of strategies and skills. It is at least questionable whether we should assume that "training" creates "better learners". Strategy training leads to what R. Smith (2003,P.130-131) calls a "weak" version of pedagogy for autonomy. He describes two versions of pedagogy for learner autonomy.

13. Is learner/strategy training equivalent to learner development?

In this study, a central idea is to stress the need for distinguishing between learner/strategy *training* and learner *development.* In Chamot & Rubin's (1994,P.771) response to Rees-Miller (1993), they explain that though "*learner training"* is a widely used term, they prefer the terms *education*, *instruction*, and *development*. Wenden (2002) also explains her choice of using "learner development" as an alternative term to "learner training", "learner education" and "learning to learn". In fact, for many researchers there seems to be no distinction at all between learner training and learner development. It seems that many researchers into strategies and strategy-training think that different words are simply being used here for the same thing, so the wording does not really matter. However, if teacher development is recognized as an important area for teachers and researchers, and is seen as distinct from teacher training, then it would seem reasonable for learner development to be similarly recognized as a distinct enterprise from learner training.

14. Distinction between learner training and learner development.

Though there is no absolute distinction between strategy training and learner development, it is nevertheless essential in this study to raise the issue of recognizing the value of learner development, a topic which has probably been overlooked in favor of training planned and directed by teachers. Yet the principles of EP suggest that in fact learners are capable, with some help, of directing their own learning and keeping up sustainable development with their own initiatives in setting goals, monitoring their progress and achieving their personal goals rather than being forever trained to fulfill their teachers' goals.

15. Learner development.

Following the clear distinctions drawn by Kohonen between learning training and learner education, it may help if I draw a parallel between teacher training and teacher development, on the one hand, and learner training and learner development on the other. A distinction is commonly made by researchers between teacher training and teacher development. Development is a strategy of influence and indirect intervention that works on complex, integrated aspects of teaching; these aspects are idiosyncratic and individual (1989,P.40).

Teachers learn the basic knowledge and skills of how to teach during their training, but when they start working in real classrooms, they are generally expected to continue their teacher development on their own. They need to think about how to deal with real classroom situations as they arise, and to develop their own ways of teaching. In brief, teachers are told what to do in teacher training, but then it is teachers' own choice and responsibility whether and how they want to initiate or continue their own teacher development (Underhill, 1988; also Head and Taylor 1997). Likewise, teachers should not dismiss the possibility of learner development for the sake of holding on to their power as teachers. On the contrary, teachers should trust learners and be confident that they can and do move on to learner development, with or without out their current teachers' recognition

Palfreyman (2003,P. 245) defines learner development from a social point of view as "supporting learners in participating with increasing confidence and empowerment in a language community". Learner development can be defined as the process of developing as learners: learners willingly seeking for or creating learning opportunities for themselves and each other, consciously or unconsciously, whether inside the classroom or in real life situations. Learners' realization of their learning process grows as their development increases and vice versa.

16. Learning, journals, reflection and group talk.

Dewey explained the principle of continuity of experiences. It "means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after" (Dewey 1938,P.35). Learning is continuous, so past experiences that students have had might come to light and be useful if students have a chance to record, recall and understand them. On making the connection between past and present, Dewey wrote: As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts. He does not find himself living in another world but in a different part or aspect of one and the same world. What he has learned in the way of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning contribute. (Dewey, 1938, p. 44)

Journals give students adequate space to step back and rethink their process of learning. Journal writing is effective in raising the learners' consciousness of their own learning process (Matusmoto, 1996). During the

process of reflection, students can go through the process of making sense of their learning experience in at least two possible ways – journal writing or group talk. It is hard to imagine students continuously moving on to further learning development without understanding their learning experiences. Students can easily lose their drive for learning if they do not even know what it is they want to learn, how they want to learn or why they want to learn.

This is how Mercer illustrates the relationship between language, learning and experience: We use language to make the future from the past, to build a relationship between what has been and what is to come; and we use the resources of past experience to make new, joint, knowledge and understanding. Using language, we can transform the raw material of our shared life experiences into stories which have continuity and coherence. This is a joint enterprise, in which we have to make assumptions about the amount of relevant prior experience and understanding we share with the people with whom we are communicating, and draw partners' attention to what is relevant. (Mercer, 2000,P.46)

Learners are actually eager to find out what other people do and think when learning English. This is where group talk comes in. With the support of group talk, stories of learning experiences can be retold, shared and hopefully understood. The accumulation of experience does not automatically in itself allow learning to take place. From a sociocultural perspective, the events that happen to people can only make sense if they can be fitted into an existing plot, or if the plot itself can be reconfigured or replaced (Pavlenko and Lantolf, 2000,P.140). Mercer stresses the importance of conversations that stimulate people to think collectively. In this way, people do not only share information. "Rather, they gain a completely new way of using their minds in combination for the purpose of solving problems, transforming individual experience into shared knowledge and making shared knowledge available to individuals." (Mercer, 2000,P.168) According to Garrison (1995), "For Deweyans [followers of Dewey], the mind that manipulates meaning emerges socially through participation in the social process of meaning construction" (p.722).

17. Conclusion.

This study sheds lights on how a mixed ability group of learners were able to understand their process of learning, through both reflecting on positive and negative learning experiences, and doing cooperative and collaborative practice with related picture description of the main reading text and thus made their learning more satisfying.

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