

Instilling an Investigative Culture in Language Learning

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Abstract

To be proficient when learning a language, one needs to have an instilled culture to investigate and probe deeper into diversities of the underlying language aspects. An investigative culture and improved critical thinking skills during language learning requires a multifaceted approach that involves both the teacher and learners to engage cooperatively. When this culture has been instilled, teachers can impart to learners skills to analyse information and evaluate sources, yet, drawing conclusions based on evidence. This paper had its main aim of investigating whether instilling an investigative culture can enhance language learning for improved comprehension skills. For this investigation, a qualitative approach was applied and entrenched in a case study design where five conveniently sampled university English language teachers as initiators to implant an investigative culture to enhance language learning were nominated as participants. To collect data, semi structured interviews were administered and this assisted to have better understanding of the underlying factors caused by lacking culture to investigate matters for enhanced language learning. From this study it was divulged that (i) enhanced research skills and (ii) improved memory retention were the major findings as outcomes of an instilled investigative culture when learning languages. It is concluded and recommended by this paper that an investigative culture in language learning can lead to improved language proficiency, with established critical thinking skills that can help to enhance research skills, thereby preparing learners for real-world encounters.

Keywords: skills, investigative culture, language, learning, proficiency

1. Introduction

As language learning has complex and underlying diverse aspects, learners become proficient when then display some sense to investigate and dig deeper to uncover the fundamental language aspects. Such an investigative culture and mindset, as opined by Green (2015) is aroused by language teachers by encouraging curiosity during the process of teaching and learning. As curiosity is considered one of the driving forces behind investigation, teachers can afford learners with thought-provoking questions as well as inspire them to ask questions in relation to what is currently learnt. This is harmonised by Ramdani, Syukur, Permatasari and Yustiqvar (2021) who articulate that using authentic materials such as news articles and videos can be another strategy to augment and sustain learner investigative skills (Pan, 2012).

Accordingly, learners are expected to draw inferences, analyse and classify the main ideas in whatever text that is comprehended. To help develop this investigative culture in language learning, there is a need to promote both collaborative learning and independent inquiry (Lai & Aksornjarung, 2018). As learners collaborate, they share ideas, insights and viewpoints. Engaging in this exercise, they get exposure to explore knowledge and subject content in-depth either as groups, individually or as pairs (Ghasemi & Pasand, 2018). This type of learning has an added advantage as learners are awarded opportunities to conduct independent research and present their findings as ways to share information gathered (Thomas & Lok, 2015).

It therefore becomes the task of a language teacher to model this investigative behaviour. As teaching and learning is supposed to be learner-paced and learner-centred activity as outlined by the Outcomes-based Approach (OBE), teachers offering languages can as well demonstrate how questions are asked by evaluating sources and drawing conclusions based on evidence (Department of Basic Education, 2015). As the teacher model such skills in a continuous manner, there is no way that learners cannot get inspired to adopt an analytical mindset (Faisal, 2019). A strategy of shifting from passive learning to active investigation is surely a positive stance to instil an investigative culture in language learning, thereby producing learners who are critical thinkers, curious and inquisitive to investigate more on the language aspects that would help them to be proficient in language learning (MacIntyre & Gardner, 1994). Although some studies have been conducted on strategies to enhance language development, this paper has identified a gap that little or nothing is mentioned by literature with regards to implanting that investigative culture which would make learners to be inquisitive perilous thinkers. It is for this reason that interest was developed to undertake this inquiry. To help achieve the study aim there was a question to be answered: What strategies can be implemented to help instil an investigative culture in language learning?

2. Literature Review

Datu, Yuen and Chen (2017) opine that developing critical thinking skills in learners is a worthwhile adventure as learners are expected be able to analyse information on their own. When they have attained such analytical skills, language learning would not be the only benefactor, instead, such critical thinking skills are a valuable necessity for life in general. Subsequent to that, learners can then become

astute consumers of information with effectiveness in problem solving and decision making, as lifelong scholars. In line with this statement, Al-Bogami and Elyas (2020) affirm that in language learning curiosity is a key motivator for investigation. When learners are rooted in curiosity, there is great likelihood that they would engross with the language and culture they are learning. As language and culture are closely intertwined, these aspects are considered inseparable. Investigation can help at attaining some innate understanding with regards to language aspects like cultural context and spoken language (Xianyan, 2021). This has an underlying benefit that when assigned to investigate a cultural topic, learners would then be exposed to life diversities, thereby become people who have a better understanding and appreciation of cultural differences. This would also lead towards enhanced ability to communicate and interact with people from different cultures (McKay, 2003).

Be that as it may, language teachers encounter a huge need to foster critical thinking skills in learners. Li (2016) denotes that as English language is an additional, foreign and non-mother tongue language in the institution where this research was conducted, learners are also faced with great challenges to be assisted towards the expected language proficiency. As anticipated by this inquiry, such skills can only be attained when an investigative culture to intertwine diverse language aspects has been deeply rooted (Cho & Teo, 2014). Critical thinking is an essential component of investigation; therefore teachers can develop this component by making provision of relevant examples and couple this by asking some probing open-ended questions. This is the type of questioning that allows for exploring the subject content in more depth (Chen & Feng, 2021). Consistently posing thought-provoking questions can surely inspire learners to investigate further.

Furthermore, Zhang (2019) proclaims that when English language teachers provide opportunities for independent inquiry, by so doing they are granting learners prospects to explore topics of interest in more depth. Concurrently, teachers need to encourage learners to engage on conducting independent research on language-related aspects (Li, 2021). When findings are presented to the class, this can lead to further investigation, more probing and viable discussion to enrich the topic under study. To harmonize this statement, Cho and Teo (2014) assert that learners become more enthusiastic when teachers ensure that they provide feedback on learner investigations as this is convenient period to highlight areas that have proved to have shown demonstration of vibrant investigative skills, as yet, noting areas that still need further consideration or improvement. Engaging in this form of interaction is considered collaborative learning as learners are provided opportunities to share ideas and perspectives whether gathered as pairs or groups (Hastuti, Setianingsih & Anjarsari, 2020).

Accordingly, it has been noted by research that there are some benefits and fundamental advantages when an investigative culture in language learning is efficiently and effectively administered (Pan, 2012). Engaging actively with language aspects is a prerequisite for developed language skills and improved language proficiency. As learners undertake the process of investigating, they are liable to being exposed to a variety of vocabulary, grammar structures, and expressions. Investigative learning as a crucial feature leads to the practice and application of what has been learned in a more authentic and meaningful way, thus resulting at improved language competence. Summarily, instilling an investigative culture in language learning can result at the production of critical intellectuals able to investigate language on own accord.

Swanson (2013) overtly contends that theoretical framework is not composed of own thought about somebody's research work, instead, it is regarded as a structure supporting a theory of the investigated or proposed task. In line with this statement, this paper is underpinned by the Theory of Language Acquisition (Chomsky, 1965). It is argued that for the capacity to learn and use language aspects in a profound manner, the human brain needs to be trained to function likewise. Chomsky had a belief that language acquisition rules need to be strengthened as humans mature and advance.

As promoted by this theory, educationally, there is a need to equip the mind of the child with language acquisition devises by planting an investigative mindset throughout their years of study. Alnofaie (2013) also concurs that as these mental properties are inborn within the minds of learners, they would eventually become inquisitive and globally competent citizens with enhanced language capabilities. Accordingly, as learning languages has a complex structure with underlying rules, universal grammar, principles and rules that govern language behaviour, instilling an investigative mindset would help to incline variations of grammar as well as features between languages.

3. Methodology

Approach

For the purposes of this study a qualitative research approach was used. This approach is appropriate for the study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of the experiences, perspectives, and opinions of the participants (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). Rooted in this qualitative approach was a case study design using an interpretive paradigm (Creswell & Clark, 2018). The case study design helped to provide a rich description of a specific rurally located institution of higher learning in one of the Eastern Cape Education Districts, thereby providing insights and real-life experiences as against challenges and opportunities for an instilled investigative culture in language learning. This is what provoked an interest to undertake an investigation as learning English language with its dynamic aspects of rules and grammar really needs one to display some exploratory and probing attitudes towards learning.

Sampling

The population of interest was language teachers specifically those offering English as an additional language in an institution of higher learning located in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. A number of five university teachers as participants were selected using a convenient sampling technique, which is appropriate for this study as it allowed for easy access to participants and was regarded as cost-effective (Frechette, Bitzas, Aubry, Kilpatrick & Lavoie-Tremblay, 2020). Convenience sampling is a nonprobability sampling strategy

employed by qualitative researchers as they collect data from elements with most convenient access and contact. This selection of participants was done in relation to approachability and inclination to participate in the study. As these participants had offered English language for the past couple of years and were working at the very same institution where the author is employed, they were considered the most relevant to supply rich data. All the identified participants willingly agreed to take part in this inquiry soon after ethical considerations were outlined. Participants were informed that all their identities would not be disclosed, instead would be kept anonymous. Further than that, they were made aware that at any given point in time when felt they were no longer interested to engage in this investigation, they had all the right to withdraw when feeling the exercise was no more in favour of them. Outlining such considerations led to participants willingly participating to share their leaved experiences.

Research Instruments

Data for this investigation was collected through semi-structured interviews which were recorded and transcribed for analysis (Aguilar & Solorio, 2019). Interviews seemed appropriate for this study as they allowed for flexibility in the questioning yet providing detailed information on the experiences and perspectives of participants. The sessions of interviewing were conducted in a comfortable and private setting to ensure that participants felt safe and could express themselves freely. Open-ended questions were posed to encourage participants to share their experiences and perspectives on instilled investigative culture during processes of teaching and learning languages. This interesting interaction between participants and the interviewer led to some probing by asking further clarity-seeking questions not primarily contained in the interview schedule (Guest, Namey, Taylor, Eley & McKenna, 2017). During this exercise, all responses, no matter how petty they seemed, were seriously considered essential and meaningful.

Method of Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to interpret data (Creswell & Clark, 2018). This is a method of data analysis that involves identifying patterns or themes within the data. Analysis was directed by the research questions, which had a main focus on issues such as additional language, investigative culture, language learning and language proficiency. The main research question that guided all responses reflected as follows: What strategies can be implemented to help instil an investigative culture in language learning? All recorded and transcribed data was played and re-played, read and re-read time and again (Sweetman, Badiee & Creswell, 2010). This was to ensure that no stone was left unturned. As related and similar responses were later grouped and gathered together as categories, it was then easy to identify themes that had begun to take a pattern. As no more new patterns were emerging, it was evident that a point of saturation has been reached (Timonen, Foley & Conlon, 2018).

4. Findings and Discussion

This is the section where an argument of findings is presented in accord with the identified themes (Ambridge & Lieven, 2015). For learners not to display analytic skills in learning of English as an additional and unfamiliar language, that could lead to decline in prospects of enhanced language proficiency, thereby also compromising language acquisition. The paper sought to investigate whether an instilled investigative culture can indeed enhance language learning towards improving comprehension skills. During the process of data analyses, emerging themes were noted as findings of this investigation. Themes that have been discussed as two findings are enhanced research skills and improved memory retention.

Enhanced Research Skills

As participants were engaging in semi-structured interviews, when responding to a question with regards to strategies used by English language teachers to stimulate investigative skills during language learning,

Participant 1 alluded: *During the time when I conduct comprehension lessons, as we engage with my learners on varying texts, I ensure that whatever new and unfamiliar terminologies that learners come across, I advise them to design self-compiled dictionaries where they undergo research to unpack meanings of such words. As they embark on this exercise, they sub-divide their dictionaries into all letters of the alphabet then infuse meanings of new words they had never anticipated.*

In line with the response above, Participant 3 commended: *Assigning discussion tasks where learners engage in serious debates amongst themselves as either pairs or groups has proved a beneficial juncture as I would also be surprised when they report findings that I never imagined I myself. This has helped to take precautions that we teach should never be underestimated at all as they prove to be potential with deep and rich intellect.*

To pride both arguments, Participant 5 commented: *For learners to seriously engage in discussion questions assigned to them has also been a wake-up call not to us as English language teachers, but to all other teaching staff members. It is high time that we re-define teaching strategies we use. We really need to be reminded that as we allow learners to exercise creativity in their mindsets, by so doing we as teachers are planting investigative mentalities because learning any language has dynamics that need digging up for sustained information aptitudes.*

Upon noting that findings of this paper were centred around enhanced research skills when learners embarked on investigating issues of concern in relation to English language learning with its diverse components and underlying rules of grammar, this study already believes that if learners could seriously adhere to using such a vibrant learning style, language development would be enhanced to greater heights. As the process to investigate is in line with conducting research, participating on practises like investigative learning can be a determinant for developed research skills among learners. Attaining research skills is not only valuable for language learning, but cuts across a wide

range of professional and academic pursuits. When this investigative skill has been nurtured by learners, being able to evaluate, identify and synthesize information become added advantages that are accomplished during the process of learning languages. Further than that, as investigation is an active yet engaging learning method, the end result is increased learner motivation towards learning a language that is additional, foreign and unfamiliar, hence not a mother-tongue language (Changlek & Palanukulwong, 2015). To have ownership of any subject learnt is motivating enough for learners to perform better, thereby inclining also in progression results. As learners display some sense of interest in whatever topic being investigated, they develop that character of exhibiting in depth investigation. When curriculum implementation is considered to be at its highest peak in relation to language learning and learner progression, as recipients to teaching and learning, learners and teachers become inspired and assertive. Accordingly, a conducive learning environment bears fruits to positive functional learning as opined by Zhang (2019).

Improved Memory Retention

During the course of the interviews, it also emanated as one of the major findings that when learners are permitted to seek for information by themselves, as the investigative mindset becomes inborn, concurrently, whatever new information outlined is then restored into their them as life-long learners.

Such memory retention was made evident by responses as Participant 2 outlined: *To consistently embark on mostly applying teaching and learning strategies that require learners to be self-motivated information diggers has helped a lot at improved memory retention even to those learners who used to display some difficulties in language learning. Actually, any person who has identified an underlying concept by himself would be proud enough never forget such self-attained and valued information.*

In coherence with an argument that English language is offered as an additional language in the site where this investigation was conducted, Participant 4 contends: *Most learners in my class previously had the not so good attitudes towards English language learning. They would complain that life at university was somehow difficult because even when expected to engage in discussions, I as their English language teacher was somehow adamant as I did not permit no home-language discussions. But with time, this cohort of learners slowly began to understand and anticipate my unique teaching approaches. I would be glad at later stages to hear them complementing me that as I allowed vigorous discussions to unpack the underlying grammar aspects, not only had their vocabulary and fluency in English language has been developed, instead, what made them happier was that as they were owners of the emergent information, this leads to improved memory retention. When memory is well retained, learners are advantaged towards excelled academic attainment.*

In addition, another major finding observed by this study was that when learners fully dedicate themselves as information seekers from widespread sources, memory retention is improved. Because an investigative form of learning is a strategy that necessitates active engagement with whatever material being learnt, this seems to lead to enriched memory retention. As meaningful context for whatever learning material used is unpacked through some investigative mechanisms, learners could be equipped at achieving vocabulary, rules and structure of language in a more profound level (Duckworth, Kirby, Tsukayama, Berstein & Ericsson, 2010). Moreover, when learners have an improved memory retention, they are likely to develop essential skills that would help them as lifelong scholars able to tackle challenges experienced in real-world situations (Nguyen, 2011). Not only does improved memory enables effective and efficient learning, as well, beyond schooling environment there is a dire need for each and every individual to have the necessary investigative, analysis and evaluation skills. Consistent practise of these skills in the language learning context can lead to excellence also towards independent and self-motivated learning (Ibbotson, 2022).

5. Conclusion

The main aim of this paper was to examine whether instilling an investigative culture inhibits indicators to enhance language learning for improved comprehension skills. It is concluded by this paper that summarily, a sustained investigative culture when learning languages is an effective and powerful tool that has capacity of leading to excellence not only in language proficiency, but also in deep and rooted understanding of culture, augmented motivation, superior researching skills, expansion of critical thinking skills, grounding for real-world circumstances, as well as upgraded memory retention. For language teachers to foster that culture of being investigative when learning, this could be a determinant that would help to provide additional engaging coupled with effective language learning capability. This paper recommends that when learners have been made to develop an investigative culture, the end result is producing independent human beings ready to conquer dynamics encountered not only during language learning, but across all subjects offered by the prescribed curriculum. An investigative culture of learning indeed is an essential resource worth implanting.

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