

# HELPING STUDENTS TAKE CONTROL OF THEIR LEARNING THROUGH THE USE OF FOCUSES WEEKLY REVIEW SHEETS

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## Introduction

This paper reports on work done with students enrolled in a Level 4 Certificate of Attainment in English (CAEL) class at the University of Waikato Language Institute in Auckland. The original purpose was to help raise the students' awareness of the role they are taking to learn English through the use of weekly review sheets. However, ongoing analysis of the data revealed that in addition to focusing the students on reflecting on what they had learned and how they learned, the weekly review sheets became a vehicle for student-teacher dialogue.

This report is based on an ethnographic case study of one class over a 12 week period in order to answer the research question: "Do weekly review sheets help raise students' awareness of the role they are taking to learn English?". It came about as a result of my interest in the role of awareness in language teaching and my desire to do some exploratory practice, as outlined by Allwright<sup>1</sup>, to better understand this concept.

## Awareness in language learning

"Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?" Allwright (1984) asked this question when he found that many of his language students were unable to tell him what his main teaching point had been, but rather offered, "alternative ideas about what the lesson had been about" (Allwright, 1984:3). The students were able to remember what they had done in class, but their reports of what they learned were not what Allwright had set out to teach. He called this, "uptake" and defined it as "whatever it is that learners get from language lessons" (Allwright, 1984: 11). To account for the students' unexpected uptake he introduced the "interaction hypothesis" which involves two claims: "the first is that interaction determines what becomes available to be learned, and the second is that interaction is the process whereby whatever is learned is learned" (Allwright, 1984:10).

To test these claims, he and a group of research students set about asking second language students what they had learned in class in order to identify the students' uptake.



the students told the truth or not, and another whether or not students could be reasonably expected to know what they had learned from one specific class. The preliminary results were perhaps not exactly what Allwright was looking for. He reports:

So far the best predictor of uptake is, boringly enough, that an item should have been explicitly taught, by the teacher. But the next best predictor is that the learner who claims to have learned an item was personally involved in interactive work on the item in question (1984:16).

Although Allwright does not talk directly about the role of awareness in language learning, he is often referred to in articles focusing on awareness. For example, Schmidt considers Allwright's definition of uptake of an indication of Allwright's interest in "the role of conscious and unconscious processes in second language learning" (1994: 12). Whether he wanted to or not, Allwright added to the "problem of consciousness (or better yet, the "debate" on consciousness) in SLA" (Van Patten, 1994: 27). Schmidt talks about the "conscious versus unconscious controversy" (1994:11) and lack of cohesiveness amongst researchers. Referring to the fact that, at the time of his writing, there was no generally agreed upon terminology in "conscious versus unconscious learning" discussions, he offered four subcategories of consciousness in language learning:

- consciousness as intentionality: the intentional/ incidental learning contrast
- consciousness as attention: focal attention and "noticing" vs. peripheral attention
- consciousness as awareness: the contrasts between explicit/implicit learning and knowledge
- consciousness as control: controlled vs. automatic processing, automaticity, explicit/implicit memory

The debates over "conscious" versus "unconscious" learning in second language learning are by no means settled by Schmidt's attempts to standardise the use of theoretical terms, but as Ellis (1994) points out, "while we might quibble with the minutiae of his [Schmidt's] analyses we should consider his counsel if only because he has had the temerity to attempt the task" (p. 38). Harley echoes Ellis's comments by stating, "Schmidt has provided a valuable basis for further investigation in terms of concepts such as attention, awareness, intentionality, and control" (1994: 57).

Schmidt chose to define awareness as one category of consciousness, although the two words to many people are synonymous. As Schmidt himself states:

a third sense of consciousness, perhaps the most common in ordinary use as well as in psychological and philosophical discussions is awareness. My desk



dictionary defines the first sense of "consciousness" as "having an awareness of one's own existence and environment," and defines "aware" as "conscious" or "cognisant" (1994: 18).

Altman (1997), from her personal language learning case study, found that, "a key to the success of the language learner seemed to be the extensive employment of awareness - the focusing of attention on all aspects of the language to be learned" (p. 93). It seems doubtful that Altman is referring to just implicit / explicit knowledge as per Schmidt's definition of awareness. Van Patten (1994) also includes attention with awareness with his comment "that the learner may or may not be aware of the product; it is sufficient for the learner to be aware of her attention" (p. 33). For both researchers, awareness plus attention on the part of the student is stressed.

"Consciousness raising" as outlined first by Sharwood-Smith in 1980, and discussed again by Sharwood-Smith and Rutherford in 1985, is "the deliberate attempt to draw the learner's attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language" (Sharwood-Smith & Rutherford, 1985, reprinted in 1988: 107). Sharwood-Smith (1994) also talks about raising learners' awareness of language structures and explains that grammatical consciousness raising does not necessarily equal explicit grammar teaching. He argues that "what might be termed grammatical 'consciousness raising' did not have to involve teaching rules and grammatical paradigms but could range from subtly highlighting relevant aspects of the input without any overt explanation to elaborate explanations of L2 structure" (Sharwood-Smith, 1994:178).

Another viewpoint is offered by van Lier (1994), concerning consciousness and awareness. According to van Lier, consciousness raising as outlined by Sharwood-Smith is an intrapersonal perspective of consciousness with its focus on the "cognitive and affective processes such as attention to form, the learning of explicit rules or metalinguistic knowledge" (1994:69). He suggests moving away from this intrapersonal perspective and moving toward an interpersonal perspective. The interpersonal (or individual) perspective is "one which argues that consciousness is important for the work of both teachers and learners, in the organic sense of organising, controlling and evaluating experience" (1994: 69). By adopting an interpersonal perspective, the notion of raising students' awareness is not limited to raising awareness of grammatical structures. The entire learning process becomes the focus of awareness. With a suggestion similar to Allwright's Interaction Hypothesis, van Lier states that:

"...as part of language awareness raising, teachers can study the ways in which they interact with their students, and their students with each other. It is widely believed that social interaction can have a decisive impact on the language learning process, and it is important to find out what aspects of interaction, and what



kinds of interaction, might be most conducive to learning" (1994: 69).

In addition, van Lier suggests that in order for learning to be successful through awareness-raising interaction three points need to be taken into consideration:

1. It is important to find the appropriate social interaction for learning to take place.
2. We should seek, be prepared to stimulate, and guide natural attention-focusing tendencies in the students.
3. We must educate the students to make their own decisions increasingly, and in order to do that we must make sure that they know what they are doing. Eventually they are best served by being able to regulate their own language learning (1994: 70).

Graham states, "one of the most important factors in becoming a proficient language learner appears to be the ability to stand back and reflect on one's own learning and assess which steps need to be taken to regulate it" (1997:85). In order to reflect on something, you must be aware of what it is, and why it is important to you. Encouraging students to become more aware forces the teacher to step back and let the student guide the learning process. Little (1990) takes it one step further - acknowledging that students must have an awareness of the language, but must also be autonomous.

Wendon (1991) also stresses the importance of learner autonomy. She believes that the learners' attitude toward autonomy will determine their success in achieving autonomy. She believes that, "learners whose evaluation toward autonomy is positive will try to become more responsible in their learning and those whose evaluation is negative will not" (p. 52). She outlines two important attitudes needed by learners toward autonomy: 1) willingness to take on responsibility and 2) confidence in their ability as learners.

In addition to attitudes, other individual factors are also important in any given learning context. As Williams and Burden note, "it is undoubtedly true that learners bring many individual characteristics to the learning process which will affect both the way in which they learn and the outcomes of that process" (1997: 89). Gillette's (1994) findings were that, "successful language learning depends on an individual's willingness to make every effort to acquire an L2 rather than on superior cognitive processing alone....Effective language learners do, in fact, infer where ineffective learners translate, and effective learners do engage in functional practice while ineffective ones prefer formal tasks" (p. 212).

To summarise, we can see that there is a great deal of support for incorporating awareness raising activities and promoting learner autonomy in the ESOL classroom. We shall



now look at one attempt to do this through the use of weekly review sheets.

## **The Study**

There were 12 students, three men and nine women, in the class: nine from China, one from Japan, one from South Korea, and one from Thailand. The average age of the class was 20. About half the class had been in New Zealand for at least four months and had completed a level 3 CAEL class at the University of Waikato Language Institute. The other half were new to New Zealand and it was their first class at the Institute.

## **Data Collection**

The students were asked, at the beginning of the course, to list what areas they felt presented them with the most difficulties. Learning new vocabulary was listed as the most difficult thing for the majority of the students. Other areas included listening, speaking and writing. The weekly review questionnaires (see figure 1) were then written so that the first two questions focused on vocabulary with the remaining questions being more general. The purpose was to direct the students to think about both what and how they learned.

The students were given the last 15 minutes of each Friday's class to fill in the weekly review sheets. The students were allowed to take the sheets home if they could not finish in 15 minutes.

At the end of six weeks, I interviewed each of the students and asked them the following questions:

- Are the weekly review sheets helpful?
- Why or why not?

The students were given the same questions in anonymous feedback surveys at the end of the twelve week cycle.

## Figure One: Weekly Review Sheet<sup>2</sup>

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### WEEKLY REVIEW

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Week: \_\_\_\_\_

1. What new vocabulary have you learnt this week?  
\_\_\_\_\_
2. Which of these new words can you use with confidence?  
\_\_\_\_\_
3. Which of these words do you feel unsure about?  
\_\_\_\_\_
4. What have you learnt about the language that you didn't know before this week?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. How did you learn this?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
6. What has the teacher done this week to help you learn?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
7. What have you done this week to help you learn?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
8. Any other comments?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



## Data analysis

I read the weekly review sheets each Friday. The first three questions were related to vocabulary and the number of words varied from student to student.

The fourth question, "What have you learnt about the language that you didn't know before this week?" tended to reflect what we had spent the most time on. For example, if I took a writing focus, the students commented on their ability to now write a personal letter, business letter, etc. If I had spent a lot of time on one grammatical point, the students tended to comment on that. These comments support Allwright's (1984) observation that students are more likely to remember and comment on what has been directly taught to them.

It was question eight that produced the most surprising results. In the first week, one student took the opportunity to write about something she did not fully understand from the week. On the following Monday I commented on it and answered her question in front of the whole class. In the next set of questionnaires, the same student again asked for clarification along with three other students. Again on the following Monday I answered the questions. The next week a few more students started asking questions on the weekly review sheet so that soon at least half the class were using the weekly review sheets to check their comprehension or ask for clarification.

In the 6 week interview I asked these students why they waited until the end of the week to ask questions. The answers were similar; the students were shy and were afraid that they would waste other students' time if they asked questions in class.

## Comments from the interview

### Example One:

Teacher Are the weekly review sheets helpful for you?

Student Oh yes, they are very useful. They help me remember and remind me to think about what I've done to help myself. Nobody ever asked me how I learn before or what I do to learn. I think it's good thing. Please continue this. I can also tell you what I like and don't like. No teacher ask me that before. When I tell you something I don't know you come and help me.

Teacher Why don't you tell ask me in class?

Student I can't do that. Too many other students. Maybe they know and I don't. I'm nervous about that.

### Example two:

Teacher Are the weekly review sheets helpful for you?

Student: It's good because I start to think about vocabulary Thursday night so I can do a good job on form.

Teacher: The form is not a test.

Student: I know, but I want to show you what I know.

Teacher: Why?

Student: Because no one ask me before. At first I thought you were just wasting my time but now I know you read form and then help me with problems. So I see you work for me so I work for you.



## Comments from the anonymous surveys at the end

The comments were very similar to what the students had said in the interviews, with a number of comments focusing on the positive side of being able to dialogue with the teacher. For example:

- It's very important to me. I can tell you what I don't know and you listen. It makes me know what I learned each week and I'm surprised by how much I remember.
- Weekly review is good because I always could review on Thursday night so I can remember for Friday. I never do that before so I never know new words. Now I can use my new words CONFIDENTLY.
- Weekly review is good because sometimes I'm lazy and don't review on my own so weekly review reminds me to work. I need that.

One student did not feel the reviews were useful and commented that,

- I don't need weekly review. I'm too busy to think about vocabulary and review each week.

## Conclusion

The answer to the research question, "Do weekly review sheets help raise students' awareness of the role they are taking to learn English?" appears to be yes. In addition the weekly review sheets proved to be a useful vehicle for the less outgoing students to use to dialogue with the teacher to get their needs met in class.

One of the most interesting things about doing research, both formally and informally, is the surprise information revealed in the data analysis. I had no idea when I wrote the form that the last "Any other comments" section would prove to be the focal point of the weekly review for a number of students. Williams and Burden remind us that "learning is essentially personal and individual; no two people will learn precisely the same thing from any particular learning situation" (1997: 96). We saw from this research that each student was given the same weekly review sheet and although they did not all use it in the way I had first expected, they used it to meet their individual needs. From that account, I consider the weekly review sheets a needed addition to my classes.

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<sup>1</sup> Exploratory practice, according to Dick Allwright is, "a research perspective rather than research in its usual sense - a search for local understandings rather than for incontrovertible findings and universalistic theory. This is what exploratory practice is all about, with its basic suggestions that standard pedagogic activities might be relatively easily adapted to serve as tools to investigate and thus help teachers and learners understand whatever puzzles them about what happens in their lessons" (1997: 369).

<sup>2</sup> This is an adaptation of photocopiable material found in *Project Work* by D.L. Fried-Booth, 1986, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 40.