Towards Metacognition, Autonomy, and Learners' Knowledge/Meaning Construction in EFL Context

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Abstract— The teaching-learning enterprises at the tertiary level in Morocco have been at stake since the 2003 educational reform. A decrease in quality and academic achievement has been noticed since then in all disciplines. English departments are no exception of this flaw. Putting a number of political and social factors aside, this paper addresses the problem from the perspective of the teacher-learner who remained traditional in a multi-faceted changing world of globalization and technology. Over the years, the teacher-student relationship has resisted change and remained vertical in the sense that most of the teaching has always taken the form of teacher lecturing and students listening. Additionally, faculty, due to one reason or another, care only about the teaching of content. Less effort, in this respect, has been devoted to coaching/training students to exercise a degree of autonomy. The majority of learners do not even make sense of the information they receive. The result, students do poorly in exams and teachers get a negative feedback about what they teach. Thus, this paper shows that engaging students in the construction of meaning by training them on self-directed learning and metacognition can yield positive learning outcomes. To make our claims credible, this paper uses the results of an experiment conducted about the learning of tense and aspect by English department Semester 1 Moroccan university students at the faculty of Arts and Humanities-IbnTofail University during the academic year 2012-2013.

Keywords— autonomous learning, learner-centred approach, meaning/knowledge construction, meaning-oriented instruction, and metacognition.

I. INTRODUCTION

A serious degradation has occurred in higher education in Morocco since the movement from the 4 year-system (old system of education) to the modular system (LMD) of 3 years. This change is generally described by the whole Moroccan society as negative since it has yielded catastrophic results. The British magazine *Times Higher Education* reflected this fact. In its latest (2019)international university rankings about the quality of teaching, research, knowledge transfer and international outlook, Moroccan universities came at the bottom of the list (more precisely, only 3 Moroccan universities were ranked between 800 and 1000). More Evidence can be taken from the profiles of university graduates, which do not generally meet the standards and the requirements of the local job market, let alone the international one.

In the absence of any official study, we,as educators and faculty members, are aware that departments of English at the Moroccan universities are no longer capable of producing, at the Bachelor level, proficient profiles in English language and in study areas such as linguistics, literature and their respective sub-disciplines. Being the two major and direct participants in the teaching-learning operation, teachers and students assume a great share of responsibility in the current educational situation. Though the field of education has witnessed a number of innovations, most teachers have remained faithful to the traditional approaches and methods of teaching which are, generally speaking, form-focused. Learners from their part lack the 21[st]century learning skills. If we give it a thought, we will realize that students are not to blame since they are a mere product of a culture of silence, reliance and passiveness. Students have never been trained to be autonomous learners before joining university. Therefore, it is no surprise to see a teacher preaching in class and students feeling satisfied with taking notes.

II. THE CURRENT EFL CLASSROOM SITUATION

Generally speaking, the Moroccan EFL classroom is teacher-centred in nature. With very few exceptions, the overall classroom practice rely heavily on the teacher as the one who decides upon the content and the design of the course. Teachers, in this regard, are also knowledge transmitters and material providers. Though familiar with the genesis of learner autonomy, only few teachers take the initiative, from time to time, to encourage individual or group work outside the classroom. By doing so, these teachers shortly become

frustrated by students' incapability of performing the tasks appropriately in terms of boththe quality oflanguage and the relevanceof the content.

Most EFL classrooms in Morocco are content-oriented, and less attention, in this respect, is given to the process of learning. This might be due to some factors such as the setting, the time constraints and the group size. In such a situation, faculty members seem to be less persistent about training students to work individually. They tend to forget that all what their students need is to be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to act accordingly. In the absence of all these, students just consume the content offered to them and give it back to teachers in the day of the exam. Their bad results in exams usually tell usabout the ineffectiveness and the inadequacy of this traditional mode of learning that unfortunately a lot ofteachers seem to be in love with. Another reason for this failure is the fact that students do not really make sense of the knowledge they receive due to the adoption of inappropriate learning strategies.

III. THE LEARNER-CENTRED APPROACH

The learner-centred approach has enjoyed popular status among practitioners in ELT. It is an approach to language teaching that shifts attention from the teacher as the transmitter of knowledge to the learner as an individual capable of taking charge of his/her learning. Collins and O'Brien (2003) define learner-centred approach as:

> an instructional approach in which students influence the content, activities, materials, and pace of learning. This learning model places the student (learner) in the center of the learning process. The instructor provides students with opportunities to learn independently and from one another and coaches them in the skills they need to do so effectively. (pp. 338-39)

The authors further claim that SCI (student-centre dinstruction) "can lead to increased motivation to learn, greater retention of knowledge, deeper understanding, and more positive attitudes towards the subject being taught"(Ibid, p.339). Within this approach, Learners also have the opportunities to draw on their own experiences and interpretations (Schuh, 2003, p.427).This can happen through their engagement in the construction of new knowledge based on old one. The role of the teacher, in this respect, is to emphasise students' capacities by particular set of adequate skills.

IV. LEARNER AUTONOMY

Within learner autonomy, learners should be seen as independent individuals fully responsible about their learning. In other words, they are required to rely on their

intellectual abilities and on the different sources and resources available to them to deal with any learning situation. Knowledge exists everywhere. All that students need to do is to use a number of strategies and skills to handle this existing knowledge and make sense out of it. This modern view that assigns new roles and gives more responsibilities to the learner takes its basis from the concept of autonomous learning appeared first in the early 1980's when Henry Holec wrote his first report on language learner autonomy for the council of Europe. Holec (1981) defines autonomous learning as "Theabilityto take charge of one's own learning, and to take charge of one's own learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (p. 3). Learners, in this new mode of learning, should decide about everything such as determining the objectives of learning, choosing the content, selecting the techniques and the methods of learning, monitoring progress and evaluating what has been acquired (Al Saadi, 2011, p. 98). Some scholars claim that autonomy is more than decision making. For instance, Little (1991) says that it is "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action" (p. 4).

Within autonomous learning, teachers have some important roles to play. Teachers need to coach their students on the principlesof autonomy. This can happen as Sinclair (1999) says only by "providing learners with situations and opportunities for exercising a degree of independence" (p. 310). In the same vein, Little (2007) also claims that the teacher needs to gradually enlarge the scope of their learners' autonomy by gradually making their students have control of the process and the content of their learning (p.26).

V. LEARNING STRATEGIES AND THE ROLE OF METACOGNITION

Research has identified six types of learning strategies. Oxford (1990) talks about: cognitive, memory-related, compensatory, metacognitive, affective, and social strategies. Oxford considers the first three strategies as direct strategies and the last three as indirect.Based on O'Malley and Chamot description, Dürich (2005) also specifies three superior strategies: metacognitive, cognitive and social / affective strategies. These learning strategies are really important for effective learning. Yet, we believe that metacognitive strategies are the most important strategies to be used by students within learner autonomy. Such strategies are the ones that make the difference between successful and ordinary learners. They are higher order executive skills entailing goal identification, planning, monitoring and evaluation (Guo, 2012, p. 2447).They help students learn how to learn. Therefore, they lead them to successful learning.

According to Danuwong (2006), some scholars like Oxford, Park-Oh, Ito and Sumrall (1993), Victory and Lockhart (1995), White (1995), Miserandino (1996), Goh (1997), and Fleming and Walls (1998) all provide evidence for the important role of metacognition in the domain of language learning. Danuwong (Ibid.) states that:

> These scholars reveal that, apart from being the key factor in distinguishing successful learners from less successful learners, metacognition also enriches students with more motivation, more engagement in learning tasks, more tolerance, more persistence, more participation, more curiosity and more confidence, as well as improving their self-esteem as learners. (p. 2)

Good learners, then, are distinguished from ordinary ones on the basis of their ability to use metacognitive strategies in their learning. Such students are fully aware of the limitations of the classroom practices and of the fact that their cognition might fail them to grasp / understand some structures in class. That is why; they opt for such strategies.

Research shows that there is an interrelationship between metacognition and learner autonomy. In addition to their ability and skill to use different types of learning strategies, autonomous learners are primarily characterised by their use of metacognitive strategies. Learners with a high degree of autonomy not only make use of their metacognitive knowledge appropriately, but they also have answers for the what, why, how, when, and where to use this knowledge. Such knowledge enables them to become independent, more responsible, and in

control of their own learning. Guo (2012) states that "The students good at using meta-cognitive strategies have planning and initiative ability, stronger autonomous learning ability and better learning outcomes" (p. 2450).

VI. THE ROLE OF INSTRUCTION

Though most current teaching approaches are learner-centred, the role of instruction remains essential in the process of language learning. Regardless of how independent learnersare, they always find themselves in need for a teacher- someone who is experienced and more knowledgeable. The teacher's role, in this regard, is to help learners overcome the problems and the difficulties they face in the learning process.The Teacher's job is no longer toprovide extensive and lengthy input. Bouras (2006) claims that intensive input applied at appropriate moments is more beneficial than extensive and lengthy input without a focus element (p. 258). Thus, teachers need to intervene only when it is necessary, and their intervention must be valuable and more practical. Within this view, teachers are only facilitators of the learning process.

VII. THE MAIN STUDY AND ITS OBJECTIVES

In an attempt to deal with the teaching-learning problems at the tertiary level, a study was conducted during my doctoral program at the *Laboratoirelangageetsociété* at Ibn To fail University-Faculty of Arts and Humanities. The study focuses on grammar; more precisely on the teaching-learning of the English tense-aspect system. The aim of the study is to show the deficiencies and the limitations of the traditional methods of teaching-learning adopted by both teachers and students. The study suggests an alternative method-we believe to be more effective- bringing principles of metacognition, learner autonomy, meaning-oriented instruction, and students' engagement and participation in the construction of meaning all together in the whole body of teaching.

7.1 Methodology of the study

In this study, I used two groups of students of the grammar class I was in charge of teaching during the academic year 2012-2013. I divided the two groups into control (N40) and experimental (N42). The control group was taught tense ad aspect by the means of a traditional form-focused approach adopting a teacher-centred paradigm whereas the experimental group was exposed to a meaning oriented-instruction. Adopting a learner-centred paradigm, the experimental group received a special treatment beginning with coaching students on learner autonomy, equipping them with metacognitive knowledge and orienting them towards the construction of meaning using both class materials and resources outside

the classroom. The in-class instruction was in the form of an inquiry-based / discovery approach that focuses more on meaning than form along with students' conceptualizations of the uses/functions of the tenses/aspects under study. Meaning-oriented instruction also occurred in moments of displaying and contrasting the most confusing and problematic aspects to students and during the phase of discussing the lexical aspect hypothesis. At this stage, students were driven to analyse the nature of verbs and the semantic properties inherent in them. Students learned that our selection of one tense/aspect over another is also determined by verbs and their semantic properties. Such meaning-oriented instruction was inevitable because we believed that such knowledge is hard to be achieved by the learners themselves.

7.2 The results of the study

Having the fact that both the experimental group and the control group performed similarly on the pre-test(had the same proficiency level, see table 1 below), our study shows, as it was expected, that the experimental group outperformed the control group in the posttest. In other words, there is a remarkable positive change not only in their performance than it was the case before the treatment, but also because their grades are better this time (in the posttest) than those of the control group. Table 1 below provides a summary of the results of the pre-test and the posttest for both groups along with a display of themean scores (scores are out of 20) and the percentage of change.

Table.1: Score comparison and percentage of change

Control			Experimental		
Pre-test score	Posttest score	% of change	Pre-test score	Posttest score	% of change
$\dot{x} = 5,8$	$\dot{x} = 7,86$	35,51%	$\dot{x} = 5,98$	$\dot{x} = 10,83$	81,10%

Based on table 1 above, we can claim to some extent, that metacognition, learner autonomy, and meaning-oriented instruction played important roles in students' improvement. Furthermore, it can be deduced according to the obtained results that students of the experimental group benefited a lot from the training they received at the beginning of the course. Additionally, students of this group were observed, during class sessions, to show more enthusiasm, more engagement, and more commitment in learning than students of the control group.

VIII.   PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Having in mind the current educational situation in Morocco and the work quality of the English departments, we all need to seek change. Instead of waiting for change from the top (change coming from the government and the authorities), faculty need to take the initiative by reflecting first upon their classroom practices. The policies, laws, regulations and curricula are already established and, whether we are for them or against, they need to be adopted for the sake of national unity. However, nobody dictates on us, as educators, how we should do our job inside our respective classrooms. Teachers are free to use whatever method or approach they think is more effective according to their teaching philosophy. Unlike the case in secondary schools, faculty are still privileged in choosing the content that students need to learn. Thus, apart from the setting and the large number of students that we have nothing to do about for the time being, faculty have some space for creativity.

Adapting ourselves to change is not a matter of choice. Traditional ways of teaching in general have been

proven by a large body of literature to be entirely inadequate for the requirements of the 21st century learning. Today's learners have different needs from those of learners of the previous centuries. Thus, teachers must go with the flow by adapting themselves to the changes happening around them. In parallel, they need to train themselves, update their information, enlarge their knowledge and, most importantly, develop their teaching capacities. The primary job of teachers today is to meet students' needs and to enable them with the skills and the strategies they lack. Additionally, teachers should always remember that students' knowledge is limited and their linguistic profile is deficient. The teachers' guidance and coaching are very important in this respect. Kober(2015) states that teachers must be conscious that students usually possess less developed or incomplete conceptual frameworks. In the same vein, Ambrose, et al (2010) claim that teachers can build approaches that may be of great help to students so as to develop and learn pathways to gain experience and become expert learners whose conceptual frameworks are deeply interconnected, transferable, rooted in a solid memory, and easily retrieved.

Meaning-oriented instruction together with students' participation and engagement in the learning process is considered, by several studies including ours, as more effective than any other type of instruction. Such instruction enables students to do well in their study career and in their lives in general. When engaged in the construction of meaning, students learn things beyond knowledge. Park (2003)says that "students who actively engage with what they are studying tend to understand

more, learn more, remember more, enjoy it more and be more able to appreciate the relevance of what they have learned, than students who passively receive what we teach them" (p,183).

Regardless of some difficulties that hinder the adoption and the application of learner autonomy, both teachers and students need to be aware of the importance and the efficacy of this new mode of learning. Teachers are responsible for changing students' perception of learning. They have to overcome their unwillingness and resistance towards becoming autonomous by motivating them. Learners, in turn, need to be flexible, determinant, and more responsible. Thanks to the emergence of Information Communication Technology (ICT) and the availability of information, the impact of globalisation, the changing needs of the work place, the contact with the new technologies, and the increasing need for communication between people from different parts of the world, it becomes necessary to be autonomous (Al-Saadi, 2011, p. 101).

IX. CONCLUSION

In the present paper, we attribute academic failure, though fully aware of other external factors, to classroom practices and to the traditional roles that both teachers and students still play in 21st century. We have tried throughout this paper to show that we, as educators and faculty members, can ensure quality education at the English departments by willingly adopting elements such as metacognition, learner autonomy, and meaning-oriented instruction. These elements can only be of great help and benefit for both teachers and students. On one hand, these are ways of lightening the teachers' workload. On the other hand, they can guarantee good learning outcomes.

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