



Students' learning conceptions of and approaches to the study of linguistics: a phenomenographic investigation

التصورات والمقاربات الطلابية لتعلم اللغويات: تحقيق في الفينومينوجرافيك

Conceptions et approches d'apprentissage des étudiants pour l'étude de la linguistique: une enquête phénoménographique

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ملخص

في هذا المقال، ينصب التركيز على البنائية الاجتماعية التي تدرك أن التعلم يكون استجابة لمفهوم الطالب، أو طريقة للتعامل مع موقف التعلم الخاص به. تنحرف وجهة النظر هذه عن الفكرة السائدة إلى حد كبير بأن التعلم هو نتيجة سمة شخصية معينة أو تعديلات في المناهج الدراسية. هذه الحججة مدعومة بنتائج بحث ظاهري في سياق التعليم العالي. تعرض هذه الورقة نتائج تحقيق ظاهري في تجربة الطلاب الجامعيين لدراسة علم اللغة في السياق الجزائري. تستند هذه الدراسة إلى حد كبير إلى الظواهر في محاولة للكشف عن مجموعة الطلاب الجامعيين في قسم اللغة الإنجليزية بجامعة الجزائر2. تم استخدام مزيج من الأسئلة المفتوحة والمقابلات شبه المنظمة ومهام الكتابة لجمع البيانات حول مفاهيم المشاركين في اللغويات، ومناهج دراسة اللسانيات ونتائج التعلم. أشارت نتائج البحث إلى أن غالبية الطلاب تبني مفاهيم مجزأة للتعلم في دراساتهم اللغوية. كما أشارت النتائج إلى أن معظم الطلاب تناولوا دراسة اللسانيات بطريقة مبوبة سطحية. كشفت النتائج أيضاً أن مفاهيم التعلم التي يتبناها الطلاب لم تؤثر فقط على الطريقة التي تناولوا بها دراسة علم اللغة، ولكن أيضاً نتائج التعلم الخاصة بهم. بالإضافة إلى ذلك، يبدو أن ثلاثة عناصر لعبت دوراً كبيراً في تشكيل تجربة التعلم في سياق دورة اللغويات: نوايا الطلاب في البحث عن المعنى، وقدرتهم على ربط أجزاء مختلفة من المعلومات لاكتساب معرفة شاملة، وتركيز انتباههم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: علم الظواهر؛ مفاهيم التعلم؛ مناهج التعلم؛ تعلم اللغويات؛ التعليم العالي.

Abstract

In this paper, the focus is on social constructivism that recognizes learning to be a response to a student's conception of, or a way of approaching his/ her learning situation. This view departs from the largely dominant idea that learning is the outcome of a particular personality trait or curricular adjustments. This argument is supported by phenomenographic research findings in the context of higher education. This paper reports the findings of a phenomenographic investigation into the undergraduate students' experience of the study of Linguistics in the Algerian context. This study draws largely from phenomenography in an attempt to uncover the group of undergraduate students in the Department of English of the University of Algiers². A combination of an open-ended question, semi-structured interviews, and writing assignments were used to collect data about the participants' conceptions of linguistics, approaches to the study of linguistics and the learning outcomes. The research findings suggested that the majority of the students adopted fragmented conceptions of learning in their Linguistics studies. The results also indicated that most of the students approached the study of Linguistics in a surface disaggregated way. The findings also revealed that learning conceptions held by the students to affected not only the way in which they approached the study of Linguistics, but also their learning outcomes. In addition, three elements appeared to have significantly played a role in shaping the experience of learning in the context of the Linguistics course: the students' intentions to look for meaning, their ability to relate various pieces of information to gain a holistic knowledge, and their focus of attention.

Keywords: Phenomenography; learning conceptions; learning approaches; linguistics learning; higher education.

Résumé

Dans cet article, l'accent est mis sur le constructivisme social qui reconnaît que l'apprentissage est une réponse à la conception d'un élève ou à une façon d'aborder sa situation d'apprentissage. Ce point de vue s'écarte de l'idée largement dominante selon laquelle l'apprentissage est le résultat d'un trait de personnalité particulier ou d'ajustements curriculaires. Cet argument est étayé par les résultats de la recherche phénoménographique dans le contexte de l'enseignement supérieur. Cet article présente les résultats d'une enquête phénoménographique sur l'expérience des étudiants de premier cycle de l'étude de la linguistique dans le contexte algérien. Cette étude s'appuie, en grande partie, sur la phénoménographie pour interroger le groupe d'étudiants de premier cycle du département d'anglais de l'Université d'Alger 2. Une combinaison de questions ouvertes, d'entrevues semi-structurées et de travaux écrits a été utilisée pour recueillir des données sur les conceptions linguistiques des participants, les approches de l'étude de la linguistique et les résultats d'apprentissage. Les résultats de la recherche suggèrent que la majorité des étudiants ont adopté des conceptions fragmentées de



l'apprentissage dans leurs études linguistiques. Ils ont également indiqué que la plupart des étudiants abordaient l'étude de la linguistique de manière désagrégée de surface. Ils ont aussi révélé que les conceptions d'apprentissage des étudiants affectaient non seulement la façon dont ils abordaient l'étude de la linguistique, mais aussi leurs résultats d'apprentissage. En outre, trois éléments semblent avoir joué un rôle important dans la formation de l'expérience d'apprentissage dans le contexte du cours de linguistique : les intentions des étudiants de chercher un sens, leur capacité à relier divers éléments d'information pour acquérir une connaissance holistique et leur centre d'attention

Mots-clés : Phénoménographie; conceptions d'apprentissage; les approches d'apprentissage; l'apprentissage de la linguistique; enseignement supérieur

Introduction

Research into the students' experience of learning stemmed from studies in higher education with the attempt to understand the complexities of what academic learning and teaching implies. It focuses on the student's learning activity from the students' perspective, i.e., the student's own description of what he/she does during and the knowledge he/she acquires during his academic experience (Brennan and Osborne, 2008; Marton, 1981; 1992). Research on student experience of learning developed from two main perspectives: meta-cognitive or constructivist and phenomenography (Qian and Pan, 2002; Ramsden 2002).

Meta-cognitive or constructivist perspective focuses on the students' epistemological conceptions of knowledge. Epistemology addresses the students' thinking, conceptions and beliefs which individuals have about the nature of knowledge (Saljo, 1979; Marton, 1992). It is concerned about the individuals' views of how knowledge is acquired and how such beliefs impact the way the students' experience of learning. Such epistemological beliefs are said to play a role in the way the students approach their learning tasks and materials. Moreover, this perspective views knowledge as being constructed by the students rather than transmitted by the teachers, hence constructivism (Qian and Alverman, 1995; 2000).

While meta-cognitive approach relies on epistemological research on conceptions of knowledge, Phenomenography is about conceptions of learning. It was coined by Marton (1981) and is based on the assumption that the student's learning is the result of what he/she perceives rather than what teachers teach. It thus focuses on what the students think learning is and the qualitatively different ways in which the students learn (Marton et al, 1993).



The students understanding of what learning involves or studies specific disciplines entails is of paramount importance; yet, it remains absent in the Algerian higher educational context. In addition, several phenomenographic studies have been conducted to unveil the students' learning conceptions and approaches in various university disciplines; yet, research on Linguistics as an academic subject of study is not available. It is therefore crucial that we understand how our students understand Linguistics to be, how they approach the study of Linguistics, and how these relate to the learning outcomes. Hence, the objectives of this investigation, within the context of the Linguistics course were to:

- Identify the students' prior conceptions of and prior-approaches to learning
- Identify the students' text-based conceptions of and approaches to learning
- Understand the nature of the Linguistics

1. Experience of learning concepts

1.1- Learning conceptions

The term 'conception' has also been used by other researchers to describe the students' general understanding of their discipline or subject area, for example, the students' conception of Accounting (Lucas, 2000). More narrowly, it could be used to refer to the students' conceptions of specific learning tasks such conception of writing an essay in sociology (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). In Saljo's (1979, 1982) study, which is widely acknowledged as initiating the majority of research in this area, findings were based on analysis of 90 students' responses to one question: "*What do you actually mean by learning?*" He (ibid) summarized all answers under five different conceptions of leaning. A sixth conception of learning was later identified by Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty (1993), who found evidence of the existence of the same five conceptions of learning already identified by Saljo (1979, 1982). The following conceptions of learning were therefore identified:

- *Learning as increasing one's knowledge.*
- *Learning as applying.*
- *Learning as understanding.*
- *Seeing something in a different way.*
- *Learning as changing as person.*



These categories of description provide evidence of a variety in the way students conceive learning ranging from those who saw learning as mainly about storing and reproducing information and those who conceive learning as a way of making sense of ideas for themselves, transforming the information they receive into 'personal meaning' (Pudie et al, 1996).

1.2- Learning Approaches

One major implication emerging from Saljo's (1979) findings is that the way a student view learning (the student's conception of learning) determines the way he goes about learning (the student's approach to learning). The term approach to learning refers to the different ways in which the students deal with a given learning task/activity or material. An approach to learning "*describes a relationship between the student and the learning he/she is doing*" (Ramsden, 1992, 44).

In this definition, approaches to learning are about the qualitative rather than the quantitative side of learning; in other words, learning approaches are about "how" the students as individuals experience their learning tasks.

In the pioneering study by Marton and Saljo (1976), were interested in exploring the ways in which the students went about reading academic articles. In this study, they (ibid), asked the students to read an academic article related to the content of their subject matter, and then interviewed the selected students about the way they went about this experience of reading with the aim to find out how the students. This method of investigating the students learning was termed phenomenography.

Based on their phenomenographic study, Marton and Saljo (1976) made a distinction between two qualitatively different ways of learning that the students might use in approaching a given learning task. These were termed "surface" and "deep" approaches to learning. "Surface approach" is related to the students who tend to memorize and reproduce the information they acquire through the learning task. This approach is characterized by a lack of reflection while completing the task and so, the students adopting this approach make use of lower order thinking skills.

These students regard learning as imposed and external to their interest, and often fail to find an internal motivation or personal interest in the learning tasks or materials they engage in. In contrast, "deep approach" is related to 'understanding' the material and looking beyond what is presented on the surface. In other words, the students adopting this approach do not confine



themselves to the information presented in the task, but rather, attempt to relate ideas to previous knowledge, evaluating arguments and manifest an interest in the content of the task or learning material.

1.3 Phenomenography

Marton (1981) describes phenomenography as a study of the differing ways in which people experience, understand, and conceptualize reality in the world. It is based on the view that different people develop various understandings of the same phenomenon within the same context (Ramsden, 2003). Phenomenographic methodology aims at identifying the variation in experiencing a phenomenon by a group of individuals. In education, the experienced phenomenon is learning and the learning experience is shaped by the learning situation in the classroom.

The various ways the individuals' understand and approach learning are identified in various categories of description that are organized from the least to the most sophisticated category (Marton, 1981; Marton and Booth, 1997). The description of these categories provides us with what is called in phenomenography the outcome space, in which the researcher arrives at the global image emerging from the students' learning experience.

2. The Study

2.1 Participants

The study was conducted in the department of English of the University of Algiers 2. The sample for this study was 40 undergraduate students all enrolled in their 2nd year. The participants were randomly selected from three different groups taught by the same teacher, who is also the researcher in the present study. As already mentioned, phenomenography attempts to capture the various ways a group of people experience one given phenomenon within the same context (Marton and Booth, 1997).

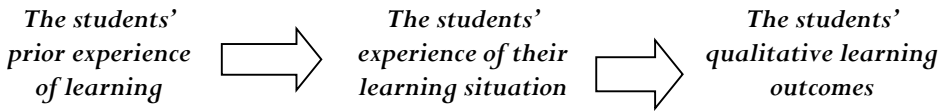
In order to capture the various ways, the students experience the study of linguistics, it was important that the participants had all to be 2nd year students and be taught by the same teacher.

2.1 Data collection instruments and procedure

Collecting data in the present phenomenographic investigation was based on Prosser and Trigwell (1999) framework to investigate the students' experience of learning illustrated in Figure 1.



figure 1: theoretical framework for the study-based Prosser and Trigwell (1999) model for the learning experience research



Based on this framework, data were collected in two stages: Stage 1 and Stage 2 of the study. The focus of Stage 1 was the prior-experience of studying Linguistics. We sought to understand the way Linguistics was understood and approached based on their prior learning experience. Data were collected by means of semi-structured interviews and an open-ended question.

In Stage 2, however, the purpose was to go deeper into the actual experience of the learning in the context of the classroom. This stage involved the design of classroom tasks based on reading a linguistic academic text, and summarizing it. Right after each classroom task, the students were interviewed about the task of reading an academic text and summarizing it.

Thus, three main research instruments were used to collect data about the participants learning conceptions of and approaches to linguistics, an open-ended question, two semis structured interviews, and students' summaries.

3. Results

3.1 Results of prior-experience of learning

The analysis of the students' written responses and their interviews revealed the way linguistics was conceived by the students that were structurally organized into four categories id description (Akerlin, 2005). These various categories constituted the outcome space for the prior-conceptions of studying linguistics, as illustrated in the table below

Based on the data of the present investigation it was observed that the participants expressed their conceptions of the study of linguistics based on their understanding of two interrelated aspects of linguistics study:

- Their understanding of linguistics as a subject matter.
- The objective of the linguistics course content



Table1: The outcome space for the prior-conceptions of the study of linguistics

	Category A	Category B	Category C	Category D
Understanding of linguistics as a subject of study	It is the historical and philosophic study of language. Understanding linguistics is limited to only a few lectures of their first-year course content.	It is a theoretical analysis of English. It contributes to the students' development of the English language skills.	It is the analysis of language. It provides the students with the basis of analysis of any language in to different levels of language (ie. Phonetically, syntactically, semantically, etc...)	It is a personal reflection over how languages, including one's language, works.
Objective of the linguistics course content	It is the quantitative increase in knowledge about historical facts about language and linguistics.	Acquisition of facts which could be used, when necessary, in the future and/or in other modules about language skills.	It provides information needed for describing and analyzing different languages, not just English.	To provide information and knowledge essential to reflect over and question the way one's language works.

The outcome space emerging from the data suggested a variation in the participants' prior-conceptions of Linguistics reported in four different categories of description. These prior-conceptions reflect the students' understanding of Linguistics as merely about the accumulation and reproduction of unrelated pieces of information, represented by Category A, to studying Linguistics as a personal and deep reflection over languages, represented in Category D.

As far as the prior-approaches are concerned, the data analysis revealed a set of hierarchically organized categories of description of the approaches to the study of linguistics that the students brought to the 2nd year experience of learning. These are presented in the table below. As illustrated in the table below.



Table2: The outcome space for the prior-approaches of the study of linguistics

	Category A	Category B	Category C
Category of description	It is based on accumulating isolated pieces of information in a passive way during the lectures directly transmitted by the teacher. Understanding is not necessary since this approach is characterized by the students' lack of interest in the linguistic knowledge and motivation in studying linguistics.	It is characterized by the students' interest in selecting the notes and memorizing the information that would increase their chances to pass the linguistics texts and exams. Understanding the information given by the teacher is considered as necessary.	It is based on relating all the linguistic information transmitted in the lectures and those obtain from the students' personal research in order to reach a global understanding of the course. They seek to understand the meaning behind the information transmitted
Strategy	Over-reliance on taking and memorizing notes directly transmitted by the teacher. The students did not do any further efforts to elaborate or make any extra research to understand the information given by the teacher.	Taking notes in the lectures judged to be important for the tests and exams. Reinforcing these notes with any extra information to be better prepared for any future assessment is also one of the main strategies. Understanding and then memorizing the information collected in preparation for the teachers' assessment is an important feature for this approach.	In addition to note-taking and summarizing, the students rely on liking the information gathered during various lectures. Simply taking notes and memorizing isolated pieces of information would not be satisfactory for the students holding this approach.
Intention	The students aim to reproduce information transmitted by the teacher with minimal effort.	The objective of the students holding this approach is maximizing their chances to pass the linguistic end of term text and exam.	Understanding meaning of the information gathered during the course and finding a relationship between the various pieces of information.

The data analysis revealed that, in addition to the students' intentions and strategies used, which were the focus of the interviews, issues in relation to their roles in linguistics classroom were constantly raised. Therefore, the outcome space.



3.1 Results of the text-based experience of learning

Given the complexity of the learning experience revealed in the data, a brief overview of the findings is first needed. The data analyzed in the previous section revealed that the students' learning outcomes fell into three different categories from the least to the most sophisticated one as illustrated in the figure below:

Table 3: The text-based experience of studying linguistics

Category A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The summaries are reproduction of the original texts - The attention paid to isolated elements and information - The intention to complete the tasks
Category B	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The summaries were reconstructions of the message of the text - The attention was directed to the way the various pieces of information could be related to each other within the text. - The intention was to understand the hidden meaning.
Category C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The summaries were reconstructions of the message of the text in relation to the course of linguistics. - The attention was directed to the way the text's information could be related to the knowledge studied in the linguistics course in general.

In Category A, which is the least sophisticated category, the learners focused their attention on isolated facts and information with the intention to complete an imposed task with little effort and motivation. Their summaries were mere reproductions of sentences randomly taken from the original text which were not written in a personal way. While in the most sophisticated category, the main concern of the students is to extract meaning and relate information to each other with the intention to obtain a holistic understanding of the message conveyed not just in the texts, but also transmitted through the linguistic course in general.

This intention led to the students to produce summaries that could be said to be rather reconstruction of the message of the text in relation to the background knowledge studied in the previous lectures. In the in-between category the attention of the students was given to the way the various pieces



of information could be related to each other within the text with the intention to understand its hidden meaning. The summaries produced reflected the students' personal reflection over the message of the text. This outcome space is summarized in the table below:

Table 4: The Outcome Space for the Students' Text-based Experience of Studying Linguistics

	Cat A: Learning materials are external tasks to be completed	Cat B: Learning materials convey knowledge that should be seen holistically	Cat C: Learning materials convey knowledge that should be put in its wider context
Quality of the summaries	The summary is a reproduction of the original text.	The summary should reflect personal understanding of the author's objective and text's meaning.	Summaries should reflect an understanding of the text within and in relation the whole context of the course of linguistics.
Conception	Learning is an imposed activity.	Learning is to have a coherent picture of knowledge.	Learning is to reflect over the knowledge in a global way.
Approach	Reproducing the received knowledge with minimal effort.	Understanding details precedes understanding the hidden message	Personally reflecting and reconstructing knowledge.

4. Discussion

The findings reported above revealed that the Prior-conceptions differ in terms of extraction of meaning in turns affected the students' understanding of the purpose behind the acquired information. In conceptions A and B, we can notice no or very little concern about the meaning of the information received in the classroom, the purpose of the lectures, or objectives of the course in general. The main concern of the students in these two conceptions was the accumulation of information or increase in knowledge without necessarily questioning its meaning. This resulted in a 'surface' understanding of linguistics. In contrast to Conceptions A and B, Conceptions C and D the students were not merely interested in increasing the quantity of the linguistic information, but rather extracting meaning and obtaining a 'deep' understanding of the linguistics course objectives and knowledge (Marton et al, 1993).



The main distinction can be drawn between Conceptions A and B on the one hand, and C, D, on the other. In common with a number of studies on the students' experience of learning, the conceptions discussed above can be interpreted along two different levels: the lower level and the higher level. The level higher up in the hierarchy embraces the levels lower down the hierarchy. The lower level includes *Conception A (quantitative increase in knowledge)* and *Conception B (the acquisition and accumulation of knowledge the English language)*, and the higher level includes *Conception C (understanding practical knowledge and analyzing languages)* and *Conception D (making sense of the linguistic information and critically reflect over languages)*.

As for the prior-approaches, the difference between the lower level and higher-level approaches in the present study is also made in relation to whether or not the knowledge acquired in the course was viewed holistically or in a fragmented way. The students who were unable to relate the information acquired to what they already know, and those who viewed the information in an isolated and fragmented way, limited the study of linguistics to merely about memorization without understanding, and the outcome of learning to obtaining the pass grade. This was the case of approach A.

In approach C however, it was necessary to appreciate the purpose of the information and understand what is beneath and beyond the surface meaning. It is also characterized by the students' constant effort to connect the information of the course to each other, and so the students with this approach manage to appreciate the course objectives and meaning holistically. Approach B represents an intermediate approach between A and C, where the students attempt to relate information to each other and achieve a deeper understanding, yet the objective was to be aware the teacher's objectives and to improve chances to obtain the highest possible grades.

The students' conceptions in Stage 2 could be distinguished in terms of extraction of meaning. This notion of meaning was found to be strong in previous phenomenographic studies. Ramsden (1992) distinguished between the two sets of categories and labeled them as "reproduction-oriented" and "meaning-oriented" learning conceptions. Later, Marton et al (1993) showed similarities and suggested a "reproductive"- "constructivist" conceptions; the distinction between the two sets in both



studies was largely related to the students' ability to seek and understanding meaning in their learning experience.

In approaching the text-based materials, the students varied between a step-by-step learning strategy where the students focus on information in isolation and emphasize details instead of the meaning behind those details, and seeking meaning in the learning materials. The outcome of the least sophisticated approach led to failure of underhand connections between various piece of information and inability to seek analogies between the various ideas. However, the students who had the intention to look and understand meaning came out with a deeper understanding of the linguistics texts and information.

Conclusion

This phenomenographic investigation was conducted with the aim of understanding what studying Linguistics might mean for our undergraduate students and how it is approached. Data were collected and analyzed following well-recognized phenomenographic models, however, various adaptations and reflections over the application and analysis of the data had to be done in the present study. The findings of this investigation suggested that the majority of the 2nd year students conceived learning as an increase in knowledge that is useful to meet assessment demands. This dominant conception is also related to the reproduction surface approach adopted by most of the participants in this study. Interestingly, a few students experienced the study of linguistics in a much deeper way adapting a conception of Linguistics as being inherently meaningful. Their main approach therefore to based on seeking meaning and relating the linguistic knowledge in order to obtain a holistic understanding of Linguistics.

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