

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL STUDIES

Enhancement of Learning among Pre-Service Teachers in the Higher Teacher Training College Bambili in Cameroon

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Abstract:

At the beginning of each academic year, most students are very enthusiastic to succeed in their studies. As time goes by some of them become reluctant and pile up their notes thinking they have enough time ahead of them. At the end of the day it becomes difficult to study effectively because of little or no knowledge on how to learn. This paper was designed to examine the extent to which student teachers employ learning strategies (time management, rehearsals/research, study/alert hours and study groups) to enhance their learning out of the classroom. An exploratory research design was used in this study in order to get in-depth qualitative data on how they enhance their learning. A systematic random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 100 fifth year students from both Arts and science Departments of the Higher Teacher Training College (HTTC) Bambili in the University of Bamenda. A questionnaire comprising open and close ended items and informal interactions were used to collect the data. After analysing the data using descriptive statistics, the findings revealed that most students had problems with time management where they put in few hours in their studies at home; some rehearse their note mostly in preparation for a test or end of semester examinations; while few of them have effective study groups. In order to enhance learning, students need to be effective time managers, carryout intensive research and rehearsals, study during their alert hours and make good use of study groups. It is very essential for students to be trained on how to learn.

Keywords: Alert hours, learning, strategies, time management, rehearsals, study groups

1. Introduction

Learning how to learn is a very pertinent issue in Educational Psychology although most researchers do not take keen interest in this aspect. According to Dunlosky (2013), the emphasis in most schools is centered on what students need to learn while little emphasis, if any is laid on training students how they should go about learning and the skills that can promote efficient studying which support learning. Most literature is centred on teacher effectiveness and how learners can learn in the classroom. According to Rosenshine & Furst, (1973) learning can be optimized when teachers used variety of methods, materials and examples in each lesson because regardless of learners' best mode of learning, it will help every learner at the same time. This means that they believed learners can only learned effectively if teachers teach effectively. It is necessary for individuals to learn on their own outside the formal classroom setting in order to enhance their learning. Learning is the reason why teaching takes place, in order to succeed in learning, Santrock (2005) states that learners must be good time managers. He emphasises that it is necessary for every student to put up a calendar of activities at the beginning of the semester which will guide them to study all their courses effectively. Learning how to learn entails many aspects, among which are learning strategies. A learning strategy is a learner's approach use in order to enhance an understanding of what he is learning. Learners use varied strategies to help them understand information and solve problems related to their school learning. According to Hall (2009), there are different strategies which learners can use to optimize learning which among others are cooperative thinking strategies, assignment completion strategies, first letter mnemonic strategies (a strategy for independently studying large bodies of information which the learner needs to master), self questioning strategies and summarizing which are used to systematically solve problems. He emphasises that if learners use these strategies effectively they will learn better. Other researchers proposed that learning can only be effective if learners carry out frequent research and rehearsals. According to Warr & Allan (1998), learning strategies can be categorised into three: Cognitive learning which entails rehearsals of material to be learned or organising the material into main themes like behavioural learning strategies which entails seeking help from others, and self-regulating strategies which are based on how learners control their emotions and are motivated to learn. They emphasise on the fact that if students put these strategies into practice they will learn better.

Most learners perform poorly in examinations not because they are less intelligent but because they do not have knowledge on how to learn or to enhance their learning. It is very common to hear students lamenting on the fact that they attended and enjoyed their lectures but could not succeed in their examinations and at times some complain that they prepared very well for a course but could not recall anything in the examination hall. From my experience as a teacher trainer I have come across students who attested that they did not really know how to effectively learn in a way that they

would have little problems during end of semester examinations or to effectively transfer knowledge when need be. All these made me to understand that effective learning is not only based on the teaching methods, instructional materials, teachers' content knowledge and lesson plan but on other aspects. It is obvious that teachers could be effective in teaching, but the learners may still find it difficult to learn effectively due to the fact that they do not know how to enhance their learning out of the classroom. So, the idea of learning to learn becomes imperative to the learners. It is on this premise that this research was designed to examine the various strategies in which student teachers in HTTC Bambili can enhance their learning outside the classroom.

2. Methodology

The purpose of this study was to find out the extent to which student teachers employ learning strategies (time management, rehearsals/research, study environment and study groups) to enhance their learning out of the classroom. An exploratory research design was used in this study in order to get in-depth qualitative data on the learning strategies they used. The target population comprised the fifth-year students of HTTC Bambili in the University of Bamenda. A systematic random sampling technique was used to select a sample of 45 males and 55 females' students giving a total of 100 students from both Arts and science sections. A questionnaire comprising open and close ended items and informal interactions were used to collect the data. Out of the 100 copies of the questionnaire administered, 98 were returned. Data was analysed using descriptive statistics particularly content analysis, frequencies, percentages, mean and standard deviations.

3. Results

3.1. Time Management

After analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data on time management specifically study time table it was realized that a slight majority 53(54.1%) of the respondents drew up their reading time table at the beginning of each semester. According to them when the time table was drawn at the beginning of the semester, it helped them to rehearse all the courses within the week and to prepare for the next lessons in their respective courses which facilitated their understanding during the teaching-learning transaction in the classroom and during assessment. Although the students acknowledged that they drew up their study time table at the beginning of each semester, majority 84 (85.7%) of them stated that time allocated for the courses varied according to the nature of the course content and difficulty. More time was allocated to difficult courses especially those they found difficult to understand in class; those with more credit values; those they came across for the first time and those with a lot of material to be covered. This was done because they needed much time to assimilate the content of the courses and to facilitate their understanding of the said courses before the examinations were being programmed. On the other hand, majority of the students without a time table were of the opinion that even if they drew up a time table they would not respect it because they preferred to read at their convenience or when examinations were programmed; they preferred to wait for the examination time table to be published so they could extract their individual time tables from it. Also, when asked if students who had time tables had any period allocated for assignments, a minority 20 (20.4%) of the respondents accepted to have allocated time for assignments while the majority, 78(79.6%) of the respondents did not.

Most of the students were of the opinion that they did their assignments when the lecturers announced the submission date using any period on their time table. When students were asked whether they respected their time table vigorously only a few 22(22.4%) of them affirmed to that, while the majority 76(77.6) said they hardly respected their time table up to 80% per week because of the busy schedule during the day. Some complained of the tight nature of their school time table, before the end of their lessons in school they were already exhausted and that made it difficult for them to respect their individual study time tables. More so, a slight majority 51((52.0%) of respondents gave a positive response to the fact that they allocated time for leisure in their time table while 47(48.0%) did not. Minority of the 40(40.8%) respondents accepted that their study periods were more than their leisure periods. Some of them justified that their leisure periods were not more than the study periods because they spent most of their time in school and when they were at home they preferred to spend most of their time in leisure activities so as to rest their brains.

When asked how many hours students put in for their studies per week (see table 1) the majority of the respondents 30(30.6%) suggested hours between 10 and below, 26(26.5%) respondents stated between 10-20hours, some 20(20.4%) of the respondents gave hours between 21-30 per week, a minority 8(8.2%) of the them said they put in at least 31hours per week, while 14(15.22%) did not specify the number of hours devoted for their studies per week. According to them, they studied when they felt like reading or when preparing for a test/examination, and that made it difficult for them to categorical state the number of hours they put in for their "home studies."

		Frequency	Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	10 hours and less	30	30.6	30.6
	11-20hours	26	26.5	57.1
	21-30 hours	20	20.4	77.6
	31 hours and above	8	8.2	85.7
	No specific time	14	14.3	100.0
	Total	98	100.0	

Table 1: Number of Hours Learners Put in for Their Studies Per Week

3.2. Students Alert Hours

From the quantitative data, gotten through the questionnaire, it was clear that majority 86(87.6%) of the respondents accepted that they were aware of their alert periods of the day when they could read and understand better while 12(12.2%) respondents indicated that they were not aware of their alert periods and that is why they studied at any time of the day. It was realized that a slight majority 51 (52%) of the students preferred early morning periods that is 1AM – 6AM because when they came back from school they were tired and needed to rest before studying. One of the respondents stated that “I prefer to read early in the morning because at this period my memory is still fresh and ready to effectively encode information as compared to evening periods after a very busy day in school since the memory would be overcrowded with the activities of the day which makes it difficult to read and understand.” Some 31 (31.1%) of the respondents preferred evening periods between 7PM and 12PM while a few of them 13(13.3%) preferred other periods during the day.

3.3. Study Group

After analyzing the data from the participants, the findings revealed that majority of the students 59(60.2%) belonged to a study group. According to some of those who had no study groups, they viewed any study group as a source of distraction to them. Others said they had once tried and the groups were a failure because some group members did not want to cooperate or share their knowledge with others. Others were of the opinion that most groups end up as gangs with a lot of negative social influence which hinder the learning process of their members. For those who had study groups they reported that they learned a lot from members of their study group especially topics that were difficult for them to understand, one of the respondents reported that “study groups instil competition among the members especially when the group comprises some intelligent and fast learners”. According to some, their study groups helped them to be more committed in their studies than when they studied individually. Although majority of the students confessed to the importance of study groups in enhancing their studies, some of them did not like the issue of teaching others, they preferred discussions. That is most of what they did in their groups was more of questions and answer sessions. In some groups they assigned members on the different topics to read and prepare questions for discussion while some actually taught others. Although majority of the students belonged to study groups most of these groups met only when they were preparing for an assignment, group presentations or end of semester examinations. It was also realised that most study groups comprised 2-5members, while a few of them were made up of 6-10members. See table 2. These numbers are good because when a study group has fewer members it is easy to coordinate the activities and ensure active participation of its members.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	No Group	17	17.3	17.3	17.3
	1-5 members	49	50.0	50.0	67.3
	6-10 members	32	32.7	32.7	100.0
	Total	98	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: Involvement of Students in Study Groups

4. Research/Rehearsals

Statistical evidence showed that majority of students 75(76.5%) accepted that they carried out research in most of the topics in their courses; while a minority 23(23.5%) hardly carried out research, they preferred to read just what their teachers taught, or the notes given in class. It was realized that only 32(32.7% of the respondents revised all what they studied in school each time they returned home while the majority 66 (67.3%) revised mostly in preparation for a test or end of semester exams and they affirm that during these periods some of the material they learned earlier had decayed which made it difficult for them to understand most of their courses.

5. Discussion

Time management is one of the most imperative strategy that enhances learning. At the beginning of each year it is a general phenomenon for learners to be enthusiastic in succeeding in their studies. From the findings of this study, it was realized that time management is really a problem. Students came up with study time tables at the beginning of the semester, some towards exams, and most of them find it difficult to respect the time tables. It is very common to see students striving to succeed at the end of the semester, but they do not know how to manage their time effectively. Some of the students give more time to leisure than their studies and before they realize it, the examination time table is put up and that is when most of them become conscious of their time when it is already late since they have been piling up materials thinking that they had enough time. Imagine a student with 8 courses of at least 40 pages of notes for each course to be read and understood in maybe two weeks. It becomes a serious problem for some of them and because they want to succeed and graduate by all cost, some resort to cheating during examinations, some enter examination halls with some written materials on pieces of papers, laps or palms and some end up disturbing others to help them during examination. In order to manage the time effectively learners need to draw up their reading table or calendar of activities for each semester which should be feasible stating clearly hours for courses, assignments, leisure/exercises, laundry, etc. In doing this they should ensure that all the courses appear on their time table.

According to Santrock (2005), if learners become great time managers they will easily succeed in their studies. He emphasizes that if learners waste their time they will find themselves poorly prepared the night before exams and this will

lead to anxiety which affects performance negatively. On the other hand, if they manage their time well, they will have time to relax before exams or other deadlines. Time management will help students to become more productive and less stressed and this will reduce anxiety during exams or presentations in class. Santrock & Halonen (2002), state that children who study 30-45 hours a week outside the class score excellent grades in their courses. This was also realized among the pre-service teachers in the University of Bamenda, majority of them who studied at least between 20-30 hours and above a week indicated that they had little or no problems during exams and they usually scored between B (60-69), B+(70-79) and A (80-100) grades and had not come for resit examinations. Therefore, if students manage their time well especially by spacing out each course severally a week, it will enhance their understanding of the course and they will avoid cramming material a few days to any assessment. This will increase their performances and will greatly reduce the level of cheating during examinations.

Since most students do not revise what was taught in class but only do that towards examinations, it becomes very difficult for them to rehearse up to 80% of what was taught in a course. This pushed some students to select some topics they preview may constitute part of the examination and neglect some of the topics. This makes it very difficult for some of them to succeed in some course especially when questions are not set from the topics they selected or when the test items are objective in nature. Learners should read to understand or learn and not just for reading sake, that is why you may see a student who reads every day, but his performance is still very low. When carrying out research, students should not skip what they do not understand and always review what they have read or learned. Rehearsals is one of the most important learning strategies and it a strategy to improve on the memory. According to Hurt & Ellis (2004), rehearsals allow information to be maintained in and recalled from the short-term memory. The more information is rehearsed, the more it gradually transfers to the long-term memory as long as the individual is using the knowledge. When information is encoded and not rehearsed it can easily decay and cannot be used when need arises. One of Thorndike's laws of learning, the law exercise states that learners' best remember information that they learn repeatedly. It means the more the learners rehearse what they learn the more they will understand and retrieve the information when needed. Extensive and intensive research is very necessary as far as enhancement of learning is concerned. When students carry out research on what they have to learn or have learned they discover new knowledge which may be more meaningful to them than what was taught in class. Teachers should always encourage students to read further on what they have taught in class by giving assignments or learning activities of each topic which is taught in class. According to Piaget (1972) learners should be assigned to carry out tasks on their own so as to discover more knowledge, when this is done learning becomes more meaningful and will last long in the memory.

It is always necessary for students to be aware of their best learning environment and their alert hours. From the findings of the study, it was realized that most students prefer to read in the early morning periods because the brain has rested, and they will understand what they are reading better. The question is how many students respect their alerts periods and the number of hours their brains are ready and attentive to take in information. Some students are influenced by their friends. If the friends are reading for 4 hours they will also want to read for the same number of hours even when they are tired and that makes learning can ineffective. This sounds like a negative impact of social influence because some of them read just to conform to what their friends are doing and not because they really understand what they are reading.

Group work is a very important strategy of learning. When learners study in groups there is development of interdependency, they share ideas and engage in positive competition. When students study in groups it is easier for the fast learners to help the slow/weak learners especially in difficulty tasks. If we go by Vygotsky's (1962) idea of the Zone of proximal development where learners may carry out some task on their own and need the assistance of skill others to carry out higher mental tasks, study groups will really fit into this and enhances collaborative learning. Within the groups weaker students may be challenged by fast or gifted children and this will motivate them to study from others. The fast learners will assist the slow learners in tasks that are above their level of understanding. Study groups are informal groups where students are very free to ask questions to their mates in any language without being afraid of the teachers reaction or the reaction of other students. There is some degree of freedom since there are not control by a teacher as opposed to the formal classroom settings. Although study groups are very necessary in enhancing learning, students should be careful with groups that are a source of distraction, any group where time is spent discussing about other people or social issues may not be a good group. They should also take note that even though they study as a group they should also create time for their individual work especially when it comes to research or reading. The group should meet mostly for discussions, assignments and revisions. When learners work in groups they cover more material faster. Working in a study group makes it possible to research and learn about various topics quickly. Each member is assigned a topic and then provides a summary to the group.

6. Conclusion

This research was aimed at finding the different ways in which students enhance their learning out of the normal classroom setting. It was realized that some learners were not really engaged in activities that could enhance their learning and that is why some students perform poorly in their courses. Some of the issues discussed in this paper that help to facilitate learning are time management (a study time tabling or a calendar of activities), research, constant rehearsals of the courses, using the best out of study groups, awareness of alert hours and study environment. It was realized that in as much as teachers do their best to facilitate learning, the learner has a greater part to play in enhancing learning. Learners must know how to learn if they want their understanding of the material taught to be easily understood. If students take into consideration and put into practice some of these issues raised in this study they will find their studies easier and will minimize examination anxiety, cheating and others.

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