Researching learners' perceptions: The use of the repertory grid technique

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Abstract

This article examines the use of the repertory grid technique as a method to investigate learner perceptions in language education research. An important issue raised in this article concerns how far a researcher's agenda may be unintentionally imposed onto a research study which is investigating learners' perceptions, and how far the ensuing data may provide an accurate representation of the learners' viewpoints. A discussion of conventional research methods in perception research indicates the limitations of many structured research instruments such as questionnaires, surveys and interviews with regard to gaining reliable insights into learners' views. The article considers the potential of using the repertory grid technique in perception research in terms of minimizing researcher influence and obtaining data that reflects learners' perceptions. Taking a research study on the perceptions of secondary school learners of the language classroom as an example, the article demonstrates how building repertory grids can reveal insights into the learners' thought processes and give the researchers access into the different ways learners view the classroom. The article also considers some issues in terms of data analysis and the interpreting of language data. It concludes that the repertory grid technique is a useful approach in perception research which can provide valuable data that is revealing of participants' actual views.

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I Introduction

It is perhaps odd that, despite a long history of professional language teaching stretching back over half a millennium (Howatt, 2004), 'the learner' as an essential ingredient in the success of the language learning process has only recently received focused attention. While a search for the 'best method' has been an ongoing concern for language teaching research, coupled with a concern for the 'best syllabus', it is only in recent decades that variability in the learner has been recognized as a crucial factor. Initially, this was framed in terms of an interest in the learner's internal processes of language acquisition, the influence of the learner's first language, and sociocultural aspects such as purposes for language learning, as evidenced in Oller and Richards' ground-breaking volume, *Focus on the learner* (1973). This spawned the beginnings of 'learner-centred' approaches, particularly those which evolved from the analysis of learner needs and the development of special purposes courses, and methodologies which involved a more active role for the learner in the classroom and an interest in their own strategies for learning.

Parallel with these developments, an alternative interpretation of the concept of learner-centredness has emphasized the part that personal perceptions may have in the language classroom. Writers such as Breen and Candlin (1980) stressed the existence of learner reinterpretation of any classroom activities, which might be at odds with the intention of the curriculum. Similarly, Allwright (1984, p. 3) in a seminal paper posed the telling question of 'Why don't learners learn what teachers teach?' suggesting that the same classroom lesson can in fact be 'about different things for different learners'. Viewed from this perspective, success or failure in the teacher's objectives may not be so much about choosing the best method, the best syllabus or aligning with any assumed conscious or subconscious processes of acquisition, but rather about the extent to which teachers and learners share the same view of the classroom and the purposes they are working towards. To rephrase Allwright (1984), learners may only learn what teachers teach if they share the same understanding of what they are doing together in the classroom. The implications of this are therefore substantial. Research into teaching methodologies and curriculum planning is likely to be significantly limited in scope if we do not take into account how learners themselves interpret what happens in the classroom and how far they then actually participate in any innovations. An investigation in learners' perceptions in the classroom thus becomes vital in understanding effective language teaching.

Motivated by the realization of the importance of learner perceptions in language education, recent studies have now explored a wide range of areas including literacy, classroom activities, discussion topics, task difficulty, student interaction, classroom materials, and learning outcomes (see, amongst others, Alizadeh, 2018; Harklau, 2001; Kuo, 2011; Lizzio, Wilson & Simons, 2002; Savignon & Wang, 2003; Shrestha, 2013; Tavakoli, 2009; Tragant & Vallbona, 2018; Wolf, 2013). As mentioned above, a number of studies have also compared teachers' and learners' perceptions. In an early study, Nunan (1995), for example, reports on the opinions of learners and teachers about which activities are important in the learning process, and finds noticeable divergence. More recently, Littlejohn, Boye and Gardiner (forthcoming), have asked whether teachers and learners 'inhabit the same classroom world' and report on data gathered with school-aged learners, again revealing a significant mismatch. Other studies have shown that