Existential Analysis in Surmounting Foreign Language Learner's Difficulties

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Abstract. This pedagogical study is focusing on the analysis of an existential background to surmount the difficulties frequently experienced by foreign language learners in higher education. The existential Kierkegaardian and Sartrean point of view is used as a starting point to explore the learner's understanding of their existence. This self-understanding is assumed to be the background of learner's difficulties in their effort to master the foreign language which mirrored in learner's outcome. The method applied in this study is qualitative utilizing observation and interview as data collective. The result obtained from this research shows problems in decision-making in determining French as the focus of learning, causing the inability of the research participants to soundly exist as responsible foreign language learners.

Keywords: *Existentialism, Foreign Language Acquisition, Learner's difficulties.*

1 INTRODUCTION

The foreign language acquisition program in higher education aims to provide learners with the competence required to successfully acquire employment after graduation. In mastering foreign language skills, learners require to extend the learning process on the outer side of the class by communicating verbally as well as non-verbal. Usage of foreign languages (French) which is the focus of learning for students of the French Language and Literature Study Program, does not seem to be a habit or experience, an integral part of daily activities.

In the statement of William James, an American-born philosopher at the beginning of the 20th century, in his book Essays in Radical Empiricism, "We thus acquire a habit, in discussing experiences, defining them by their relation to something more." (1912)[1] , contained the understanding that the running of an experience-activity will always be related to other things and if done continuously it will become a habit. James, according to Kolb and Kolb, is the foundation founder of experiential learning (2009, p. 297)[2]. Before acquireing a habit in utilizing foreign language in everyday life, learners oblige to define that existence as a foreign language learner, then speaker, is their desire to be. This focus on existential realm in this process is determined based on the basic concept of existentialism established by the father of existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard, that humans must make choices freely and carry out decisions on that choice with full responsibility (Stewart, 2015, p. 88)[3].

The research team realizes that the existential domains are rarely approached related to education, on the other hand, research in the existential realm is considered important to be

carried out in order to investigate more closely the learners' selfhood in relation to the unsatisfactoriness of their learning achievements. This assumption is in line with the opinion of DeSoto (1970, p. 231)[4] who also views the need for an existential approach in the realm of education because the basic purpose of education is to facilitate the independence of students who are free and personally responsible (233) to develop well. Thus an existential approach is not regarded as something incompatible with education, but as complementary (234).

The data obtained from the application of this existential approach is further used as an initiation of an alternative step to help the research team in designing the syllabus, developing the following material and techniques and appropriate learning media. The new design of this learning device will help learners of foreign languages integrate learning activities comfortably and sustainably in their daily life (experiential learning). This integration will make foreign language learning activities a habit. As it is becoming a habit, the authenticity and responsibility of the learner as a French Language student will be more visible through increasing competence and in line with this, the mastery of their learning. In order to achieve the aim of this research, discover the existential background of the foreign language learner's difficulties in higher education, the following are references used as the base of research.

Existential thinking is a very long tradition, starting with Socrates and his teaching that teaching is not done through words but through what he does (Flynn, 2006, p. 1)[5]. In other words, the focus of existentialism is more on how to act appropriately than theorizing about how to act appropriately. Existentialism was then put forward by Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche who were said to be the fathers of existentialists in the 19th century. Whereas in the 20th century, near the end of World War II, Jean-Paul Sartre conveyed his thoughts that existentialism is humanism. Investigating into the thoughts of these existentialists, all of which convey the same thing that has been mentioned before, that existentialism is a philosophy of concrete human beings; act freely, authentically responsibly (Flynn, 2006)[5].

The research team considers existential learning to begin when the learner is faced with choices that must be taken in his life. As according to Kierkegaard (Flynn 2006, p. 33)[5] that "... our entire life is a choice for which we are equally responsible." Which is underlined again by Sartre who stated clearly, "... "So human beings who exist and live life must make decisions and make choices, because if not, then humans are the same as not exist and do not undergo life.

Further, about the human self, Kierkegaard states that humans do not naturally grow and develop into a self that is able to act appropriately. Being (selfhood) is an ongoing process towards something that is considered authentic, which means in a freely determined manner (Stewart 2015, p. 85)[3]. Often people experience complaints such as "feeling depressed" or "doubting themselves" and so on, according to Kierkegaard, because humans do not see themselves as creatures who are free to determine their lives responsibly. Humans view themselves as environmental passive products. The second possibility is that humans place themselves too deeply in the ideal state they dream of and forget about the conditions in which they are real.

There are various existential concepts that refer to selfhood, which is understood as a state that is not static but dynamic because it keeps moving. In other words, selfhood is a process of 'being' that will never stop throughout life (Sartre, 1948)[6]. As the basis of this research, the team established several existential concepts for guidance in conducting data analysis, as follows;

1. **Choice**

Choice translates necessity into freedom. This does not mean, however, that necessity is dissolved. It is still a synthesis of necessity and possibility, but it takes on a new qualification. In every case there is a hidden necessity or a factor of facticity. If necessities were dissolved, finitude would be vanish, and the self would become an infinite or absolute freedom. But as long as it exists, the self remains finite and actualized freedom, which means that it has a destiny, or Heidegger would say, it 'exists factically.' (Schrag, 1977, p. 191)[7]

The concept of choice was chosen and then translated into questions on the questionnaire given to learners who were participants in the research, to provide an understanding of the background of French language setting as the focus of their learning in higher education.

2. **Unauthentic / bad faith or not authentic / dishonesty**

"Thus attitudes of negation toward the self-permission to raise a new question: What are we to do with who is the possibility of denying himself? But it is the question of the attitude of "self-negation" in its universality. The kinds of behavior that can be ranked under this heading are too diverse; we risk retaining only the abstract form of them. It is the best way to do it, it is a reality, which is actually a consciousness that instead of directing its negation outward turns it toward itself. This attitude, it seems to me, is bad faith (mauvaise foi)." (Sartre, 1943, p. 81)[8]

The application of this concept in data analysis is to acquire an understanding of the situation of research participants related to whether they choose freely or not. Unauthentic is a situation where learners live a life inharmoniously to their true self (self-negation / denial). The existential situation related to this research is when the existence of students in the realm of French language learning is not in line with their wishes.

3. **Authenticity or authentic**

Being true to myself means being true to my own originality, and that is something only I can articulate and discover. In articulating it, I'm also defining myself. I am having a potential that is properly my own. This is the background of modern understanding, and to the goals of self-fulfillment or self-realization, which is usually couched. This is the background that gives moral force to the culture of authenticity, including its most degraded, absurd, or trivialized forms. It is what gives you the idea of "doing your own thing" or "finding your own fulfillment." (Taylor, 1992, p. 29)[19]

This concept describes the ideal condition of man, where he lived his life according to his true self. In the sense that learners choose freely to do further studies in French in UB Malang and undergo these choices in a comfortable and responsible manner.

Whereas other existential concepts such as death are considered to have no relevance to the focus of this research. The brief explanation of existentialism above provides a framework for research in order to examine the root of the inconvenience and difficulty experienced by learners of foreign languages lead to their nonoptimal learning outcomes.

1.1 Research Method

Qualitative methods are chosen because it is an appropriate procedure in conducting this research which "produces descriptive data in the form of written or oral words from people and behaviors that are the object of study" (Moleong, 2005, p. 4)[10]. Descriptive data is the result of this method in the form of a written picture of analysis, interpretation, and synthesis between data and theory (Surakhmad, 1994, p. 140)[11].

The acquisition of descriptive data is carried out by the method of observation, then interviews and followed by analysis, interpretation and synthesis between data and theory. Observations were made both on academic behavior and academic achievement from the mid-term exam and final exam grade of research participants. Interviews with four selected research participants were carried out in detail and in depth with a guide to the list of existential questions aimed at exploring the causes of participants' learning difficulties and thus nonoptimal academic achievement.

1.2 Result and Discussion

This section describes the result of the research and the discussion that initiated to provide answers to the identified problems, the cause of the difficulties in mastering foreign language resulting in nonoptimal academic achievement, approaching from an existential point of view. The systematic reporting of results and this discussion will begin with the elaboration of the results of questionnaires and interviews which are classified into three groups according to existential concepts as outlined in section 2, namely choice, unauthentic and authentic. Each subsection will be summarized with the segmental conclusions to deliver final conclusions.

1. Choice

As explained in the previous section, the choice of necessity into freedom, in particular, the freedom to have choices and then make a decision. Regarding the questions in this category, in general the participants answered positively.

Athena explains that the choice to do higher studies in a French program and do it in a university far from family is indeed her own choice. It just seems that in terms of the French realm, Athena's choice is not supported by long conscious considerations, as Sartre said should be done (Bugental, Pierson, Schneider, 2015: 120)[12].

Eros also gave a positive answer, in the sense that the learner indeed chose to do further studies in Malang, in Brawijaya precisely, based on long conscious thoughts and considerations. This is indicated by the mention of specific ideas in the realm of this learning location.

Aslan, on the other hand, does not give a positive answer in terms of free choice. The French domain is chosen not freely because parents play a very big role in this matter, it can be said that parents are the ones who make the choice for Aslan to carry out specific further studies in the French program. The basis of this decision is the ability to speak good English and having been selected to take part in a student exchange in Australia, then it was decided that the competence in a foreign language other than English in addition to that, is ideal, and French was chosen without a thorough study.

Métis is a participant who, although she seems to freely decide to do her higher studies in the realm of the French program, is in accordance with her interests in a foreign language, but the choice is made without a conscious rationale. This has resulted in inconvenience in carrying out a real study in France which should have been the focus. This can be seen also in classroom learning, Métis seemed very worried and did not have self-confidence when she got the turn to articulate French verbally. Regarding the study location far from the family, Métis did not have a problem in this matter because she really wanted to go far away.

The tentative conclusion of the Choice category is that in certain domains, research participants determine choices freely. They have an obligation to make a choice to carry out further studies, and they do it freely, even though that choice does not always put French as the main focus. This can be seen from their shock when they finally faced what they chose freely. Athena, Eros, Aslan and Métis all feel the inconvenience of making decisions which, although

carried out freely (without including Aslan in this category), are not based on long and conscious considerations

2. Unauthentic

This concept that can be matched with 'not being honest with yourself' by Sartre is called the term mauvaise foi (1943, p. 81)[8]. A simple understanding of this concept is when a person does not freely choose for himself what is in accordance with him but makes what others choose for him as a representation of himself, thus being dishonest to himself or denying his true self.

Athens in terms of the selection of the focus of further study in French, although it is done with a little encouragement from the family, but is something that is not authentic. This can be seen from how he did not feel comfortable undergoing French learning, passive in class, almost always late and often did not enter so that the learning achievement was not optimal. The convenience of undergoing something chosen by Schrag (1977, p. 180)7 is termed as existential centeredness, and inconvenience because of living a situation that is not himself as losing his existential centeredness. How you can let this happen is because he doesn't stop and asks "how do I have to exist, live a life like that" then undergo a conscious process of understanding before deciding confidently about the realm of France. From the answers given to the team, Athena set the choice to do further studies in Malang in the realm of Frenchness so that they could live independently (themselves). Interest in foreign languages other than English and Korean that has been mastered, has not been able to make Athens exist and live its current life as an authentic French learner.

In terms of French, Eros also made his decision freely but in his statement it was clear that the decision was not the result of a process of understanding, something that was confirmed by the diction chosen to describe his situation, as consciously done and processes, then Eros lives his life as a learner of French in an inauthentic manner and therefore becomes a non-free self, French is not what he wants when Eros starts his learning here. Heidegger describes humans who live in an inauthentic manner as self-untrue to themselves, a self that does not have its own thoughts, does not have its own space, do things it decides on itself, becomes itself (Inwood 2002, p. 26)[13]. However, there are positive things related to French in Eros who still feels an interest in French. This attraction if it grows out of authenticity in itself, then Eros will be more like him. In addition to France, Eros also stated that he did not like everyday life as a student, where there were more responsibilities borne, naming, time management. With irregularly scheduled lectures in hours and days unlike high school, Eros feels he has a freedom that is so excessive causing him to overdo it, becoming regular latecomer or absentee, this new responsibility makes him uncomfortable. This is one form of non-authenticity as a self that continues to develop, it does not accommodate that development. While the non-authenticity itself is because Eros did not freely undergo the process of choosing and consciously deciding from the beginning the idea of moving to Malang from Jakarta, embryo within. Living life irresponsibly is a result of non-authenticity.

On the other hand, Aslan clearly stated that the choices and decisions regarding further studies were left to his parents, he did not freely decide this on his own. It's okay if his parents vote, but especially, Aslan must have made his choice and made his own decision in him, so that when his parents seem to make a decision for him, actually what happens is that parents follow what has been decided by him. In this case, Aslan looks to cut the process of consciously choosing into direct decision making, then lives life as an authentic French learner, without also understanding the true meaning of its authenticity. In terms of the lives of students with greater responsibility regarding time management, there are similarities with other research participants where they are often late or absent. The running of an authentic life is certainly not a life that is

lived with responsibility. Aslan seems to refuse to answer the last few questions that are more closely related to his selfhood, this requires more study in the next stage.

Métis gave more or less the same answer regarding French program, which indicated that living life as a French language student even though it seemed to be a decision she had freely made but without the background of an understanding process that was aware of authenticity. It was also seen in the question of the ideals he had before reaching the college stage that Métis wanted something completely different from a career in the field of France that she did not answer. However, there is a sense of responsibility for the choices that have been taken, which can be seen from his presence in lectures, Métis is never absent or late.

The current walk of the life phase for the four research participants seems to be inauthentic, especially in terms of learning French, however, this is not a permanent situation. Sartre said that self is impermanent because it always changes endlessly, a constant project (Bugental, Pierson, Schneider, 2015, p. 120)[12]. It is very possible for Athena, Eros, Aslan and Métis to then gain authenticity and live their daily lives more as students of French learning.

3. Authentic

Honest with yourself is to be the real self and this can only be found and determined by oneself and not by anyone else (Taylor, 1992, p. 29)[9]. While Sartre added that authentic existence is a process towards self-meaning, and to exist authentically, the self must choose freely and live out what it chooses. This is the starting point of authentic life; realizes that it is the person who establishes its meaning in its own right, accepts responsibility for what is chosen and it is decided consciously that it continues as an achievement that is never completed during life. This authenticity has not been seen significantly in the life of the four research participants in the realm of student learners in French.

2 CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion from the implementation of this stage of research, it can be stated that the cause of the nonoptimal learning outcomes of the four research participants was due to the choice, not motivated by a conscious understanding process in choosing and taking decision freely. Defining French as a focus in higher education from the self that is not free causes the participants to live an unauthentic life, different from the real self and cannot present a responsible self.

However, because of the non-permanent nature of the self, this authenticity can still be achieved by returning to choices and making decisions freely after going through a conscious understanding process, then undergoing that choice with full responsibility. Thus the authenticity of learners of foreign languages will be raised through a harmonized syllabus which will be compiled in further research. Acceptance of the individuality of research participants (learners/students) will include aspects of flexibility in learning and personalization methods in the implementation of teaching.

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