Self-Regulation and Language Students' Learning Experience[1]

Experiencias de aprendizaje del lenguaje y la autorregulación de los estudiantes

Fredy Orlando Salamanca González
fredyo.salamanca@gmail.com
Universidad Pedagógica y Tecnológica de Colombia - Tunja, Colombia[2]

How to cite this article (APA, 6th ed.): Salamanca, F. (2015). Self-regulation and language students' learning experience. *Enletawa Journal*, 8 (2), 71 – 85.

Abstract

The aim of this reflective article is to display the relationship between B.A. students learning experience and self-regulation metacognitive skills. It is a demanding task for a teacher to assess their apprentices in terms of their individual academic needs and capabilities. Self-regulation metacognitive skills can empower students with the tools to recognize themselves as learners with different expectations and aptitudes. The challenge for current classrooms is to work on making students aware and responsible for their own learning. Commitment and discipline are key aspects of becoming a self-regulated learner.

Key words: Learning, metacognition, self-regulation, B.A students.

Resumen

Este artículo busca mostrar la relación entre el aprendizaje de algunos estudiantes y sus habilidades de autorregulación. Para un profesor es difícil analizar sus estudiantes en relación con sus necesidades y aptitudes individuales. La habilidad de autorregulación puede darles a los estudiantes las herramientas para reconocerse como aprendices con diferentes expectativas y capacidades. El reto para las aulas de hoy en día es el de trabajar para hacer que los estudiantes sean conscientes y responsables de su propio aprendizaje. Compromiso y disciplina son aspectos claves para que un aprendiz aplique la habilidad de autorregulación.

Palabras clave: Aprendizaje, autorregulación, estudiantes, metacognición.

Introduction

Metacognitive skills are becoming relevant because they have changed teaching and learning in the languages field. Teachers must promote reflection, monitoring and evaluation of students' own learning. In a specific case, Zimmerman (2002) declares that self-regulated learners have been proven to be effective learners because they establish learning goals, know how to achieve their objectives and evaluate their progress.

The self-regulation theory that supports this essay is proposed by (Zimmerman, 2002). Sometimes, for students time management is a variable that interferes a lot in the development of their self-regulation skills; students do not have enough time for their assignments because they had many tasks to do overnight and because they tend to procrastinate.

Literature Review

In a B.A. in languages program in a public university in Tunja, students are exposed to diverse courses in which they are led towards reflecting upon their role as learners and future teachers. This paper will examine the situation of students in the "Applied Linguistics" course in a public university in Tunja (Boyacá), Colombia. In this course, which is located in the sixth semester of the syllabus, the apprentices read about theoretical issues in relation to critical pedagogy, language learning, teachers' roles, learning strategies, among others. In the sixth semester, students have had enough experience in the application of strategies due to the contact they have with language and the resources they use on their own (tablets, computers, internet, music, etc). From that perspective, students must be able to recognize themselves as learners and thus, be able to analyze the way to achieve knowledge and how to establish learning parameters, goals and study habits.

The Languages School of a public university in Tunja (Boyacá) pursues an integrated education of its students. That integrality has to do with the development of knowledge of the language, knowledge of teaching, classroom management, material design, humanistic approaches and metacognition. The goal for the Languages School is to make its students proactive risk takers and researchers. The metacognition component is revealed by means of students' participation in research groups, article writing and tutorial attendance. It is the goal of the program that students, through time, become aware of their own learning, their achievements, weaknesses, strengths and ways to approach language.

Metacognition

Metacognition has become increasing relevant in the languages field. Students have different expectations for their learning and

thus, there are multiple aspects to fulfill if teachers want to enhance students' metacognitive skills. Metacognition builds successful learners because they know what they need to learn and they know how to achieve their learning goals.

Knowing oneself as a learner is not easy; it is a long process in which a learner must fall into a cycle of failing, analyzing, evaluating and starting again. This procedure is divided into two main components: knowledge and regulation.

> *Metacognitive knowledge includes knowledge about oneself as a learner and the factors that might impact performance, knowledge about strategies, and knowledge about when and why to use strategies. Metacognitive regulation is the monitoring of one's cognition and includes planning activities, awareness of comprehension and task performance, and evaluation of the efficacy of monitoring processes and strategies* (Lai, 2011, p 2).

The language classroom has mutated from memory approaches, learning by heart, to metacognition. Some years ago, language classes were understood as the transmission of knowledge from teacher to students. Classes were essentially based on memorizing concepts, filling in pages and following teacher's instructions without any contradiction. "The nature and development of metacognition and cognitive monitoring/regulation is currently emerging as an interesting and promising area of investigation" (Flavell, 1979, p. 906). Nowadays, education has transformed and another perspective has been taken into account in the language classroom, communication. Teachers looked for ways to encourage students to communicate effectively by foregoing memorization and having students express their own feelings in the target language. Lately, classrooms have included metacognition as a means to improve students' learning and to make them reflect upon their own process.

> *Metacognition is related to knowing about a specific subject matter and to being able to evaluate that knowledge. Metacognition has to do with reflection and analysis. If metacognition is conceived as (knowledge of) a set of self-instructions for regulating task performance, then cognition is the vehicle of those self-instructions. These cognitive activities in turn are subject to metacognition, for instance, to ongoing monitoring and evaluation processes* (Veenman, Van Hout-Wolters, & Afflerbach, 2006, p. 6).

Thus, an evaluating process must be carried out every time that someone executes a task, in this way improvement can be reached.

There are various definitions of metacognition for example, "the knowledge and control children have

over their own thinking and learning activities" (Cross & Paris as cited in Lai, 2011, p. 5). The word "control" here implies that the learner knows how to handle knowledge. Also, when a student has control over his/her own learning there is no need for a teacher to tell him/her what tasks to do nor how to work. Another definition for metacognition is stated as follows.

> *Awareness of one's own thinking, awareness of the content of one's conceptions, an active monitoring of one's cognitive processes, an attempt to regulate one's cognitive processes in relationship to further learning, and an application of a set of heuristics as an effective device for helping people organize their methods of attack on problems in general.* (Hennessey as quoted in Lai, 2011, p. 5).

This quote, in addition to mentioning awareness, cites regulation. The regulation aspect has to do with planning, monitoring and evaluating the medium, strategy or tool by which a student learns. It means analyzing whether the learning process was adequate, pertinent, and effective and to replicate the same process with other topics or subjects.

Other authors mentioned that metacognition was originally referred to as the knowledge about and regulation of one's cognitive activities in the learning processes. Also, Flavell (1979) and Brown (1978)

as cited in (Veenman, Hout-Walters & Afflerbach, 2006) propose that metacognition is used as an umbrella term for aspects of metacognition: metacognitive beliefs, metacognitive awareness, metacognitive experiences, metacognitive knowledge, feeling of knowing, judgment of learning, theory of mind, metamemory, metacognitive skills, executives kills, higher- order skills, metacomponents, comprehension monitoring, learning strategies, heuristic strategies, and self-regulation.

Metacognition has also been addressed in research. For instance, a research study was carried out in Iran with EFL learners in which (Khonamri & Kojidi, 2011) studied the relationship between metacognitive awareness and reading strategies. The researchers, in this study, collected data by means of a think-aloud protocol analysis, error detection and retrospective questions in order to analyze students' monitoring skill. Here, monitoring of cognition has two components. "The *evaluation* of progress toward a cognitive goal, and the *regulation* of activities through the use of appropriate strategies. If a student is regulating his or her cognition, then he or she has already attempted to evaluate progress" (Khonamri & Kojidi, 2011, p. 100). These researchers proved that a student, who is metacognitive capable, is competent enough to know how to achieve learning objectives.

Another aspect to bear in mind, in relation to metacognition, is the difference between metacognitive knowledge and metacognitive skills. According to Veenman, et al. (2006), metacognitive knowledge is tied to the concept of what is right or wrong and cannot be easily changed. For example, a student applies the same learning activities whether they are effective or not. On the other hand, metacognitive skills are related to feedback; students are able to monitor their progress and plan future actions when a task is not performed effectively. More metacognitive knowledge is produced leading towards cognitive and intellectual enhancement and as a consequence a student can redefine and select only the activities that are useful for his/her learning.

Self-Regulation Skill

One of the components of metacognition is the self-regulation skill. Metacognition implies engaging in many mental processes that demand that a student be aware of his/her own learning, what is needed to learn and how to achieve learning goals. In a classroom there are different people and therefore different points of view, motivations and learning needs. It is a demanding task for a teacher to assess each apprentice in terms of their academic needs and capabilities. The self-regulation metacognitive skill can empower students by offering them the tools needed to recognize him/herself as a learner with different expectations and aptitudes. Self-regulated learning refers to "our ability to understand and control our learning environments. To do so, we must set goals, select strategies that help us achieve these goals, implement those strategies, and monitor our progress towards our goals" (Schraw, Crippen & Hartley, 2006, p. 111).

Self-Regulation can lead students towards improving their learning. Being a successful learner motivates the student to keep working, to learn more and to become autonomous. "Few students are fully self-regulated; however, those with better self-regulation skills typically learn more with less effort and report higher levels of academic satisfaction" (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000, as quoted in Schraw et al. 2006, p. 111). Satisfaction with learning is the ultimate goal for education. Those who feel satisfied with what they learn will work patiently and honestly and will persevere until they achieve their goals.

Self-regulation skills allow learners to focus on their objectives, to plan monitor and to evaluate the way they perform learning tasks. "Self-regulation refers to the degree individuals are metacognitively, motivationally and behaviorally active participants in their own learning process" (Zimmerman, 1989, as cited in Cubukcu, 2009, p. 54). From the self- regulation perspective,

students are not seen as passive recipients anymore. Self-regulation skills require that apprentices constantly inquire about their own knowledge and that they work on their weaknesses and enhance their strengths.

As mentioned previously, metacognitive students have a high probability of becoming successful students. Apprentices have a high percentage of responsibility for their learning. Self-regulation skills are the key components in achieving success. "Self-regulators are immediately identified in the classroom according to such criteria: they are self starters, they are confident, strategic and resourceful, they are self-reactive to task performance outcomes" Cubukcu, (2009, p. 54). Cubukcu (2009) goes on to state that one of the reasons why students fail is because of a lack of self-regulation. Hypothetically speaking, if students were aware of their self-regulation skills, everyone would have the possibility of achieving good scores and consequently learning more and learning better.

Some authors have emphasized that self-regulation implies knowing one's self as a learner. The learning needs, the strategies to apply, the goals proposed and the method to achieve learning are coherent enough to say that the self-regulated students will always achieve their learning objectives.

Students who are skillful at academic self-regulation understand their strengths and weaknesses as learners as well as the demands of the specific tasks. They approach learning with an assortment of strategies they might apply to achieve their goals and an understanding of when and how to implement their plan (Isaacson & Fujita, 2006, p. 55).

Self-regulated learners have the capability to modify their learning contexts. These students adjust their behavior, implement different resources and are able to recognize when their learning plan has to be revised. "Students' ability to monitor their learning is one of the key building blocks in self-regulated learning; students who are aware of the level of their mastery of material can adjust their study time and strategies" (Isaacson & Fujita, 2006, p. 40). The challenge for current classrooms is to work on making students aware and responsible for their own learning. Commitment and discipline are the key aspects to becoming a self-regulated learner.

Some researchers have worked on topics that involve the self-regulation metacognitive skill. Pineda (2004) carried out research about critical thinking in EFL classrooms with students in a private university in Bogotá (Colombia). The main theoretical constructs proposed in the study were: critical thinking, knowledge, interpretation, analysis,

inference, explanation, evaluation and self-regulation.

> *Self-regulation implies monitoring our own thinking processes. That is, constantly revising all elements used to achieve a task. The goal is to question, confirm, validate, and correct one's skills, how they were used, and the results obtained. Self-examination and self-correction are at the center of self-regulation.* (Pineda, 2004, p. 51).

In terms of self-regulation skills, Pineda (2004) concluded that students were able to monitor their learning. Her study emphasized that teachers play an important role for students who are becoming aware of self-regulation. In her research, Pineda (2004) informed students about self-regulation skills and explained to them the metacognitive model proposed by (Chamot, Barnhardt, Dinary & Robbins, 1999). In that sense, students understood the model, became familiar with it and knew what they were doing in their learning process.

Self-regulation is a skill that has to do with a different perspective of seeing learning. Learning moves from the passive role of expecting what to do, towards the learning that is meaningful, necessary and important. "Learning is viewed as an activity that students do for themselves in a proactive way rather than as a covert event that happens to them in reaction to teaching" (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 65).

Self-regulated students do not expect a teacher to assign chores, but they work on their own establishing their own goals and they get involved in a never ending improvement process. Following Zimmerman (2002), this improvement starts from becoming aware of one own weaknesses and strengths, also bearing in mind that everything can be changed or improved and so learning; the satisfaction for achieving goals motivates students to keep working.

Self-regulated learning is always effective. This learning adapts to different situations because students know themselves as learners thus allowing them to overcome metacognitive problems and to address their own experience of meaningful and more consistent ways of learning. "Because of their superior motivation and adaptive learning methods, self-regulated students are not only more likely to succeed academically, but to view their futures optimistically" (Zimmerman, 2002, p. 65). Another positive aspect of self-regulation is that the skills turn into lifetime long learning skills. Self-regulated students are more likely to succeed in their jobs, getting promotions or joining college program because of their passion. Self-regulated learners must fulfill some parameters:

> *(a) setting goals for oneself, (b) adopting strategies for attaining the goals, (c) monitoring performance for signs of progress, (d) restructuring one's physical*

and social context to make it compatible with one's goals, (e) managing time use efficiently,(f) self-evaluating one's methods, (g) attributing causation to results, and (h) adapting future methods. (Schunk & Zimmerman, as cited in Zimmerman (2002b, p. 65).

Self-regulation skills allow students to approach their classes from another perspective. Commonly, students are taught a series of topics that must be evaluated. Self- regulation skills allows pupils to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning, thus a teacher is not the only one that must guide the learning process. "Self-regulated learning assists students in managing their thoughts, behaviors, and emotions in order to successfully navigate their learning experiences. This process occurs when a student's purposeful actions and processes are directed towards the acquisition of information or skills" (Zumbrunn, Tadlock & Roberts, 2011, p. 4). When a learner follows a plan and when that plan is monitored, learning is effective. Students' learning experiences are vital in the self-regulation process, consequently when a student constantly evaluates his/her learning experience, it is easier for him/her to re-adequate learning.

Students' Learning Experience and Self-Regulation Skill

Students´ voices were heard by means of a survey and conversations.

The following section will present some excerpts of students' voices and its relation to the taxonomy provided by (Zimmerman, 2002) about self-regulation skills. This author emphasizes that the self-regulation skills must fulfill some aspects: (a) setting goals for oneself, (b) adopting strategies for attaining the goals, (c) monitoring performance for signs of progress, (d) restructuring one's physical and social context to make it compatible with one's goals, (e) managing time use efficiently, (f) self-evaluating one's methods, (g) attributing causation to results, and (h) adapting future methods.

To begin, the first aspect, (a) setting goals for oneself, was analyzed. Students' opinions were vital for analyzing the way in which students approached learning and its relationship to self-regulation: "Yes I propose myself to check if what I do for learning is really useful, if it really builds knowledge and leaves something in my learning process" (Student O). "Yes, for example, the last semester my objective was to improve my pronunciation" (Student Z). Then we have time, we extend and extend the moment to do it because I say: no, this is more important, or I have to do this for tomorrow I can meet my classmates later… well there are many things that happen before a deadline" (Student O).

You do what you must do first, when I organize a schedule, it is like: what do I have

to do for tomorrow, what do I have to do for the day after tomorrow… then you set your schedule and check your assignments, so depending on that you start working on your homework and because this one is for next week I can do it later because there are many more things to do (Student L).

Despite the fact that students argued to set their own goals, the apprentices did not support their comments. Students set goals for themselves, but the amount of assignments made them focus on some other tasks. Students seemed to extend their homework, giving priority to the ones that have to be done immediately.

The second aspect proposed by (Zimmerman, 2002) is (b) adopting strategies for attaining the goals. In relation to this aspect students mentioned the following: "I design mind maps, I write summaries and memorize concepts. The mind maps is the strategy that has had positive academic results, nevertheless when I memorize I cannot retain knowledge for much time, so I don't have good scores" (Student L). "I can mention that for me it is very important the help of my teachers and tutors, because I can enhance, understand and perfect my language level. Another aspect is that I can develop learning strategies to acquire knowledge" (Student O).

(What is done in class) is not enough because the students tend to do what is given in class

and no more, but in the spots in which they don't have class they will forget everything, if they do not apply that knowledge in a context… then is when it is very important to work independently to improve knowledge, for example in English (Student L).

Ones knows that something was learnt and knowledge also depends on what I did on my own, it is very different when you work in class than when what you do in class is enriched with some other things, then is when I realize that the (learning) process is different (Student M).

Students implied that they applied strategies for achieving their learning goals. A positive characteristic was that apprentices reflected upon what was done in class. They argued that the knowledge given is not enough and that extra class work is needed which means that students are aware of what they need to do to improve and to learn more. For the third aspect, (c) monitoring performance for signs of progress, students provided the following information:

I look for information in internet, books, or I look for people that can know about the topic. I evaluate my way of learning because I can know if what I am doing to study is useful or not in my learning process (Student O). *My learning process has been positive, because maybe, the results I have gotten are positive, because what I did and what I have done, maybe one can work harder, but it has*

to do with the motivation and that depends on each person (Student L).

I can say that my learning process has been good, but there are many more thing s to learn and to improve, I say this making a comparison between my school and my university. It is obvious that the two processes are different, but personally I have lived things that had impacted positively or negatively in my learning process at the university (Student O).

In the monitoring aspect, the students declared that when they do not understand a topic, they look for help. Also, student L, implicitly states that if she is not motivated she would not do anything in favor of her learning. In that sense, it can be inferred that the monitoring aspect is closely related to the feelings towards the class and to the empathy that apprentices feel towards the subject. Participant O stated that his past experiences as a learner impacted his attitude in relation to his learning in the university. The following aspect is (d) restructuring one's physical and social context to make it compatible with one's goals: "(To study I need to) have nice music, to be in a comfortable position and with enough illumination, to eat something before studying" (Student Z).

In the university I am discipline when I want, knowing people and being in a place that was unknown to me have influenced mi academic process, before I had not paid too

much attention to my learning process, but I have worked on finding the balance between my academic and personal life (hobbies, party); thus the responsibility I accepted to have when I joined to the university would not be affected (Student O).

It is interesting to note that some students actually need a specific kind of environment to study. Meanwhile, some other students look for an equilibrium between their academic responsibilities and their social life. At this point, students try to keep the behavior they had before joining the university in order for them to achieve their academic goals. Learning is personal so the place or the conditions that students want to have when studying is important. The following is a discussion of the aspect (e) managing time use efficiently.

More than time, I mean hours, is the quality of time, if I really focus on doing something and I work on it, I start by looking for information, or whatever I need to study, the quality of time that I invest for what I have to do is important to get a good result (Student Z).

Most of the times I take lot of time to study for exams or doing homework, for the presentations I try to read many times to avoid memorizing, because when I am presenting I feel nervous and my mind gets in blank (Student L).

Eventually you trust in yourself, because you say: well, I have a week to do this, so I

can wait until the last moment to do it. Or, one has, I don't know, in my case, or that frequently happens that I commit myself to do my homework from the day it was assigned, but because I have a week, I can wait a little, and maybe there is party or something like that, or maybe external things like a problem or something, then I give more important to those things in that moment, and when I realize, wow I have just one day or two… I am more worried about making the date rather than what I did (Student O).

The students displayed a difference between what they propose and what they do and despite setting their learning goals there is not enough time for them to work. Students give priority to the assignments they had to do right away and their time management is not appropriate. Unfortunately, students wait for the very last moment to finish their assignments. On the other hand, students are aware about their role as learners and as pre-service teachers so they know that their professional life won't be easy. Class preparation, grading, designing material, teachers' meetings are aspects that involve time management and dedication.

It seemed that time management is a problematic issue for students. In their comments they confessed to procrastinating. They mentioned that no matter how much time they had for their assignments, they completed their homework at the very last moment. A pedagogical reflection that can be made

from the previous assertion is that students eventually do their homework or that they study for an exam only for a grade. Another key aspect to think of is that if students would manage their time efficiently, they could be more successful in their cognitive and academic performance. Another aspect proposed by (Zimmerman, 2002) is (f) self-evaluating one's methods: "(I have good results) thanks to the resources that the languages school has, the classrooms are well equipped and those materials motivate that the learning process is good" (Student M).

Most of the times I perceive that there are some things that I do not understand, then I read slowly or I look for other information sources, and when in think I understood I realize that I am confused and that the topic is not clear to me, thus I will have a bad score in the exams (Student L).

A positive situation is that students recognize how helpful the material resources of their program are. Thus, they attribute their results to the usage of those resources. Also, the apprentices are capable of predicting what could happen if they just read or study without analyzing the material assigned by their teachers. Students evaluate their learning and if they do not understand a topic they look for resources or people. The next aspect is (g) attributing causation to results:

(The results) depend on the topic, if I see that it is going to be useful for me or that I like it a lot, then I study to learn, but if it is a grade that is the 60% of the final mark, then I study for the score (Student M).

I think that the theater has had an influence in my learning process at the university, I have understood the difference between doing thing because you want it and because you have to. Also, I have theater friends that study in the Math program and they can do everything well (Student Z).

As mentioned in a previous sample, students' results largely depend on the empathy they have for or the preferences for their teachers and the content of their subjects. Also, a curious aspect was related to what student Z mentioned. It seems, that for her, if their friends are able to perform theater plays and to study having good results in both activities, she can successfully act and study too. In that sense, competence can be perceived as the motivation to fulfill personal and academic demands. The final aspect is (h) adapting future methods.

I analyze the feedback provided by my teachers for next exams, teachers want that their students are efficient and competitive; he just wants to improve the knowledge that we have and correct the mistakes we can make in our path (Student M).

Generally, after finishing a term I evaluate how my process was, if I took advantage of time and if I have overcome my expectations.

Thus I realize about the things I must change and improve for the next term. However the problem is not to realize about the problems, but to do something to correct the problems (Student Y).

Students mentioned analyzing what they do to avoid mistakes in the future. Although this can be positive, the fact that they recognize that most of the time they do the assignments at the very last moment, this does not indicate that they tried to change their behavior. To conclude this section, students learning experience revealed positive and negative issues in terms of the self-regulation metacognitive skill. It is positive that students have studying habits and that they set goals. Also they mentioned that they reflected upon their overall progress and that they evaluated the way they studied.

In contrast, their learning experience at the university has led them towards thinking about improving their language level, but sometimes their personal context or social life interfered with what they wanted to, achieve as learners. Students realize that they had to improve many things, but also they asserted that they felt overwhelmed by assignments and that eventually they worked because of a grade to pass a course.

Another situation to think of is procrastination. Apprentices set priorities in terms of the assignments they had to do for a day or two and

extended working on the others. Students revealed that what work in class was not enough for them and they related the topics of the classes to their own lives to make knowledge more understandable. Also the interest in relating to a topic depended on how usable or practical it is for their lives; besides, for apprentices the way a teacher manages the topics is a variable in feeling interested in classes.

Conclusions and Pedagogical Implications

The big conclusion that can be inferred from this research is that students need to better organize their time. The samples obtained from the participants compared with the theory demonstrated that students set their learning goals, designed strategies, monitored their progress, adapted their physical context to feel comfortable when studying, evaluated their learning methods assessed their results based on what they did; unfortunately, these students mentioned not managing their time efficiently. Although time management is just one of the aspects proposed by Zimmerman (2002) it seems that if a student does not know how to manage his/her time, the self-regulation process fails.

Not only did students mention feeling overwhelmed by assignments, they did not invest their time in such a way that they could accomplish everything they had to do. A big implication that this study revealed was that sometimes some students gave more importance to their social life than to their academic responsibilities. They postponed their tasks and when time was running out they felt worried and worked for a grade and not for learning.

Finally, self-regulation is a skill, and as a skill, it must be practiced in order to be perfected. Somehow, apprentices revealed the reasons why some of them ask for extensions when turning in their assignments. Also, it does not matter how much time they have for doing their homework, their product does not demonstrate disciplined and thoughtful work. In that sense, it is difficult to teach a person to control his/her time. Realizing about what can be done right or wrong, also makes part of metacognition.

There are three pedagogical implications to analyze. First, students are aware of their role as learners. Also they asserted that becoming a teacher is a process and thus they are aware about it. They feel that, little by little, they are getting ready to face their professional life.

Second, self-regulation skills must be socialized with students for them to realize if they are self-regulated learners or not. Also, it is necessary to portray the outcomes that students can get when exercising the self-regulation skill.

Third, time management is a variable that interferes a lot in the

development of the self- regulation skills. Students did not have enough time to prepare for their assignments because of the amount of tasks they had to do overnight and also because they are used to procrastinating.

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