

“Let students take control!” Fostering learner autonomy in language learning: An experiment

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Abstract. Learner autonomy is an increasingly important aspect of higher education because it meets the needs of developing life-long, autonomous learners. However, cultural features and teachers’ misconceptions about their roles have led to less emphasis on autonomous learning and possibly a lower quality of higher education in Southeast Asian countries. It is identified that in order to foster learner autonomy in language learning in such educational contexts, teachers must be seen as a foremost factor because of the interdependence between teacher and learners (Little, 1995) and social cultural influences on teaching and learning in Southeast Asian countries. This research explores actual teaching practices relating to learner autonomy in order to gain a better understanding of teacher’s roles in fostering learner autonomy in language teaching and learning in Vietnam.

Key words: learner autonomy; Vietnam; EFL; teaching practices

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy in English-as-a-foreign language (EFL) education has received great interest from researchers in Europe (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991) and has been further researched and developed by Asian researchers in countries such as Hong Kong (Littlewood, 2007) and Japan (Aoki, 2001). This research recognizes the global trend of an increased approach to learner-centered pedagogy (Benson, 2007).

The benefits of fostering learner autonomy can be summarized into three major areas (Little, 1991). First, as the learner participates in setting the agenda, learning should be focused and purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term. Second, as responsibility for the learning process lies within the learner, the barriers between learning and living that are often found in traditional teacher-led educational structures should be minimized. Lastly, if there are no barriers between learning and living, learners should have little difficulty in transferring their capacity for autonomous behaviors to all other areas of their lives, and this may make them more useful members of society and more effective participants in the democratic process. Today, there is a growing trend to explore learner autonomy in foreign language contexts. The current research follows that trend with the specific purpose to explore teachers’ roles in fostering learner autonomy in Asian countries.

2. Conceptions of learner autonomy

The term ‘learner autonomy’ appeared the first time in the Council of Europe’s Modern Language Project in 1979 by Holec. This led to the publication of Holec’s 1981 seminal report (Holec, 1981), in which he defined learner autonomy as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (p. 3). In this definition, Holec treated learner autonomy as an attribute of the learner. Following this, various other definitions of learner autonomy have been used. For example, Wenden (1999) indicated the importance of metacognitive awareness when she claimed that true learner autonomy refers to how students reflect on their learning and how they are able to realize when they have effective learning opportunities. In another example, Littlewood (1996) took the notion of autonomy as ‘learners’ ability and willingness to make choices independently’ (p. 427). The current researcher believes that a different notion of learner autonomy which has both local and universal values is needed. In the current research, learner autonomy is defined as *learner’s willingness and ability to take responsibility to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning in tasks that are*

constructed in negotiation with and support from the teacher. There is a great interdependence between teacher and learners in this definition of learner autonomy. The role of the teacher is to give control to their students so that their students can become autonomous.

3. Eastern culture and educational constraints

Researchers (Ho & Crookal, 1995; Littlewood, 1999) indicate that Eastern learners, including Vietnamese learners, share the same traditional beliefs of relational hierarchy in the classrooms, where the roles of teachers and learners are rooted deeply in people's thinking. In these classes, students tend to be very passive and dependent upon their teachers for learning. Second, close to the Chinese respect for authority is the Chinese pre-occupation with 'face'. Face here refers to others' self-image and feelings. In communicating, it is very important for a Chinese person to protect the other person's self-image and feelings. For example, in the classroom, the students are not allowed to confront teachers directly. This would be disrespectful and cause the teacher to lose face. As a result, the majority of learners undergo the process of learning through recitation in which the teacher is the authority rather than a facilitator. Educational systems in Asian countries are considered as teacher-centered with traditional teaching methods widely utilized. Dang (2010) revealed that being strongly considered part of the Eastern culture, the popular philosophy of educational practices in Vietnam is more associated with absorbing and memorizing than experimenting and producing knowledge. Additionally, schools are formed in a structured way where the authority is not shared; individuality and creativity are less encouraged. As a result of this system, learners tend not to take responsibility for their own learning during their educational process. It is clear that teachers must be the person to give students control over their learning in such educational contexts.

However, Little (1991) stated that some teachers believed that the educational system in Asia is "so all-powerful and inflexible that autonomous learning can never happen" (p. 40). He suggested this is because of three misconceptions held by teachers. First, these teachers think that the syllabus is so powerful that it is supposed to determine everything that a teacher does in the classroom. In fact, a teacher has their own unique understanding of the syllabus. This means that their teaching cannot be identical to anyone else's. The second misconception is that the examinations are barriers to the development of learner autonomy because they determine the content of learning. But recently, the testing of language has focused more on skills rather than content which opens up the possibility for learner autonomy to be encouraged in the classroom. The third misconception is with the content of learning. Many teachers believe that there is a specific content that must be covered, certain things that must be taught. This concern originated from the traditional teaching methods. But the fact is "no amount of teaching has ever been able to guarantee learning, in second and foreign languages or any other subjects" (p. 42) so what can be taught can be flexible to meet learners' needs as well as the curriculum.

As discussed above, in order to be successful in implementing and reinforcing learner autonomy, teachers need to be aware of their role and responsibilities. This requires that teachers are willing to change and negotiate with their students in the classroom. In order to promote autonomous learning, teachers have to be prepared to accept their new role (Little, 1995). The following section presents an experiment of fostering learner autonomy in an EFL class in the Vietnamese educational context.

4. An experiment

The researcher has been working as a teacher of English in Vietnam for nearly ten years. She found that creating interesting lessons which can meet almost all students' needs in large classes and promoting active learning in the teaching-learning process poses a great challenge for even the most experienced English teachers. Therefore, she carried out a project called "Let students take control!" which aimed at stimulating students' interest in learning English and fostering their independent learning through peer-teaching.

In semester 1 of the school year 2009-2010, the researcher's teaching focused on grammar and vocabulary as test-oriented pedagogy. She thought if she followed the same way of teaching as she had done previously, that is, she designed the lessons including choosing activities and materials, it would take her a lot of time and it was possible that the class would have been very boring for students with little effective learning occurring. Therefore, she decided to change the program and the teaching-learning methods to a

more student-centered approach, which included scope for students to become autonomous learners. There were 6 units in the semester; each unit contained a grammar point and topic. At the beginning of the course, the researcher asked students to form 6 groups and each group chose a unit to teach to their peers according to the time-table of the class. The teaching groups decided all the objectives of the lesson, the activities, and materials to teach their own lesson. The teacher acted as a facilitator in the class. She observed that the class atmosphere was extremely exciting for her as a teacher and for the students. The students were totally engaged in the lessons and enjoyed the activities carried out by their classmates. All students were engaged in the activities. The project's results indicated that when the teacher gave students more chance to be involved in class decision making, they were more active and motivated to learn, which led to a better and higher quality of teaching and learning.

5. Conclusion

It can be concluded that the students' ability to behave autonomously depends on their teacher who is responsible to create an autonomous learning culture. In response to Little's (1991) three misconceptions, this teacher's understanding of the curriculum allowed her to make appropriate changes to promote learner autonomy without compromising the set syllabus for teaching and learning. Students were still obliged to write final exams but the new approach to pedagogy enhanced rather than detracted from their learning. And finally, students were allowed to take some control of the content and process for learning which was highly effective in helping them understand the content. In such social-culturally affected educational contexts such as Vietnam, the role of the teacher is first to understand their role in developing and delivering learner autonomy as a pedagogical approach and then to help their learners take control of their own learning.

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7. References

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