How Can We Best Encourage Our Students to be More Autonomous?

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Abstract

Autonomy has been one of the latest buzz words recently used in a number of academic arenas, especially in the context of English Language Teaching (ELT). With the increasing demand of English as an international language, academic scholars agree that some degree of autonomy is required in order to promote learners' active role in the process of effective language learning and teaching (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981; Smith, 2008). This article looks into how autonomy can be integrated and encouraged more in the tertiary context so that undergraduates can benefit from a self-directed learning approach and become more independent from their teachers. Most importantly, this can lead them in the direction of lifelong learning which, in the view of many,is the ultimate goal of higher education.

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Introduction

The arrival of the ASEAN Community in 2015 will bring with it a number of changes both economically and socially to other member countries as well as Thailand. English will play an even more important role as the lingua franca in these parts of Asia. The job market will become more competitive and increasing demands for English competency will be one of the tough requirements new graduates have to face. As speculated by Wiriyachitra (2002, p.4), "Thailand will lag behind in the competitive world of business, education, science and technology if the teaching and learning of English is not improved." This is supported by Baker (2008) in that Thai students have relatively low TOEFL scores in comparison with other countries in the same region.

At the tertiary level, what is demanded on language instructors is the fostering of autonomy in the learners and an implementation of the principle of continuous lifelong learning, an objective that has been proposed as one of the key policies in the Thai National Education Plan (Office of the Education Council, 2004). However, as pointed out by a number of key figures (e.g., Benson & Voller, 1997; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981), autonomous learning cannot be easily established as learners need some support in order to help them develop the skills and capabilities that are necessary for them to become autonomous, independent and self-directed in their language learning. It is believed that classroom teachers are the most appropriate people to assist students in this process (Lee, 1998).

This article begins with an exploration of the key term of "autonomy" in ELT. Next, it discusses the constraints of putting this idea into practice. After that, it lists what teachers can do more in their language classes to promote autonomous learning. The paper ends by stressing the emerging need for teachers to balance their roles as teacher and facilitator in helping learners to acquire autonomous skills, which is considered to be one of the ultimate goals to pursue both inside and outside the class at all levels, especially in higher education (Fazey and Fazey, 2001).

What Does "Autonomy" Involve?

In general, autonomy supports the active role leaners play in their learning and use of language inside as well as outside the classroom context. It is considered to be a valuable asset for achievement and is highly valued in education systems.

The concept of autonomy has been widely discussed in the field of ELT over the previous decades. The term has been coined from "individualization" to "learner independence" and finally to "learner autonomy" over a period of time (Smith, 2008). There have been major attempts to define autonomy in various studies on autonomy (Cotterall, 2008).

According to Gardner and Miller (1999), terms such as "autonomy" and "independent learning" are difficult to define for several reasons. This is due to the fact that different scholars often hold different views when defining them. Also, these concepts are still in a relatively early stage of development and finally, they may have developed independently in different geographical areas.

Henri Holec, who is one of the pioneering figures in autonomy, defines "autonomy" as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981, p. 3). The five aspects of learning include the abilities for learners to determine their learning objectives; define the contents and progressions; select methods and techniques to be used; monitor the procedure of acquisition; and evaluate what has been acquired.

Littlewood (1999) highlights two main features of learner autonomy which involve the learner taking responsibility for their own learning so that they can continue learning outside the classroom context and taking partial or total ownership of their own learning processes. Some of these processes draw some similarities as proposed by Holec (1981) in "deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods and evaluating progress" (Littlewood, p. 71).

Benson (2001, p. 46) defines autonomy as "the control of one's own learning." With regard to language learning, he suggests that learners are required to take control over their learning management, their mental process as well as the content of what is to be learned. As summed up by Benson (2003), it is generally accepted that the major skills involved for students to become autonomous learners include planning their own learning activities, monitoring their progress and evaluating their outcomes. Voller (1998) elaborates that autonomy should not be restricted "about learners making choice, it is about learners being successful too" (p. 3).

Scharle and Szabó (2000, p. 4) define autonomy as "the freedom and ability to manage one's own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well." According to Scharle and Szabó (2000), the terms *autonomy* and *responsibility* have a close relationship. Therefore, in order to foster learner autonomy, learners need to develop a sense of responsibility while taking an active role in making decisions about their own learning.

As can be seen from the definitions provided above, autonomy supports learners to take full control of their learning which can take place both inside and outside the classroom context. In application to the area of ELT, it reflects a gradual move from teacher-led classroom activities to a more learner-centered approach in which learners have the freedom to take more responsibility for their own learning.

Constraints Based on Cultural Influences

One of the constraints of putting autonomy into practice is that students of a particular cultural background might have different degrees of readiness for learner autonomy (Benson, 2001; Littlewood, 1999). As also confirmed by Yildrim (2012), "Cultural and educational settings of the instruction affect how the teachers and students perceive the concept of learner autonomy, and these differences in perception obviously affect how the ways to promote learner autonomy work" (p. 11).

Littlewood (1999) draws two distinctions between *proactive* and *reactive* autonomy. While the first type of autonomy goes in line with what has been proposed by Holec (1981), the latter is considered to be a preliminary step towards the first type of autonomy. To elaborate the difference between the two, Littlewood (1999, p. 75) points out that "once a direction has been initiated, [it] enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal."

The issue under cultural influences and individual difference specifically to East Asian learners also plays a role in the process of language learning and teaching. Five generalizations have been made as follows:

1.   Students will have a high level of reactive autonomy, both individually and in groups.

2.   Group of students will develop high levels of both reactive and proactive autonomy.

3.   Many students will have experienced few learning contexts which encourage them to execute them to individual proactive autonomy.

4.   East Asian students have the same capacity for autonomy as other learners.

5.   The language classroom can provide a favorable environment for developing the capacity for autonomy.

Littlewood (1999, pp. 87-88)

As suggested by Littlewood (1999), these generalizations about East Asian Learners can be viewed as *hypotheses* and *prediction* rather than *stereotypes* as they are a multifaceted reality that teachers may experience in class due to cultural influences as well as individual differences.

What Teachers Can Do in Language Classes

Ellis and Sinclair (1989, p. 1) state that helping learners to become autonomous has resulted in numerous benefits. Some of which include learners' abilities in taking more control of their own learning, learning inside and outside classroom contexts, and transferring learning strategies to other subjects.

Based on Ryan's findings (as cited in Littlewood, 1999, p. 75), learners need to be facilitated by their teachers in a number of ways, such as providing concrete support through assistance and resources as well as opportunities to make their own decision about learning.

Cultural background plays a crucial role and should not be disregarded while trying to implement learner autonomy as supported by studies and experts (e.g., Chan, 2001; Cotterall, 1995; Cotterall, 1999). As supported by Benson (2001, p. 55) "if we accept that autonomy takes different forms for different individuals… we may also need to accept that its manifestations will vary according to cultural context."

Based on the study carried out by Yildirim (2012) with four Indian English as a second language (ESL) learners' perceptions related to teacher and learner responsibilities in the language learning process, the researcher looked into three different aspects and entailed responsibilities of language learning process as follows: First, those where the teacher has more responsibility, such as correcting grammar mistakes of students, ensuring accuracy in the language, planning the language course, setting the objectives, etc. Second, those where the student has more responsibility which include deciding on what to learn outside class and evaluating what has been learned. Last, those where both the teacher and students share responsibility which consists of increasing students' interest in language learning and making sure students make progress during the language learning process.

Although Yildirim's (2012) study was carried out in the ESL context, some implications can be drawn and made applicable to the EFL context.When it comes to the methodological issues of learning, the participants perceive the teacher to have the greatest responsibility in planning and organizing the English lesson, which suggests that some of the students may not be quite ready for this sudden responsibility. Therefore, teachers need to create a more autonomous learning environment by gradually increasing the responsibility level put on their students. This reluctance may be due to learners' past learning habits and nota lack of interest in becoming an autonomous learner. As stated by Yildirim (2012, p. 27),

"… no matter what cultural background the students have, or no matter how big [the] responsibility they give to the teacher, there may still be some aspects of learning that the students are ready to share responsibility, or take more responsibility than the teacher. Teachers may identify those aspects with the help of simple surveys or classroom discussions, and use them as the starting points for promoting learner autonomy".

In formal language learning situations, Little (n.d.) emphasizes the fact that the key lies on the use of the target language in the classroom in order to monitor learner language use, which refers to the extent of what learners can *do* in the target language. The three classroom practices include learner involvement, learner reflection, and appropriate target language use (p.2). In order to accomplish the tasks successfully, the teachers are required to use the target language, involve learners through learning activities, and help them acquire the skills to become autonomous learners.

Benson (2003, pp. 294-296) also proposes some steps taken to foster autonomy in the classroom which include: (1) be actively involved in the students' learning; (2) provide a range of learning options and resources; (3) offer choices and decision making opportunities; (4) support the learners; and (5) encourage reflection. The application of these principles can vary according to the teaching and learning situation and the teacher's initiatives.

Conclusion

Clifford (1999, p. 115) indicates that if autonomous learning is to be encouraged in universities, some attitude changes of staff and students are required. For example, staff need to develop new concepts about teaching and learning and new skills while moving from the role of a knowledge expert to that of a resource person and facilitator. Meanwhile, students also need to develop new learning strategies in order to move away from being passive to become autonomous learners.

It can be seen that autonomy plays a vital role in language teaching. Autonomy can be promoted and developed among learners under appropriate learning situations and preparation. According to Benson (2001, p. 1), "if learners succeed in developing autonomy, they become better language learners." To Chan (2003, p. 34), the development of learner autonomy is considered to be "an essential goal of any learner training programmes."

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