In the Classroom/En classe

Fostering Learner Autonomy in an ESL Classroom

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This article reports on an action research project on ways and means of promoting learner autonomy in an ESL classroom. It focuses on the implementation of an autonomy-based English program with a group of first-year university students at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. The context and objective of this autonomy-based program are presented, classroom procedures and group learning tasks are described, and suggestions are provided for teachers to adapt these procedures and tasks to suit the needs of their particular students.

Introduction

A significant body of research about learner autonomy in language learning has indicated an ongoing interest in ways to help students learn autonomously (Holec, 1981, 1988; Riley, 1985; Dickinson, 1987, 1992; Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Little, 1991; Cotterall, 1995; Dam, 1995; Van Lier, 1996). Learner autonomy is regarded as an important educational goal, and the link between learner autonomy and effective learning inevitably has led to various pedagogical attempts in widely varying contexts to foster learner autonomy (Jones, 1995; Lee, 1997; Aoki & Smith, 1999).

Learner autonomy is a difficult concept to define as it carries multiple meanings with different interpretations of the autonomous self. The classic definition of autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3) and "a potential capacity to act in the learning situation" (Holec, 1981). Central to this definition is the concept of knowing *how* to learn. Autonomous learners need to make significant decisions about *what, how,* and *when* to learn (Van Lier, 1996). In the process, they establish a personal agenda for learning (Little, 1994) that sets up directions in the planning, pacing, monitoring, and evaluation of the learning process. Autonomous learners assume responsibility for their own learning in most, if not all, of the following ways: (a) setting their own learning goals, (b) identifying and developing learning strategies to achieve such goals, (c) developing study plans, (d) identifying and selecting relevant resources and support, and (e) evaluating their own progress.

Developing learner autonomy in a classroom requires a gradual move from teacher-centered or teacher-directed teaching to learner-centered or

learner-directed learning (Dam, 1995). Learner-centeredness provides a good basis for the development of learner autonomy. However, as an individual learner may be autonomous in one situation but not in another, teachers need to be aware of such differences to make informed choices about autonomous language programs.

Context and Objectives

Promoting learner autonomy requires teachers' time, effort, skill, and patience. It is especially difficult for teachers working in exam-driven contexts where the classroom is run in a formal and structured manner. The Hong Kong context is an example of a teaching and learning environment that many would regard as the antithesis of a context for promoting learner autonomy. The Hong Kong educational scene has long been regarded as one where independence and individuality are neither required, valued, nor nurtured (Biggs, 1987). Our students are often characterized as dependent, reticent, and passive (Pierson, 1996). They are perceived as being used to the tradition of teacher-centered and didactic learning modes. Therefore, developing learner autonomy appears to be something far-fetched or even impossible in the local context.

The classroom in this action research consisted of 15 first-year students enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts language course in contemporary English at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. As these language major students appeared to be more motivated than their peers majoring in other subject disciplines, I decided to carry out a case study of the group. The main objective was to explore the extent to which learner autonomy could be implemented in the tertiary language classroom.

Orientation to Procedures and Learning Tasks

Both the course design and the teaching approach were primarily learner-centered, with individual work alternating with group work to maximize student involvement and participation. The inclusion of group work in the course aimed at providing learning environments to promote interaction, negotiation, and collaborative learning among the different group members. In the group learning experience, students were expected to exercise the different responsibilities expected of an autonomous learner such as deciding what to cover, choosing what learning materials to use, and planning how to carry out learning assessment, as well as taking advantage of the group effect on the creativity and motivation of the group members. To facilitate the development of learner autonomy, a strong element of learner choice was incorporated in the various student-centered activities.

Briefing session

The first class was a teacher briefing session on the autonomous nature of the English program. This short introduction was aimed at orienting students to

the benefits of autonomous learning and the procedures of the autonomous learning approach, which students were expected to undertake. The primary objective of the course (i.e., to help students to develop autonomous learning skills) was explained, followed by a brief overview of the course agenda. The learning tasks included:
1. short talks and seminar discussions,
2. group presentations,
3. debates,
4. a newspaper project, and
5. student-teacher consultations.

The briefing session was concluded with group discussions about their learning preferences and expectations (see Appendix A). This pre-course learner input helped to inform the design, development, and implementation of the course and of the learning tasks.

Group Learning Tasks
Short talks and seminar discussions
The first student-centered task was the individual short talk. For this activity each student was required to give a short talk of 5-10 minutes on a topic of his or her choice. Students were provided with suggestions for possible topics (see Appendix B). They were also free to choose other topics related to their study or topics of general interest. The individual short talks helped to foster learner autonomy in several ways. First, students were made responsible for selecting their own topics in order to be relevant and interesting. They had to look for specific texts from different sources (e.g., newspapers, journals, Internet), which served as the basis of the talk.

An important aspect of the short talk was the subsequent 10-15-minute seminar discussion that involved the whole class. For this activity students worked in groups of five, one of them being the discussion leader. Each group was required to conduct a seminar discussion on issues related to the short talk. These discussion sessions were designed primarily to encourage exchange of views and to develop discussion and negotiation skills. More important, students were put in charge of the task (see Appendix C).

Group presentations
As students became more familiar with the collaborative learning mode, they were introduced to the more challenging task of the group presentations.

For this activity students worked in small groups of three (see Appendix D). As in the short talks, the presentation topics were chosen by the students. In small groups the class first discussed the nature and purpose of oral presentations and identified some of the key characteristics of effective presentations. In planning and researching for the presentations, the different groups held focused discussions on various issues such as (a) focus and rationale of the presentation, (b) kind of research to be undertaken and

reference sources to be consulted (e.g., newspapers, journals, Internet), (c) structure of the presentation, (d) distribution of work among team members, (e) use of audiovisual aids, and (f) assessment criteria (e.g., content, delivery).

To prepare for the presentations, students practiced the skills of planning and organizing. Asking the class to devise their own assessment criteria was intended to raise their awareness of the criteria required for evaluating the talks. The student-generated evaluative checklist (see Appendix E) would help the audience give focused comments on the quality of their classmates' presentations (see Appendix F). To encourage reflection at the end of the presentations, there was a whole-class review of individual learning experiences in groups (see Appendix G). Below are some typical examples of learners' responses to the group presentation exercise.

> *Student A*: The group presentation is an unforgettable experience for most of us. It is mainly because of the effort and time that we have put in.
> *Student B*: I really like the way that we are learning right now.... I have decided to have a change, a good change.
> *Student C*: From this experience, I have learned how to solve problems by myself.
> *Student D*: The result may not be as good because we didn't have the experience, but we did prepare well.
> *Student E*: At first, I didn't know what exactly you wanted us to do.... But we promise that we would be more independent from now on.

Such feedback suggested a generally positive experience in this group activity. It also helped me better understand my students' capacity to learn autonomously and the problems that they had encountered in the process.

Debates
Group debating (see Appendix H) was another student-centered activity to enhance learner autonomy. This time the class was divided into three debating teams of five students, one being the team captain. The class drew up a list of possible debate motions, deriving principally from their current academic concerns. Next, three debate motions were selected. Students then drew lots to decide on which side (the affirmative or negative) they would be. Each debate team held focused discussions (both in and out of class) on the various aspects of the debate ranging from developing the main line of argument to apportioning responsibility among individuals for researching particular aspects.

As in the other group activities, the debate embodied a learning evaluation element. The class had to design their own assessment criteria for evaluation.

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The group that was not taking part in the debate served as the panel of adjudicators. Their main task was to give constructive feedback on the two teams' performance, using the criteria that had been set (see Appendix I).

Newspaper project
A newspaper project (see Appendix J) marked the final step in the development of learner autonomy. This time students worked collaboratively in three editorial groups to produce a class newspaper. Each editorial group was responsible for a number of tasks. These included (a) deciding what text types to include, (b) drafting and revising the texts, (c) reading one another's drafts to help improve them, and (d) doing the final editing and design of the newspaper.

To manage and monitor the project, students were required to hold editorial meetings (both in and out of class) to plan and discuss progress.

One important aspect of the newspaper project was text analysis. Each group selected two text types from authentic newspapers to analyze and to present to the class. The chosen text types could range from commentaries to advertisements depending on the preferences of the individual group. These 30-minute group presentations on the chosen text types served several purposes. First, they aimed at raising the awareness of the presenting groups (and the audience) of the characteristic features (e.g., content, style, tone) of the text types that had been studied. Second, through the presentations it was hoped that students would better understand the purposes, the intended audience, and the macrostructure of the range of texts in a newspaper. And it was hoped that such knowledge would help students write their own texts more effectively.

Again, to encourage learning evaluation (and revision of writing), students were asked to exchange their drafts for peer comment. To help individual writers read each other's texts critically, students developed a set of criteria in the form of completion prompts (see Appendix K).

Student-teacher consultations
Student-teacher consultations were held in mid-semester. These were 30-minute consultation sessions between myself and each individual student. To give them a greater sense of purpose and responsibility, students were put in charge of the discussion. They set the agenda, and they had to come prepared, ready to talk about areas of major concern (e.g., usefulness and relevance of the course, problems with learning tasks). A set of questions was provided to guide the discussion (see Appendix L).

Suggestions for Organizing an Autonomous Classroom
In order to foster learner autonomy in the tertiary classroom, a number of areas need to be addressed. The following reflections, I hope, will provide

useful suggestions for teachers who wish to teach to enhance learner autonomy.

Progression of task complexity
Learning autonomously is a skill that takes time to master. Therefore, in any autonomous-based language program, it is important for the teacher to begin with the more structured tasks before moving on to the more difficult ones. Short talks such as those described above may be a good basis to raise students' confidence and motivation. Such group activity helps to provide a collaborative learning environment for students to interact with one another. As students are provided the chance to initiate and make decisions, it gives them a greater sense of responsibility. Only when individual students feel that they can learn autonomously in small ways (such as giving short talks and conducting group discussions confidently) can fuller learner autonomy be achieved at later stages.

When students feel more comfortable with the collaboration learning mode, they can be introduced to the more challenging tasks such as the group presentations, debates, and the newspaper project described above. These tasks are progressively more challenging as they raise the level at which students need to make decisions, helping them to move a step closer to learner autonomy.

The teacher's role
The teacher plays an important role in the autonomous classroom. In the above case study my continuous methodological preparation and guidance proved indispensable. For example, my students generally tended to attempt topic areas that were either too broad or too narrow for their short talks or group presentations. Part of my role was to check that the framework was sound and to offer advice, if necessary, for its modification. During the process I also became more aware of their needs and problems. For example, in the group presentations one group commented that they were uncertain about how to go about the task. This highlighted the importance of making explicit at the outset the objective of any autonomous learning exercise, its benefits, and its demands on the learners.

Peer assessment
Peer evaluation constitutes an essential follow-up activity in the autonomous classroom. It allows students to contribute to the assessment process, as the teacher is no longer the sole judge. Peer feedback is also beneficial to the individual student. It adds a more personal dimension to the whole assessment process and helps individual students develop expertise in reflection, self-assessment, and evaluation. In this way, it is hoped that they will be able to assess the extent of their own learning more effectively.

Evaluation can be done in pairs, in groups, or with the whole class, depending on the demands of the task in question. It could also focus on specific areas such as (a) objectives of the task, (b) classroom interaction, (c) relevance and usefulness of learning materials and activities, and (d) learning outcomes. Evaluation forms can be selected or developed (see Appendixes). If students develop their own evaluation forms, they will become more aware of the criteria required for evaluating different task types and thus the essential elements that contribute to effective outcomes.

The above action research concludes that learner autonomy is an achievable goal, even in settings that seem to discourage the acquisition of autonomy. Given an appropriate syllabus, instructional design, and teacher guidance, autonomous learning can be an interesting and rewarding experience for ESL students.

The Author

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Appendix A: Student Preferences and Expectations

In pairs, discuss the following questions:

1. In the English class, do you like:
   - individual/pair/group work?
   - doing student-centered tasks/activities?
   - taking part in discussions?
   - answering questions from the teacher or classmates?
   - making your own decisions?
   - designing class activities?
   - choosing your own materials?
2. What was your last English class like? What were the best and worst aspects?
3. What do you expect from this language course?

Appendix B: Topics for Short Talks

Give a short talk (5-10 minutes) on *one* of the following topics:
   - The major benefits of tertiary education
   - Your university English course
   - The English learning attitudes/successes/problems of students in Hong Kong
   - Chinese and western culture
   - Dreams/Fashion/Music
   - The modern youth
   - Pornography and violence in children's comics
   - The popularity of video game centers
   - Stress management
   - Working mothers

Appendix C: Contributing to Seminar Discussions

   - Did you enjoy the discussion? (Why/Why not?)
   - Did you contribute any ideas? (Why/Why not?)
   - Did you encourage your classmates to contribute ideas? (Why/Why not?)
   - Is there anything that you can do as an individual to make the discussion more successful (e.g., volunteering answers)?
   - Which discussion sessions did you enjoy most? Why?

Appendix D: Preparing Group Presentations

Form groups of three. You are required to investigate an area of the English language, which you find most interesting and follow it through with research on the topic. The group then will give a 30-minute presentation on your findings.

Topics

For example, you may choose to look at interesting idioms in English or the differences between English and American English. Alternatively, you may find it more productive to analyze language use in advertising and public notices, or another topic of your choice.

Research

The information you collect must come from different sources such as books, magazines, newspapers and the Internet. In your talk, you have to produce some material evidence of having undertaken some serious research.

Consult your teacher for the suitability and relevance of the topic and the materials used before proceeding to prepare for the talk.

Visual aids

You should include suitable visual aids (e.g., an accompanying poster) for the talk to raise audience interest and understanding.

Assessment criteria

The whole class is required to devise your own set of assessment criteria to be used for the evaluation of your own and your classmates' presentations.

Appendix E: Checklist for Observing Group Presentations

Content
- Suitability for audience
- Clarity of purpose
- Background information

Organization
- Overall structure
- Sections logically arranged
- Effective introduction
- Effective conclusion

Delivery
- Pace
- Fluency
- Smooth transitions
- Pronunciation
- Accuracy

Nonverbal techniques
- Effective use of visual aids
- Eye contact
- Confidence

Appendix F: Evaluating Group Presentations

- Which group presentation did you enjoy most? Why?
- Were the presentations as interesting as they could be? (If not, what suggestions would you give individual groups for future improvement?)
- Did the various groups know their facts? (If not, what were the problems?)
- Did you learn something new about the topics? Give examples of the most interesting/useful information that was given.
- Were the key points clearly explained? Give examples.
- How do you feel about the presentation style in general?

- Was the transition from one speaker to the next always clear and smooth? (If not, how could the group improve?)
- How well did the various groups respond to the audience questions and comments?

Appendix G: Evaluating Learning in Groups
- How much time did you and your group spend on this task?
- Were there any problems finding the necessary and/or relevant materials? If so, what were the problems? How did you (your group) resolve them?
- Was the task successfully completed? (Why/Why not?)
- Did the group collaborate well ? (If not, why?)
- Was the teacher input adequate? (If not, what further support was necessary?)
- What skills (e.g., critical thinking) do you think you have practiced ?
- Can you use these skills confidently from now on? (If not, explain why not).
- What other skills do you expect to learn for the next task?
- Do you like this kind of task-based, autonomous learning approach? (Why? Why not?)

Appendix H: Preparing Debates
The class is to be divided into three groups. You should brainstorm ideas for possible debate motions. Then draw lot to decide which motion to work on and which side (affirmative/negative) each group will take.

Each debate team is required to plan for the debate. This includes working out the main line of argument and supporting evidence (both for and against the motion). The observing group (i.e., the team that is not taking part in the debate) will serve as the adjudicator. At the end of each debate, the observing group will give comment on individual debater's performance and the overall effectiveness of the speeches.

Guidelines on preparing your speech
You should take note of the following when planning your speech:

(a) Structure
- Your speech should have a beginning, a middle, and an end. The points you make should follow logically and smoothly from one to the next. Try to finish with a strong conclusion
- The opening sentence is very important. Try to engage the listener's attention by making it interesting

(b) Content/organization
- Define and explain key terms
- Organize your thoughts around a few main points and deliver them clearly
- Cite up-to-date facts and evidence to support key points
- Anticipate opposing arguments, and try to counter argue them

(c) Language
- Be specific (Avoid long, involved sentences. Remember: Your listeners do not have a text to read in front of them)

- Don't be dogmatic, moralistic, or pompous

(d) Relating to the audience
- Appeal to your listeners (e.g., by identifying with their beliefs, needs, and experiences)
- Encourage audience participation (e.g., by asking them a few questions)

Appendix I: Evaluating Debates

Now that you have done your debates, the following questions will help you to evaluate one another's performance. Discuss with several other classmates your reactions, and make suggestions for improvement. Then, report to the rest of the class the group opinions.
- How did you feel when presenting your argument (e.g., interested, nervous)?
- Have you (the group) prepared well?
- Was the talk forceful enough?
- Was the opening clear enough?
- Did you (the group) clarify the motion?
- Did you (the group) define key terms appropriately?
- Was the content relevant/complete?
- Was there evidence of good research?
- Was the argument easy to follow? Was it well supported?
- Did you (the group) pick up on the opposition's argument effectively?
- How well did you (the group) handle questions from the floor?
- How well did you (the group) summarize what had been said? Were the points drawn together effectively at the end?
- Did you (the group) set a good pace?

Appendix J: Preparing a Newspaper Project

For this task, the class is required to produce a class newspaper.

You should form groups of five. From authentic newspaper(s), each group will choose two text types to analyze. You have to research into the features and styles of the chosen texts and collect authentic examples to present to the class. The group presentation should last about 20-30 minutes (with time allowed for questions from the floor).

The group presentations
The presentations should focus on the following areas:
- Typical content (i.e., what generally about)
- Style/tone (e.g., persuasive, serious, objective, biased)
- Recurrent language features (e.g., typical grammatical features/vocabulary/collocations and stylistic devices/textual organization/information structure)
- Language of headlines
- Layout (e.g., shape of text, use of fonts, headings)
- Punctuation

Appendix K: Peer Feedback on Newspaper Drafts

(a) Devise your own set of criteria to evaluate one another's presentations.

(b) Work in pairs. Read your classmate's draft newspaper text and give comment on the following areas:
- The best part of this article is …
- I find the content quite …
- I particularly like the part on …
  But, the part on … can be developed further.
  Perhaps, you could …
- I am not sure what you've said about …
- It seems that you are not quite sure about the use of …(Give examples of specific language problems here)
- My final comments are … (e.g., content, organization, register, vocabulary)

Appendix L: Questions for Student-Teacher Consultations
- What aspects of the course (e.g., activities, materials) do you find most useful? What are the less useful aspects?
- Do you want to do more student-centered/student-generated activities? (Why? Why not?)
- Has the course helped you to learn autonomously? How autonomous do you think you are now?
- What in your own opinion are the factors that facilitate the development of learner autonomy? What are the factors that constrain it?