

Fostering Autonomy in EFL Cross-Cultural Distance Learning

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The Korea-Waseda Cross-Cultural Distance Learning Project (KWCCDLP) is an endeavor to promote awareness of linguistic and cultural differences of speakers from different backgrounds through the medium of English. The project fully utilizes a student-centered approach to learning where learners are the agents. This project aimed at university level students is unique in its promotion of autonomy both in and outside of the classroom. Here, a case study of a joint course between a Korean and Japanese university is presented as a model for autonomous long-distance learning. The various activities that comprise the course are presented and how they instill responsibility in learners is discussed. Relevant examples show that activities catering to the learner's interests are effective in lowering anxiety and enabling learners to focus on meaningful interaction instead of grammatical accuracy. In addition, the activities show that autonomy is achieved through collaboration and scaffolding provided by peers. Once the course is over, students maintain and retain relationships with each other which results in continuous, meaningful interaction in naturalistic (as opposed to the formal learning context of the course) contexts.

Key Words: EFL, autonomy, distance learning, collaborative learning

1 Introduction

Korea and other East Asian countries are often referred to as collectivist societies in contrast to an individualistic society such as the United States (Kashimay, et al., 1995; Rhee, Uleman, & Lee, 1996). Collectivism presupposes interdependence and communalism (Kashima et al., 1995), in turn fostering reliance on others. Collectivism is ingrained in the Korean language as seen in the commonly discussed use of collective pronouns such as *uri* 'we' as opposed to *na* 'I.' When these pronouns are used in English, although not a grammatical error, such use presupposes collectivism and may result in what would be considered pragmatically inappropriate use of language in a culture that tends to focus more on the self (e.g., *our* school vs. *my* school). In language learning, collectivism and individualism lead to differential orientations, responses, and manifestations of the self as a learner (Littlewood, 2001, p. 5). Although it may be difficult to apply the 'Western' idea of autonomy to 'non-Western' learners (Benson, Chik, & Lim, 2003, p. 23) autonomy should be considered a universal trait that can be tailored to specific needs of a

specific culture.

Collectivism is reflected in the educational culture of a society. One issue concerning English learning in Korea that is tangentially related to collectivism is an overreliance on private sector instruction. Private institutions are burgeoning with their quick-fix remedies and promises to compensate for the shortcomings of public school education. The conundrum being that oftentimes private sector education does not offer higher quality education that has substance nor sustenance. The real motivation behind private institutions—making a profit—is veiled. The private sector plays upon the fear of parents of their children falling behind or being deprived of what others have. Upon entering higher education, these children continue to rely on external sources for English education instead of relying on themselves. In this light, collective learning is erroneously considered a safe haven—one is part of a crowd. This reliance on other-driven collective learning undermines what can be accomplished autonomously by the learner. The freedom of being able to learn at one's own pace and one's own liking should be considered a joy and not a fear.

Promoting autonomy seems to be often overlooked or considered an afterthought in English education in an EFL context although it is of vital importance since there is little exposure to the target language. It is difficult to learn a language based on the sheer quantity and quality of instruction found within the four walls of a classroom. Continuous self-driven learning that is motivated from within can make a world of difference. Challenges of autonomy come from within the learner him/herself and from the teacher (Richard-Amato, 2003, p. 87). The learner is daunted by being the agent (i.e., doer) of learning (Harmer, 2007, p. 394; Reinders & Cotterall, 2001, p. 23). S/he is often bewildered with where to start and how to deal with independence. This is where the classroom and the teacher can step in and prod learners (Little, 1995). Merely talking about the benefits of autonomy does not suffice. Instead, autonomy has to become a learning-related lifestyle that stems from awareness of learning that the teacher can instill in learners. Empowering students by making them the agent can be achieved through student-centered activities.

The Korea-Waseda Cross-Cultural Distance Learning Project (KWCCDLP) is one endeavor in an EFL setting to transfer responsibility from the teacher to the learner. Since its inception in 1999, the project has developed several instructional methods where the teacher serves as a facilitator. Technology is utilized to bridge physical distance between learners who live apart and are from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. In a region where English will be most likely used as a communication tool between non-native speakers of different backgrounds, the KWCCDLP attempts to provide a springboard for continuous and autonomous learning that extends beyond the reaches of the classroom.

The purpose of this paper is thus to describe one particular course in the KWCCDLP and how it implements various activities in promoting autonomous learning inside and outside of the classroom. In the course, learners are engaged in topic-based learning coupled with personal interests and practical concerns (Shao & Wu, 2007, p. 97) with a cross-cultural twist. Relevant examples show that students

handle responsibility well if given the opportunity and provided with guidance. Due to the nature of the course, students are able to form and maintain relationships outside of the classroom to continue engaging in meaningful interaction in a non-classroom context.

2 Tasks and Activities in the KWCCDLP

This section introduces the tasks and activities that have been implemented in the *Global English through Internet* course offered at K University in Korea and how they have fostered learner autonomy. This was a joint course held with W University in Japan. The course was held in real time through an internet connection which enabled videoconferencing. First general aspects of the course are briefly mentioned and then activities which promote particular language skills are presented. All of the examples and extracts are taken from the course which was taught in the spring semester of 2008.¹ The examples all focus on the topic of “diet.”

General

Participation

Participation was the major evaluation criterion of the course. Students were told they would not be assessed according to their English ability but on the basis of active participation. This considerably lowered the students’ anxiety and enabled them to concentrate on sustaining interaction rather than on grammatical errors. Emphasis was placed on making an effort to avoid communication breakdown and to make one’s self understood and to understand others. This requirement of participation also prompted students to speak during the live sessions with W University.

Topic Selection

One integral aspect of learner autonomy is the placement of responsibility on the learner. In the course, students were responsible for the selection of presentation/discussion topics. Students in groups nominated potential topics they were interested in and which had a cross-cultural perspective. The nominated topics were then voted on so that high-interest topics were selected. Student selection of topics was considered important in ensuring active participation and so that students could talk about topics that were meaningful and relevant to their immediate lives. The list of topics for the spring semester of 2008 was as follows:

(1) Topics

street food, subculture, men vs. women, diet, smoking, global warming,
dating

¹ Grammatical errors were not corrected in the students’ examples. However, spelling and punctuation were corrected to facilitate reading.

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Speaking

Speaking was realized through prepared speech in topic presentations, spontaneous speech in the whole class discussions, and in oral chat sessions.

Presentations

Students formed groups of 3-4 members and prepared presentations of the designated topic for the week's class. The presentations were allotted approximately 20 minutes and were intended to give an overview and respective cultural standpoints of the topic. Groups were required to prepare a PowerPoint slide presentation. The last slide of the presentation included discussion questions which could offer cross-cultural discussion on the topic at hand.

(2) PowerPoint presentation sample – Korean



Ok Joo Hyun

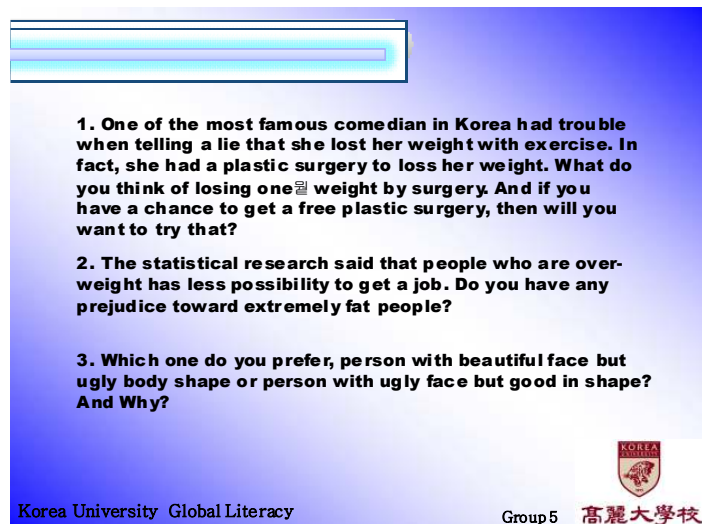


Yo ga

Korea University Global Literacy

Group 5 高麗大學校

This slide features a blue background with a white title bar at the top. The name 'Ok Joo Hyun' is written in black text. Below the name are four small square photos of her in various outfits, a larger photo of her in a white lace top, and a photo of her in a blue tank top performing a yoga pose. A blue arrow points from the photos to the yoga photo. The text 'Yo ga' is written below the photos. The slide includes the Korea University Global Literacy logo and 'Group 5 高麗大學校' at the bottom.



1. One of the most famous comedian in Korea had trouble when telling a lie that she lost her weight with exercise. In fact, she had a plastic surgery to loss her weight. What do you think of losing one's weight by surgery. And if you have a chance to get a free plastic surgery, then will you want to try that?

2. The statistical research said that people who are overweight has less possibility to get a job. Do you have any prejudice toward extremely fat people?

3. Which one do you prefer, person with beautiful face but ugly body shape or person with ugly face but good in shape? And Why?

Korea University Global Literacy

Group 5 高麗大學校

This slide features a blue background with a white title bar at the top. It contains three numbered discussion questions in black text. The slide includes the Korea University Global Literacy logo and 'Group 5 高麗大學校' at the bottom.

The Korean group presented about dieting in the Korean media by providing examples of various celebrities and the ways they diet.² The first slide in (2) shows a well-known celebrity who did yoga to lose weight. Such celebrities set diet fads in Korea so this was a pertinent example of Korean culture. The next slide in (2) shows the discussion questions the group prepared. For example, the first question mentions a celebrity scandal where the celebrity lied about how she lost weight. The other questions also attempt to elicit the Japanese students' opinions.

Samples from the Japanese group's presentation slides are seen in (3).

(3) PowerPoint presentation sample - Japanese

We're on diet but we can eat ♪




**“Lose weight
or
Lose body fat”
“Tighten body-line**

Diet can be mostly anything as long as the person think it's diet

The Definition IN JAPANESE

TODAY'S CONTENTS

JAPANESE METHODS FOR DIET



Aesthetic Salons







EXERCISE



FOOD

² There were several non-Korean students in the course, mainly from Malaysia. The use of “Korean” hereafter implies the Korean side including non-Korean students.

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The first slide followed a slide provided a general definition of the word “diet.” This slide shows the Japanese interpretation of the word. The second slide in (3) shows various methods that Japanese employ to lose weight, which aptly indicated cultural differences from Korean culture.

Class discussion

Another spoken component of the course was the whole class discussions. These discussions stemmed from the discussion questions prepared by the groups which gave presentations. In the whole class discussions, the instructors from both the Korean and Japanese sides served as discussion facilitators and encouraged students to speak. (4) is an excerpt from the whole class discussion.

(4) Excerpt from whole class discussion

Participants: KI = Korean instructor, K students = several students simultaneously, K1~6 = Korean, J1~2 = Japanese

K1: First discussion question. One of the most famous comedian in Korea had a trouble when telling a lie that she lost her weight with exercise. In fact, she had plastic surgery to lose her weight. What do you think of losing one's weight by surgery? And if you have a chance to get a free plastic surgery, then will you want to try that?

KI: What do you think?

K2: If I am going to become thinner (singer?), probably, maybe I will. If I'm just gonna be like... maybe.

KI: Okay, so what do you think about this question? If you have chance, would you do plastic surgery? Would you get surgery for weight reduction?

K2: Yes. It's free.

J1: I think I wouldn't do free plastic surgery. 'cause I personally think plastic surgery is kind of scary. 'cuase you have to... I don't know how you do but you have to cut somewhere. (exercising is better even though I am lazy to do that... - blurred, weak signal) so I wouldn't try it.

J2: I have a question, questions about, I think, there is a celebrity... and people knew that she had plastic surgery to lose her weight, to get more beauty. I think, in Japan, it also happens, it's gonna be, kind of big problem. Media's gonna broadcast it, news and magazine will point it out and I wonder why that's happen. Why do you people like point people in the back, when they have, when they knew that someone had plastic surgery.

KP: Right. If you have plastic surgery, why do you have to, you know, talk about them behind her back?

K3: I think, to me, plastic surgery is not big deal in modern days, it's just like having your cars or bikes modified. And if it makes you feel better, so not be a problem. It's just a little modification to body, that's it.

K4: Public people, because they can make a trend or.. and nowadays, people usually want to see the natural beauty more than plastic surgery. or social pressure or social condition is not very accepting the plastic

surgery like stars, kind of like. Usually people say that they had a natural beauty, but afterwards it is revealed they had the plastic surgery and you get to not like them like that. I think that social condition and the trend is the reason.

J1: I have a question. Did the comedian who got surgery become famous, I mean is she popular?

K students: Yes. She is now. She was. She was. Nowadays... she...

KI: But did it make difference? Her question was, did it make difference that she got plastic surgery and lost her weight. Did it make any difference?

K5: I think so.

KI: Did she get more popular because she lost weight?

K5: Because of losing weight?

KI: Yeah.

K5: Yeah. Just because of losing weight, she became more popular.

K6: But, but she told a lie.

K Students: Yes that was the problem.

K5: Yeah. That was a problem. Because she lied.

...

(4) shows that students were reciprocally asking questions and building upon each other's utterances. The Korean instructor prompted dialogue and clarified questions through paraphrase and elaboration.

Oral chat

An additional speaking-oriented activity was the inclusion of online chat in the course. Students were required to chat in groups consisting of a mixture of 3-4 Korean and Japanese students. The chat sessions were topically organized around the designated discussion topics for the course. Through online chat, students were able to further extend the whole class discussion individually and autonomously. They could reflect on the class sessions to determine what strands of the topic were worth pursuing further. They were also able to ask questions related to their own interests and to state their opinions and personal views in a more concrete way. (5) is a transcription of part of an oral chat session on the topic of 'diet.'

(5) Oral chat session

Participants: K1, K2, K3, J1, J2, J3

...

K1: Do you feel full after eating a diet, like calorie bar?

K2: Calorie Mate? That's so small I mean.

K1: I know, but I want to know what they think.

K2: Ah okay.

K1: Do you think? Do you guys, is it enough for you guys? After eating it, a calorie bar, can you just cope with that eating without, anything else?

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K2: So, that's for meal, right?

K1: Yes of course yes they don't eat anything else, but a calorie bar. Do you think it's enough?

J3: No...

K1: No? Yukari, What do you think? Do you think it's enough?

J2: It's enough...?

...

As seen from (5), K1 is introducing the concept of meal bars. K2 adds on to the topic by referring to a particular brand and the size of the bar. K1 and K2 then attempt to elicit J2 and J3's opinion about meal bars and whether they think it suffices as an alternative to a regular meal. Thus, interaction is self-initiated by the students and it is up to them to carry out the conversation.

Listening

Although listening naturally occurred in tandem with speaking, the course provided students with exposure to academic listening in the form of lectures. Students listened to and watched on-demand videos of lectures about different varieties of English such as Korean English, Japanese English, and Malaysian English. The videos focused on characteristics of the varieties and on the influence of the particular native language on English language use including accents. The intention of the videos was make students aware of the concept of World Englishes and how English—in its various forms—is used as a medium of communication. This component also prompted reflection about the learner's own variety of English and what difficulties could be anticipated in cross-cultural communication.

Reading

A reading component was included so students could build up schema for the discussion topics. The readings were authentic in nature since they were not simplified from the original sources in any way. The groups (i.e., Korean and Japanese) designated to present on a particular topic were also responsible for the selection of two readings. The following are examples of the background reading from both the Korean and Japanese sides for the topic of 'diet.'

(6) Reading-Korean

Originally diet means “a plan to eat only particular types or amounts of food, especially because you want to get thinner or because you have a health problem”. But the meaning of diet for Japanese is somewhat different from it. When you hear ‘I want to go on diet’ in Japan, he/she just wants to lose weight. So for Japanese people, diet does not necessary mean a plan of eating but indicates all means to lose weight. Today, obese child is increasing year after year. Not only because they eat a lot of high-calorie food, but also the lack of exercise because of TV games and cram schools that end late in the night, causing children to eat at late hours which is one reason to obesity. Obesity increases the risk of lifestyle diseases and a variety of bad problems. In Japan,

metabolic syndrome medical examination started this year in April. Metabolic syndrome is a combination of medical disorders that increase the risk of developing cardiovascular and diabetes. So obesity obviously influences health. Government predicts that the cost of health insurance will increase in the future. So governments decided that people who are 40~74 years should get medical examination. Now many people start to care about their health and they start to go on a diet...

As can be seen from (6) the Korean students attempted to provide a general description of the topic dieting and selected a reading that reflected this goal.

(7) Reading-Japanese

Diet Mistakes: 6 Reasons You're Not Losing Weight

These common dieting pitfalls can sabotage weight loss.

By Kathleen M. Zelman, MPH, RD, LD

WebMD Weight Loss Clinic-Feature

Reviewed by Louise Chang,

The truth, experts say, is that even when you're "on a diet," you may be eating a lot more calories than you think. There's often a disconnection between what we know we should do to lose weight, and what we actually do while trying to diet.

For starters, stop thinking about dieting. Instead, take a look at those everyday habits that could be causing weight gain. Going on a diet can create an obsession with food, heighten cravings, and lead to a "throw-in-the-towel-because-diets-don't-work" mentality.

You might not realize just how quickly calories can add up. An extra tablespoon of salad dressing can add 75-100 calories, an extra tablespoon of butter adds 102 calories, and that 1-ounce bag of chips with your sandwich at lunch adds 162 calories. Eating while cooking, starting each day with a high-calorie coffee drink, finishing off the kids' plates at dinner, or having one too many glasses of wine -- these are just a few of the sneaky habits that sabotage weight loss efforts.

Yet as quickly as calories can add up, they can be subtracted. Becoming mindful of your diet mistakes -- the subtle ways that calories sneak into your diet throughout the day -- can add up to real weight loss. Check out our list of common diet mistakes people make, and see if any sound familiar to you...

In (7) the Japanese students provided a particular aspect of dieting, i.e., the pitfalls and why dieting does not work. In this sense, the contents of the Japanese side readings and the Korean readings were complimentary and gave a holistic perspective of the topic. The readings were thus general in nature in contrast to the specific cultural vantage points given in the actual presentations themselves.

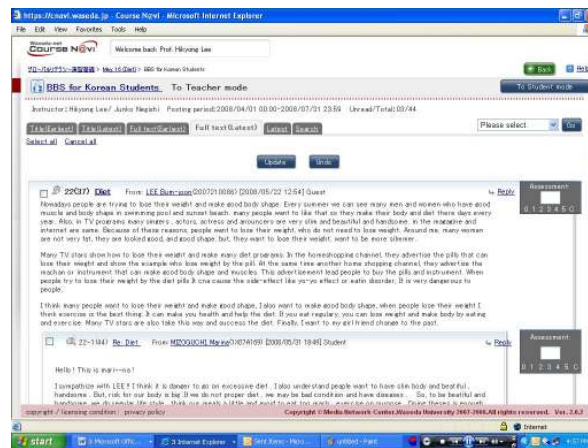
Writing

Writing was also focused on in the course so a balance of all four language skills could be provided. An online component which was utilized was the use of a

bulletin board system (BBS) on the course webpage. As a course requirement, students were required to upload a posting on BBS after the class discussion on the particular topic of that class. The intention of the postings was to foster interaction of a more personal nature that could complement the whole class discussions where students did not have ample time to speak due to time restrictions and consideration of others who wanted to speak. In addition to the postings, the students also had to reply to a counterpart's postings.

(8) and (9) show examples of the course website 'Course Navi' which was used in the course. (8) was the site where Koreans posted and Japanese replied and (9) was where Japanese posted and Koreans replied.

(8) BBS – Korean



(9) BBS - Japanese



(8) and (9) show that students took the initiative to stimulate further discussion on the topic at hand autonomously. As seen in (9) students also included pictures and photographs to their postings to make them more interesting.

(10) and (11) are samples from the BBS Korean side.

(10) BBS sample-Korean

Diet From K 1

Nowadays people are trying to lose their weight and make good body shape. Every summer we can see many men and women who have good muscle and body shape in swimming pool and sunset beach. many people want to like that so they make their body and diet there days every year. Also, in TV programs many singers, actors, actress and announcers are very slim and beautiful and handsome. in the magazine and internet are same. Because of these reasons, people want to lose their weight, who do not need to lose weight. Around me, many women are not very fat, they are looked good, and good shape. but, they want to lose their weight. want to be more slimmer.

Many TV stars show how to lose their weight and make many diet programs. In the home shopping channel, they advertise the pills that can lose their weight and show the example who lose weight by the pill. At the same time another home shopping channel, they advertise the machine or instrument that can make good body shape and muscles. This advertisement lead people to buy the pills and instrument. When people try to lose their weight by the diet pills It can cause the side-effect like yo-yo effect or eating disorder, It is very dangerous to people.

I think many people want to lose their weight and make good shape, I also want to make good body shape, when people lose their weight I think exercise is the best thing. It can make you health and help the diet. If you eat regularly, you can lose weight and make body by eating and exercise. Many TV stars are also take this way and success the diet. Finally, I want to my girl friend change to the past.

As seen in (10), the Korean student first talks about diet in a general way and then goes on to express his opinion in the last paragraph which starts off with "I think..." The contents of this posting is interesting and invites others to voice their own views. One such reply is in (11).

(11) BBS reply - Japanese

Re: Diet From: J1

Hello ! This is m-- !

Hikyoung Lee

I sympathize with K1!! I think it is danger to go on excessive diet. I also understand people want to have slim body and beautiful, handsome. But, risk for our body is big. If we do not proper diet, we may be bad condition and have diseases. So, to be beautiful and handsome we do regular life style, think our meals a little and avoid to eat too much, exercise on purpose. Doing theses is enough. Without regard to diet, we exercise healthily each other !!

In (11), the Japanese student begins with the words “I sympathize...” showing an affective reply to the Korean student. The student then continues to express his opinion.

(12) is an example of a Japanese student’s posting and (13) of a reply from a Korean student.

(12) BBS sample-Japanese

My Ideas on Diet From: J2

· Hi guys, this is Y-- F-- from W-- University.

In Japanese society, at least as far as I know, plastic surgeries do not bring good images. Usually people would try to hide that they have gone through a plastic surgery in the past. Actually, plastic surgeries are not that popular in Japan.

I think we have different ways in thinking towards plastic surgeries. I mean, If my friend had a plastic surgery, I would be REALLY surprised. I don't think I've ever come thru someone with one of them.

How would do u guys think, say if one of our friend had a plastic surgery? Have u ever come across someone with a plastic surgery?

but one thing, I would get surprised but I don't think its a bad thing to have one of them though. I know I'm kinda contradicting my self but I just get surprised coz I've never seen someone with one of those plastic surgeries!!

The Japanese student in (12) expresses the cultural perspective of Japanese on plastic surgery in relation to dieting. The student provokes opinions from others through the use of explicit questions.

(13) BBS reply – Korean

Re: My Ideas on Diet From: K2

Hi Y--, I'm ----. You missed all the fun last week! The presentations were so fun and interesting.

Contrary to the situation in Japan, you wouldn't be surprised if I saw plastic surgeries is popular in Korea yeah? It's popular the ladies especially after they have completed high school and is in the university stage.

It seems that people are becoming more open-minded as they're starting to accept the fact that plastic surgery is a normal thing to do like you're doing a little "fix" to your body like you're modifying your cars.

Even though it is possible to change our look by doing plastic surgery, we must always bear in mind about the outcome of it as it could create stress to the person himself/herself as well as the consequences if the surgery goes awry.

It's good that people there don't do plastic surgeries yeah? Actually it's good in a way that people just accept God's creation the way it is. Maybe we should accept things as it is as everyone in this world is unique. Yeah?

Nevertheless, I wouldn't have any prejudice against anyone doing plastic surgeries as I think it's quite normal now, would you?

In (13) the Korean student provides a cross-cultural viewpoint of plastic surgery and elaborates on his opinion about it. He ends with an open-ended rhetorical type question that also invites further discussion about the topic.

4 Conclusion and Implications

This paper has shown that cross-cultural long distance learning can serve as a compensatory form of education in an EFL learning context. Distance learning relies on technology as well as collaborative learning. It also brings together speakers from different backgrounds in a meaningful way which can in turn lead to continuous learning outside of the classroom and even after instruction ceases.

The KWCCDLP, as described in this paper, is a unique venue situated in an EFL setting where input and exposure to the target language are not readily available. It is somewhat a form of alternative learning as opposed to traditional EFL classrooms in that the teacher's presence is minimal and instruction is truly student-centered. The fusion of formal and informal learning has provided learners with a context that is conducive. Moreover, because learners are engaged in peer interaction they are using authentic language that fits the maturity level they are presently at.

With the further advancement of technology, the fine distinction once made between ESL and EFL contexts will no longer hold due to the sheer amount of exposure that will be made available through not only non-reciprocal language input but also face-to-face interaction. In addition to modifications in instructional methods, this also implies a more facilitative environment for autonomous learning. Classroom activities can be designed in an overarching manner to bridge inside and outside classroom learning. In this light, providing a springboard for autonomy can take on new meaning.

Inner strength is a powerful force that can propel learners to successfully reach their target language goals. Responsibility for one's learning cannot be placed on the shoulders of others nor can it be bought with money. Self-reliance may not be able to be acquired on one's own but instead can be nourished through collaboration between the learner and the teacher. A little prodding through facilitative instruction can go a long way for learners.

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