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The Enhancement of Learner Autonomy and the Growth of English Language Proficiency

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Abstract

English language learners, with their different social and cultural backgrounds, attitudes and objectives, approach the learning in different ways. Why are some learners more successful than others? According to Nguyen (2009), good English language learners possess positive attitudes about learning, strong motivations towards learning, confidence in self and well-constructed strategies to manage learning independently. Little (2007) states that success in language learning is significantly influenced by learner autonomy and how much progress a language learner makes indicates how much he or she can take charge of his or her own learning. This research paper (1) clarifies and discusses the mutually supporting correlation between the development of EFL learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency, (2) points out some problems related to language learner autonomy in the EFL teaching and learning context of Vietnam, and (3) comes up with some suggestions in terms of what tertiary teachers of EFL can do to help their students promote both English proficiency and autonomy.

Keywords: autonomy, proficiency, English, EFL, language learners, language learning

Introduction

Much empirical research by Dam (1995), Dam and Legenhausen (1997), Legenhausen (2003), and Little (1999) on issues related to learner autonomy has indicated that each student's individual factors, such as particular profiles of talents, goals, interests, learning styles and strategies, are the decisive elements leading him or her to the target language proficiency. Since the end of the 1980s, linguists and educationists have devoted much more time and research on the impact of learner-centered theories, and learner autonomy has been taken into consideration more often and even more emphasized in many national curricula (Dam, 2000). Teachers and students, therefore, have become familiar to the term "language learner autonomy" as well as "self-directed learning", "self-monitoring", "self-assessment" and "critical thinking". Little (2007), however, contends that "little research has focused explicitly on the relation between learner autonomy, the processes of language learning and the development of proficiency in the target language." (p. 2)

The principal purpose of this study is to investigate the above relation mentioned by Little (2007) and it also aims to make a contribution to EFL teachers' success in language teaching by elaborating some suggestions in terms of improving autonomous language learners and users. The following questions, consequently, are addressed: 1) What is the nature of the correlation between the enhancement of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency? 2) What are some problems related to language learner autonomy in the EFL teaching and learning context of Vietnam? 3) How can tertiary teachers of EFL, on the basic understanding of language learner autonomy, help their students achieve the linguistic and communicative goals on the one hand and become autonomous on the other hand?

The correlation between the enhancement of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency

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To begin with, the present article's authors would like to accept the definition of learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" provided by Holec (1981, p. 1) in his report entitled *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, first published by the Council of Europe in 1979. According to this view, language learning should have an instrumental purpose and that language learning programs should be capable of meeting the specific communicative needs of individual learners. Since the 1990s, learner autonomy has been dressed in borrowed clothes: "independent learning" and "critical thinking", and it now seems to be a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves (Little, 2007).

In the heart of his paper, Little (2007) puts a remarkable emphasis on the language learning's intended outcome, the improvement of proficiency in a second or foreign language. He argues that the access to the centre of language teaching theory and practice can be only based on an indispensable understanding of the essential relation between the development of learner autonomy and the growth of target language proficiency. Learner autonomy is said to be the product of an interactive process in which the teacher gradually promotes his or her learners' autonomy by gradually addressing them to more control of their learning. As a result of this, autonomy in language learning and autonomy in language use are considered the two sides of the same coin.

According to Deci (1996), an American social psychologist, "autonomy", "competence" and "relatedness" are the three basic needs that we must satisfy in order to obtain a sense of self- fulfillment. This psychologist clarifies that we become autonomous when we are "fully willing to do what [we] are doing and [we] embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment" (p. 2). We obtain the target language competence when we face and successfully deal with "optimal challenges" (p. 66), and we experience the relatedness when we love and are loved by others (p. 88). Deci also makes a clear distinction between autonomy and independence:

Independence means to do for yourself, to not rely on others for personal nourishment and support. Autonomy, in contrast, means to act freely, with a sense of volition and choice. It is thus possible for a person to be independent and autonomous (i.e., to freely not rely on others), or to be independent and controlled (i.e., to feel forced not to rely on others). (p. 89)

From Deci's perspective, learners who are autonomous or volitional in their learning will become fulfilled and thus motivated learners and their autonomy will be undermined if they do not feel that their learning effort is paying off.

In the constructivist view, formal learning is maximally effective when it is "participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them" (Bruner, 1996, p. 84). Each learner constructs his or her knowledge through the interaction between what he or she already knows and the new information, experiences and ideas that he or she encounters. The constructivism suggests that we should adopt pedagogical procedures which allow learners to assume discourse roles that traditional pedagogies deny. By the adoption of such roles learners start to take responsibility for their own learning meanwhile they are drawn into reflection on the content and processes of their learning. This is what Bruner (1986) calls "reflective intervention", a defining characteristic of an autonomous learner:

If he fails to develop any sense of what I shall call reflective intervention in the knowledge he encounters, the young person will be operating continually from the outside in – knowledge will control and guide him. If he succeeds in developing such a sense, he will control and select knowledge as needed. If he develops a sense of self that is premised on his ability to penetrate knowledge for his own uses, and if he can share negotiate the result of his penetrations, then he becomes a member of the culture-creating community. (p. 132)

According to Little (2007), when learners use the target language as the medium of both *task performance* and *metacognition and metalinguistic reflection*, their developing proficiency is an integral part of the autonomy arising from successful task performance. That, as it seems to him, is the indispensable characteristic of language learner autonomy.

In the study of *Teaching and learning in the language classroom*, Hedge (2000) builds a quite clear picture of self-directed or autonomous learners who (1) know their needs and work productively with the teacher towards the achievement of their aims, (2) learn both inside and outside the classroom, (3) can take classroom-based materials and can build on them, (4) know how to use resources independently, (5) learn with active thinking, (6) adjust their learning strategies when necessary to improve their own learning, (7) properly manage and divide the learning time, and (8) don't consider the teacher as a god who can give them an ability to master the target language.

In short, the body of literature mentioned in this section restates an understanding of language learning autonomy in which the enhancement of learner autonomy and the improvement of target language proficiency are not only mutually supporting but also fully integrated with each other.

Some problems related to language learner autonomy in the EFL teaching and learning context of Vietnam

One of the recurrent problems the Vietnamese educational system has to cope with is that the output or production of learning process remains a noticeable gap from the rest of learners' lives. In a total agreement with Little's (2007) viewpoint, the researchers see that effective learning is a matter of not only memorizing what one is told or taught but also properly and efficiently using "school knowledge" and gradually making "school knowledge" become "action knowledge". Barnes (1976), in his classic book *From Communication to Curriculum*, says about these two kinds of knowledge:

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School knowledge is the knowledge which someone else presents to us. We partly grasp it, enough to answer the teacher's questions, to do exercises, or to answer examination questions, but it remains someone else's knowledge, not ours. If we never use this knowledge we probably forget it. In so far as we use knowledge for our own purposes however we begin to incorporate it into our view of the world, and to use parts of it to cope with the exigencies of living. Once the knowledge becomes incorporated onto that view of the world on which our actions are based I would say that it has become "action knowledge". (p. 81)

Besides, Little (2007) states that learners' initiative and control are more important than unconscious and involuntary work of cognition. This significant indication is illustrated by Vygotsky's (1978) definition of the zone of proximal development (ZPD). Acknowledging the vital role of expertise in guiding the process of learning, Vygotsky identifies autonomy in the sense of being able to do things for oneself, "independent problem solving", as a learning objective; "The distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers." (p. 86)

It is not difficult to realize that a great number of learners in Vietnam are often reluctant to take responsibility for their own learning. The traditional school apparently assigns this passive role to a lot of generations of Vietnamese learners, who just come to class and try to copy down everything the teacher shows on the board. It is no surprise that many of these students bear nothing in mind about the idea that they should, together with the teacher, set learning agendas and targets, select learning materials and activities, and evaluate their learning outcomes. Getting into the basic acknowledgement of learner autonomy, the authors would like to suggest three more fundamental characteristics of an autonomous learner, which are (1) an awareness to use language materials effectively, (2) careful management of time for learning, and (3) active adaptation to successful learning strategies.

It is quite difficult for some teachers in Vietnam to negotiate a curriculum exclusively on the basis of the learners' perceived needs. Language teachers at certain schools are obliged to design and conduct their courses in accordance with fixed curriculum guidelines, sometimes in great detail. Each teacher, however, must clearly understand the curriculum and he or she necessarily has his or her own approach to achieve the intended goals. One crucial thing needs to be taken into account is that the syllabus may be the same but the lessons are not. One teacher with his or her own expertise, attitudes and methodology can perform his or her teaching differently from other colleagues. What Little (2007) implies for the teacher's role is to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners can "be autonomous" in order to "become more autonomous".

How is it possible to enhance both learner autonomy and communicative proficiency in a second or foreign language?

One widely accepted answer is to make the use of what is learnt, "target language use", through interaction. In her paper entitled *Interaction as the key to teaching language for communication*, Rivers (2000) asserts that:

For the genuine interaction language learning requires, however, individuals (teachers as well as students) must appreciate the uniqueness of other individuals with their special needs – not manipulating or directing them or deciding how they can or will learn, but encouraging them and drawing them out (educating), and building up their confidence and enjoyment in what they are doing. Teacher – directed and – dominated classrooms cannot, by their nature, be interactive classrooms, and this is what language teachers need to learn. Interaction can be two-way, three-way, or four-way, but never one-way. (p. 7)

What Rivers (2000) suggests requires a shift from “direct teaching” to “self-directed learning” and if this shift is successfully carried out, we can “make the process of language learning more democratic by providing the conceptual tools for the planning, construction and conduct of courses closely geared to the needs, motivations and characteristics of the learner and enabling him so far as possible to steer and control his own progress.” (Trim, 1978, p. 1)

From the constructivist theories, Little (2007) derives three fundamental principles - learner involvement, learner reflection and target language use – in terms of how to promote learner autonomy and target language proficiency. Little also points out some ways in which these principles may be implemented in the language classroom. As for the principle of learner involvement, it requires that the learners must be put into their own language learning so that they can share responsibility for setting learning agendas, selecting learning activities and materials, managing classroom interaction and evaluating learning outcomes. In addition to what the principle of learner involvement implies, the principle of learner reflection requires both teachers and learners to include “reflective intervention” as a crucial part of the teaching and learning process. The third principle, target language use, simply entails that the target language must be the medium through which all classroom activities are conducted, organizational, reflective and communicative. However, EFL teachers should clearly acknowledge that some kind of a ban on the use of the learners’ L1, or the monolingual approach, seems impractical because it seems highly probable that ESL/EFL students’ identity is shaped to some extent by the language they learn as children and their natural inclination to communicate in their mother tongue is non-negotiable (Dajani, 2002). Therefore, it is advisable for Vietnamese EFL teachers to progressively eliminate the use of the L1 from the classroom and to use English as often as possible (Nguyen Trong Nhan & Ho Thi Lai, 2012).

As tertiary lecturers of EFL in Vietnam, with experience of more than five years teaching English at different levels in different fields, the authors constantly wonder how far their adopted methods reach the intended objectives. One permanent question has haunted them during the last five years is that: Why do so many students seem to have a detailed knowledge

of the target language but a limited ability to put this knowledge into effective communication? There seem to be many elements in the answer to this question, but in the scope of this brief paper the researchers would like to suggest some of what an EFL teacher can do in order to enhance English language learner autonomy and communicative proficiency.

First of all, the teacher should not look for the best method for teaching languages, but rather the most suitable approach, design of materials, or set of procedures in a particular course. The teacher needs to be flexible and innovative in adopting and adapting a repertoire of techniques, while keeping active interaction both inside the classroom and outside (the environment where the language is spoken) the classroom.

The teacher needs to know who his or her students are and understand them. It is very important for the teacher to consider the age of the students, their scholastic backgrounds, their culturally absorbed styles and strategies of learning, as well as their purposes and goals in studying the language, without ignoring the political and social pressures which mostly determine their motivation.

As a teacher, do you always go into the classroom with a relaxed and friendly face? It cannot be denied that some teachers sometimes bring with them the bad mood into the classroom. These teachers then accidentally create a stressful atmosphere from which the students, “the innocent victims”, will suffer. Frankly speaking, we know this is not a new implication but whatever promotes students’ participation in a comfortable and non-threatening environment is decisive to successful language learning. This is part of what Krashen (1982, pp. 155-157) means a “low affective filter” that plays a very important role in deciding how much “acquisition” occurs, and how much input is absorbed by the learner.

The teacher should also encourage moderate risk-taking and boost the self-esteem and confidence of the students to reduce anxiety or pressure and to promote a desire for interaction

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among them. How can the teacher do the above things? The teacher should give the students permission to use the language with less than perfect performance. He or she must be tolerant of errors the students make while attempting to communicate and help the students lose their fear of embarrassment so that they can accept responsibility for their own learning and do not leave all responsibility to the teacher. Giving appropriate compliments and rewards is also meaningful to students in building confidence and creating willingness and eagerness in the language use.

Besides, the teacher should try something new, something can be called “novelty” or variety in setting learning tasks. For example, with one new activity every week or even everyday if possible, an unimaginative and conventional classroom can be gradually transformed and the students will be highly motivated. The tasks set to the students should allow them to study in fields which interest them and for purposes which really matter to them. Nevertheless, the students need their teacher’s good scaffolding, dedicated guiding and support before and during individual or group tasks.

According to Little (2007), few learners will come to their first class ready to accept full responsibility for their own learning; most of them will have to learn, step by step, how to efficiently self-manage their learning. Therefore, the teacher’s task is to identify specific areas in which he or she can require the learners to take decisions from the first class, but the teacher must also be quick to relinquish his or her control as soon as the learners are ready to take over in other areas. In order to motivate English language students to work independently, we would like to recommend some following interesting and useful macro-tasks mentioned by Wilson (2003):

- Produce a web-based magazine for the school
- Plan an excursion for your class, and act as tour guide
- Write an article for a tourist magazine and submit it for publication
- Write a script for a play or movie and produce it for the school
- Make a documentary / CD Rom on a subject you are passionate about

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- Prepare a mini-conference or trade fair (including poster presentations, individual and group presentations) and invite guests of honor
- Conduct an advertising campaign
- Compile an anthology
- Produce a radio broadcast on local radio. (p. 5)

Conclusion

The purpose of education remains the same as ever: to give learners access to the multifaceted culture into which they have been born. Learners cannot construct their knowledge out of nothing, neither can they know by instinct how to conduct focused and purposeful characteristic of the subject in question. Teachers remain indispensable, both as pedagogues and as discipline experts. (Little, 2007, p. 7)

In conclusion, the authors of this article argue that either learner autonomy or communicative proficiency in a second or foreign language is the product of an interactive process in which the students are assisted and directed by their teacher so that they can take more active initiative and voluntary control of their learning.

Furthermore, it is decisive to insist that the teacher must engage his or her learners in participatory, interpretative and exploratory processes which give the learners the right to raise exploratory questions, to express their opinions and ideas, to challenge their classmates' statements, and to evaluate their own learning styles, strategies as well as their obtained outcomes. In other words, the teacher must make it possible to make the learners more and more proactive and collaborative, to involve them in "negotiating" and integrating their "personal agendas" into the course's agenda.

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