

## Developing Learner Autonomy

Pornapit Darasawang\*

*Department of Language Studies King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Thailand*

---

### Abstract

Learner autonomy has been of great interest to language teaching practice and research for more than two decades now. This paper reviews definitions of and research into learner autonomy and discusses ways in which autonomy has been implemented both in and outside the classroom. It also looks at the role of learner training and the importance of environmental factors such as the provision of resources and opportunities for self-access learning and ongoing support.

*Keywords: Learner autonomy; Learner training; Learning strategies*

### บทคัดย่อ

การให้อิสระในการเรียนได้รับความสนใจทั้งในทางปฏิบัติและในการทำวิจัยเกี่ยวกับการสอนภาษามาเป็นเวลากว่าสองทศวรรษแล้ว บทความปริทัศน์นี้ได้ครอบคลุมนิยามและวิจัยเกี่ยวกับการให้อิสระในการเรียน โดยกล่าวถึงวิธีการในการให้อิสระในการเรียนที่เกิดขึ้นในห้องเรียน และนอกห้องเรียน นอกจากนี้ยังกล่าวถึงบทบาทของการฝึกผู้เรียนและความสำคัญของปัจจัยแวดล้อม เช่น การจัดหาวัสดุอุปกรณ์ และการให้ความช่วยเหลืออื่น ๆ เพื่อให้เกิดการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง

---

Learner autonomy has been of interest in the field of English language learning circle for more than two decades. The concept of learner autonomy has been defined differently by different authors. Generally, learner autonomy is seen as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981). This includes having the right attitude for learners to be responsible for their own learning (Dickinson, 1992). However, there are many educators who look at learner autonomy differently. It can also be regarded as a set of skills and strategies that students use for self-directed learning. It can also be seen as a capacity that we are born with but that we lose through formal education (Benson and Voller, 1997).

With reference to the skills of autonomous learners; knowing how to set their

---

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +66-0-2470-8722; fax: +66-0-2428-3375  
E-mail address: [pornapit.dar@kmutt.ac.th](mailto:pornapit.dar@kmutt.ac.th).

pedagogic state where the students do not have to create their own direction in learning, but they are expected to organise their resources autonomously to reach their goals. So the learners can learn cooperatively in groups without being pushed by the teacher (Littlewood, 1996).

Because autonomous learners are regarded as effective learners in all cultures, educators have discussed how to help learners to develop autonomy. Generally, three approaches can be employed to develop learner autonomy: the individual-centred approach, the group-centred approach and the project-centred approach (Boud, 1988).

The individual-centred approach focuses on individual learners and their needs. Teachers, co-learners and other resources for learning such as learning materials, help to facilitate the attainment of the goals of the individual as defined by the individual. Groups of learners may provide general support but they do not have a specific role or commitment to any project other than their own. A learner contract or a form for learners to state their learning plan is normally used to facilitate this approach. The learners have to prepare individual contracts which specify learning goals, activities in which they will engage, criteria for judging their performance and how the contract can be assessed.

The group-centred approach focuses on the needs of a particular group of learners and is characterised by a strong commitment to group learning and group processes. In other words, it is a reactive autonomy which has been used in an Asian context. Individuals pursue their own learning needs within the context of the group. Much learning occurs from learning among group members. Curriculum negotiation or the discussion of what, where, when and how to learn between the learners and the teacher is a common practice in the group-centred approach. In this approach, the learners are encouraged to make their own decisions rather than accept decision from others made on their behalf.

The project centred-approach focuses on the outcome of the project. In this approach, the learners in a group work from their own needs and while doing the project, they have the freedom to choose the content and methods for completing it. They have to negotiate with other group members in order to reach conclusions and go through the process of planning, monitoring their difficulties and evaluating their performance.

In addition to these three approaches, developing learner autonomy can be conducted through learner training (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987). Learner training involves helping the learners to change their attitudes towards their own roles in their learning and helping the learners to learn more about how to learn and about how to use effective strategies as these can help students to be more successful at

selected by the learner' (Cohen, 1998, p.4). Wenden (1986) suggests that learner training should be explicit in purpose and that it should be offered in context because it enables the learners to perceive the relevance of the task, and enhances comprehension and facilitates retention.

Cognitive strategies are the strategies learners use with the incoming information in order to help with their learning. It involves interacting with the materials and applying some techniques to complete the task or understand the materials to be learned (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Cognitive strategies can be classified differently but in general they centre around learners' trying to understand the language; guessing or making hypotheses about linguistic forms, semantic meaning or speakers' intentions; trying to look for general rules to approach language learning tasks; practising by repetition, rehearsal, application of rules; finding ways to memorise new words, summarizing, note-taking, translating, etc. (Rubin, 1987; Chamot et al, 1988 cited in O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Learners employ cognitive strategies all the time when studying; therefore, it is important that they have a large enough repertoire of cognitive strategies so that they can choose the appropriate one for the task they are working on.

Metacognitive strategies involve 'thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring the learning task, and how well one has learned' (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, p.137). Wenden (1991) uses the term self-management strategies to refer to metacognitive strategies whereas Holec (1981) refers to them as the skills of self-directed learning. Metacognitive strategies or self-management strategies involve planning how to achieve the task so learners have to determine what their objectives are and decide on the means to achieve them, monitoring or being aware of difficulties they encounter in learning, and evaluating or being able to reflect on the outcome of the strategy they choose and judge the outcome based on the criteria they use. O'Malley and Chamot (1990, p.8) think that metacognitive strategies are important because 'students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions.' McDonough (1999) agrees with this idea as he states that monitoring and self-evaluation strategies contribute to the ability to be an autonomous learner.

In order to use metacognitive strategies successfully, Wenden thinks that metacognitive knowledge plays an important role (Wenden, 1998). Metacognitive knowledge refers to what an individual knows about how he thinks and how other people think. It refers to the knowledge and beliefs that one has accumulated through experience in various cognitive activities (Flavell, 1976). Metacognitive knowledge is separated into person knowledge or beliefs concerning what individuals are like as thinkers, task knowledge or the nature of the information to be addressed when facing

Legenhausen, 1996). This study compared vocabulary acquisition of the students of two classes, one was a class that was taught using autonomous learning, whilst the other class was a traditional book-based class. The class which was taught by an autonomous approach showed that the number of words students acquired in the first few months was higher than that required in the syllabus. The students were more aware of the English language surrounding them and could integrate this knowledge to develop their English language competence.

In addition to developing learner autonomy in the classroom context as previously discussed, learner autonomy can also be fostered through providing an environment and resources for the learners to practise their cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies. Such an environment is usually called a 'self-access centre' or 'independent learning centre'. Self-access centres are generally referred to as facilities provided to encourage learner autonomy (Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1988; Esch, 1996). It also provides support for independent learning such as a learner contract, a cataloguing system, clear instructions and helpers or counselors. Benson (1994, p.8) views the relationship between learner autonomy and the self-access centre as autonomy representing the goal; self-directed learning, a means to achieve it and the self-access centre, an environment within which it can be achieved. Gardner and Miller (1999) state that when working in the self-access centre, the learners have to change their roles because they are expected to be responsible for their own learning, and realize the importance of reflection on their learning as it helps them to see if they achieve their learning goals or have to redefine them.

As the self-access centre is regarded as an environment provided to develop learner autonomy, learner training for learner autonomy can occur in the self-access centre because when using the self-access centre, learners have to 1) decide on what to do 2) find the appropriate materials 3) use the materials. In other words, they have to use both cognitive and metacognitive strategies when working in the self-access centre and working in the self-access centre can also provide an experience of independent learning to help them have more confidence to learn on their own. Also, the self-access centre can be used as supplementary to learner training in class. Some teachers may provide learner training on how to use cognitive and metacognitive strategies in class and then ask the students to use and practise those strategies in the self-access centre.

However, self-access centres can also be seen as related to independent learning. The use of self-access centres in teaching and learning a language has developed into its own area which is not related to learner autonomy. This can be seen from the research conducted in the self-access centre to gain more insight into what learners do while working in the self-access. The research on the self-access centre also involves the support given in the self-access centre through the use of contracts,

- Dam, L. (1995). **From theories to classroom practice**. Dublin: Authentik.
- Dam, L. and Legenhausen, L. (1996). The acquisition of vocabulary in an autonomous beginning English. In R. Pemberton, E.S.L. Li, W.W.F. Or and H.D. Pierson (Eds.). **Taking control: Autonomy in language learning** (pp.265-280). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Dickinson, L. (1987). **Self-instruction in language learning**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1992). **Learner training for language learning**. Dublin: Authentik.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1995) Autonomy and motivation: A literature review. **System**. 23 (2): 165-174.
- Esch, E. (1996). Promoting learner autonomy: Criteria for the selection of appropriate methods. In R. Pemberton, E.S.L. Li, W.W.F. Or and H.D. Pierson (Eds.). **Taking control: Autonomy in language learning** (pp.35-48). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Ellis, G. & Sinclair, B. (1989). **Learning to learn English: A course in learner training**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flavell, J. H. (1976). Metacognitive and cognitive monitoring. **American Psychologist**. 34: 906-911.
- Gardner, D. & Miller, L. (1999). **Establishing self-access: From theory to practice**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gieve, S. & Clark, R. (2005). The Chinese approach to learning: Cultural trait or situated response? The Case of a Self-directed Learning Programme. **System**. 33 (2): 261-276.
- Groß, A. & Wolff, D. (2001). A multimedia tool to develop learner autonomy. **Computer Assisted Language Learning**. 14 (304): 233-249.
- Holec, H. (1981). **Autonomy and foreign language learning (prepared for the Council of Europe)**. Oxford: Pergamon Press.
- Holec, H. (Ed.). (1988). **Autonomy and self-directed learning : present fields of application**. Strasbourg: Council of Europe.
- Kelly, R. (1996). Language counselling for learner autonomy: The skilled helper in self-access language learning. In R. Pemberton, E.S.L. Li, W.F. Or, and H.D. Pierson(Eds.). **Autonomy in language learning** (pp.93-113). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Littlewood, W. (1996). 'Autonomy': An autonomy and a framework. **System**. 24 (4): 427-435.
- \_\_\_\_\_. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. **Applied Linguistics**. 20 (1): 71-94.
- Loewen, S. (2006). Autonomy and language learning behaviour: The role of student initiation in meaning-focused L2 lessons. In T. Lamb & H. Reinders (Eds.). **Supporting Independent Learning: Issues and Innovation** (pp.37-54). Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Lynch, B. (2001). Promoting EAP learner autonomy in a second language university context. In J. Flowerdew & M. Peacock (Eds.). **Research Perspectives on English for Academic Purposes** (pp.390-403). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- McDonough, S. H. (1999). Learner strategies. **Language Teaching**. 32: 1-18.
- O'Malley, J.M. and Chamot, A. (1990). **Learning strategies in second language acquisition**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Palfreyman, D. and Smith, R. C. (Eds.). (2005). **Learner autonomy across cultures**. Great Britain: Palgrave Macmillan.