Developing Autonomy in an East Asian Classroom: from Policy to Practice

Thao Thi Thanh PHAN

Thanhdo University – Hanoi – Vietnam
Queensland University of Technology – Brisbane - Australia

Abstract. Education will not take place without autonomy (Kenny, 1993). In accordance with global trends, Vietnam has identified developing learner autonomy (LA) as one key strategy of its higher education. The aim of this paper is to propose an action research which is planned to promote LA of Vietnamese students of English at tertiary level. Firstly, a survey questionnaire will be conducted to a class of English majored students to explore students’ views of their responsibilities and decision-making abilities, their actual and preferred learning activities. The students will then join in several activities, which are designed to develop their autonomous learning. The learning tasks will include individual short talks, group discussion, group presentation (oral or written), debate and drama. Finally, in-depth interviews will be taken with three random students to obtain students’ ideas about autonomous EFL learning, especially, the changes of their learning style after the recommended activities. The paper implies suggestions for pedagogy of an autonomous classroom in the East Asian context.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Classroom, East Asian Context, Vietnamese Context, Pedagogy

1. Introduction

This paper concerns the issue of how East Asian teachers foster their student autonomous learning in classroom setting. Descriptor as “reactive autonomy” has been used in regarding to East Asian learners (Littlewood, 1999). They are also said to be accustomed to a teacher-directed teaching classroom where the effort to encourage LA seems to be an impossible approach. Therefore, careful consideration should be given to how to effectively develop LA, a Western concept, within the context of East Asia.

The proposed study will include three stages in one English class in a Vietnamese university: (1) questionnaires for the whole class; (2) an intervention; (3) interviews with voluntary students. The intervention will consist of activities during which students will have input in managing their own learning. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to the development of autonomous classroom management in East Asian countries.

2. Characteristics of Autonomous Learners

The early and still influential definition of learner autonomy is by Holec (1981, p. 3). According to this, autonomous learners are those having "the ability to take charge to one's own learning", the responsibility (1) to determine the objectives, (2) to define the content and progression, (3) to select methods and techniques to be used, (4) to monitor the procedure and acquisition, (5) to evaluate what has been acquired. Later researchers also produce their own lists of the attributes of autonomous learners. They are said to be highly motivated to learn. They can work independently in determining learning objectives, and engaging with learning content flexibly and actively. They are believed to have ability in selecting their own learning methods, evaluating and identifying their learning strengths and weaknesses (Chan, 2001; Dam, 1995; Dickinson, 1993; Littlewood, 1996; Trinh, 2005).

3. Promoting LA in the Classroom

The approach to promoting LA in the classroom takes the emphasis on learners' abilities to manage their own learning within the classroom environment. In other words, this approach highlights the changing

Corresponding author: phanthao@thanhdo.edu.vn
relationship between teachers and students and classroom practices (Benson, 2001). It requires a gradual move from teacher-directed to learner-directed learning environment (Dam, 1995). According to this, teachers play the role as language advisors. Their responsibility is to create a learning environment that supports successfully the development and implementation of learners’ study plan (Murray, 2009).

This section attempts to produce a comprehensive framework of LA implementation in the language classroom. Employing Crabbe (1993)’s six aspects that should be considered to overcome difficulties in order to carry out independent learning tasks (task initiators, language practice, task problems, task decision makers, and feedback), the section locates our learners into the Vietnamese academic context where planning, student-directed learning, and evaluation demonstrate LA (Smith, 2003). This framework not only provides students opportunities to reject and renegotiate but also creates opportunities for teachers to rebuild a more familiar but necessary authority in their classroom teaching (Nguyen, 2009).

![Planning session](image)

**Planning session**:
- Students clarify individual learning goals
- Brainstorming of ideas for within-class learning activities; formation of groups
- Students draw up plans for (individual or group-based) within-class learning activities

**Student-directed learning sessions**:
- Student-directed within-class learning (generally group-based)

**Evaluation session**:
- Groups/individuals give presentations on within-class learning

Fig. 1: A student-directed learning cycle – Adapted from Smith (2003, p.136)

4. The Academic Context

Vietnam has recognized “autonomy” as one of key outcomes that higher education graduates need to possess. This has been strongly stated in the country higher education law 2013. In term of English as a major, university graduates are required to be independent users, which are clearly announced in “Project on National Foreign Language Teaching and Learning up to 2020”. Therefore, fostering learner autonomy, specifically, helping students to identify goals and employ effective strategies to achieve these goals, has appeared to be a “must” task for Vietnamese universities.

However, academics and educators claim that Vietnamese students are hindered by high levels of inertia. They do not know how to take responsibility for their own learning. In the EFL classroom, they tend to listen to teachers and take notes without offering any personal ideas or raising questions (Phung & Doa, 2010). It is said that students are not self equipped with language learning strategies. They depend totally on teachers (Nguyen, 2011). There are also issues that challenge most Vietnamese institutions in their English education such as the shortage of teaching and learning resources (Kam, 2002; T. H. T. Pham, 2011) the overloaded curriculum (Duong & Nguyen, 2006; H. H. Pham, 2007; T. H. T. Pham, 2008, 2011), the large classes (Kam, 2002), traditional teaching methods ((Lewis & McCook, 2002; H. H. Pham, 2007).

5. The Study

5.1. Research Question

In what ways can teachers encourage autonomy in the classroom?

5.2. Setting and Participants
The researcher plans to carry out a case study in an English major class at a Vietnamese private university. The main reason for this option is the experience of the researcher herself in teaching for English students. The second reason is because of English important role in the development of Vietnam. The students of this subject area will participate, to be selected on a voluntary basis.

5.3. Research Process and Procedure

- Phase 1: Questionnaire
  The questionnaire with students (in English and Vietnamese) will be in two parts, and last for approximately thirty minutes. It aims to investigate students’ views of their responsibilities and decision-making abilities, their actual and preferred learning activities.

- Phase 2: Intervention
  I employ the topic *Describing your job* from a list of situations and topics for the second language suggested by Nation (2001, pp. 405 - 406). Others can be used alternatively. The main reason for this option is it breaks down a big task into smaller short-term goals so as making the learning more goal-directed. All the five activities follow the learning cycle: *planning, student-directed, and evaluation.*

  **Activity 1: Individual short talks**
  Students will be asked to talk about their future career of 2 – 3 minutes. This activity is considered as a warm up activity to get students general orientation to their learning goals. It also helps students to gain confidence, looking for several sources to prepare themselves for a very basic talk.

  **Activity 2: Group discussion and presentation**
  Students who share the same job option will form their own groups. They will then discuss about the characteristics, requirements of the job they choose, and what they should prepare for themselves to achieve the job. They will make an oral presentation about it.

  **Activity 3: Debate**
  Students will write a discussion about the advantages of disadvantages of the chosen job
  Students will debate about the pros and cons of the job in peer groups.

  **Activity 4: Drama**
  Students will create their own drama of 20 - 30 minutes of any aspects relating to their career.

  **Activity 5: Report**
  Students will write a report to reflect on what their strong or weak points of their own performance.

- Phase 3: Interview
  In-depth interviews will be carried out individually with three students focusing on any changes of autonomous learning style after the intervention.

5.4. Data Generation and Analysis

5.4.1. Questionnaire

Participation will involve completing an 8 item anonymous questionnaire with likert scale answers (strongly agree – strongly disagree) that will take approximately 30 minutes.

For example: Choose the best option to answer the questions

- The teacher should build on student’s potential to learn independently?
  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
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- The teacher should give guidelines and suggestions on how to get more information and how to explore new ideas.
  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

The participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If students agree to participate they do not have to complete any question(s) they are uncomfortable answering. Their decision to participate or not participate will in no way impact upon their current or future relationship with the university, for example their grades or with associated external organisation. If students do not agree to participate they can withdraw from the project at any time without comment or penalty.
5.4.2. Intervention

Before the teachers and the students conduct their project work, there will be an orientation by the researcher with the teachers. The researcher will give guidelines and model the project work first. Then there will be consultation with the teachers in order to conduct the work effectively. The researcher will collect their ideas on the final design.

5.4.3. Interview

The interviews will be arranged at a room on the university campus at the participants’ convenience and will be audio recorded. The data will then be typed into text for a careful qualitative theme analysis (Sanacore, 2008). All these transcripts will finally be segmented and coded.

6. Conclusion

Employing a student-directed learning cycle, the paper has described a study which will be undertaken to explore the implementation of LA in a tertiary classroom setting in Vietnam. Individual short talks, group discussion and presentation, and drama have been arranged from easy to more difficult level following the learning cycle: planning, student-directed, and evaluation. The findings of the study are expected to contribute to effective pedagogic intervention to promote LA in East Asia classrooms in general and Vietnam in particular.

7. References


