

Promoting Autonomy in and out of the Classroom

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Abstract

Providing learners with an increased amount of autonomy can lead to higher levels of motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This reality, combined with the fact that learning a foreign language requires many hours of study, suggests that teachers need to help learners take control of their learning. This paper first provides a theoretical background to explain what learner autonomy is. Following that, the article discusses why it is important to promote learner autonomy to our learners. Finally, it introduces a number of practical ways for teachers to give more control to students over their learning. These methods range from giving students choices in the classroom, introducing websites or apps, and promoting self-access and other learning beyond the classroom. A list of relevant resources for teachers appears at the end of this article.

My first job teaching English began in 2000, as an *eikaiwa* teacher. Teaching at that school, I noticed that some students made significantly more progress than others; and those students had decided to do extra work outside of the classroom. For example, one student did a listening transcription every week, and another wrote a daily diary in English. Throughout my TESOL career, I would go on to notice that those students who took more responsibility for their learning seemed to make more rapid developments in their learning.

As a learner of foreign languages, too, I have had similar experiences. During those times when I was not simply following a teacher's direction, but made important decisions about my own learning (e.g., choosing the materials; setting my own goals; and determining the methods of learning), I noticed that I was able to learn more effectively, and I also felt more motivated. Ultimately, these realizations, from both a teacher's and a learner's perspective, led me to focus on autonomous learning as my primary professional interest.

But what does learner autonomy actually mean? Why is it important? And how can teachers foster it? This paper will seek to provide answers to these questions.

What is Learner Autonomy?

Based on past communication with teachers working in a number of different educational contexts, it seems many language teachers today are familiar with the notion of learner autonomy. When asked to explain what it is, teachers have used a wide variety of terms, such as self-study, self-regulated learning and self-access.

While all of these are indeed related to learner autonomy, they often refer to different aspects of the learning process. For instance, *self-study* often indicates the type of materials used (Benson, 2011); *self-regulated learning*, studied by educational psychologists, is concerned with cognition and motivation (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008); and *self-access* is most often discussed in relation to collections of materials and the physical spaces where autonomous learning is promoted (Cotterall & Reinders, 2001). In the field of TESOL, learner autonomy is perhaps the most commonly used term for those who are interested in these and other related practices. Being that it operates as a kind of umbrella term, however, learner autonomy is not easy to define.

One oft-quoted definition came from Henri Holec (1981, p. 3), who defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.” Holec further explained that this means “to have and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.: determining the learning objectives; defining the contents and progressions of learning; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition; and evaluating what has been acquired” (p. 3).

Benson (2013) pointed out that this early definition of learner autonomy described the decision making process involved in autonomous learning in technical terms, and it neglected to include cognitive capacities. Benson himself proposed this definition: “The capacity to take control of one’s own learning (p. 61).” He went on to explain that there are three dimensions over which learners can have control: learning management, cognitive processes, and learning content. Benson also argues that a definition of learner autonomy should include its political character, as learners making decisions about the learning contents can after all pose a challenge to established classroom and institutional power relationships (p. 61).

Other scholars in the field have provided further clarifications of learner autonomy. Little (1990) explained that learner autonomy is not a teaching method; not a single easily described

behavior; nor a synonym for self-instruction. Whereas early manifestations of learner autonomy were represented by individual study carrels and audio headsets in the self-access centers of the 1970s and 1980s, more recent research and corresponding educational programs demonstrate its social dimensions. A collection of papers under the title *Social dimensions in learner Autonomy and language learning* (Murray, 2014) is a clear indication from the literature. Furthermore, many self-access centers have spaces or programs designed to promote social interaction. They also hold events and workshops, promote the formation of student groups, and self-access centers explicitly reach out to help learners through advising programs. In this way, autonomous learning is no longer simply viewed as independent learning.

Why is Learner Autonomy Important?

For most EFL students, learning a language requires a significant investment of time, as well as perseverance. Second language acquisition research shows us that a higher amount of time on task is generally beneficial for language development (see, e.g., Turnbull et al., 1998). By promoting autonomy, we can encourage more contact with the target language. Furthermore, as autonomous learning can include a good amount of variety in terms of learning activities and resources, it can be more intrinsically motivating than rigid, comparatively traditional forms of instruction. The more students enjoy the learning process, the more likely they are to study and use the language.

While students can learn autonomously in or outside of the classroom, learner autonomy is often associated with learning beyond the classroom. Anecdotally, students and teachers report that learning is more successful when it includes learning outside of the classroom (Nunan, 2014; Benson & Reinders, 2011). Richards (2015) lists a number of benefits associated with learning beyond the classroom, including developments in communicative and pragmatic competence, improved fluency and accuracy, extended contact with English, and enjoyment in learning (pp. 19-20). Language learning is a complex process. If students do more autonomous learning beyond the classroom, then they will have an increased number of opportunities to understand these complexities and develop more confidence using the language.

Educational psychologists also stress the importance of supporting students' autonomy. According to self-determination theory, a theory of motivation that has been rigorously applied in educational and other contexts, autonomy is an essential human need and it is a crucial component of the learning process. Ryan and Deci (2017) explain that "There are three *basic*

psychological needs, the satisfaction of which is essential to optimal development, integrity, and well-being. These are the needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness” (p. 242). In modern classrooms, competence can be included through assessments, and relatedness can be addressed by social groupings. However, autonomy is sometimes neglected. At a recent conference in Tokyo, Ryan (2018) emphasized the link between autonomy and motivation and strongly advocated for autonomy supportive teaching. Fostering autonomy is vital for students’ learning, motivation, and development.

How Can We Promote Learner Autonomy?

There are many ways that English language educators can promote learner autonomy to their students. Teachers can promote autonomous learning in and out of the classroom, and the scope of this support can range from using teacher language more carefully to offering courses which enable students to carry out self-directed learning. Below, a variety of methods will be described.

For teachers who want to begin by making small changes to support autonomous learning, one simple thing that they can do is to involve students in class decisions. For instance, they can ask the class if they would like to work in groups or individually. Teachers can also ask them how long they would like to complete an activity. Such involvement shows students that teachers value their opinion and input, and gives students a more active role in making decisions about their learning.

Another thing that teachers can do is to offer students choices. For instance, they can give them different topic options for a paper or a presentation. Students who are given more control over their assignments are more likely to be invested and motivated in them. Some activities like extensive reading or using language learning apps and websites inherently involve student choice as learners can select topics, genres, language skills and online platforms that appeal to them. Finally, surveying students about their preferences by conducting a needs analysis is a great way to find out more about what students would like to do in the class. By collecting your students’ opinions, you could make simple decisions about the class that reflects their desires or make more significant changes leading to a negotiated syllabus.

When teachers support students’ autonomous learning, they show their learners that they respect them as individuals. One simple way that they can do this is to be more mindful of the language that they use in the classroom. While it is important to carefully consider the level and complexity of the language that they use with our students, there are some small changes that

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they can make that demonstrate their support for students as individuals. For instance, teachers might ask questions such as “What is your favorite sport?” The question assumes that the students do in fact enjoy sports. This can create cognitive dissonance for students who are not interested in sports. These kinds of questions can be changed to “Do you like sports? If so, which ones?,” or “What do you think about sports?” These changes allow students with different opinions to respond honestly to the question. Another example would be to use classroom language that it is more polite and friendly. For instance, rather than using imperatives, such as “Stand up,” a teacher could use a softer approach by asking, “Could everybody please stand up?” This kind of language shows more respect for the students. Of course, body language and facial expressions also play a role in communicating the tone of the discourse and delivering classroom language with a smile may help to dissolve a sense of hierarchy in the classroom.

In a practical article, Thornton (2010) describes how classroom teachers can promote self-directed learning. She advocates a four-stage process in which students make a *Plan*, *Implement* their plan, *Monitor* their learning, and *Evaluate* their learning progress (P. I. M. E.) Thornton includes a number of practical tips for teachers new to promoting self-directed learning and she includes example learning plan documents at the end of the article.

There are of course many ways that autonomous learning can be carried out beyond the classroom. Self-access centers are a popular way of supporting students’ autonomous learning. These can range from designated rooms where students go to read books or converse in the target language, to purpose-built centers where administrative staff and advisors are hired on a full-time basis. Cotterall and Reinders (2001) offer this definition of self-access centers:

A Self Access Centre consists of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities and support) usually located in one place, and is designed to accommodate learners of different levels, styles, goals and interests. It aims to develop learner autonomy among its users (p. 1).

There are a number of groups and publications based in Japan that are dedicated to researching and sharing practices related to self-access centers, including the *Japan Association for Self-Access Learning*, *Research in Learner Autonomy Education* and *Studies in Self-Access Learning*. Links for these and other sites are listed in Appendix A.

Sometimes included in self-access centers, advising has become an increasingly popular pedagogical approach. Carson and Mynard (2012) define it as follows: “Advising in language learning involves the process and practice of helping students to direct their own paths so as to become more effective and more autonomous language learners” (p. 4). As Carson and Mynard explain, advisors draw on the discourse practices of language teaching and humanistic counseling. They go on to explain that advisors support learners and promote autonomy by “raising awareness of the language-learning process; helping learners identify goals and make learning plans; motivating, supporting, and encouraging learners; helping learners to self-evaluate and reflect on their learning,” as well as other ways (p. 16).

Appendix B contains a list of ways to promote learner autonomy that was shared during the symposium. Most of these are discussed above.

Discussion: Promoting Autonomy at Japanese Universities

For teachers who would like to include more choices for their students, it may be best to start small. From the author’s experience, most Japanese students are not accustomed to making key decisions about their own language learning, and many of them seemingly want to be told what to do and how to study. This may especially be true with first-year students, who have mostly experienced a rather teacher-centered approach to learning.

In terms of promoting learner autonomy outside of the classroom, one simple thing teachers can do is to encourage students to visit a self-access center or learning website (e.g., a YouTube channel). This gives them a focus on learning outside of the classroom. Extensive reading and extensive listening projects are another effective way to begin. Teachers can offer advice in terms of what types of materials are suitable, but students can choose the books or listening resources that appeal to them. With the author’s first year university students, we have an extensive listening project in spring semester, which is followed by an autonomous learning project in fall semester, where students set a goal, create a plan, and carry out their learning in a way that best suits their wants and needs. The autonomous learning project is broader in scope, and the spring semester helps prepare them for this by asking them to begin making decisions about their learning. By gradually introducing ways to promote autonomy, students are likely to feel more comfortable with these unfamiliar ways of learning.

Conclusion

This paper examined learner autonomy by answering three questions: what is learner autonomy?; why is learner autonomy important?; and how can we promote learner autonomy? Learner autonomy is not a simple concept. There are a number of reasons for teachers to support learners' autonomy, and many pedagogical approaches have been developed. These range from simple changes in teacher talk to the installation of sophisticated self-access centers. It is hoped that this paper will encourage teachers to experiment with these approaches in an attempt to promote learner autonomy.

BIO DATA

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APPENDIX A

Resources for Learning more about Learning Autonomy

Based in Japan

SiSAL Journal

<https://sisaljournal.org/>

RILAE

<https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/rilae/>

Relay Journal

<https://kuis.kandagaigo.ac.jp/relayjournal/>

JASAL

<https://jasalorg.com/>

JALT Learner Development SIG

<http://ld-sig.org/>

Based outside of Japan

IATEFL Learner Autonomy SIG

<https://lasig.iatefl.org/>

International Association for the Psychology of Language Learning

<https://www.iapll.com/>

International Association of Language Learning and Teaching

<https://iallt.org/>

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APPENDIX B

Ways to promote learner autonomy

1. Having students make learning plans and carry out their own individual autonomous learning
2. Asking for student input on classroom decisions (groupings, topics, etc.)
3. Conducting a needs analysis; a negotiated syllabus
4. Project learning
5. Vocabulary notebooks
6. Extensive reading
7. Introducing English language learning websites to your classes
8. Language learning spaces such as self-access centers, conversation lounges
9. Organizing (virtual) language exchanges/tandem learning projects
10. Study abroad programs
11. Advising (in self-access centers; in the classroom; during office hours)
12. Language learning diaries or language learner histories
13. Consciously using teacher language that promotes autonomy