Effects of Autonomy in an English Language Learning Class

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Abstract

Autonomy in language learning in one form or another has established itself as an important factor in student achievement and performance. This paper examines some of the effects of various aspects of autonomy that were implemented with 27 first-year university students attending an elective English course to encourage their educational growth and development in English language skills. At the end of the semester, the students participated in a general survey which rated their opinions on several aspects of the class. Parts of this survey which relate to the use of autonomy in class will be discussed in this paper. The authors also share observations citing specific cases where giving the students a certain amount of freedom resulted in outstanding performance on the final project of the course, an approximate 5-minute presentation in English. Both the results of the survey and the author observations support the notion that giving students some amount of freedom fostered autonomy, and is beneficial in a language learning context.

Key words : Autonomy, reactive autonomy, freedom, responsibility, creativity, performance

Introduction

This paper sets out to examine the effects of autonomy in a language learning context. The authors believe that some amount of autonomy in class is necessary for effective language learning to take place. Based on this belief, 27 first-year university students taking an evening elective English course were encouraged in every class to take responsibility for their own learning throughout the semester and were given a large amount of freedom in how they conducted the final project of the course, an approximate 5-minute presentation in English to be performed in front of the class. Additionally, at the end of the semester, the students participated in an anonymous survey requesting their opinions on certain aspects of the class. Parts of the survey were related with autonomy, and the results of the survey relevant to autonomy will be provided in this paper. Finally, the authors will share observations that were made and cite specific cases where students created high quality work that would not have been made if the students were held to strict rules and controls on how they conducted the final presentation.

In the next section, a short background on autonomy in language learning will be provided. More specific details of the course, final presentation, and how autonomy was used in class will then follow. The method and procedures of the survey will then be presented, followed by the results and a short discussion of the survey relating to autonomy. Finally, some specific cases will be shared that support the opinion of the authors that autonomy in the class is important in creating an atmosphere that is conducive to effective language learning.

Autonomy in Language Learning

The authors of this paper agree with Benson (2001), taking a position that autonomy is both a desirable and legitimate goal of language education. Benson also argues that three main claims made for autonomy are equally important to language learning theory and practice:

• There is a natural tendency for learners to take charge of their learning.
• Learners who appear to lack autonomy are capable of developing it given appropriate conditions and
preparations.

- Autonomous learning is more effective than non-autonomous learning.

For the purpose of this paper, only broad definitions and general overview will be presented along with certain aspects of autonomy that were implemented in the class under discussion.

The most widely cited definition of autonomy in language learning is by Holec (1981), who defined it as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3).

There have been other variations of the definition with “ability” being replaced with “capacity”, and “take charge of” being replaced with “take responsibility for” or “take control of”; however, the key idea in these definitions is the notion that autonomy is an attribute of the learner (Benson, 2006). Later, Dickenson (1987) expanded the term to also describe learning situations arguing that autonomy was the situation where the learner took responsible for all decisions and subsequent actions concerning his/her learning.

Often, autonomy has been used synonymously with “freedom”; however, most in the field of autonomy accept that freedom in learning is not the same as autonomy and that this freedom is always constrained (Little, 1996). However, many advocates of autonomy support the argument that some degree of freedom in learning is necessary if learners are to develop their autonomy (Benson, 2006). The authors of this paper agree with this notion, as they gave students that were involved with this paper certain levels of freedom in order for them to cultivate their autonomy.

In the late 1990s, many proponents of autonomy began to argue that autonomy was both a matter of degree and contextually-variable (Benson, 2006). Several writers began creating models of the different levels of autonomy. Only one relevant model will be presented here.

Littlewood (1997: 81, cited in Benson, 2006) proposed a three-stage model which involved dimensions of “language acquisition”, “learning approach”, and “personal development.” Relevant to language acquisition, autonomy included an ability of work independently with the language and to use it to communicate personal meaning. Relating to learning approach, autonomy involved the ability for learners to take charge of their own learning and to execute “personally relevant strategies.” Finally, in the context of personal development, it involved a higher goal of generalized autonomy as individuals (Littlewood, 1997, cited in Benson, 2006). It is noteworthy to mention Littlewood’s model, as it was of general relevant interest to the authors and served as a backdrop in an environment encouraging autonomy. The students that were involved with the paper were also encouraged to communicate personal meaning through English during in class discussions. Additionally, they were advised to search for and find their own strategies of learning that suited each of them the best. Moreover, one of the goals of the course that went beyond language learning was to promote the students’ personal growth, and to help in the development of their autonomy, not just as language learners, but also as contributing adults in society.

Littlewood (1999: 75) also made a distinction between two levels of autonomy in language learning. He terms these as “proactive” autonomy and “reactive” autonomy. Proactive autonomy affirms individuality and the directions that are set up are partially created by the learners themselves. Littlewood associates this type of autonomy to Western culture, and suggests that for many in the field of autonomy, this is the ultimate goal for autonomous learning.

Reactive autonomy does not have directions that are partially created by the learners; however, once directions have been established, the learners are enabled to manage and organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal (Littlewood, 1999). He states that it stimulates learners to learn vocabulary without being pushed, to re-examine past papers on their own initiative, or to organize themselves into groups to help each other with class assignments. He suggests that this type of autonomy can be a preliminary step towards proactive or even a goal in its own right. He supports this suggestion by arguing that East Asian contexts are different from Western contexts and proposes that East Asian students “will have a high level of reactive autonomy, both individually and in groups” and that “Groups of students will develop high levels of both reactive and proactive autonomy” (Littlewood, 1999: 87).

Reactive autonomy is of special interest in this paper, as it was the primary type of autonomy that was implemented in the course under discussion.
Description of the Course, the Final Project, and the Encouragement of Autonomy

The Course

The Basic Spoken English (BSE) evening course, an elective course which is currently offered by the Department of Human Communication at the University of Electro-Communications (UEC) for the Spring Semester of 2009, consisted of fifteen 90-minute classes on Wednesday evenings from 17:50 to 19:20. There were two English instructors who were responsible for the class and four teaching assistants (TAs). These TAs, UEC graduate students in their late twenties, were comprised of three men from Bangladesh, Thailand, and Vietnam, and one woman from China. All were arbitrarily considered by the instructors in communicative terms, both competent and fluent in the English language.

Twenty-seven first-year university students, 21 males and six females, attended the class. Since this class is in the first semester of the first year of university life for the students, the only English skills requirement was to have had the standard six years of English education that are offered in junior high and senior high schools. It is noteworthy to point out that contrary to the UEC day course student requirements, the UEC entrance examinations that the evening course students take do not include an English examination made by the university. There exists a widely held view among UEC faculty who are familiar with the English program that the level of English skills for UEC evening course students generally tends to be lower than that of the day course students. However, this does not necessarily mean that the evening course students have lower motivation than the day course students to learn English.

At the beginning of the semester, the students were randomly divided into six groups. Each instructor and TA became the group leader of one of the groups for the entire semester. The main theme for each group was the country of origin of the group leader. One of the instructors is Japanese, and because one of the purposes of this theme was to study about countries and cultures outside of Japan, this group leader chose the country of England as his origin since he had lived there before and had much knowledge of England and its culture.

There were two primary goals of the course. One was for the students to learn about their group leader’s country of origin. The other was to learn basic presentation skills and language, which would all culminate with a final presentation to be given by each student in front of class at the end of the semester. Although several class activities were conducted throughout the semester, there were two activities that occurred in every class throughout the semester. One was a lecture portion that covered various aspects of the final presentation and the relevant language points that are used in achieving its communicative goals. The other activity was group work and discussion, which typically followed the lecture portion, and was aimed at implementing what was presented in the lecture.

The Final Project

The final project of the course was a presentation that was to be given in front of class by each individual student. The theme of the presentation would be the group leader’s country of origin. The presentation was suggested to be from 4-5 minutes in length or from about 375 to 400 words. Using computer presentation software (i.e. PowerPoint, Keynote, etc.) was strongly encouraged, although not mandatory. A copy of the presentation speech and a copy of the software presentation in the form of a computer data file were to be submitted prior to giving the presentation.

Manner of Encouraging Autonomy

As mentioned earlier, the type of autonomy used in the BSE course in a general sense could be categorized as reactive autonomy. That is to say, the students did not participate in creating the class goals or the directions that were given in class. The course goals were predetermined by the instructors before the course began. However, the manner in which the students could accomplish the goals was largely left up to them.

For example, the students were aware that the theme for their final presentation was their respective group leader’s country of origin. However, students were encouraged to think about what aspect or topic of their group leader’s country seems most interesting

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1 To clarify the terms that are being used in this paper, “instructors” refer to the two instructors that were ultimately responsible for the class, “authors” refers to the authors of this paper, two of whom are the instructors, and “group leader” will refer to both instructors and TAs that headed the student groups.
for them to research. As Benson’s (2001) second claim stated above argues that students who lack autonomy are capable of developing it given appropriate conditions and preparations, material for scaffolding were also provided to assist and encourage student to think for themselves.

Another example of creating an environment that would promote autonomy was on how to do the final presentation. During the lecture portions of the class, specific presentation patterns of organization and presentation language were provided to the students via handouts, verbal explanations and model examples provided by the instructors. However, the students were told that what was being taught in class was just a guide to help them create their own original presentation. For instance, the following basic pattern was taught in class to help them organize their presentations:

1. Introduction: Greet the audience, introduce the topic, give a reason for choosing the topic, and give an opinion of the topic.
2. Body: Talk about three points that support your opinion.
3. Conclusion: Restate your opinion, make a closing remark, and close the presentation.

Additionally, specific language points were taught that are often used in certain parts of presentations:

1. Introduction: Good evening. Today I will talk about...I chose this topic because...I think that...
2. Body: I will talk about three main points. First, I will talk about...Second...Finally...
3. Conclusion: In conclusion, I think that...I hope that...Thank you for listening to me.

These two specific teaching activities were put in place to accommodate those students who appeared to lack autonomy. It gave them the bare essentials for accomplishing the goal of giving the final presentation. However, it was often stated that these were just guidelines and that there are several ways to conduct a good presentation. A model example was given that did not use any of the language points that were taught in class, and a copy of two different speeches covering the same topic were given to students for them to compare and contrast two different ways of presenting the same topic. It was the hope of the authors that some of the students would take advantage of the amount of freedom that was given to them and that they would autonomously create exceptionally high quality work. Later, specific cases will be presented where the authors could witness the effects of reactive autonomy.

### Study Methods and Procedures

#### The Participants

At the end of the Spring Semester of 2009, all students (six females and 21 males) from the BSE evening course at UEC participated in an anonymous survey rating their opinions on several aspects of the class.

#### The Survey

The survey, which addressed several aspects of the class, consisted of 10 statements to which the students would select the response that would most accurately describe their opinions or feelings. A copy of the actual survey that the participants received is provided in Appendix A. However, for the purposes of this paper, only statements that related to autonomy will be addressed.

#### The Procedure

The students were requested to participate in the study and were told that it was completely voluntary and anonymous. To avoid misunderstanding, the survey was done in both English and Japanese. The questionnaires were passed out and the students were told to simply check the response that best described their opinions or feelings to each statement. They were also advised that answering any of the questions was optional. Once the students were finished, the surveys were collected and the results were later calculated and analyzed.

### Survey Results

Table 1 shows the results of the responses to the statements that are relevant to this paper:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement 3: Students will perform higher if given enough freedom in how they do their presentations.</th>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Effects of Autonomy in an English Language Learning Class

Statement 4: I was given enough freedom to prepare my presentation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statement 7: The class environment had a positive effect on my performance.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statement 8: The class environment had a positive effect on my confidence in using English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Statement 10: I enjoyed the class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tally</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Agree</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly Disagree</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Short Discussion on the Results

As mentioned earlier, the instructors constantly encouraged the students to be autonomous, or in other words, to take ownership and responsibility for their own learning. The results of the survey suggest that this approach, from the students’ perspective, had a positive effect on their learning experience.

From survey statement 3, “Students will perform higher if given enough freedom in how they do their presentations”, 81 percent of the students agreed, and from statement 4, “I was given enough freedom to prepare my presentation”, 71 percent agreed. It can be inferred from these results that a strong majority thought that both having enough freedom in how they do their presentation will lead to higher performance in general and that they thought they themselves had enough freedom. The word “enough” was used because in fact, the students were not given complete freedom, as their presentation was limited to a topic within the overall theme of their respective group leader’s country. However, they could choose the specific topic by themselves according to their interest and do research on their own. Some example topics that were chosen include: comedy, marriage system, economics, politics, language, and travel.

From survey statement 7, “The class environment had a positive effect on my performance”, 89 percent of the students were positive. This result suggests that there were aspects in addition to freedom and autonomy that contributed to their performance. This notwithstanding, the authors believe that a large part of the class was aimed at creating an environment encouraging autonomy and therefore the connection could be made that giving students a large amount of freedom allowed student autonomy to develop and contributed to positive effects on their performance. Additionally, the environment fostering autonomy had contributed positively to a majority of the students’ confidence, as 75 percent of the students agreed to survey statement 8, “The class environment had a positive effect on my confidence in using English”.

From survey statement 10, “I enjoyed the class”, 89 percent of the students answered positive. This result could suggest that an environment encouraging autonomy could make the class more interesting, which could in turn be very helpful for the effective learning by the students.

Author Observations of Specific Cases

In this section, some observations will be made on three specific cases that were considered outstanding by the authors. Additionally, how in these cases the authors believe that autonomy played a major role in the performance of the students will also be discussed. These observations are reflective in nature, as no actual notes were taken at the time of the original witnessing of the specific cases, and the authors met after the semester was completed to recall the events for the purpose of this paper.

Student A

“Student A” is a 19 year old male. The country within which he chose a topic was England. After realizing that he had the freedom to choose any topic of his interest within the theme of England, he chose to
discuss the differences between Japanese and British comedians. It is noteworthy that although a list of 32 topics were given to students as possibilities, this student quickly and enthusiastically chose a topic that was not on the list.

All of the group leaders concurred that his presentation was one of the best ones for several reasons. Firstly, this student demonstrated a strong will to communicate. This was evident in his preparation and the enthusiasm with which he spoke during the presentation. Secondly, he communicated that he had strong interest in other countries and cultures. Thirdly, he specifically stated that he had a strong interest in communicating in English and didn’t care about making mistakes.

He appeared to be a highly motivated person, and motivation has often been related to autonomy. In the authors’ view, he developed his autonomy not just by choosing his own topic of interest, but also in the way he prepared for his presentation. His pattern of speech organization was quite different from the language points that were taught in class. As a matter of fact, he did not use any of the specific language points that were presented during the lecture portions of the class. Despite being different from the basic presentation model that was taught, his presentation was still cohesive, coherent, and highly engaging. Often during his presentation, he would turn to the audience asking many questions, and he also showed prowess in using the presentation software that kept attention and interest in his topic very high.

**Student B**

“Student B” is 19 year old male. He was considered by the authors as an extremely introverted person. Through several years of experience, the authors have observed that students with apparent reclusive or introverted characteristics generally participate less in class activities. If they do not like the class they may even drop out during the semester. However, it seemed that trying to create an autonomous environment generally helped seemingly unsociable students to feel better about joining class activities, which eventually could lead to better performance.

This apparently very introverted student followed the often observed pattern of not participating in class activities at the beginning of the semester. He did not interact or intermix with other students in class, even in Japanese. He remained largely quiet during group discussions. However, for the final presentation, which was primarily an individual task, he performed exceptionally well.

His topic was on World Heritage sites in Bangladesh. He provided a lot of interesting information, some of which was not even known by the group leader, whose country of origin is Bangladesh. He gave a presentation that the authors considered was among the better presentations that were conducted even though he primarily stuck with the basic presentation model and language points that were taught in class.

The authors believe that the freedom that was given to him in doing his individual presentation promoted autonomy and created a situation where he could move and operate within his own comfort zone and achieve the course goals in his own way.

**Student C**

“Student C” is a 19 year old female. She made a very unique presentation compared to others. One result of having an autonomous environment could be unique and creative performance. Students can perform according to their imagination and can apply their creativity. Sometimes, some technical skill is required, but student can obtain that skill through extra effort when they really enjoy the class.

Most of the student presentations generally had the same pattern and structure, but the one by this student was completely different. Her topic was to discuss three places in Thailand, her group leader’s country of origin. The student performed the presentation as a tourist guide on a virtual tour. She used extreme adeptness in her technical skills using the presentation software. The authors were impressed and even inquired about how to perform the technical maneuvers she used in the presentation software.

In the opinion of the authors, this was clearly something that came as a result of autonomy. This presentation was also considered one of the best performances and would have never existed if rules were enforced to control how the presentation was to be done. This presentation neither followed in any way the basic presentation pattern nor used any of the language points that were taught in class. It was purely created with a highly imaginative and creative mind that the authors argue was a direct result of giving her the freedom to do the presentation in her own way.
It could be argued that she did not demonstrate full competence in the basic presentation pattern or the target language that was taught in class lectures; however, this issue was subordinate to the more important goal set by the instructors to promote and encourage autonomy in the class.

Addressing the Limitations of the Survey and Citing Specific Cases, and Recommendations for Future Studies

Although the survey was interpreted with autonomy in mind, there are other ways in which interpretations could be made regarding the results. This is one of the weaknesses of the survey since it was not designed to address autonomy specifically, but was rather a general survey and measured various aspects of the class that were of interest to the authors. However, the authors saw a connection with the way autonomy was encouraged in class and the results of the survey. Therefore it was deemed appropriate to be included and discussed in this paper. For future studies if a survey is used, it would be more relevant if the survey questions target autonomy specifically, and also include open ended questions to gain more accurate interpretations of the data.

One weakness of using only three case studies is their ability to be generalized to a larger population. However, the strength of looking at specific cases is the quality of in depth observations and data. Additionally, the authors feel that there were several other specific cases that could also have been discussed, but for the practical purposes of this paper, it was limited to three. It is recommended that future case studies include interviews so that better discussions in future papers can ensue and stronger connections can be made to the argument for promoting and encouraging autonomy in language classrooms.

Conclusion

It is the general conclusion by the authors that learning in an autonomous environment is more effective than a non-autonomous environment. Additionally, in line with Benson (2001), autonomy is both a desirable and legitimate goal in language education. From the view point of the authors, encouraging autonomy in the BSE evening course at UEC resulted overall in students creating exceptionally high quality presentations. Additionally, these student creations would have never had been discovered if the class was conducted with strict rules and tight controls over how students were to perform the final presentation. The authors feel fortunate to have witnessed such outstanding performances by many of the students, some of whom enthusiastically put much effort and creativity in their final presentations. The key words are “their presentations”, as it was always encouraged for the students to take responsibility for their own learning, take ownership of their work, and do things, not for the instructors, but for the benefit of their own educational growth and development.

Acknowledgements

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References:
Appendix A: The Student Opinion Survey

Basic Spoken English Research Survey – July 2009

The goal of this research survey is to find out students' opinions on some aspects of the Basic Spoken English course. If you agree to take this survey, which is completely voluntary, please read the following statements and check the response that best describes your opinions. Your answers will be anonymous and confidential. (Basic Spoken Englishに対するみなさんの評価を知り、今後に活かしたいと思っています。差支えなければ、以下の質問に匿名でお答えください。個人情報は守られます。)

評価：Strongly agree（強くそう思う） Agree (そう思う) Disagree (そう思わない) Strongly disagree (全く違うと思う)

1. Lecture contents were easy to understand. (理解しやすい授業だった)
   □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree

2. Lecture handouts were confusing. (授業で配られたプリントは理解しづらかった)
   □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree

3. Students will perform higher if given enough freedom in how they do their presentations. (プレゼンテーションを行う際、準備と発表に関して可能な限り発表者の自由を認める方が、発表はうまくいくと思う)
   □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree

4. I was given enough freedom to prepare my presentation. (今回のプレゼンテーションに際し、準備と発表を自分の望む形で行えた)
   □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree

5. A relaxing environment is good for learning. (リラックスした雰囲気は授業効果を高める)
   □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree

6. The instructors created a relaxing class environment. (授業担当者はリラックスした雰囲気を作っていた)
   □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree

7. The class environment had a positive effect on my performance. (このクラスの雰囲気は、私のプレゼンテーションにプラスに働いた)
   □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree

8. The class environment had a positive effect on my confidence in using English. (この授業を通して、英語を話す自信がいくらか得られた)
   □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree

9. The class environment helped increase my interest in other cultures. (この授業を通じ、外国の文化への興味が増した)
   □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree

10. I enjoyed the class. (この授業は楽しかった)
    □ Strongly agree  □ Agree  □ Disagree  □ Strongly disagree