

Classroom Reflections on Student Autonomy

Sowing the Seeds of Learner Autonomy in a Learner-Centered Class Environment

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The aim of this study was to raise student awareness of autonomous learning practices. By introducing students to autonomous learning practices and creating opportunities to trial them in a learner-centered classroom environment, it was hoped the seeds of autonomy could be encouraged to grow.

Rationale

The goals of autonomy in an educational context are to enable each learner to progress at their own pace to achieve pre-set goals. Autonomy programs are often initiated and operated on the assumption that the approach will naturally be put into practice by students and accelerate their progress. Additionally, students are expected to spontaneously react in a positive manner to these changes. The reality is that not all students are equipped—or even naturally inclined—to take an autonomous approach to their own studies and learning. In this case study, the teacher-researcher took a step-by-step approach to introducing autonomous practices to students to gain their understanding and acceptance.

Case Study Class

The object of this study was a third year class of thirteen (11 female, 2 male) mixed-level English majors at a four-year university. The objective of the class was to develop their communicative English skills. The class was structured as a learner-centered class. The course content, seating arrangements, class procedures and assessment procedures were negotiated with students and remained flexible as the semester progressed.

Autonomy

In this class, the elements of autonomy that I strove to develop in my students included:

- developing stronger self-awareness of their abilities and needs
- accepting circumstances positively
- self-discipline to do what needs to be done
- regulate their own behavior as needs changed
- to think for themselves and to act in their own best interest

Procedure

At the beginning of the semester students introduced to the course program and the goals the teacher desired to reach with regard to developing learner autonomy. The broad goals of the program, based on Griffiee (1995), were to enable students:

1. to define their own learning deficits and needs,

2. to develop an awareness of their own learning styles,
3. to be able to use various learning strategies to enhance learning,
4. to set their own learning goals,
5. to negotiate the curriculum, determine the content and organize their learning activities,
6. to give appropriate feedback so their learning can be evaluated,
7. to find motivation to continue working outside of class hours,
8. to evaluate the accomplishment of the learning goals they negotiated with their teacher.

The ultimate goal of this program was to raise student awareness of themselves as language learners and to allow them to experience different approaches to learning that may benefit them in the future.

The students were given a skills inventory and a survey on what kinds of study skills they employed, and were asked to self-evaluate themselves. For most students, this was the first time they had ever been asked to think about their abilities and how they studied. The teacher then introduced the concept of autonomy and how developing various learning strategies can help students become better language learners. The teacher then talked to students individually about their skills inventory and study skills survey and offered advice and

suggestions for developing study plans. The students were then asked to form groups of four and determine which units of the course textbook (“Milestones”) they’d prefer to study during the semester as well as suggestions for how their study should be evaluated.

During the semester, students were encouraged to take some autonomous steps. They were encouraged to try different types of approaches with the topics selected and to exchange ideas with other students about topics/materials and study approaches. The teacher continuously monitored the students’ work and offered advice when students seemed stalled.

At the end of the semester, the teacher asked students to reflect on their achievement of their class goals. The teacher discussed with individual students their progress, and on what grade they thought they have earned. The final assessment was awarded based on in-class activity/ participation, their individual class journals containing their semester’s work/study, and a final small-group discussion where teacher was only an observer.

The students were also asked to again complete the survey on what kinds of study skills they employed during the semester and to provide feedback on the semester program.

Survey of study skills employed

The following results were obtained from the study skills survey, showing the number of students who checked

each item both before and after the autonomy program was implemented :

Table 1: Results of Study Skills Survey

Skill	Before	After
Study during class	5	11
Doing assigned homework	10	13
Reading the text	6	11
Checking dictionaries	9	13
Revision by myself	6	13
Doing extra homework	7	13
Note taking	8	10
Study in library	0	7
Video/movies	0	10
Practice speaking skills	0	6
Talking to teacher	1	9
Asking teacher questions	0	6
Cramming	2	0
Reading English newspapers	0	3
Listening to radio	1	4
Watching English TV programs	1	9
Writing letters	0	7
Listening to study cassettes	0	5
Memory	7	5
Do practice tests	1	4
Reading other books	1	6
Reading magazines	0	6

Student feedback

Students' comments on the feedback form included the following:

"I agree with Gregory's way now. Learning with joy is important."

"The goal of this class is to realize (our) own ability of English and then try to get better ability."

"This is a special class for me, and Greg teach us various things in English. So I think it helps me to show my pride."

"If students lose their motivation or forget their goals, they will speak Japanese and forget the meaning of this class."

"Students have enthusiasm to improve their ability of English and keep it all the way."

"One of the goals of this class is how much joy of learning and confidence in English remain in students."

"This class has gone forward by every student, not (the) teacher. The teacher only helps us when the students need help. The purpose of this class is not for grade but for myself."

From these comments, one could conclude that the semester program did indeed achieve its goal of raising student awareness of themselves as learners.

Suggestions for fostering positive outcomes

For teachers considering implementation of a similar type of autonomy program, the following suggestions are offered as to how students can be helped to stay on track to achieve their personal goals as well as course goals:

1. Make sure students are fully aware of all the resources available to them and how these may be accessed and used. There are many instances where students have felt lost or out of touch with the program because they were unsure what to do with the resources available to them.
2. Make a starting point. As with any new approach, students first need to learn to crawl before learning to walk or run. Teachers should offer each student some initial guidance in getting started, then monitor their progress and then offer counseling and advice to those who need it. A good starting point is usually a set of diagnostic exercises to help students appraise where their strengths and weaknesses are.
3. Goal setting needs a particular focus. Some students tend to set very low goals with the idea that achieving them satisfies the requirements of the program. To overcome this problem, most students will initially require guidance in how to set realistic but challenging goals. The goals they set for themselves should give them a focus for the

- direction of their studies. Fortunately, goal setting becomes much easier with experience.
4. Once goals are set, students need to decide how to work to achieve them. This is where learning strategies fit in the picture. Numerous factors exist to explain individual differences in strategy preferences and selection and it is important for teachers to recognize these differences (O'Dowd, 1999). It is important to note that learners at different levels of proficiency are likely to use different kinds of strategies, depending in part on the kinds of skills they are trying to develop and the resources they will use.
 5. Provide guidelines for in-class activities, i.e. make 'room rules'. Autonomy is not an excuse for a free-for-all atmosphere in the classroom; a proper learning environment needs to be maintained for the sake of all learners. Room rules set the working parameters for progress and alert teachers when things are going sour, e.g., when students don't understand what to do or how to do it. Rules may include normal practices such as keeping silent when doing certain activities and asking the teacher for help when they experience difficulties or doubt, to general items related to application and adherence to the processes, and time limits. It is very important that students understand that the rules established are there to help them achieve their learning goals.
 6. The teacher needs to focus on how their own role and perceptions must change. In order to achieve an increasing degree of student autonomy in the classroom, teachers may have to alter their views on the role students' play in their learning process, how both view classroom interactions, and how the teacher's own role within the entire framework is not diminished by autonomy.

Also, the following important considerations need to be remembered throughout the program:

- in a learner-centered class, time is needed to develop autonomous practices,
- step-by-step instruction may be needed initially to get the ball rolling,
- some students may continually need direct guidance,
- students have to learn autonomy is a process, not a quick jump,
- one-on-one teacher/student discussion is necessary to keep learning on track,
- monitoring progress must be continuous; lapses can cause student anxiety,
- learner expectations may sometimes not be met, but this is no reason to stop trying.

Conclusion

In this case studies the focus was on preparing students for autonomous learning in a student-centered program. Analysis of the findings and results highlight some of the important issues and rationales involved in developing an autonomy program for learners. Finally, suggestions have been given as a guide to develop better procedures in the critical initial stages of program implementation. Of course, continual experimentation and evaluation are needed to further fine-tune the mechanisms for the process to reach what could be regarded its best practice.

It should now be clear that, as more teachers aspire to develop autonomy programs for their students,

more focus needs to be given to the development of the learner in the process of acquiring language skills. This must inevitably involve teachers guiding students towards the following:

- effective needs-analysis
- self-diagnosis of strengths and weaknesses
- the planning of objectives and approaches
- deciding direction
- experimentation with different learning strategies
- evaluation of their own learning progress.

For most students autonomy doesn't come naturally, but it can certainly be developed.

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