Language Learning as a Lifelong Endeavor: Fostering Autonomy in the Language Classroom by Adapting Textbook Materials

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All language courses come to an end, but the learning still needs to continue, and what teachers must do is to prepare learners to become autonomous so that they can develop into becoming life-long, independent learners. In fact, various approaches have been taken to promote learner autonomy. This presentation proposes a framework in which conventional textbook materials could be adapted to foster the concept in an institutionalized setting, a traditional language classroom.

学習者自律は近年の言語教育、学習分野で注目を集めていることは言うまでもないが、その概念はコンテキストや文化的側面によって様々である。従って、その実践方法もおのずと異なってくるものと考える。本章では学習者の自律性を向上させる一つの案として、教科書への新たなアプローチを提案するものである。

The subject for this year's JALT Conference revolves around the theme "language learning for life". Learning a language is indeed a never-ending endeavor where the process of learning is dynamic, ever evolving, and never static. Whether you are a native or non-native speaker of English, a teacher or a learner, you find yourself constantly discovering or learning something about the language or language learning.

But, at the same time, if you are teaching or learning in a formal setting, you will realize that one thing is for certain: there is an end to all language programs. However, although all language courses come to an end, it is, of course, unrealistic to assume that students have learned everything of the language by the end of any given program. Learning surely needs to continue, but what can we, as teachers, do?

One obvious answer is that we should prepare students to become independent learners so that that they can continue learning even after the course. In line with Nunan (2000), if we regard language learning as a life–long endeavor, we are able to conceptualize language learning as a 'learning career', where the main objective is to guide the students in becoming life-long independent learners. In such a context, the questions that arise are: How far, and in what ways, can teachers prepare the learners for a successful 'learning career'? In this paper, the concept of learner autonomy will be introduced as a possible answer to these questions.

If learner autonomy can be viewed as an alternative method to language education, this implies that teachers and educational institutions should attempt to facilitate autonomy by creating an environment that will allow learners to engage in a mode of learning in which this capacity might develop.

In fact, over the past two decades or so, various approaches and practices have been adopted to encourage learner autonomy in language education. Some have taken advantage of technological advancements such as the use of self-access centers or by incorporating CALL programs into the curriculum --- all of them, when applied and implemented appropriately, can be highly conducive in encouraging autonomous learning. However, in this paper, the aim is to explore the potential of promoting learner autonomy in the conventional setting of a classroom with the learner, the teacher and the conventional teaching material. First, a brief account of the theoretical understanding of autonomy in language education will be presented. Following this, a framework will be proposed in which our most common teaching resource, the textbook, can be utilized to foster the concept of autonomy.

Towards a Definition?

Autonomy has been described in a number of different ways in connection with language learning, and one of the frequently cited definitions can be found in Holec's report to the Council of Europe, where he defines autonomy as: "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1988, p. 3). Although Holec's description of autonomy has been cited as a common reference point in the literature, there are different interpretations as to what "the ability to take charge" entails, leaving an uncomfortable impression that autonomy is a multifaceted concept. Over the years, attempts have been made to develop a more systematic and comprehensive theoretical model on the concept such as Benson's model of 1997 or, more recently, Oxford's framework (2003) which outlines four perspectives on autonomy. However, as Benson (2004) himself has recently noted at a conference, the concept of autonomy has been expanded and re-interpreted through being subject to different contexts and practices, and, thus, suggests that the focus of debate should now shift from being merely a discussion concerning what autonomy *is*, to one based on the issue of what autonomy is *for*: "we have this concept in front of us and the problem is to understand how it got here, and what purposes is serves –why autonomy and why now?" (p. 30). Benson emphasizes the need for us to see beyond the cognitive and linguistic dimensions of learning, and proposes a more socially informed approach to language education. Whatever the outcome of the final representation, it is important for us to have the flexibility to encompass the various dimensions of learner autonomy, and, as far as its application is concerned, to be able to take into account the characteristics of each different learning culture. In other words, there is a need to formulate a universally accepted description of the concept of autonomy, but its implementation should be according to each particular context.

Keeping the theoretical aspect in mind, the notion of autonomy in this paper is basically understood as a capacity to exercise control over one's own learning. In principle, autonomous learners are able to take on active roles in the

learning process, initiating and generating new ideas rather than simply reacting to various stimuli. They are able to independently choose aims and purposes and set goals; choose materials, methods and tasks; exercise choice and purpose in organizing and executing the chosen tasks; and, finally, they are capable of choosing their own criteria for evaluation.

Basic Assumptions for the Framework

The framework is founded on (a) three basic assumptions of autonomy and (b) the notion of reflection. Earlier in this paper, the importance of arriving at a broader description of the concept of autonomy was noted. Indeed, Sinclair (2000) succinctly provides a taxonomy of thirteen areas of learner autonomy. Although the listing is by no means exhaustive, three areas that appear to be more relevant to the immediate concerns of the theme of this paper will be addressed.

These three basic assumptions are as follows:

Assumption 1. The capacity and willingness of learners to take control of their own learning is not necessarily innate.

Learners do not come to the task of language learning as autonomous learners. They do not come into the classroom with the natural ability to make choices about what to learn, how to learn it, and when to learn it. Such ability is not inborn, but must be acquired. The learners need to be nurtured in an environment where they can be systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn it.

Assumption 2. Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal

This suggests that autonomy is not a goal to be met, but a goal to be pursued. It shows that autonomy is a dynamic process rather than a static product that can be reached once and for all. It also implies that promoting learner autonomy is always subject to a certain degree of constraint by rules, the cultural and political aspects of the society of which one is a part (Benson, 1997). Furthermore, it entails the idea that learner autonomy cannot be taught in the traditional sense, but only can be promoted. It is also a matter of empowering learners so that they are in a better position to take on more responsibility for their own learning (Sinclair, McGrath & Lamb, 2001).

Assumption 3. There are degrees of autonomy

Underpinning this is the notion that autonomy is not an all or nothing concept, but a relative matter. The concept includes the idea that there are certain levels in autonomy (Little, 1996; Littlewood, 1996, etc.). The extent to which it can be developed will be subject to the constraints imposed on the learner such as "the psychological and cognitive make-up of the learner as well as the cultural, social and educational context in which learning takes place" (Nunan, 1997, p. 195).

The notion of reflection also plays a pivotal role in forming the basis of the framework.

Some of the classical examples of pedagogical means to foster autonomy in formal settings include Dam's (1995) famous experiment at secondary schools in Denmark or Huttunen's (1988) case at a secondary level in Finland, where a three-stage model was employed in developing autonomy. Both Dam and Huttunen's projects are forms of a curriculum-based approach to autonomy. Nunan (1997), on

the other hand, proposes a 5-level model aimed at promoting learner autonomy through the use of materials. The instances above are all examples of practices that illustrate how autonomy in language learning can be promoted in an institutionalized context. However, whether it is through the curriculum, resources or any other practice, the crucial factor common to all cases lies in the *manner* in which the tasks are to be carried out in the classroom.

For instance, let us consider a case where materials provide the main source of instruction. If learners were merely required to complete the tasks set out by the teacher without any discussion, this would suggest a situation where the teacher had completely ignored the learner – training potential of the task. To make the task explicit to the learners it should include "using a questioning approach which encourages *reflection*, discussion and a sharing of ideas" (Sinclair, 1996, p. 157). It is through this *learning process* that the learning – training potential becomes transparent, and a change in the learners' perception towards the learning process occurs.

Furthermore, reflection in the learning process allows learners to make informed choices: that is, decisions based on experience. One way to ensure that learners develop such ability is by providing them with opportunities to discuss and reflect upon their choices so that a learning process consisting of a flowing cycle of decision-action-review emerges. Here, the actual task itself is less important than the act of choosing. What is of concern lies in the process of the act that leads up to making the choice. Giving learners opportunities to reflect on their learning, they are at the same time provided with the means to sensitize themselves to the nature of the learning process. It is through this process that the learners develop different attitudes and approaches to learning, which will, in turn generate positive changes in their perception towards language learning. Before proceeding, the relationship between reflection and strategy training will be explored since reflection also plays a pivotal role in strategy training, including learning to learn skills.

Skills or strategies are generally thought of as instrumental techniques such as vocabulary-learning strategies, but it must be emphasized that fostering and developing autonomy cannot be acquired through a set of skills or strategies alone (Dickinson 1987; Dickinson & Carver, 1981; Edge & Wharton, 1998; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989, etc). For it is obvious that even if learners possess a vast array of skills, they will not be able to use them in an autonomous way. Certain 'attitudes' need to be embedded within the learners. Such an attitude can only be developed when the learners' psychological orientation towards their own learning can be transformed. In fact, it is through the process of acquiring skills and strategies that there evolves a deep change in the learners' psychological orientation towards the learning process and the content of learning. Consequently, the transformation of one's own learning occurs. There seems to occur a paradigm shift in the learners' attitude towards their own learning, where the learner's view of learning is not one simply aimed at completion of tasks set by others, but one in which knowledge is constructed for oneself.

Attempting to Propose a Framework

The previous discussion on the importance of the reflective process in learning supports the proposal of a framework of the learning process in which teachers can incorporate opportunities for more learner involvement. This scheme allows learners to:

1. Stage 1: consider what they need to prepare for an activity

2. Stage 2: perform the activity or task

3. Stage 3: review and assess what has been done

Labeling each stage in the learning process as Plan, Action, and Review respectively, an on-going cycle of learning can be illustrated as follows (Figure 1)

Figure 1. Plan-Action –Review Model
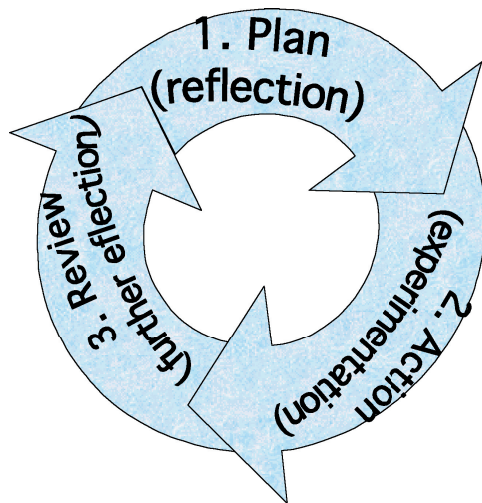
The arrows overlap to indicate that there is a continuous flow of learning in progress. At times, the distinction between the three stages may be not be as clear-cut as one would like, since the progression from one particular area to the other can merge. In particular, the transition from Stage 1 (Review) to Stage 3 (Plan) may, at times, be problematic. Planning will frequently require one to reflect, whether consciously or unconsciously , on previous experiences. In this framework, Plan is thus understood in the broad sense of the term. The three-stage scheme of Plan-Action-Review can also be identified as reflection (Plan), experimentation (Action), and further reflection (Review) (see Figure 1).

Another component crucial to the framework is based on understanding that there are degrees of autonomy (as in Assumption 3). Although, in a sense, it is ironic that increased guidance from the teacher is more effective in facilitating learner autonomy, the following five-stage model of implementation (which is based on Nunan's scheme mentioned earlier in this paper) is suggested. Under this scheme, the five different levels allow learners to gradually increase the degree of autonomy in their learning. Instead of throwing the students into deep water, I have found that providing support and guidance as necessary, especially at the initial stages, proves to be a more effective, and makes tasks less daunting for the learners. This seems to be particularly true in the Japanese context where the learners have been accustomed to a "teacher front learning culture". It is also interesting to note from observations and interviews with students that the process from one level to the next is not always a linear one.

Figure 2. Developing Autonomy in the Classroom: Levels of Implementation

Stage	Description
Level 1 Raising Awareness	Learners attempt to explore/identify pedagogical goals and the strategic implications of the tasks. Being able to state their reasons for their choices is important in developing attitudes of self-direction and autonomy.
Level 2 Participation	Learners are given several tasks on the same topic and aim to choose from them. They select their own goals from the range of alternatives offered. The important point here is to state the reasons for their choices. Here, the act of choosing is more important than the actual tasks themselves.
Level 3 Involvement	Learners attempt to adapt and modify goals, content and learning tasks according to their preference and needs by adapting or supplementing textbook materials. Again, giving their reasons for the changes is important.
Level 4 Production	Learners are now finally asked to set their own goals, content and learning tasks. Incorporating language learning projects such as listening to songs, watching movies, reading English newspapers, etc.
Level 5 Connection	Learners go beyond the classroom by making links with the world beyond. At this level, learners can be regarded as being well on their way towards becoming autonomous in their attitudes towards learning a language.

Based on Nunan, D. (1997).

Some Examples

Using the Plan-Action-Review framework and by integrating it with the five-level model above (Figure 2), the following will illustrate how textbook materials can be adapted to offer learners more opportunities to initiate and to produce more creative work. Limit in space will only permit a brief description, but here are some examples to show how the framework can actually be used in the classroom.

Level 1: Raising Awareness

At this exploratory stage, the purpose is to explore/ identify pedagogical goals and strategic implications of the tasks.

Level 2: Participation

The primary difference between Level 1 and Level 2 lies in the tasks set out in the PLAN section. Here at Level 2 learners are given several activities on the same topic to choose from. They will receive possibly one or two tasks from the textbook and others supplied by the teacher. Then, they select their own tasks from the range of alternatives offered. Since the act of choosing is as important as the actual tasks themselves, learners should be encouraged to make the reasons for their choices explicit.

Figure 3. An Example at Level 1: Raising Awareness (Ss=students)

Level 1 Raising Awareness	Topic: Talking about summer vacation experiences. Aim: Using the simple past tense; expressions	
1.Plan	1. Ss listen /read/watch several types of passages / video clips (including ones from the textbook) 2. Ss identify the correct passage/ clip that uses the past tense and talks about the summer. 3. Ss group words, phrases, expressions related to the topic or the goals and/or aims of the materials. 4. Discuss in groups the purpose of the materials: it's goal and aim.	*how did they know? *what were the clues? (indicate them. Work individually, in groups / in pairs) * any observations they noticed?
2.Action	1. Work on the prescribed tasks in the textbook.	
3. Review	1. Ss evaluate their performance. 2. Discuss errors 3. Discuss possible reasons 4. Discuss what they can do to correct their mistakes 5. Are there any other ways they could study	*how did you do? *how useful is this type of English to you? *can work individually/in groups/in pairs.

Figure 4. An Example at Level 2: Participation (Ss=students)

Level 2 Participation	Topic: Food Aim: Task A: (from the textbook) Ordering Food at a restaurant. Task B: Health and Food. Task C: Recipes. Task D: Food Around the World	
1.Plan	1. Ss explore/ identify pedagogical goals and strategic implications of the tasks. 2. Ss choose either Task A, B, C, or D.	* what are the aims / goals of each task? * which task did you choose? * why?
2.Action	1.Ss work on their respective tasks.	
3. Review	1.Ss evaluate their performance. 2.Discuss errors 3.Discuss possible reasons 4.Discuss what they can do to correct their mistakes. 5.Are there any other ways they could study?	*how did you do? *how interesting was the extract? *how can you improve your performance? *can work individually/in groups/in pairs.

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Figure 5. An Example at Level 3: Involvement (Ss=students)

Level 3 Involvement	Topic: Making Vacation Plans	
1.Plan	1. Ss explore/ identify pedagogical goals and strategic implications of the task in the textbook. 2. Ss set their own goals according to their needs/ preference. 3. Ss modify the task.	* what are the aims / goals for of the task? *what are your reasons for the modifications.
2.Action	1.Ss work on their tasks.	
3. Review	1.Ss evaluate their performance. 2.Discuss errors 3.Discuss possible reasons 4.Discuss what they can do to correct their mistakes. 5.Are there any other ways they could study?	*how did you do? *how interesting was the extract? *how useful is this type of English to you? *how can you improve your performance? *can work individually/in groups/in pairs.

Level 3: Involvement

At this stage, learners attempt to adapt and modify goals, content and learning tasks according to their needs or preferences by supplementing textbook materials. Again, being able to present the reasons for any modifications are important for it will enable learners to be aware of their errors, which will encourage them to review and monitor their own work more carefully. By going through such a process, the learners will be able to take more responsibility for their work as well as developing self-help strategies to make their corrections.

Level 4: Production

This is an open-ended stage. The learners are asked to set their own goals, content and learning tasks. Incorporating language learning projects such as watching movies, reading English newspapers, listening to songs, etc. are some of the popular projects that students have worked on in my lessons. The more one moves towards the higher levels of independence, the more one appears to move away from teacher (or textbook) produced materials and towards learner-produced materials. This is a healthy course of development: the more the materials are learner-produced, the more they help break down the barrier between the classroom and the world beyond.

Level 5: Connection

At this final stage, the students attempt to transcend the classroom, trying to link what they have learned with the actual world. At this level, learners are well on the way to becoming truly autonomous in their attitudes towards language learning.

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Limitations and Conclusion

The examples provided above are obviously neither comprehensive nor exhaustive. Nor are they particularly innovative since I am sure many teachers have used similar activities in their own classrooms. However, the novelty of the approach lies in its attempt to propose a framework to design materials that blend into the regular curriculum, allowing for differences in approaches to learning. There has been, over the past several years, an increasing number of textbooks that include measures to encourage strategy training or skills learning. However, there is still a need for learners to go through a systematic process in order to build new attitudes of responsibility for their learning. It must be noted that nurturing this sense of responsibility in the learners and moving towards learner autonomy is not an overnight process, but one that requires gradual development through several stages.

In Japan, autonomous learning as an educational goal is being actively promoted at the level of national policy. The next step would be to emphasize its significance in language education by viewing language learning as a 'learning career' that does not end with the conclusion of the last unit of a language program. Since learner autonomy involves a change in learners' perception towards learning itself, it will not only affect learners' beliefs about teachers and their role and about themselves as learners and their role, but will also have impact upon their attitudes towards feedback, language learning, and learning in general. This would suggest that developing learner autonomy cannot be accomplished by a top-down process alone, but that it will also need to be bottom – up as well. It is a mutual process that needs to work from both directions: an awareness that is an essential foundation of learner autonomy.

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