Reading English websites for pleasure: Learner autonomy and language improvement

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Yang (2001) examined the benefits of learner autonomy and found that autonomous learners are willing to exert great effort. This study focuses on students' reading processes when reading English language websites for pleasure. It was found that students could improve their language proficiency as a result. Autonomous learners set their own learning goals and they exploit reading strategies to achieve these goals. This study also shows that students benefited from social support.

本調査は、学生が気楽（自発的）に英語のウエブ・サイトを読む場合の読解プロセスに焦点をあて、その自主性の利点を考察した結果、自発的な学習者は、必要があれば進んで学ぶ気持ちを抱いていることを発見した。結論として、自主的に学ぶ学生は英語能力を伸ばすことができたのである。自主的な学習者は自分で学ぶ目標を設け、その目標を達成するために、reading strategiesを効果的に利用する。この論文ではまた、教師や友人からの助言が学生にとって有用であることを示すものである。

Hobrom (2004) states that there is a perceived relationship between technology and learner autonomy. Resources from the Internet offer numerous texts, visuals, and audio materials and are also interactive and offer ready-made self-access materials available without limitations of time and place. This paper investigates the relationship between learner autonomy and the manner in which Thai students at Thammasat University, Bangkok, read English language websites for pleasure. The paper is divided into: previous studies, research questions, participants, research methodology, findings, and discussion.

Previous studies

Benson (2001) has examined the relationship between technology and learner autonomy. Similarly, according to Hobrom (2004), learners become increasingly empowered when using technology because they develop self-discipline and confidence through increased responsibility for their own learning process. The following review will be divided into two parts: 1) learner autonomy and 2) the relationship between online resource and learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy

Dickinson (1992), Naiman et al. (1978), and Yang (2001), suggest that learner autonomy helps students to learn better because it promotes reflectivity and self-awareness. Learner autonomy includes

- Student ability to create their own learning goals
- Student persistence
- Student use of metacognitive strategies
- Student use of social strategies

Student ability to create their own learning goals

Little (1990) contends that learner autonomy originates by the students' acceptance of responsibility for their own learning, creating their own learning goals and independently working toward their accomplishment. As Holec (1981) claims, autonomy is the "ability to take charge of one's learning" (p.3). Moreover, according to Locke (1996), and Locke and Latham, (1990, 2002), people with goals outperform those without goals and a person performs better with a goal than without a goal. So people who create goals for themselves would perform better than those who do not create goals.

Gollwitzer (1999) differentiates specific goals and "do your best goals." Specific goals are more effective. He further claims that better performance is observed when learners set themselves specific goals as compared with vague goals.

Student persistence

Autonomous learners tend to be persistent when they face difficulties unless they believe they can reach desired goals through their own efforts (Ozer and Bandura, 1990). They will have little incentive to persevere in the face of difficulties. Thus, students who believe that they have the ability to learn tend to reject negative thoughts about themselves or their abilities. In contrast, those who believe that they are incapable of producing a desired effect or result tend to attribute the poor result to their inability to perform and easily tend to give up on the tasks. In this way, self-efficacy[1] affects an individual's ability to deal with difficult situations, and it also affects individual aspirations, analytical thinking, and perseverance in the face of failure (Bandura et al., 2001).

Student use of metacognitive strategies

According to Gordon and Braun (1985), metacognition is "an awareness of our own cognitive processes (thinking and learning activities) or knowing about what we know" (p.

2). Autonomous learners "consider the point of the learning activity, the purpose of personal endeavors, and become aware that different outcomes will require different learning activities" (pp. 2-3).

Student use of social strategies

Autonomous learners ask questions to verify their understanding and ask for help in doing a language task. Hobrom (2004), for example, emphasizes that promoting learner autonomy does not mean that instructors would become able to abandon their teaching responsibilities. On the contrary, autonomous learners tend to seek support from more capable persons to help them with learning tasks.

Online resource and learner autonomy

Egbert, Chao, and Hanson-Smith (1999) found that online resources also provide an excellent language learning environment for autonomous learners. The reason is that students tend to be attentive during the learning process. Schofield and Davidson (2002) looked at six kinds of outcomes of the use of online resources that students experienced:

> *[E]nhanced enjoyment and motivation, a better understanding of both computing and the Internet, a greater ability to produce work of quality, more access to career information and opportunities, exposure to a broader range of perspectives and experiences, and improved reading skills in both English and foreign languages* (p. 209).

Research questions

The study here investigated the following research questions:

1. How much time do students spend reading English websites on their own? Are students who spend a lot of time reading on the web more autonomous learners?
2. Does the students' time spent reading English websites for pleasure correlate with language skill improvement?
3. Do the students' reading attitudes influence the amount of time they read on the Web?
4. What are some of the students' strategies of reading on the web?

Participants

The participants were forty-five students who were taking reading courses at Thammasat University, Bangkok, Thailand in three intact classes of students from several faculties: the Faculty of Liberal Arts, Faculty of Commerce and Accountancy, Faculty of Liberal Science, Faculty of Law, Faculty of Economics, and the Faculty of Journalism.

Research methodology

Triangulation

The study used various methods of data acquisition: TOEFL tests, questionnaires, interviews, diaries of Web usage and observations of net use. I hoped in this way to reduce or eliminate the threats to validity as suggested for

triangulation. As defined by Maxwell (1996), triangulation is "collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings, using a variety of methods" (p.93) and the results of the study here arise from an integration of the various data.

TOEFL test

The reading part of the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) was used in this study. It was used in the pretest to establish the students' English proficiency at the beginning of the semester. It was also used in the posttest to show the students' proficiency at the end of the semester.

Questionnaires

In addition to the standardized test (TOEFL), I used a questionnaire with questions about the amount of time students read for pleasure on the Web. I also asked about the students' attitudes toward reading for pleasure in English, as well as their metacognitive strategies when accessing a number of the Web elements.

Interviews

The study used interviews to determine participant beliefs and attitudes concerning reading English websites for pleasure. To collect information from the participants, I asked open-ended questions. Rather than imposing a set of answer categories such as agree, disagree or strongly disagree, I used open-ended questions so that the participants could elaborate as much as necessary.

Diary of web usage

I asked the students to keep a diary of their Web usage including the following information:

1. The specific URL of websites (If initial access was through a search engine, they were to indicate their keyword(s))
2. An indication of the objectives in visiting the website
3. A description of how they read the website, skimming, scanning, or reading in detail
4. An indication how much time they spent at the website

Observations

I asked the students to demonstrate actual Web surfing, and made short notes of what I noticed. I immediately expanded the notes into field notes by adding details as well as interpretation when I had the opportunity to do so (usually at the end of the day). See figure 1.

Observation chart

Date/ Time	Observations	Interpretation (Connect back to my research question)

Figure 1. Observation chart used in this study.

Findings and discussion

Answer to research question 1

The students varied widely in terms of the amount of time they spent reading English websites for pleasure (Table 1).

Table 1. Time students spent reading English websites for pleasure

Groups of the students	N	Percent
Students who read less than 30 minutes per week	3	6.7
Students who read 30 minutes to 1 hour per week	6	13.3
Students who read about 1 hour per week	9	20.0
Students who read 2-3 hours per week	13	28.8
Students who read 4-5 hours per week	5	11.1
Students who read more than 5 hours per week	9	20.0
TOTAL	45	100

Autonomous learners tend to set their own learning objectives

According to Little (1991), autonomous learners are able to set their own learning aims. In this study, students who read more were more likely to have specific purposes. Nitaya, one of the students in the study, would like to study at a TEFL program. She very often noted down in her diary that she went to websites that contained information on TESOL. For example,

August 18, 2005

Website: www.google.com > "department" "English" > http://www.engl.virginia.edu/graduatestudents/coursedescriptions/gradsp06.htm

Purpose: To find information on a TEFL program

Comment: This website is not what I want. I want to find a TEFL course, not a program in literature

Time spent: 20 minutes

August 22

Website: www.google.com > "master" "TEFL"

http://www.american.edu/tesol/MIP.html

Purpose: To find information on a TEFL course

Comment: This website seems to be what I want. However, only American citizens are eligible for this course

Time spent: 45 minutes

August 25

Website: www.google.com > "master" "TEFL"

http://www.ndu.edu.lb/rfr.htm? http://www.ndu.edu.lb/academics/fhum/dete/ma_TEFL.htm

Purpose: To find information on a TEFL program

Comment: This website seems to be what I want. However, this is not a place I would like to go to.

Time spent: 1 hour

August 28

Website: www.google.com > "master" "TEFL"

http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/academic/masters/

Purpose: To find information on a TEFL program

Comment: This seems to be a place I would like to go to.

Time spent: 30 minutes

August 30

Website: http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/academic/masters/>deadline

Purpose: To find information on deadlines for application

Comment: I now have some idea of when to apply.

Time spent: 1 hour

Nitaya had a specific purpose and that led her to visit websites of the same subject frequently. Similarly, Bubpa, another student, reported that she visited websites on "Rain," a famous Korean movie star, almost every day because she would like to know the most recent news about him.

> My close friend is very interested in him. We talk about him almost every day. Thus, I need to read about him so that I have something to contribute when we discuss him and the TV series at school.

In conclusion, having specific purposes helped students to read more. These students had their own specific goals.

Students were persistent

Students who read more tended to be more persistent than those who read less. In the above example, Nitaya did not get the information she wanted immediately. She had to go back to the search engine and modify her search several times until she got the information she wanted.

Bandura (1997) contends that students who are self-efficacious are motivated to exert more effort over the task at hand. They are self-confident and self-sufficient. They are independent and have a positive self-concept. Students who read more scored significantly higher than students who read less (Table 2).

Table 2. Students' self-efficacy

		N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Self-efficacy	Less than 2 hours a week	17	12.06	9	14
	2 hours a week or more	28	13.68	10	17
	Total	45	13.07	9	17

The ANOVA test shows that the difference was statistically significant $F(1,43)=9.393$. The students who had self-efficacy tend to read more than the students who lacked this quality.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Self-efficacy	Between Groups	27.752	1	27.752	9.393	.004
	Within Groups	127.048	43	2.955		
	Total	154.800	44			

Further, students who read more reported that they were confident in their technological ability. They were certain that they could find the information they wanted from the Internet even if they did not find the information immediately. Students who read less, on the other hand, tended to easily give up looking for information, and were not persistent in finding what they wanted.

Moreover, students who believed that they were capable of producing a desired effect or result tended to have strategies to lower their anxiety. Malinee, a participant in this study, was a good reader. She read frequently and it seemed that she enjoyed the activity. When I asked her whether she was a "perfect" reader who understood everything in the reading passage, she said

> No, I don't think that I'm a perfect reader. I make mistakes, quite often too. However, I think that making mistakes is a process of learning. If I never begin, then, I would never be able to read anything at all.

Her statements suggested that one useful strategy to lower anxiety is to think that making mistake is a natural process of learning. Moreover, since the focus of this study was voluntary reading of English language websites, some students said that this activity was not stressful. Linchong, for instance, said that

> Reading on the web for pleasure is reading on my own. It is unrelated with course work or grades. I'm not going to be judged or looked down upon if I misunderstand the content.

In addition, autonomous students tended to praise themselves when they understood the websites very well. Linchong went on to say that

> The other day, I read about the bombs in London. I discussed the events with my friend. It seemed that I understood the passage very well. I was very pleased. I told myself, "Good job!" It's a feeling of self-accomplishment. It gave me motivation to continue reading.

In conclusion, autonomous learners have strategies to help them continue reading. They tend to be more persistent and

are willing to expend effort on the reading tasks. Moreover, they have strategies to lower their anxiety such as self-praise.

Social strategies

Hobrom (2004) reported that students with learner autonomy also tend to display social autonomy. This is in line with Vygotsky's belief that interpersonal behaviors are the basis for new conceptual understanding in cognition and communication. In this study, students who read more tended to get support socially. One of the participants, Nitaya (also cited above), was trying to find websites on a program in TEFL. She was an English major at Thammasat University. At first she thought that she could find information of TELF courses on websites associated with "the Department of English." However, she was not successful during her first search. She was confused about the use of the name "the Department of English." She did not understand why when she typed "English" and "department" into the Google search engine, the result was a webpage full of literature courses. She asked for clarification from the instructor, which included the following statement:

> I don't understand at all. Here, at Thammasat, I'm an English major and I'm studying English designed for people whose native language is not English. However, in American universities, the Department of English seem to focus on literature courses.

In addition to support from the instructor, the students received support from their classmates too. Bubpa, for example, liked the Korean series "Full House." She was interested in the leading actor of the series "Rain." She read English websites about him and discussed the readings with her close friend.

> The series is very popular right now. My closest friend also likes him a lot. We keep reading information about him on the websites. I discuss him with my friend. Sometimes I don't understand the use of the language in the websites and I ask her about it.

In conclusion, the students realized the concept of interdependence. They also demonstrated social strategies, asking questions of their friends and/or the instructors.

Answer to research question 2:

Students who read more had higher gains in test scores than those who read less. The difference was statistically significant, above the 0.01 level. Students who read more than 2 hours a week had an average increase of 3.18 points in test scores whereas students who spent less than 2 hours reading had an average increase of 2.06 points (Table 3).

Table 3. Time spent reading and gains in test score

		N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Gains in test scores	Less than 2 hours a week	17	2.06	1	4
	2 hours a week or more	28	3.18	1	6
	Total/average	45	2.76	1	6

Result of ANOVA test

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Gains	Between Groups	13.263	1	13.263	12.660	.001
	Within Groups	45.048	43	1.048		
	Total	58.311	44			

Eveland and Dunwoody (2000) focused on different categories of information processing on the Web. The Orientation category includes navigational tasks which refer to planning routes through the network. In other words, the Web surfers decide which websites they would like to visit. According to Eveland and Dunwoody, navigational tasks impose a high cognitive load upon the user. As a result, Web users are robbed of "precious cognitive resources from other information-processing activities that may be more valuable for learning" (p.225).

Another category proposed by Eveland and Dunwoody is elaboration. According to Perse (1990) cited by Eveland and Dunwoody, during elaboration, the user "relates the incoming information to existing knowledge and images and attaches connotative and associative meaning" (p.19). In other words, elaboration is the process through which connections are made between new and existing pieces of information. Elaboration serves to connect new information into existing schema as well as to connect information within schema. Eveland and Dunwoody commented that elaboration is an important part of learning.

The present study shows that the students might undertake different levels of processing. Many students went to search engines and looked at the result pages to decide which website to explore. This was the orientation stage, the stage in which the students made decisions about the navigation tasks. The Web surfing demonstration revealed that the students who read less normally believed that a page full of text would be difficult. Faced with such a page they stopped reading immediately. They even went away from that webpage altogether. In this way, they did not have a chance to go to the stage of elaboration, the stage where meaningful learning occurs. The students who read more, on the other hand, tended to engage in deep processing of information. They engaged in a deep level of processing information, demonstrating the integration of the new information with their background knowledge.

Answer to research question 3

Students had positive attitudes toward the ability to read in English. The difference between the two groups of students (reading less or more than two hours a week) was not statistically significant. Quantitative data showed that the students were not different in their beliefs about the usefulness of pleasure reading in English. The mean scale score of the students who read less was 27.18, which was more than the 26.8 achieved by the students who read more. The overall average for this item was 26.95 out of a maximum of 30. This indicates that students had very positive attitudes towards pleasure reading. However, their attitudes did not always lead them to action. This suggests that learner autonomy was what set apart these two groups of the students. Autonomous learners were capable of setting

their own learning goals. They could also work toward accomplishing goals independently. Nitaya's diary entries show that she had a specific goal: to get information of TEFL courses. Her goal led her to look for the desired information. Students who lacked learner autonomy, on the other hand, had good attitudes toward learning activities, but did not set their own goals and did not initiate the activity they deemed useful (Table 4).

Table 4. Students' values

		N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Value	Less than 2 hours a week	17	27.18	22	30
	2 hours a week or more	27	26.81	23	30
	Total/average	44	26.95	22	30

Results of ANOVA test

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Value	Between Groups	1.364	1	1.364	.304	.584
	Within Groups	188.545	42	4.489		
	Total	189.909	43			

Answer to research question 4

Quantitative data showed that students who read more seemed more comfortable to use Web features such as links, graphics, and audio. The differences were not statistically significant, however. For example, for the item "Pictures in the websites usually help you to understand the content better," the students who read less had a mean scale score of 4.18, whereas the students who read more had a mean scale of 4.27. The *F* value was .233, and the scores of the 2 groups of the students are not statistically significantly different (Table 5).

Students reported that when reading online, they tended to preview the task at hand to get an idea of how long it would take them. Peerapon, a participant in the study, stated that

> I have to skim the passage first before I read the passage in details. Skimming helped me to have a whole idea about the passage.

Moreover, since students have to evaluate whether the page they are reading is relevant to their needs, skimming is an essential strategy when reading online. Peerapon went on to say that

> We do not always arrive at the page containing information we need immediately. I have to skim the passage so that I can make a decision whether I should read on or not.

In addition to skimming and evaluating, students reported that they had to self-monitor whether they understood the text correctly. Linchong, for example, stated,

Table 5. Students' interaction with graphics and audio

		N	M
You usually look at pictures in the websites.	Students who read less than 2 hours a week	17	4.18
	Students who read 2 hours a week or more	27	4.33
	Total	44	4.27
Pictures in the websites usually help you to understand the content better.	Students who read less than 2 hours a week	17	4.18
	Students who read 2 hours a week or more	26	4.27
	Total	43	4.23
Graphs/diagrams provided in some website help you understand the content better.	Students who read less than 2 hours a week	17	3.88
	Students who read 2 hours a week or more	26	4.04
	Total	43	3.98
You go to websites which give you definitions of words such as www.dictionary.com when you encounter unfamiliar words.	Students who read less than 2 hours a week	17	3.00
	Students who read 2 hours a week or more	26	3.31
	Total	43	3.19
You usually follow sound provided by the websites.	Students who read less than 2 hours a week	16	3.25
	Students who read 2 hours a week or more	27	2.89
	Total	43	3.02
Links to sound make the websites more interesting.	Students who read less than 2 hours a week	16	3.38
	Students who read 2 hours a week or more	27	3.07
	Total	43	3.19

Results of ANOVA test

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Tendency to watch pictures	Between Groups	.257	1	.257	.655	.423
	Within Groups	16.471	42	.392		
	Total	16.727	43			
Believing that pictures help with understanding the content	Between Groups	.088	1	.088	.233	.632
	Within Groups	15.586	41	.380		
	Total	15.674	42			
Believing that graphs/ diagrams help with the understanding of the content	Between Groups	.250	1	.250	.496	.485
	Within Groups	20.726	41	.506		
	Total	20.977	42			
Tendency to visit sites that help define meaning of unfamiliar words	Between Groups	.973	1	.973	.558	.459
	Within Groups	71.538	41	1.745		
	Total	72.512	42			
Tendency to visit sites that help define meaning of unfamiliar words	Between Groups	1.310	1	1.310	1.001	.323
	Within Groups	53.667	41	1.309		
	Total	54.977	42			
Believing that listening to audio resources helps make websites more interesting	Between Groups	.910	1	.910	.723	.400
	Within Groups	51.602	41	1.259		
	Total	52.512	42			

> I encounter unfamiliar words all the time. I normally try to guess the meanings of those words first. Then I will verify the meaning. If I think I make a mistake, I will have to re-read the passage. Sometimes, I realize that I could not guess the meaning, I have to consult the dictionary.

Linchong's account shows that she was able to use metacognitive strategies. She chose the strategy on her own by guessing the meaning of the words. Then she realized that she had to verify her guesses. She even knew when she had to use the dictionary. Table 6 summarizes the extent to which the students used metacognitive strategies.

Table 6. Metacognitive strategies

		N	Mean	Minimum	Maximum
Metacognitive strategies	Less than 2 hours a week	17	30.29	24	37
	2 hours a week or more	25	32.08	26	39
	Total	42	31.36	24	39

Result of ANOVA test

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Metacognitive Strategies	Between Groups	32.273	1	32.273	3.458	.070
	Within Groups	373.369	40	9.334		
	Total	405.643	41			

In sum, the study here shows that when students read online texts, metacongition strategies were very important. Millions of pages are available on the Internet and the students can go to other pages quickly if the page they were reading did not contain the information they wanted. Thus, they tended to skim the page quickly to get the main idea of the content before they began reading in detail.

Conclusion

Students benefit from opportunities to read English websites for pleasure. They set their own learning objectives and tend to put more effort into the task at hand. In other words, they show some of the characteristics of autonomous learners. Data from standardized tests reveal that students who read more achieve better language improvement. Thus, students should be encouraged to read English website for pleasure. Moreover, autonomous students tend to seek support from those with higher language proficiency than their own, so the teacher is not free to abandon the responsibilites of teaching.

Notes

[1]Bandura (1986) defines self-efficacy as "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances" (p. 391). Schunk and Zimmerman (1997) reviewed research showing that students with high self-efficacy see difficult reading tasks as challenging and work diligently to master them, using their cognitive strategies productively.

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