

Learner autonomy in a primary English programme

Kari Royden, Michael Bryson, & Chantal Hemmi
British Council Teaching Centre, Tokyo

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This paper discusses the results of an on-going small-scale interpretive research conducted at Morimura Gakuen Elementary School. The purpose of the study was to investigate to what extent autonomy, the capacity to take control over one's own learning (Benson, 2001), was a feature in the pupils' learning strategies for improvement in English. In July 2005, we asked 480 pupils from year 3 to 6 to write a reflective composition on a) what students thought they had learnt, b) how they thought they could improve their English in the future and c) what they wished to learn in the second term. The findings show that considerable attention has been given to the use of play in learning. Contrary to our assumptions, data concerning autonomous learning was limited. We discuss the implications of the findings from this small-scale research in connection to how learner autonomy could be facilitated in the programme.

この論文は、森村学園初等部においてブリティッシュ・カウンシルの英語教師が教育の現場で行った小規模の解釈的な研究の報告で、研究の目的は生徒の自主性、つまり「自分の学習を自らコントロールすること。」(Benson, 2001) がどの程度、生徒の英語学習方法に現れているかを探ることである。2005年の7月に3年生から6年生までの466人の生徒は、振り返りの作文を書き、a) 一学期の英語コースで何を学んだか、b) どのようにしてこれから英語を上達させようと思っているか、そしてc) 2学期にどのようなことを学びたいか、その三つの点について書く課題を与えられた。その結果、学習における遊びの要素の導入について、子供たちが多く気付き、感想を述べている。振り返りの作文における、自主性に関するデータは限られたものであったがここでは、生徒の作文のデータをもとに児童の自主性をプログラムの中でどのように促していくかについてディスカッションする。

The context and choice of participants

Since April 2005, three teachers from the British Council, Tokyo have been involved in the implementation of a new English programme at Morimura Gakuen Elementary School. Morimura Gakuen is a private school in Yokohama. The new English programme employs a task-based syllabus with structural and lexical components woven together into the curriculum. Activities that encourage learner autonomy in reading, such as a phonics approach to letter recognition and technology-based activities that use a CD-ROM programme for vocabulary building have also been incorporated.

Classes consist of one 40-minute session per week at years 1 and 2 and two sessions per week for years 3 to 6. The programme is run throughout the regular academic year which begins in April and ends in March. In this context we asked 480 pupils from years 3 to 6 to participate in writing a reflective composition in their first language, Japanese. The rationale behind the choice of this group of pupils is that they have had experience in writing compositions of this nature in other subjects, including their homeroom. Thus we considered it appropriate to ask them to reflect on their progress and to come up with their own interpretations of their learning.

One aspect unique to this teaching context, as is the case with a number of private primary schools outsourcing their programmes to English language providers, is that there is a strong demand from teachers and parents for the children to perform well in English. Furthermore, the governors of the school, the parents and the teachers are anxious to see the new English programme succeed and become a positive feature of the curriculum. Therefore the students are likely to understand the importance of performing well in class as they will be rewarded and encouraged.

Theoretical framework

The word autonomy is derived from the Greek stems for 'self', 'law' and 'rule' and it means 'the having or making of one's own laws' (Feinberg, 1989). The concept of autonomy in the area of English language learning originates "in a response to ideals and expectations aroused by the political turmoil in Europe in the late 1960s" (Benson, 2001: 7). Autonomy can be broadly defined as the capacity

to take control over one's own learning (Benson, 2001). In the 1970s and 80s, autonomy was closely associated with the concept of individualisation, a way of taking into account learner needs. However, Holec (1981:6) argues that individualisation does not necessarily facilitate learner self-direction since the teacher often decides the learners' favourite methods of learning and level, thus keeping the learner in a position of dependency.

Although Little (1990:7) argues autonomy is not 'a single, easily describable behaviour', Benson advocates a multi-dimensional autonomy that involves control over learning psychology, behaviour and situations. Furthermore, 'successful' or 'expert' or 'intelligent' learners have learnt how to learn (Wenden, 1991:15), thus making them actualise the state of 'self-rule, self-determination, self-government and independence' (Feinberg, J, 1989:27).

Vital to our teaching context is how to incorporate the goal of autonomy into 'the whole curricular system, rather than an occasional part of it' (Crabbe, 1993:208). This includes emphasizing collaborative work and including 'authentic samples of target language input gathered from outside the classroom into creative written and spoken output to be shared with the class' (Dam, 1995). Moreover, a self-evaluation cycle is indispensable in order to share ownership of student progress through dialogue between teacher and pupils.

In summary, Royden, Bryson and Hemmi (from here on referred to as the BC Morimura Team) have put special emphasis on autonomy, the capacity to take control over one's own learning (Benson, 2001) throughout the new curricular system.

Research methodology

At the end of the first term in July 2005, we asked 466 pupils in Years 3 to 6 to write a reflective composition on a) what they thought they had learnt b) how they thought they could further improve their English and c) what they wished to learn in the second term. These compositions were written in class in the pupils' first language, Japanese, and were later analysed interpretively to obtain direct feedback from the learners. Most students managed to write approximately 400 to 600 characters on Japanese composition paper.

We employed this method of data collection to analyse, reflect and identify aspects of autonomy as perceived by the learners. The compositions were collected in class and analysed amongst the BC Morimura Team. We first read the compositions to see which categories emerged then we conducted a count of quotations under each category. The rationale for not asking students to write specifically about autonomy was that we wanted to see what data emerged from their compositions naturally. In future research it would be meaningful to ask participants to comment more specifically about autonomous study in order to find out how students view their control over their own work.

Findings and discussion

The findings from the students' reflective compositions show they gave considerable attention to use of play in learning. Contrary to our assumptions, very little data emerged concerning autonomy.

What students thought they had learnt

Table 1. What students thought they had learnt

Years 3 and 4 (235 respondents)		Years 5 and 6 (231 respondents)	
Citation	Number	Citation	Number
1. To say words connected to family	19	1. To count up to 20	18
2. How to count to 20	15	2. To talk about what we do every day	9
3. To sing the 'apple,a' song	1	3. To ask questions about what people do	4
4. To draw pictures of my mother and father	1	4. To tell the time	3
5. To draw pictures of Muzzy's house	1	5. To write the alphabet	1
6. To say 'thank you' and 'hello'	1	6. To write my name in English	1
7. To say, 'here you are'.	1	7. To listen to a lot of English	1
8. To say many names of things	1	8. To say a lot of words in English	1
9. To talk about actions	1		
10. To do barn dancing	1		
Total number of citations	42	Total number of citations	38

Concerning year 3 points 1, 2 and 4 relate to main aims in the syllabus. 19 students cited 'we learnt how to talk about the family' and 15 said that they learnt 'how to count up to 20'. Points 3 to 10 were quoted only once each. As the year 3 and 4 students share the same curriculum, it is natural students made similar comments. Point 5 refers to a character in a video series and the purpose of the exercise

was to learn the names of the rooms in a house. Point 10 refers to curricular cultural input where an English country dance was taught.

In the year 5 and 6 data there were only 38 citations concerning learning content out of 231 respondents. Point 1, ‘to count up to 20’ was the most frequent, followed by points 2 and 3, which relate to talking about daily routines. Points 5 to 8 were only mentioned once each. Finally, points 7 and 8, used once each, refer to frequent use of English in class.

In summary, although only 80 of 466 students mentioned what they had learnt, it is evident that those who did have a clear understanding of the main aims of the syllabus.

How students thought they could improve their English in the future

Table 2. How students thought they could improve their English in the future

Years 3 and 4 (235 respondents)		Years 5 and 6 (231 respondents)	
Citation	Number	Citation	Number
1. To study hard	6	1. To repeat the words many times to remember them	7
2. To study in an enjoyable way	3	2. To study in an enjoyable way	4
3. To be quiet when the teacher is talking	2	3. To listen to the teacher more and to speak more in class	3
4. To speak to the teacher	1	4. To work hard	1
5. To concentrate more	1	5. To be quiet in class	1

6. To say the same word again and again	1	6. To keep a vocabulary book	1
7. To take some notes	1	7. To take notes	1
8. To memorise what we learnt	1	8. To ask my friends about things I don't know.	1
9. To speak lots of English during the holidays	1	9. To go abroad and speak English	1
10. To watch films in English	1	10. To do the workbook more on my own	1
Total number of citations	18	Total number of citations	21

Concerning the year 3 and 4 data, ‘to study hard’, mentioned six times, was the most frequent comment. Effort, a controllable internal factor (Weiner, 1986) seems to be considered an important attribute for improvement. Secondly, ‘to study in an enjoyable way’ was written three times. This shows some pupils are aware that enjoying English, an affective factor, is important for future improvement.

The third most frequent comment was ‘to be quiet when the teacher is speaking’. This is a behavioural factor that can be controlled by the students and it shows the pupils are aiming to be responsible for their own learning. Points 4-10 were only quoted once each. Whilst point 4, ‘to speak to the teacher’ could be interpreted as a sign of teacher dependency, one could also consider it as indicating the fact that the learner wants to converse with the teacher. Point 5, ‘to concentrate more’ is a factor influenced by the student and learning environment. Points 6 to 8, ‘to say the word again

and again', 'to write some notes', and 'to memorise what we learnt' were also used only once each. The data is intriguing as these learners are aware of some possible strategies for learning language.

Finally, points 9 and 10, written once each, show signs of learner autonomy in that 'to speak lots of English during the holiday' and 'to watch films in English' take place outside the classroom environment. The pupils seem to be motivated to use English for authentic communication outside class. Additionally, the pupils who cited points 9 and 10 seem to have access to an environment where they can speak in English and watch videos in English. To sum up, points 9 and 10 are the only quotations from the year 3 and 4 data that show aspects of autonomy.

Similar data emerged from the year 5 and 6 compositions. The most frequently cited comment was 'to repeat the words many times to remember them'. It is illuminating that learning from repetition is clearly a strategy the respondents perceived as important for learning vocabulary. Point 2, 'to study in an enjoyable way' was quoted 4 times and it is clear these pupils considered enjoyment an important affective factor. The third most frequent, mentioned 3 times, was 'to listen to the teacher more and speak more in class', a comment that reflects a conscious decision to fully participate in class. In some respects this shows an aspect of autonomy in that the pupils are trying to take control over their work by making a commitment to listen and speak more in class.

Points 4 to 10 were only quoted once each: 'To work hard' and 'to be quiet in class'. These relate to effort and attitude, both internal controllable factors (Weiner, 1986) that may affect students' future progress in learning English.

On the other hand, 'to keep a vocabulary book', 'to take notes' and 'to ask my friends about things I don't know' relate to strategies that may link to student autonomy. By keeping a vocabulary book and taking notes learners can keep a record of what they have learnt, making it possible to review independently of the teacher. Point 10, 'to ask my friends about things I don't know' is illuminating in that the student is aware that co-construction of knowledge through collaborative work is important. Asking peers could also facilitate independence from the teacher.

In summary, compared to third and fourth year students, fifth and sixth students were able to express awareness of their language learning processes. This is reflected in comments that referred to attitudes and strategies toward learning English.

What students wished to learn in the second term

The chart below shows the results of the data from year 3 and 4 students and year 5 and 6 students:

Table 3. What students wished to learn in the second term

Years 3 and 4 (235 respondents)		Years 5 and 6 (231 respondents)	
Citation	Number	Citation	Number
1. to play games	27	1. to play games	18
2. to make crosswords	15	2. to learn a lot of words	4
3. to go for a walk and learn the names of birds and things	2	3. to learn how to write	1
4. to learn words connected to sport	1	4. to practice speaking	1
5. to use the computer room	1	5. to sing songs	1
6. to use videos	1	6. to have parties	1
7. to use the workbook	1	7. to use the workbook	1
8. to study sentences	1	8. to record activities on video	1
Total number of citations	49	Total number of citations	28

As can be seen in table 3, the most frequently requested activity for future classes was ‘to play games’, cited 27 times by year 3 and 4 students and 18 times by year 5 and 6 students. The former group was keen to ‘make crosswords’ (cited 15 times) whilst the latter thought ‘[learning] lots of words’ (cited 4 times) important.

It is interesting that Years 3 and 4 mentioned ‘to go for a walk and learn the names of birds and things’ twice. This may be because they had done this with other subject teachers in Japanese. The other citations were made only once each from both groups. Nevertheless, they include

some practical suggestions for the content and method of learning and the materials they wished to use in the future. Whilst year 3 and 4 students are interested in learning ‘words connected to sport’, year 5 and 6 students want to ‘sing songs’ and to ‘have parties’. Year 3 and 4 pupils requested to use ‘the computer room’, ‘videos’ and ‘the workbook’. Similarly, the Year 5 and 6 students want to use ‘the workbook’. ‘To record activities on video’, ‘to learn how to write’ and ‘to practice speaking’ were also requested by year 5 and 6 students.

In summary, a considerable number of students showed interest in the use of games, as 45 respondents from 466 requested the activity. Furthermore, students felt that ‘studying in an enjoyable way’ was important when considering improvement in the future. This data relates to intrinsic motivation where students ‘[*learn*] towards achievement to experience stimulation, engaging in an activity to experience pleasant sensations’ (Dörnyei, 2001: 28).

Concerning autonomy, the reflective compositions contained very little information on ‘direct production of behavioural and psychological changes’ (Benson, 2001:111). However, the data shows that students perceived effort and attitude as being important in improving their English. So this may be an indication that the pupils want to take control and be in charge of their own work.

Little (1997a: 94) argues that ‘if we make the development of autonomy a central concern of formal learning, conscious reflection will necessarily play a central role from the beginning, for the simple reason that all formal learning is the result of deliberate intention’. Therefore, reflective compositions could be employed again in the future as an

important tool from which the pupils can observe their thinking about the English language programme and their learning processes.

Conclusions and implications

This small-scale interpretive research shows some students were aware of the aims of the curriculum in that they cited them in their compositions. Effort was perceived to be an important factor in improving English. Furthermore, learning through repetition was the most frequent comment made by year 5 and 6 pupils. For future improvement, 'to speak lots of English during the holiday' and 'to watch films in English' were cited once each and can be interpreted as aspects of learner autonomy. In terms of what the students wished to learn in the second term, playing games and making crosswords were frequent requests.

The implication of this study is that 'direct production of behavioural and psychological changes in the learner' (Benson, 2001:111) linked with the notion of learner autonomy was not observed. However, some students are apparently starting to take control over their learning by making a conscious decision to fully participate in class and are becoming more dependent on their peers and less on the teacher. Also, some students commented that keeping a vocabulary book and taking notes may help further develop their English. These strategies may also lead to more independent learning in the future.

The pedagogical implications are that learning through meaningful play such as games is an important factor to consider when further developing the curriculum. Moreover,

it is essential to introduce different ways of making the learners more independent in the future so as to further encourage autonomy. Unless pupils are informed about how they can develop on their own they will not be able to choose methods that suit them. Examples of learning strategies include note-taking, developing reading skills through a phonic approach, dictionary skills, and different ways of keeping a record of vocabulary learned. Examples of methods of self-study are the use of graded readers to develop reading skills and use of young learner websites and DVDs to further develop listening skills, knowledge of vocabulary and structure of the language.

Limitations

The limitation of this on-going small-scale study is that the data consists of only learner perceptions and not teacher and parent perceptions. Also, the data is based solely on written work. In future it would be meaningful to analyse teacher and parent perceptions of the new programme and interview some students for a more in-depth view of their perceptions. If the findings yielded by the different data collection methods are consistent, the validity of those findings is increased (Frankfort-Nachmias and Nachmias, 1996:206).

Implications for further research

Although we gained insight into what the pupils learnt and what they wished to learn in future lessons, this study generated only a limited amount of data concerning learner autonomy.

In future research concerning aspects of autonomy it would be meaningful to ask students to comment more specifically on their preparation for classes, self-study, ways of dealing with review, aspects of collaboration and preparation and production of the projects designed into the curriculum. Furthermore, some semi-structured interviews in which students are asked to comment on the topics above may yield rich descriptions of student perceptions of learner autonomy.

Kari Royden is a teacher at the British Council Teaching Centre, Tokyo. Her research interests are in developing ways of promoting learner autonomy in reading through a phonics approach.

Michael Bryson is a teacher at the British Council Teaching Centre, Tokyo. His research interests include ways of developing learner autonomy in vocabulary learning strategies through technology based approaches.

Chantal Hemmi is a teacher at the British Council Teaching Centre, Tokyo. Her research interest is in the development of learner identity within a global learning context.

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