

Fostering autonomy: A matter of choice

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Language teachers can help foster autonomy amongst their learners by introducing classroom activities which promote active involvement in the learning process. This paper discusses the use of the multilevel-task approach as an indirect training tool for learner autonomy in a mixed-ability EFL class. A series of 10 multilevel writing tasks were specifically designed, incorporating the required textbook and syllabus, to offer three different levels of support within the tasks. Throughout the 16-week course learners were encouraged to monitor, evaluate, and reflect on their own performances and progress in order to make informed choices regarding task levels. Questionnaires and interviews were administered to examine the changes in learners' motivation, confidence in writing, attitudes toward autonomy, and self-directed behaviours. Findings from the study suggested the development of language learning awareness, self-monitoring skills, reflective thinking, and increasing motivation as a result of the implementation of the multilevel-task approach in the classroom.

学習者を自らの学習過程へ積極的に関わらせるような教室活動を導入することによって、教師は学習者の自律性を促すことができる。本論では、レベルの異なる学習者が混在するEFLクラスにおける、学習者の自律性を促す手段としてのマルチレベルタスクの使用について論じる。指定のテキストとシラバスに沿ってライティングタスクを10種類用意し、各タスクごとに3段階の異なるレベルのサポートを提示した。学習者は各タスクのレベルを自ら選択するため、16週にわたり自らの学習成果と進捗状況をモニター、評価、および内省した。また、アンケートとインタビューを実施し、動機付け、ライティングへの自信、自律性に対する態度と自己指向性行動における学習者の変化を調べた。本研究の結果、マルチレベルタスクを使用することによって、言語学習におけるメタ認知的知識、自己モニタースキルおよび内省的思考が発達し、動機付けが向上したことが示された。

THE PEDAGOGICAL shift toward learner-centred curricula has become more prominent in the years since the notion of learner autonomy was adopted into the field of second and foreign language instruction. Language teachers around the world have attempted to foster learner autonomy through various methods. As learners' readiness for autonomy may vary in degrees and can take place at different times, previous research findings suggested the implementation of a well-designed curricular framework and support system would be most effective, rather than simply providing learners with absolute freedom and leaving them to navigate through it blindly. The present study, which deals with the creation and implementation of a series of multilevel writing tasks to promote autonomous skills, was built upon the idea of gradual transformation. Being allowed to make decisions on a certain aspect



of learning, namely the selection of task levels they would like to perform, learners can experience a slow transition away from teacher-controlled instruction and start taking responsibilities for their own learning.

Literature review

Learner autonomy

Holec (1981, p. 3) defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.” This implies that learners are responsible for making all decisions involved with the learning process such as determining the goals, selecting contents and methods, setting the pace, monitoring progress, and assessing outcomes. Autonomy is not innate but can be acquired through training. Nevertheless, autonomy should not be viewed as a state which a person either achieves or fails to achieve. Instead, it should be perceived as a continuum on which learners may develop their abilities to different degrees along the process (Benson, 2001).

Littlewood (1996) proposed that autonomy consists of two components, namely ability and willingness. The former requires the possession of knowledge about available choices and skills needed to carry out appropriate actions whereas the latter refers to the possession of motivation and confidence to take charge. According to Littlewood, autonomy will hardly develop if learners have acquired an ability, but are not willing to exercise it. On the other hand, learners who are keen to take control, but lack the necessary ability to do so are not likely to be effective in developing their autonomy either. It is suggested that learners should receive methodological as well as psychological preparation in order to become more autonomous (Dickinson & Carver, 1980). To be methodologically prepared, learners must be aware of the learning process and gain sufficient opportunities to practice control over their learning. At the same time,

learners who are psychologically prepared must possess motivation and confidence in independent learning.

The most common approach to fostering learner autonomy is to incorporate the training into the learning process itself (Nunan, 1997). It is believed that learners can become aware of how they can contribute to their own learning only when given opportunities to be actively involved in the production of the target language, the selection of content, and the evaluation of learning progress. Furthermore, as learners are engaging in metacognitive processes, such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating, their affective domain is also enhanced. Learners are constantly reflecting upon their learning in terms of personal needs and interests; therefore, their motivation is likely to be heightened and well-sustained (Little, 2000).

Even though motivation is recognised as one of the elements that are strongly associated with autonomy, it is arguable whether it is a prerequisite or a by-product of learner autonomy. On one hand, autonomous behaviours which supposedly lead to better learning outcomes are thought to enhance motivation as perceived successful learning experiences are highlighted by personal involvement and efforts. On the other hand, intrinsic motivation, which is defined as personally rewarding feelings that arise genuinely from engaging in learning activities, is claimed to be an essential condition for autonomous learning. Intrinsic motivation is believed to ensure and sustain involvement of learners in their learning process, as they can perceive personal rewards in the engagement itself as well as the outcomes (Ushioda, 1996). In any case, motivation is inevitable where learner autonomy is concerned.

Motivation

Second language motivation is described as “a multi-faceted construct” which combines both general and situation-specific

components to govern learning behaviours (Dörnyei, 2006, p. 50). Motivation is considered dynamic and thus fluctuates over time. Therefore, teachers seeking to employ motivational strategies in their language classrooms should focus equally on three distinct phases of motivation during the learning process: *choice motivation*, *executive motivation*, and *motivational retrospection* (Dörnyei, 2001, p. 21). The first refers to the determination of goals and the selection of tasks, while the second refers to the learner's resistance against distractions. Motivational retrospection, on the other hand, is defined as the evaluation of task performance, which is likely to affect the learner's choice of learning activities in the future.

Of the two main types of motivation, extrinsic and intrinsic, the latter is more favourable as it leads to genuine enjoyment in learning and is thus more sustainable than the former, which is merely driven by temporal, external factors. It is possible to promote intrinsic motivation through classroom learning experience by helping the individual learner to develop a sense of success (Littlejohn, 2001). Learners need to see themselves as competent when engaging learning tasks and to later recognise progress that results from their own efforts. Successful outcomes are likely to fuel motivation whereas failures tend to deteriorate morale.

Findings from my previous study (Nuangpolmak, 2005) have shed some light on the process of fostering motivation. It was found that, to promote choice motivation, learners must be allowed to work on tasks that address their needs and also match their learning styles. The higher the relevance of the task to individual needs and the greater the compatibility of the task format with personal preferences, the more likely that a given learner would be inclined to pursue such a task. In addition, learners must perceive the tasks as manageable in order to sustain executive motivation. Results showed that task manageability was associated with topic familiarity and the assistance provided.

As the manageability of the tasks was heightened, learners tended to persist and increase their efforts, since success could be expected.

Multilevel-task approach

Individualised instruction has been proposed as a way of increasing compatibility between learners and learning tasks and at the same time ensuring task manageability for all learners (Dickinson, 1987). According to this approach, teaching materials should be designed to match individual needs and levels of proficiency. In line with Dickinson's view, several authors (Hemingway, 1986; Nolasco & Arthur, 1988; Prodromou, 1992) mention the use of multilevel tasks—singular tasks which can be operated at different levels—as one way to address the problems of individual differences with respect to mixed language ability, diverse learning styles, and various degrees of motivation in the classroom.

The study

The current study proposed the use of a multilevel-task approach as classroom training to foster learner autonomy. The main principle underlying the concept of the multilevel-task approach was to provide choices to learners, in terms of task characteristics and degrees of support. Learners were given opportunities to make decisions regarding learning materials. As learners performed at the task levels that were appropriate for them, the manageability of the tasks would be ensured and expectancy of success would be raised. It was anticipated that learners who experienced success would become more motivated and willing to pursue similar learning activities in the future. At the same time, as choices were provided, learners had to take the first step of learning responsibility by selecting the task level they would like to work on. In order to make informed choices, they were also required

to constantly monitor, evaluate, and reflect on their performance and progress. It was anticipated that, by becoming actively involved with their own learning process, learners would gradually develop the skills necessary to become more autonomous in their learning. The flow chart below (Figure 1) was developed to illustrate the contribution that the multilevel-task approach was expected to make to fostering learner autonomy.

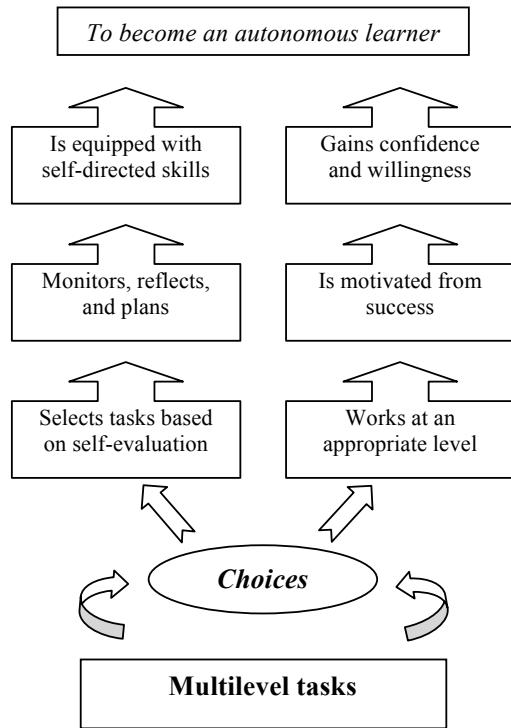


Figure 1. A conceptual framework for a multilevel-task approach

Participants and setting

The study was conducted at a university in Bangkok, Thailand. The context of teaching was a compulsory 16-week English course which was offered to all students who were non-English majors. The class comprised 28 learners whose English proficiency varied, ranging from beginner to higher intermediate.

There was a fixed syllabus, accompanied by a main textbook, in which learning objectives, themes, and language points to be focused on were specified. The students were also required to sit for two formal assessments, mid-term and final examinations, that dealt with certain topics from the textbook. Even though the aim of the course was the development of the four skills, the examinations mainly tested reading and writing skills. Therefore, writing skills were chosen as the focus of task design in this study.

The design of multilevel writing tasks

A series of multilevel writing tasks were designed to be incorporated into the existing syllabus, functioning as both teaching materials to assist students in developing greater writing proficiency and as a training tool to promote the development of autonomous skills.

Principles for task design

Literature in the areas of task-based learning and materials design (Candlin, 1987; Prabhu, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Willis, 1996; Tomlinson, 1998, 2003; Ellis, 2003; Nunan, 1988, 1993; 2004) illustrate several characteristics of good pedagogical tasks. The following criteria have been employed as principles of task design in this study:

1. The objectives of tasks clearly reflect those of the curriculum and syllabus.
2. The tasks promote awareness of language forms, features, and functions.
3. The tasks provide opportunities for language practice.
4. The tasks are primarily focused on meaning.
5. The tasks offer variety, freedom, and choices.
6. The tasks are authentic and relevant to academic and real-world contexts.
7. The tasks are appropriately challenging.
8. The visual presentation of tasks is appealing.
9. The tasks are user-friendly and non-threatening.
10. The tasks encourage learners to reflect on the learning process.

Since mid-term and final examinations were compulsory, it was essential that the learners who participated in this study acquired and practised the topics and language points discussed in the textbook which would later be tested (principles 1-3). Nevertheless, the successful achievement of tasks should not be determined on the basis of learners' correct use of grammar but rather on communicative success (principle 4). In addition, to attract and sustain learners' engagement on the tasks, several motivational strategies were included in the task features (principles 5-9). Last but not least, to encourage learner involvement in the learning process, a guided reflection form was embedded as a part of the task (principle 10).

Principles for grading tasks

Adding to the design of the aforementioned writing tasks were different levels which learners could select to work on. The criteria used to distinguish levels of tasks in this study,

drawn from the literature in the areas of task complexity and sequencing materials (Prabhu, 1987; Brindley, 1987; Skehan, 1996; Graves, 1996; Nunan, 2004; Willis, 2004), are as follows:

1. The steps involved in completing the task
2. The complexity of cognitive demand
3. The explicitness of information
4. The syntactic and lexical complexity of input
5. The degree of communicative control
6. The amount of help available

The multilevel-task approach aims to create different versions of the same pedagogical tasks so that learners can choose to work on the ones that they believe are most suitable for them. Consequently, careful consideration must be made when differentiating each version of the material. Tasks which required learners to perform many steps or to think about many different things were considered more difficult than ones containing a few simple steps (principles 1-2). Vague instructions written with complicated structures and/or unfamiliar vocabulary was considered another factor contributing to task difficulty (principles 3-4). Lastly, the more manageable the tasks were, the easier they appeared (principles 5-6).

Task description

A total of 10 multilevel writing tasks were created for this study. Aimed at the same learning objectives, three levels were offered for each writing task: Supported Writing (Level A), Guided Writing (Level B) and Free Writing (Level C). These levels were graded according to the degrees of assistance provided within the task, in terms of instruction, language guidance, and task demand. Table 1 below explains in detail the features of each task level as presented to the learners (see Appendix 1 for task samples).

Table 1. Description of three task levels

Task level	Description
Supported Writing	The writing task in this level supports the student in his or her writing. It contains very detailed instructions on how to complete the writing piece step by step. Grammatical structures which are likely to be used in the writing are pointed out. Some examples of language patterns are also provided.
Guided Writing	The writing task in this level guides the student through the writing. It contains some instructions on how to complete the writing piece. New or unfamiliar grammatical structures may be pointed out. Links to language samples are provided.
Free Writing	The writing task in this level gives the student a lot of freedom and choices. It contains lists of questions as guidelines to help the student complete the task. Language points are not explicitly discussed. Examples of language patterns are not provided.

Implementation of the multilevel-task approach

The participants were informed about the implementation of the multilevel writing tasks from the beginning of the semester. A description of each task level and information about task procedure were explained to participants prior to the commencement of the first writing task. In a study session where a writing task would be assigned, the teacher would discuss broadly with the class what the task entailed. Then each student decided on the

task level s/he would like to perform and collected their task sheet accordingly. Upon completing the writing, the students were required to fill in a guided reflection form embedded at the back of the task sheet and to submit the writing piece to the teacher for feedback. The teacher applied the same assessment criteria to all pieces of writing, regardless of task levels.

Data collection and analysis

At the beginning of the course, the participants were asked to fill in a questionnaire aimed at surveying their levels of motivation, confidence in English skills, attitudes toward learner autonomy and self-directed behaviours. The same questionnaire was administered again at the end of the course to examine any changes in attitudes. Interviews were also conducted to further investigate the participants' perspectives. In addition, classroom observations were carried out and the participants' written reflections were collected.

Answers to the pre- and post-course questionnaire items were counted for frequency and compared. Interviews were transcribed and translated for content analysis. Then the qualitative data, which included interview transcripts, the participants' written reflections, and teacher journal entries, were scrutinised to find emerging themes. Broad themes were categorised and broken down into sub-themes.

Findings and discussion

Data from questionnaires, interviews, and written reflections highlighted four main areas that were reinforced by the use of multilevel writing tasks in the classroom: language learning awareness, self-monitoring, reflective thinking, and motivation.

Language learning awareness (LLA)

LLA is defined in this study as learners' ability to recognise their learning preferences, such as learning styles, learning strategies, and working conditions, specifically in relation to the acquisition of the target language. Having the choice to work on tasks with different characteristics and levels of support, learners realised the best conditions for their learning to take place. The examples below illustrate the LLA of two learners:

At first I chose B because I thought there were plenty of guidelines. However, in some tasks which involved summary writing, I would choose C because I didn't think I would need a lot of guidelines. Any tasks that I could write based on a source, C would be okay but any tasks that required a lot of personal ideas, B would be better because there were suggestions provided. (Student S)

Sometimes it depended on the day – if I had good concentration on the day, I would be able to work at a more difficult level because I had paid attention and was fully aware of what I was supposed to do. However, most of the time, it wouldn't be like that so I would rather choose A because I wasn't sure how to complete the task. Once I chose A, I could clearly understand what I was supposed to write. (Student X)

Wenden (1991) asserts that three areas of metacognitive knowledge should be focused on when training learners for autonomy: knowledge about themselves as learners, knowledge about learning strategies, and knowledge about tasks. She argues that the extent to which learners can utilise self-management strategies depends greatly upon the learners' knowledge about the tasks to which these strategies will be applied. In this study, the participants were provided with opportunities to engage in writing tasks which varied not only in terms of

text types (postcard, information report, essay etc.), but also the nature of the tasks themselves (i.e., guided or free writing). Consequently, they became more aware of personal learning preferences and gained insights about the characteristics of certain tasks. The participants were able to use the metacognitive knowledge they acquired through previous task engagement to assist them in planning for future task selection to achieve the best possible results. Furthermore, this particular knowledge, according to Wenden's notion, will also be stored for future reference whenever self-management strategies are required in the participants' pursuit of autonomous learning.

Self-monitoring

Participants were encouraged to select the task levels based on self-evaluation. Consequently, they were constantly monitoring their own performances in order to make informed choices. Students described how they arrived at their decisions for task levels in the following excerpts.

When I first assessed myself, I thought that since I've almost never written anything before studying writing in this course, I wouldn't dare choose C because I didn't have such a strong background. However, I assessed myself as not being so weak at English that I needed to be told everything either. So I decided to choose a middle one [B]. (Student T)

I chose A at first and B later on because I didn't know how to write in the beginning. Toward the end, I started to get some ideas and wanted to use my own wordings so I tended to choose B more. (Student G)

To conduct self-directed learning successfully, learners must possess self-management skills such as planning, monitoring, and evaluating. There is no better way to provide training

for these skills than to allow learners to practise them in real learning contexts (Nunan, 1997). The multilevel-task approach required learners to monitor themselves as a part of the task selection process. Through self-monitoring, the learners not only tracked their own progress, but also kept a close watch on their task performances. By doing so, they were able to witness the gaps between their current proficiency and the requirements of the tasks. The learners then would try to bridge those gaps by selecting the task levels that would assist them in accomplishing the task. In addition, self-monitoring contributed to the development of LLA as learners became more observant and sensitive to different learning contexts.

Reflective thinking

As part of the multilevel-task requirement, a guided reflection form (see Appendix 2) had to be filled in upon task completion. This aspect of the task encouraged learners to reflect on their learning process. The learners were asked to think about any problems that might have occurred as they attempted the task and how they had overcome them. Figure 2 below shows a sample from part of one completed reflection form.

My problem when doing this task was I can't explain everything about my thoughts. It's just that I don't know how to arrange the information in my head.

I solved this problem by thinking slowly and then use the pencil to write it down because it's easy to erase when I have to fix it.

From this task, I learned to order my thoughts. My writing is more clearly.

Figure 2. A sample of a student's written reflection

According to many scholars (Kohonen, 1992; Ridley, 1997; Benson, 2001), the learner's conscious attention should be drawn to the learning process through reflection activities. It is believed that this cognitive process can enhance learners' understanding of their own learning experiences and may lead to behavioural changes. Like other self-management skills, reflective thinking is best fostered through practice. In this study, learners were required to look back on their performances in order to evaluate and plan for the next task selection. Even though the learners were able to satisfactorily fill in the answers the reflection form demanded, those answers tended to be short and patterned. However, it should be noted that the learners became more expressive during the interviews which were conducted in their mother tongue. It was apparent that the linguistic demands of writing reflective expressions in the target language were too complicated for many learners in this particular group. Thus, future research which involves investigation of learners' reflections should take this point into consideration.

Motivation

The analysis of pre- and post-course questionnaires suggested an upward trend in learners' motivation. Table 2 shows the comparative numeric data of answers to the questionnaire item: "How motivated are you to learn English?"

Table 2. Comparison of learners' motivation levels

Pre-Course (24)				Post-Course (23)			
Not at all	Sufficiently	Very	Extremely	Not at all	Sufficiently	Very	Extremely
5	8	5	6	1	9	8	5

As can be seen in Table 2, at the beginning of the semester five learners indicated that they were not motivated to learn English at all. After participating in the research classroom where the multilevel-task approach was implemented, only one learner still insisted that s/he had no motivation. Also, the data pointed to a slightly upward trend for the numbers of learners who considered themselves very motivated.

Consistent with the numeric data, the participants reported positive views toward the multilevel-task approach in the interview. Factors such as choices and task manageability were claimed to contribute to their enjoyment when engaging in multilevel writing tasks, as presented below:

From the very first class, you've mentioned that there were three task-levels. I felt good about it because I could choose what I was going to do... (Student I)

...for someone who can't do it at all or has no idea, at least there is some writing partially provided so that she can continue on more easily. However, for someone who wants to express her thoughts freely, she can choose the one with less support and be able to do it as well. (Student Z)

Each of the three phases of learner motivation (see Dörnyei, 2001) was addressed by certain aspects in the design of the multilevel writing tasks. To illustrate, the variety offered in terms of task characteristics addressed individual needs and interests (i.e., choice motivation); the support provided within the tasks helped sustain student effort (i.e., executive motivation); and finally, the reflection activity highlighted learner contribution to task accomplishment and led to positive views of the tasks (i.e., motivational retrospection). The enjoyment and success the learners experienced on the tasks gradually built up their confidence and willingness to learn.

I think it was more of a change in my thinking, from what I thought it was difficult, now I feel that it's easier. (Student C)

Conclusion

The principle of multilevel-task design in this study highlighted the importance of choice in fostering learner autonomy. Not only is task level choice a first step of responsibility learners could take regarding their own learning, but it also engages learners in positive affective domains such as self-confidence and intrinsic motivation. The concept of a multilevel-task approach can be applied in any classroom despite there being a fixed syllabus or required textbook as long as teachers are willing to transfer some control to the learners. It is an effective method for addressing problems associated with classroom diversity and at the same time allows the practice of self-management strategies as pathways to developing learner autonomy.

Bio data

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Appendix I

Samples of multilevel writing tasks

Level A: Supported Writing

Name _____ I.D. _____

Unit 1: What's the Story? Task 1: Postcard to a Friend (A)

Think of a trip you have taken to a different province or overseas.

Write a postcard (about 100 words) to tell a friend about the trip.

- > First, you need to think about all the fun things you did or the exciting/ surprising/ disappointing experiences you had during this trip.
- > You can use the guided writing to begin and end your story.
- > After a short introduction of where you are and how you feel about the overall trip, you can begin to write about the things you saw, activities you did or people you met etc. - use adjectives and/or adverbs to describe how you feel such as beautiful scenery, strange people, meet unexpectedly or moving too slowly.
- > Remember to use Past Tense - you are telling a story that already happened!
- > You may arrange the information according to the order it happened - use time expressions and phrases such as *first, next, then, later, in the end* etc.



Dear _____

I am at _____ with my _____

I'm having a _____ time here. _____

I _____ it. This is the _____ trip of my life.

Wish you were here!

Level B: Guided Writing

Name _____ I.D. _____

Unit 1: What's the Story? Task 1: Postcard to a Friend (B)



Think of a trip you have taken to a different province or overseas.

Write a postcard (about 100 words) to tell a friend about the trip.

- > You may begin by telling your friend the background information such as where you are, how you got there, or whom you came with.
- > Then you can write about what exactly happened in the trip.
- > You should add your thoughts and/or feelings about the trip at the end to conclude.
- > You can use Past Tense to talk about the events that already happened and Present Tense to talk about general facts.
- > You may use time expressions and phrases such as *first, next, then, later, suddenly, in the end* etc. to help telling your story in chronological order.

Dear _____

Wish you were here!

Level C: Free Writing

Name _____ I.D. _____



Unit 1: What's the Story? Task 1: Postcard to a Friend (C)

Think of a trip you have taken to a different province or overseas.

Write a postcard (about 100 words) to tell a friend about the trip.

Before you start writing, ask yourself these questions:

- > How do I begin writing? Do I need to give a short introduction?
- > What should I include in my story?
- > How should I arrange the information?
- > Which tense should I use to tell my story?
- > Should I include my feelings and comments or just give the facts?
- > How should I end the story?

Dear _____

Wish you were here!



Appendix 2
Guided reflection form

In my opinion, this task is too easy for me too difficult for me suitable for my ability

I could do this task on my own with my friend's help by referring to study tips

I think I did this task very well quite well badly because _____

My problem(s) when doing this task was _____

I solved this problem by _____

From this task, I learned _____

I can use what I learned to _____

I will choose level A B C for the next writing assignment because _____