

Learner Autonomy and Independence: The Students' Perspective

Introduction

There has been increasing interest in the area of autonomy and independence in second language (L2) learning in recent years. Most of the studies related to autonomous learning have focused on the teachers, curriculum, and materials as the students' source of knowledge and autonomy. This perspective perceives the instructor to be the "implementer" of autonomous learning, while the materials are assisting in this implementation.

Ironically, this view resembles the top-down way of thinking where the teacher is provider of knowledge, and the student is the passive recipient, like an empty vessel, receiving that knowledge. This particular perspective is especially inappropriate for the discourse of learner autonomy because the concept of learner autonomy assumes the students are fully capable of taking responsibility for their own learning. Indeed, the various definitions of learner autonomy imply the teacher taking less of an authoritarian role while the students take a more active role in their learning process. Education is then viewed as a social process where power is redistributed among participants and the learner takes control of their own learning (Benson and Voller, 1997, p.2).

Rather than focusing on the instructor or the materials, in this study I looked at the students as agents who are the ones responsible for their shift to autonomous learning. If the students are the ones to accept and take up autonomous learning, then as teachers and researchers we may be able to better understand the topic if we listen to the students'

perspectives. My goal during this pilot study was to hear the voices of the students on learner autonomy, a topic that is usually claimed by teachers and researchers.

Background & Previous Studies

The debates and interests regarding learner autonomy have become increasingly popular. There is a tremendous amount of information available on the topic, not just in the form of books and journal articles, but also in book series (e.g. *The Authentik series on learner autonomy*, Little, 1991 – 1997), and in electronic format, such as electronic discussion forums, on-line newsletters, special interest groups, and databases of current on-going research. There are also new international conferences (e.g. Independent Learning Conference, SC Symposium on Learner Autonomy) and a great number of organizations (e.g. AILA Scientific Commission on Learner Autonomy, SMILE Strategies for Managing an Independent Learning Environment). This abundance of accessible resources and organizations reflects the plethora of literature produced on the topic.

The area of learner autonomy in second language learning has expanded and evolved over the past thirty years. It was initially prevalent in the field of education before Holec (1979) brought it to the L2 learning field. Holec's (1979, 1981) Council of Europe report, wherein he proposed learner autonomy from theoretical and pedagogical perspectives, is considered a landmark classic because of the further interest and literature that it elicited. For example, Dickinson (1987) then built on this information and gave a more in-depth explanation including practical pedagogical implications for teachers.

Self-access learning and distance learning (Little, 1997a, 1997b; Littlewood, 1997; Cotterall & Reinders, 2004) have also contributed to a recent explosion of literature, which makes sense when one considers the growing amount of self-access centers and distance learning programs throughout the world. These centers and programs have boosted the interest in and study of learner autonomy, and, indeed, most of the presenters at the aforementioned conferences have themes related to second language learning in the contexts of self-access or distance learning.

Another popular interpretation of learner autonomy as “a set of *skills*” has produced a large amount of literature, especially in terms of skills and strategies that the learners can develop (read: be *taught* by teachers) including cognitive and metacognitive learner strategies (Wenden & Rubin, 1987; Carrell, 1989; O’Malley & Chamot, 1990; Wenden, 1991a, 1991b, 2001; Stoller, 1994; Fitzgerald, 1995; Oxford, 1996; Cohen, 1998; Chamot, 1999; Zhu, 2001; Yang, 2002; Akyel, 2002; Gu, 2003).

Because there are many possible interpretations of the term ‘learner autonomy,’ researchers in the area have focused on various distinct aspects of learner autonomy. However, it should be noted that the term *learner autonomy* is also referred to as *independent learning*. The two terms are often used interchangeably, even in the same piece of writing. Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s learning” (p.3), while Benson and Voller’s *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning* (1997) further articulated and expanded this definition by stating that the term learner autonomy has been defined and referred to in the following five ways:

1. for *situations* in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. for a set of *skills* which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. for an inborn *capacity* which is suppressed by institutional education;
4. for the exercise of *learners’ responsibility* for their own learning;

5. for the *right* of learners to determine the direction of their own learning”
(p.2, italics in the original).

Related to this interpretation is the literature on self-regulated learning (Butler & Winne, 1995; Dornyei, 2005), which also incorporated the third and fourth points raised by Benson and Voller (1997) of “an inborn capacity” and “the exercise of learners’ responsibility.” This perspective has been around in first language learning literature (from educational and psychological points of view) for quite some time and has only recently appeared in second language learning literature.

Other approaches have included critical interpretations such as Aoki (2001, 2002, 2003), Aoki & Smith (1999), Pennycook (1997), Holliday (2003); and Ho (1997)). These perspectives did not take for granted the cultural factor that may be involved during language learning, such as whether people have characteristics to adapting to learner autonomy. They acknowledged that there may be other factors involved. Pennycook, for example, talked about learner autonomy as a Western construct and how we should look for cultural alternatives. Aoki, who is a feminist with a critical perspective, asserted that it could be the situational context rather than whether the learners are Western or not. She acknowledged that certain cultural groups may be more favorable to learner autonomy and more quickly adopt learner autonomy, but she emphasized there may be other factors that are just as relevant.

While the student’s role in autonomous learning has been addressed to some extent, the context was to improve the teacher’s understanding so that they could foster an environment that supports the development of autonomous learners. What has not been addressed is the students’ agency in this process.

Research Questions

My broad research question is as follows: How do students' perceive "autonomous learning" in their new EAP university classes? How do the students use their "voice" in the way they frame and tell their stories and perspectives during the interviews? As I mentioned earlier, teachers and researchers are the ones who usually "claim" this topic "as their domain" (Cotterall, 1999). My interest was in how students discussed these topics in terms of their own experience.

This perspective can be very valuable for instructors and researchers because our primary concern is that of the student and their L2 linguistic development and acquisition of academic literacy. It is possible that "autonomous learning" may be a very foreign and new discourse for some of our students. Perhaps in the new foreign context of a North American institution, students may struggle through new conflicting discourses (cultural and otherwise), and in listening to the students' voices, we can have a clearer understanding of the learners' experience and development.

The Study

The setting for the study was an English for Academic Purposes (EAP) program within a public North American university. The students were international students who were matriculated into a full-time master's degree program in the university, and who were required to take an English placement test, which determined if they needed any EAP courses. Depending on the score they received for different skills such as reading, writing, listening, and speaking; they were either exempt from the EAP courses or they were placed into intermediate or advanced courses. They needed to pass these courses to

graduate from their program; however, they received no credit for the courses. The method of interviewing was used to elicit their views on learner autonomy.

Methods

Few studies have looked at the students' voices in autonomy (see Benson, 2005; Cotterall & Reinders, 2000; Cotterall, 1995, 1999; Victori & Lockhart (1995). Cotterall's (1995) perspective was especially interesting because of her approach. She utilized interviews and questionnaires, and from there she categorized the students and looked for the factors or components of the students' beliefs that either promote or inhibit the development of learner autonomy. She quantified the students' beliefs, which may not necessarily be appropriate. It is possible that if there are a large amount of students, one could see patterns in terms of student "types," since it seems as though when individual students are compared, very strong differences are more prevalent (Kern, 1995).

However, I believe this simplifies a very complex phenomenon. The nature of the topic of learner autonomy itself does not lend itself to quantitative studies. Beliefs about autonomy and independence are not measurable or static. How can one categorize something that is constantly changing and evolving? It is like putting the students in a box when, in fact, the students have agency. If a researcher limits the students to these categories, they may miss many of the other complex factors involved. Therefore, I chose to use interviewing because as Kvale (1996) explained "interviews are particularly suited for studying people's understandings of the meanings in their lived world, describing their experiences and self-understanding, and clarifying and elaborating their own perspective on their lived world" (p.105). Qualitative interviewing appeared to be

the most appropriate method to grasp some pieces of the students' complex and ever-changing experience and understanding.

The interview was designed with a series of elements in it (see Appendix for full details). In the five sections, I went from very general to very specific. In the first section, I posed some very open-ended questions, such as "Could you talk a little about your experience learning English?" We then engaged in a word association activity, where I said a word, and the participant said a response. I followed this with presenting two classroom activities, a grammar activity and a discussion task, and asking for their reactions regarding the two tasks. Then the student completed a questionnaire with a Likert scale, after which I asked the interviewees to explain why they chose the numbers expressing agreement or disagreement to the comments written on the questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire was not to categorize the students or find numeric significance; rather it was simply another measure to elicit detailed responses from the participant. I concluded with more specific questions and also gave them the chance to explain any further their earlier comments. I used these various activities in order to give the interviewees different opportunities to elicit valid, authentic responses that reflected their attitudes and beliefs. Each interview lasted one hour. The compensation I offered was 30 minutes of writing editing.

Focal Participants

The two students I interviewed were in the highest level in the EAP listening and speaking course. It was the last month of this final EAP course they needed to take before they were exempt from the EAP program. They were both older than me by five

to ten years, concurrently master's level students in the university, and English teachers in their home countries.

For the purpose of the participants' anonymity, both names are pseudonyms. The first participant, Mohammad, was a male from Egypt, and was extremely talkative and delighted to share his story and beliefs openly. In fact, he even refused the compensation because he said he enjoyed the topic so much. His teacher informed me that the student was friendly and highly motivated.

The second participant, Aki, was a female from Japan. She made arrangements to work on editing her paper *before* the interview. Even though I granted 30 minutes, after 75 minutes, she requested that I look at another paper, which I had to refuse. I had another appointment and told her that we had to conclude the editing session. Her teacher described the student as being very quiet and not very motivated.

Findings

The two participants both saw the student (and not the teacher or materials) as responsible and agentive in their own learning, and they also saw the student as the source of learner autonomy. Both of these points were made clear despite the fact that the interviews were significantly distinct from each other. In fact, it is hard to imagine that they could have been more different.

Learner 1: Mohammad

The first participant very enthusiastically shared his experience of learning English with me. During the one hour, he spoke almost the entire time, with my comments being kept very short. Initially he was not interested at all in learning or

teaching English, which he was said was influenced by his instructors' grammar-translation approach.

“I didn't imagine myself as an English teacher. I have a bad memory, and I'm not satisfied from this curriculum. Why do I have to learn it? Not to speak English, but English for test...All of the teachers focus on grammar-translation method, and I didn't like it.”

Then one day in class, when his teachers told him who would go to which university based on the students' English score, it was a moment when something changed in him. He saw the cultural capital of the language, and at the same time he felt like it was not fair for his teachers to exclude students just based on that test score.

“So he selected some students who would make the college. But I was one of the students who he didn't select. It made me feel bad. So, I didn't imagine myself as an English teacher. My parents suggested I enter the college of education, but I hated that. I didn't want to be a teacher because I had bad examples of teachers...”

This event greatly impacted him, and he became highly motivated to learn English. Despite the fact that he “hated” the idea of becoming a teacher, he obeyed his parents and joined the Curriculum Studies Program. He decided that he would be a better teacher than his English teachers had been, and he made a conscious decision to “love” English.

“In Egypt, we have a proverb, ‘if you teach something, you have to love it.’ So I realized I have to love English and love education. So, I started studying *on my own by my own*. So I started looking for other books, even if the teacher didn't recommend it. Listening to English was easy, but speaking was hard because you need someone to speak with. So I found the only way to speak was in class, so I always speak in class. And if he can't understand me, then I had to re-phrase it.”

He saw the opportunity to develop his English skills in English-medium curriculum studies classes, where he very actively participated every chance he could in the classroom. Not only did his English skills improve, but he also appeared like a serious motivated student, which made him favorable in the eyes of his teachers. He took

advantage of this relationship with the teachers, and said that before a test he would approach the teacher and ask them what he should study for the test. He was proud of this and stated that others in the class had just not thought to ask the teachers, but the teachers would actually tell him what he should focus his time studying on.

He also emphasized that for the test, he studied what his teachers told him to focus on, but for his own English learning, he studied *on his own by his own*, and he gave the example of studying books that his teacher had not recommended. From his utilization of the teacher and his own self-study, he finally succeeded and gained a very prestigious position with Egypt's Ministry of Education.

“During the 4 years, we had 8 tests, and my score was the highest score. At the end, I had the highest score in the school... Because I always interacted with my professors, so they knew me. But I talked because it helped me improve. So the Ministry of Education offered me a job because my score was so high. Which is really rare because it's hard to get a job with the government.”

He expressed that the reason he spoke in class was to improve his English skills, but the other advantages came along with that. The two times that I observed him here in his classes at UH, I saw that he still maintains his gregarious nature, and his teachers' view him as a dedicated student who is interested in the content matter. He utilizes whatever opportunities to practice English that come his way.

To further illustrate his point that the student is responsible for their own learning, later in the interview, when he filled out the questionnaire, he very strongly disagreed with the comment, “I learn better when the teacher does most of the teaching” and I asked if he could explain what he meant.

“I'm the one who knows what I want to learn. The teacher can't know everything I want to learn. I should improve myself by myself. I am the one responsible for my learning. The teacher can be a reference. Could you [the

teacher] give me some feedback and guidance because you are more experienced than me with this.”

Finally, at the end of the interview, I asked him what he thought about independent learning and independent learners, and he replied by further emphasizing that the teacher’s role should be that of a guide.

“He [the student] can learn by himself if he can find something useful, but he cannot know if it’s in the right direction and he will waste a lot of time and effort. And in our age and time, this is not efficient. If I want to discover things by myself, I would neglect all the experiences of what has happened before. And why should I rediscover something that someone else already discovered? I would discover the same thing that another person already discovered. You need to get a reference for yourself, like a teacher or books, so, yes, you have to find your resources and references. Some people say we need no school because the students can teach themselves. But if I made a mistake or needed advice. Give me the sources that I can trust.”

He considered himself to be an independent, autonomous learner.

“For myself? As a learner, yes, I think so. I didn’t try to be an independent learner but I found my style of learning to be like that. So when I found there is something called an independent learner, I realized, “Yes, this is what I am!”

Learner 2: Aki

Aki spoke very softly and gave mostly one or two-word responses. Most of her interview involved me speaking, either in asking the questions or in repeating what she said and urging her to explain more. Her primary motivation in participating in the project was the writing tutorial I provided, and she did not think that she had anything interesting to offer to the study. When I asked her to share her experiences learning English, she responded, “unfortunately for you, I think I am typical learner in Japan.” She also explained that her experience with the North American university learning was her worst language learning experience that she has had in her life. She said it was

shameful to lead presentations and engage in the class discussions, and she did not like it at all. To her independent learning has a negative connotation. She did not have to do these kinds of activities in Japan, where the classes were more structured and teacher-lead. She expressed this in the word association section of the interview:

V: independence.

A: America.

V: *laughs* America? independent learner.

A: independent learner is ... I think studying can be individual. They already study by individually.

V: what do you mean 'study individually'?

A: If we could learn by myself. So means already there.

V: dependent learner.

A: Japanese. *both laugh*

V: Why do you say that?

A: I *really* think so because I think that we used to that. We need something, um... how can I say? Something a list to follow. Usually teachers give that.

She mentioned this "list to follow" several times throughout the interview. This was a very significant theme that came out of the small amount of information that she gave. Later in the interview she expanded her definition of the term *autonomous learner* to include the fact that these learners can study individually without a list to follow. They have a clear goal in mind, they create their own list of what they need to follow, and they move quickly and independently towards their goal.

Ironically, when I asked her if she saw herself as an autonomous learner, she said, "no, not at all." She admitted that she made her own list to follow to reach her goals, but she did not enjoy it. Her distinction was that even though she engaged in those behaviors, she did not enjoy them, and that is the distinction between dependent and independent for her. Independent learners *enjoy* doing those particular activities and engaging in those behaviors, whereas a dependent learner does them but without enjoyment.

Throughout the interview, even though I asked her about the teacher's role, she did not connect learner autonomy to the classroom or the class activities. She resisted the 'independent' activities that she was required to do in her new university classes. These activities did not make her an 'independent learner' but rather they made her do work on her own while making her miserable. She admitted to me that she did not understand the purpose of leading a class discussions, and she said it does not help her learn at all. To Aki, learner autonomy came from the student's own learning style - they could study individually and enjoy it.

Conclusion

Both participants had something to say about autonomous learning and had certain perceptions (and possibly misconceptions) about the topic. The first participant thought of it as synonymous with communicative language teaching and using the language, while the second participant thought it meant that one enjoyed learning independently.

For Mohammad, learning English was not just a question of particular kinds of activities and teaching styles, rather it was surrounded by other cultural features such as the politically charged (forced curriculum) of English that was mandated upon him if he wanted to go to a good university. The purpose of learning English was also confusing for him, and he constantly questioned this.

"And so I always ask my professors *why* I have to learn English. English is for communication, so we should be able to communicate."

He thought a language should be learned to be actually used, and then he looked for other sources of learning (to *use* the language). As he reaped the rewards from this, his

interest increasingly developed. This fueled the development and his motivation. This was the point where he began to embrace the language, which was another key shift in his learning. It was far more complex than just a teaching methodology. His experiences were surrounded by other circumstances, such as not having access to certain universities and being able to succeed in curriculum studies, which was an English-medium curriculum. He saw the teacher just a guide, as a source. First the teacher was the preventer of his learning English because of their grammar-translation methods, and then the teacher became a source of conversation practice – to use the language during the content-based courses.

Even though Aki was enrolled in the same course as Mohammad, she did not look favorably to the same activities that Mohammad said were "perfect." She saw the activities as "shameful" and even though she did the activities and ultimately successfully passed the course, she was not at all happy that she had to undergo those experiences. Ultimately, even though her teachers encouraged her and designed materials to help her become more autonomous, she had agency and resisted the role of the autonomous learner.

Students also play a role in the implementation of learner autonomy in the class. While the teachers, materials, and teaching methodology are all important, students are individuals who have agency and changing shifting beliefs and attitudes. While factors such a self-esteem and past educational experiences may play a role in their development as autonomous learners, it is ultimately up to the student to use their agency to accept, reject, resist, or endure that role.

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Appendix

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Rapport

I'm collecting different experiences of language learning, what works for you. how different people experience learning, their views.

2. Open Q's: Could you talk a little about your experience learning English?

What was your worst learning experience?

What was your best learning experience?

3. Word Association

Good Learner

Good Teacher

Bad Teacher

Bad Learner

Independence

Independent learner

Dependent learner

4. Have you ever done this kind of exercise?

Did it help you?

5. Questionnaire

6. Specific Questions

Is there anything that helps you to learn? (That the teacher does or doesn't do? classroom activities? Things that do you do on your own?)

Is there anything that makes it more challenging to learn? (That the teacher does or doesn't do, classroom activities, or things you do on your own?)

What do you think about "independent learner"?

Have you ever heard the word "autonomous"? What do you think about this idea?

QUESTIONNAIRE

Name: _____

Please circle the number that most accurately expresses your agreement or disagreement.

1. English learning through sentence drilling is effective for me.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

2. I prefer a classroom activity or project that has a lot of structure.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

3. I learn alone at home.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

4. I learn better when the teacher does most of the teaching.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

5. I learn better when I do activities with my classmates without the teacher being involved.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

6. I am responsible for most of my learning.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

7. My teacher is responsible for most of my learning.

Strongly disagree 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 Strongly agree

Agreement to Participate in An Evaluation Project

Investigator: Varsha Graves, M.A. Candidate, Dept. Second Language Studies

Faculty Supervisor: Prof. Lourdes Ortega
Department of Second Language Studies
570 Moore Hall, University of Hawai'i at Manoa
1890 East-West Road
Honolulu, HI 96822

Purpose of this Research:

This project is intended to explore the role that second language learning students play in their own language learning. I am interested in understanding students' experiences of learning English and how experiences influence how they learn English now both on their own and in the classroom.

What You Will Be Expected to Do:

The method of data collection will involve an interview. You have every right to decline participation in any or all aspects of the data collection process. Use of data for further analysis and inclusion in the research report will be cleared with you before any such action is undertaken.

Your Rights

• To Confidentiality

The research protocol will be organized and conducted to preserve anonymity where possible and/or necessary. The entire data collection process will use pseudonyms in so your name will not appear anywhere in the data.

• To Ask Questions at Any Time

You may ask questions about the research or data collection methodology at any time before, during, or after the research process. The researcher may be contacted at:

Varsha Graves: vgraves@hawaii.edu

• To Withdraw at Any Time

You may withdraw from the research project at any time, and you may request that relevant data be destroyed, without any consequences.

Compensation:

As compensation for your participation, you will be given the option to choose either between 30 minutes of writing editing or 30 minutes of writing tutoring.

Benefits and use of results:

As stated above, the overall purpose of this research project is to understand the role

students play in their own learning. All research participants will have complete access to the finished report. More specifically, it is hoped that the process of interviewing will itself prove to be enlightening for the research participants insofar as it ideally will provide an opportunity for reflection and clarification of beliefs and actions that come to light in the course of the investigation.

Possible Risks:

To the best of the researchers' knowledge there is no foreseeable detrimental effects of this research process.

Signature:

I certify that I have read and understand the above, that I have been given satisfactory answers to any questions about the project, and that I have been advised that I am free to withdraw my consent and to discontinue participation in the evaluation at any time, without any prejudice or loss of benefits.

I agree to be a part of this study with the understanding that such permission does not take away any of my rights, nor does it release the investigator or the institution (or any agent or employee thereof) from liability for negligence.

(print your name)

(date)

(signature)