Awakening Opportunity

Makiko Ebata

Awakening Opportunity:

Three Elements to Foster Learners' Autonomy

Makiko Ebata

Digital Hollywood University

dhucocomaki@yahoo.co.jp

Introduction

Second or other language acquisition is a long process that never ends, and people that study

second or other languages appreciate that the ability to communicate in those languages enables

them to better understand the different values of the people they are communicating with. By

acquiring a new language, people can not only come to respect differences, but also realize that

they live in a small world. Although there are many positive aspects to acquiring a new

language, not every person who attempts to learn a new language succeeds in obtaining the

ability to effectively communicate for several reasons such as losing motivation and confidence

towards learning, lacking effective learning environments, and so forth. I strongly believe that

teachers are one of the most significant factors in producing successful language communicators.

Teachers are able to maintain and control students' motivation towards studying both inside and

outside of the classroom, which certainly produces students' confidence in their communication

skills. Besides the significant role of the teacher in the language learning process, students must

also make an extensive effort to acquire a targeted language on their own. After careful consideration of the role of the instructor and learner in language development, I have come to the conclusion that effective language learning requires fruitful teaching and learner autonomy. This paper will show the effectual teaching strategies that create learner autonomy.

Learners' Autonomy

Learner Autonomy Definition

According to Usuki (2002), learner autonomy is characterized by learners taking charge of their own learning. Similarly, Little (1995) claims learner autonomy occurs when the student handles all aspects of the learning process from planning to assessing performance. Sert (2006) asserts that responsible learners acting autonomously make the decisions regarding what they will learn, how they will learn it and under what time frame the learning will take place. Accordingly, the autonomous learner must also play a pivotal role in outlining the criterion for determining the progress of the learning taking place. So, based on the definitions of learner autonomy above, we can see that one way students may become conscious of their learning strategies is by developing their autonomy. In other words, they come to create their own learning goals, plan the way to accomplish those goals, and review and evaluate their assumptions about their learning. This means that they become independent and conscientious learners with clear goals

and do not just sit passively waiting for their teacher's directions. Furthermore, it is suggested by some researchers that development of learner autonomy has a direct connection to learner motivation and confidence. According to Usuki (2000), learners that develop autonomy have greater self-confidence and trust in their capability to focus their learning potential to maximize their educational experience. Kimball (2007) also states that autonomy is a major factor in why people staying motivated towards activities that challenge them. This means that creating an environment in which learners develop autonomously is of great importance in order to raise students' motivation and confidence levels, since motivated and confident learners can lead themselves to become successful learners not only inside but also outside of the classroom.

Elements in Learners' Autonomy

According to Kimball's interview for autonomy research, there are three themes in autonomy development: "(1) personal autonomy, (2) relational autonomy, and (3) lack of autonomy" (2007). She found that "perceptions of autonomy are often embedded in their relationships with others and are derived from having a developed sense of identity" (2007). Usuki stresses that "(I) learner autonomy is not a matter of institutional mode but of learners' internal attitude; and (II) learner autonomy entails an awareness of both self-direction and collaboration between teacher and students, and between student and student. In particular, a teacher's attitude towards

his or her students might hold the key to learner autonomy" (2002). In order to foster self-directed learners' awareness, special attention towards the students-teacher relationship and student-student relationship is necessary. With a great relationship between both the teacher and fellow classmates, students are believed to build their identities which is significant in developing autonomy.

What Teachers Can Do In Language Classes

Great teachers provide students with motivating lessons. The very first thing that comes to mind when I think about effective English teaching is an energetic teacher who taught me how beautiful it was to be able to be familiar with what was outside of Japan. With an ability to communicate in English, I lost the sense of being afraid to step forward wherever I chose to go. Energetic lessons, on the other hand, are not easy to provide to students without well-planned effective methods, and understanding each of the students' personalities, background, and goals. In order to provide effective lessons, the followings are necessary in order to lead learners to becoming autonomous in their learning.

Useful Content and Teacher's Role

It is obvious that people want to enjoy learning. What they learn should be meaningful and contain useful knowledge that can be used in real life. In other words, language teachers should understand what their students need to know, want to learn, and their future goals in order to encourage the students to enjoy learning both the new content and the target language. According to Stryker and Leaver, "if the teacher carefully selects the content, students will study topics for which they already possess schemata (i.e., the relevant linguistic, contents and cultural knowledge). Using content and context together to understand messages students develop coping mechanisms for dealing with unknown language in other contexts, ultimately fostering the development of foreign language proficiency" (p. 9. 1997). Careful content choice fosters students' understanding of both the content and the new language. They also suggest that "if the teacher knows how to effectively shelter the texts, making them accessible to the students at their level of proficiency, most students can benefit from the use of authentic materials in any content area, even if their linguistic skills are minimally developed" (p. 8. 1997). Durwin and Sherman mention that "instructors are not only concerned with choosing a textbook that meets their needs with respect to content coverage, scope, and course objectives, but they also want a textbook that students will like 'so the will actually want to read it) and understand" (2008). Teachers in language classes need to pay careful attention to both content choice and the way to appropriately use the content for the students' language levels, and they need to understand the

students' preference; this will result in the students' comprehending the content and further developing their language. When they realize that they have a great deal of understanding of the content and their language is improving, they become confident and motivated to keep learning. Usuki suggests that "learner development should promote self-confident and self motivation through the language learning process, so that learners come to believe in their own potential. At the same time they need to improve their capacity for self-analysis, and in this it is extremely important for them to get the teacher's support and understanding" (2002). She also claims that "fostering autonomy is not just a matter of learning a few techniques－it involves changing the way in which teachers relate to learners" (2002). Developing a sense of confidence and motivation is essential for students to be able to evaluate their own learning.

Student-Centered Cooperative Learning Environment

Akindele and Trennepohl conducted some interesting research on the collaborative learning method at Botswana University; their research conclusion follows:

The Majority of the students liked the idea of undertaking cooperative learning tasks.

They felt more relaxed and freer to communicate with each other. They were also

interested in and happy with learning communication skills. They enjoyed writing positive

and constructive comments on their colleagues' work and speaking in group discussions

and during the interview process. Indeed, through the group activities, each student was

afforded the opportunity to participate in the tasks. It gives the lecturer the opportunity to

see each student at work, contributing to the attainment of the group goals, thus granting

the lecturer freedom to teach and assess individual students. It is an opportunity for the

lecturer to assess the students' formatively instead of using only the traditional summative

form of assessment.

Student-centered cooperative learning environments are advantageous for both learners and the teacher; learners are relaxed enough not to be afraid of making errors during communication with peers, and most importantly, every student has a chance to participate in class while the teacher is able to observe and evaluate each student's improvement and behavior in class. Student-centered environments enable students to enjoy learning with their peers, which motivates them to learn. Ming states that "motivation is central to student achievement. Students who are motivated to learn about a particular topic perform better than their less motivated peers" (1998). Ming also asserts that "cooperative learning can improve student motivation" (1998). When students motivation increases, they gain autonomy in their learning. Reeve suggests that "an intention is a determination to engage in a particular behavior, and it is equivalent to being motivated to act" (2006).

In student-centered cooperative learning environments, group and pair work is vital. In this type

of work, each student has a role, meaning that he or she has to become responsible for a target

task. When students become responsible learners, they come to learn that they can accomplish a

task independently.

Meaningful Skills Teaching

Students in Japan, for instance, receive at least a six-year English education. Although the

education system has been modified in order to produce successful communicators, it is a fact

that many students can hardly express their opinions after six years. There are several reasons

behind this such as teachers using Japanese in the English classes; the students are not trained

enough to use English especially for output skills; the students population in each class is too

large; the students prefer a teacher-lecture style; and, they are not obliged to use English in

Japan. In order to enable the students to use English, teachers need to put more focus on four

skills integration.

Richard-Amoto asserts that "integration of the four skills can take place right from the

beginning without causing an undue overload on students' mental capabilities" (p. 96, 2003).

She also suggests that "natural curiosity may push students into more and more complex levels

of communication, incorporating all the skills of which they are capable" (p. 96, 2003). She

names this "the natural curiosity phenomenon" (p. 96), meaning that if students gain an interest in a class, they can unexpectedly accomplish reading and writing tasks. Thus, first, it is of great importance to provide an interesting class in order for students to acquire a curiosity to learn. Teachers also need to plan a lesson in which students have plenty of opportunities to use all the skills. Furthermore, research by Quek, Wong, Divaharan, Liu, Peer, and Williams describes that "just-in-time skills: information searching, processing and presentation of research" are important to teach in class (2007). In order to teach these skills, the use of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) is vital. Fernandez (2000) demonstrates that the Internet is a helpful tool in learning. His research suggests that the use of the Internet enables students to become proficient in English and also to become acquainted with vocabulary related to their main discipline. The result is a more dynamic approach to teaching English, so that the students gain autonomy, with the instructor acting only as a coordinator, supervisor and tutor. Moreover, CALL is useful to promote self-study, improving students' English skills. Ning and Lin mention that "one common detailed skill improvement was listening comprehension developed through the switching of subtitles in culture-enriched films. Learner autonomy, according to the interviewees, was strongly emphasized to accompany the learning environment of the CALL self-access classroom, including cozy interior decoration, well-organized learning programs, and timely assistance" (2008).

Research and Outcomes

My inquisitiveness to thoroughly understand learner autonomy resulted in a research project in which I attempted to find out what motivates my students to learn English. Since motivation has a strong connection with developing learner autonomy, I believe that searching for motivation elements brings a great deal of understanding of how to produce autonomous learners.

I asked sixty-four students the three questions below:

   1. What kind of teacher is preferable in your English class? If you have a favorite teacher, describe him/ her.

   2. What kind of activities do you want your English teacher to do in your class?

   3. Do you like group work and pair work? Why, or why not?

The sixty four students are freshmen and sophomores at a technology university in Japan, between the ages of eighteen to twenty-eight. Their nationalities are Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Taiwanese, Filipino, Thai, German, French, Cambodian, and Malaysian; their English levels range from native-like to very beginning.

1. What kind of teacher is preferable in your English class? If you have a favorite teacher, describe him/her.

Their opinions resulted in three categories. First, I found that they prefer friendly, frank, and open-minded teachers since they can feel comfortable in class. They also want to enjoy talking not only about a subject but also about any topics they want to talk about with a teacher without any hesitation. Second, they prefer knowledgeable teachers who can provide the students with useful knowledge. A number of students from other countries seem to prefer this type of teacher. One student answered, "I like a teacher who have much knowledge about a subject and can share his/her knowledge which can be used outside of school." Lastly, passionate teachers are preferred by a number of students. They want to feel teachers' passion towards education, which they believe never allows them to give up on teaching in any circumstances.

2. What kind of activities do you want your English teacher to do in your class?

Most students answered that they preferred discussion with peers; they regard learning English as a communication tool. They also mentioned that discussion allowed them to understand about their peers deeply enough to feel more comfortable with them in class, to learn something new from them, and to enjoy using what they learn in class such as vocabulary words, structures, and expressions. Some advanced-level students want to discuss topics with peers that can stimulate

their critical thinking. Furthermore, fun activities using music, games, and movies are preferred by them. According to their opinions, learning English should be fun so that they can enjoy learning how to communicate in it. This opinion came from most of the Japanese students who were accustomed to a teacher-centered class in Japan.

3. Do you like group work and pair work? Why, or why not?

Every student likes group work since they can have plenty of opportunities to speak English, can have lots of fun talking with group members, and can understand the class by asking questions to group members. A student answered, "I love group work because it is fun and I can learn from my members. I also can ask questions to them that I cannot to my teacher, so I feel very relaxed." On the other hand, some students dislike pair work for two reasons. First, if a partner is uncooperative and quiet, they feel uncomfortable with him/her, and lose their motivation to complete a task. Second, if a partner is reluctant to speak English, the students find pair work meaningless. In English class, they believe that using English is important, thus they need a teacher to make effective pairs.

This research made me realize what the students want from a teacher and a class in order for them to keep their motivation toward leaning English. Teachers should help students relax in

class so that they can feel relaxed enough to produce a great deal English. To do so, teachers

need to be friendly and understanding in class. They should also be knowledgeable and

passionate since the students want to gain useful knowledge which can be used outside of class.

They also want to feel teachers' passion towards education. Passion allows teachers to energize

both teachers and students. In addition, discussion is preferred by the students, and this reveals

that they want to use English in class, and they like a student-centered environment. Moreover,

the use of group work is beneficial for fostering students' motivation. It can provide a number of

opportunities to use what they learn in class since learning English is not merely for test

preparation, but it is for actual communication. Careful attention is necessary when pair work is

used in class because it might de-motivate students; uncooperative and reluctant partners ruin

meaningful activities.

Conclusion

Developing learners' autonomy is important in producing successful learners. Among several

elements for developing learners' autonomy, I find three elements especially important; 1.

Effective content and teachers, 2. A student-centered cooperative learning environment, and 3.

Meaningful skills teaching. All of them are crucial in order to foster learner autonomy. In

addition, autonomous learners have increased motivation towards learning. My research allows

me to understand that friendly and understanding teachers, conversation opportunities, and

effective group work and pair work are needed by students. In short, these elements can provide

opportunities to become successful learners who can eventually become great English

communicators. They are great opportunities givers that can develop learners' autonomy.

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Makiko Ebata

She is currently an instructor at Digital Hollywood University. She has a Master's degree in TESOL form Hawaii Pacific University, Hawaii, U.S. A. Her research interests include motivation, content-based instruction, teacher education, and project-based instruction.