

A Reflective Approach to Examining the Effects of Teaching Strategies for Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has been recognized as one of the most important factors affecting language students' learning. The aim of the article is to summarize four language instructors' reflections on their approaches to the promotion of learner autonomy in the classroom setting. Taking on a constructivist perspective to the understanding of how learner autonomy could be facilitated through classroom activities, the article focuses on the teaching strategies implemented by the instructors in relation to their effects on the learners' learning. The instructors describe their observation of the students' learning behaviors in class respectively, followed by an analysis of their students' written reflections or verbal feedback. By examining the learners' autonomous learning behaviors observed in class in relation to their feedback, the effectiveness of the teaching strategies employed could be better realized. In addition, through discussing the challenges the instructors faced, the pedagogical implications of the teaching practice of the four instructors could be of value in shining light on how types of teaching activities could better cater for autonomous learning in the classroom setting.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Teaching Strategy, Reflection

Introduction

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) have become a central and important focus for government initiatives across the world since they were introduced at an UN Summit in 2015. Among these goals, providing learners with high-quality education (SDG 4) is seen as one of the most salient and prominent goals, which is of particular relevance for educators. Since fostering lifelong learning for all is of great importance under the high-quality education goal, learner autonomy has an indispensable role to play.

In the field of language education, it is a common understanding that learner autonomy plays a crucial role in the student's language learning. In the teaching context in Taiwan, most learners start to learn a foreign language in a formal educational setting. Accordingly, how language instructors teach in class could have significant impacts on not only how students learn but also what they think about language learning. For a course aiming to foster learner autonomy in the classroom setting, it is essential to examine the teaching strategies adopted in relation to their effects on the students' learning. By doing so, issue in terms of how improvements could be made regarding the teaching practice for learner autonomy could be better comprehended.

In this paper, the definition of learner autonomy will be discussed in relation to ways in which students' autonomous learning could be observed and/or identified in class, followed by an illustration of four language instructors' reflections on their teaching practice. To be specific, the study adopts a reflective approach to understanding the effects of the adopted teaching strategies on the students' development of learner autonomy. In addition, through discussing the challenges the instructors faced, the pedagogical implications of the teaching practice of the four instructors could be of value in shining light on how types of teaching activities could better cater for autonomous learning in the classroom setting.

Learner Autonomy in the Classroom Setting

Learner autonomy has been defined by Holec (1981: 3) as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning.' Based on Holec's theory, autonomous learners should be capable of determining their learning goals and making decisions on methods, monitoring and assessing what they have learned. In a way, this definition signifies the importance of the learner's process of learning rather than the learning outcome. The term 'learner autonomy' is sometimes associated with the term 'self-regulation'. According to

Zimmerman (2002: 65), self-regulation is 'the self-directive abilities into academic skills' and learning is seen 'as an activity that students do for themselves in a proactive way rather than as a covert event that happens to them in reaction to teaching.' In this sense, autonomous learners should possess the abilities of self-direction. Besides, autonomous learners should play an active role rather than a reactive one. In a classroom setting, this 'active' trait of learners seems to be one of the observable behaviors for the identification of autonomous learners.

In addition to the active learning behaviors of learners, students working with their peers could be considered essential to their development of learner autonomy. It has been mentioned that "the growth of learner independence is supported by learner interdependence" (Little, 2000:22), implying the important role collaborative learning plays in the facilitation of learner autonomy. On the other hand, it has been stressed that being able to reflect on the learning process is crucial for autonomous learners (Benson, 2011). Since the reflective process could not be easily observed, the learners' verbal or written feedback regarding their learning process becomes extremely relevant information for the investigation of the teaching practice in relation to the development of learner autonomy.

In terms of forms of autonomous behaviors, it has been noted by Cooker (2013:30) that there are "multiple ways of being autonomous". Accordingly, being able to identify the signs of autonomous learning behaviors could be important for language teachers who intend to facilitate their students' capacity for learner autonomy through their teaching practice. In this sense, language instructors who put learner autonomy as an important learning objective might need to examine their students' behavioral signs of autonomous learning and scrutinize the learners' feedback to better comprehend how their teaching practice could be improved for a course aiming to promote learner autonomy in their students.

From the discussion above, it could be summarized that learner autonomy in the classroom setting could be identified or traced through three means: the observable autonomous learning behaviors, the learners' approaches to collaboration with their peers and the students' verbal or written feedback regarding their own learning. In this paper, four language instructors' reflections on their teaching practices will be illustrated, focusing on examining the teaching strategies employed in class in relation to the development of learner autonomy in their

students. By taking on a constructivist approach to the understanding of the topic under study, the paper summarizes four language-related courses aiming to promote learner autonomy in the classroom setting using qualitative research methodology for data collection and analysis.

Reflections on Four Teaching Practices for Learner Autonomy

In this section, four teaching practices are described regarding objectives of teaching of the course, activities and teaching strategies employed, how these strategies affected students' learning. In this section, the four teaching practices will be described and discussed respectively.

Course One: Finance English (FE)

The course aims to enhance the students' ability in reading finance-related texts through introducing financial terms and vocabulary as well as guiding the learners to apply their grammatical skills to comprehend complex sentences in the text. In order to enhance the students' autonomous learning in class, the instructor designed a group-project on using news videos from well-renowned international news media. The students have to transcribe the news. Then, they have to find out the most important 5 sentences and the essential 10 financial words from the text, and translate these sentences and vocabulary into Chinese. At the final stage of the project, the students have to do a presentation on their designated news. During the presentation, the students have to show their peers the video with English subtitles. Then they have to explain the meaning of their listed sentences and financial words/terms of importance. Also, the students not only have to assess their own and peers' performance, they have to reflect on what they have learned from the project and provide suggestions for future activities.

There were three main teaching strategies for learner autonomy employed for this group project. Firstly, by having the students work in groups, the students were given the opportunities to work collaboratively with their peers. The second strategy was related to the use of authentic materials. By using the most up-to-date financial news as learning materials, the students also had the chance to be aware of what was actually going on in the real-life financial world. The third strategy of the project was related to the students' peer assessment experience and the after-project reflection. The students were able to think about their learning process instead of merely focusing on their learning results.

From the instructor's observation, the students seemed to have shown more actively involved while working on the project, compared to their seemingly less active behavior in the lecturer-based teaching sessions. On the other hand, the increase in the teacher-students and student-student interactions during the project sessions, compared to the lecture-based teaching sessions, has been noticeable. Despite this, it was also noticed two of the teams seemed to make bare minimum effort to the preparation of the project as they would prefer spending more time on preparing for their university entrance applications.

The effects of how the group project on the students' autonomous learning could be reflected by the learners' end-of-class reflections and feedback. For example, the following extracts from the students' written reflections indicate the students have become more aware of their learning needs (S21&S44), their learning preferences in class (S8&S32) and their improvement of their criticality in how they learn (S13&S38).

S21: Because I don't really read financial news myself, I found the content quite hard to follow. When the teacher reminded us that the texts are from real-life news report, I start to find the news from local news media. Afterwards, I found it easier to understand the text in English.

S44: I think the course is quite difficult for me, especially the financial terms and vocabulary. I will go online to find more information about these terms in Chinese so that I can understand better what they mean.

In addition to being aware of their learning needs, the student's description (S21) of utilizing local news media to help them understand better the content of the English text has shown how this learner attempted to learn better through using local resources, indicating an enhancement of language learning awareness in this student.

S8: I hope we can have more mini presentations in class. I really enjoy working with my team.

S32: Initially, I found it very difficult to understand financial texts. After discussing with other group members, I can not only remember the words better, but also understand the article better. After finding the answers to the questions I had in mind, it feels great.

Both of the students stated how they liked to work with their peers as a team. The first student (S8) expressed her preference for learning activities. The second student (S32) described in detail how working with peers helped her to improve her vocabulary and reading comprehension, showing that she was conscious of how group discussion was of help in enhancing different language skills. This has indicated the student's metacognitive awareness has been strengthened through the experience.

S13: In order to complete the project smoothly, I know I need to improve my vocabulary. I decided to use Quizlet to make vocabulary cards for me so I can practice on the bus.

S38: I like to keep a vocabulary notebook. In this course, there are lot of difficult words to learn. For the project, I need to explain the important financial words, I need to improve my vocabulary. So, I tried to learn few words a day. After few weeks, I found reading financial texts a little less difficult for me.

The students' feedback implies that the group project has been effective in helping the students to increase their learning awareness and metacognitive ability regarding how they learn. Despite the positive findings, it was also found that the students realized peer assessment difficult for them as they were 'not sure how to give scores of other teams' (S31) and 'not confident in giving scores' (S42). Also, some students wrote their feelings about the feedback such as 'I don't like other peers' criticisms' (S6) and 'some of the peers' comments were not right' (S9). These comments reflect the issues of lack of training in peer assessment. In the future, it might be necessary to provide training for the students to carry out peer assessment as well as guide the students to make constructive comments.

Course 2: Business English (BE)

The main objective of the course is to enhance students' English proficiency in the context of business. Students learn the relevant vocabulary, grammar, and whole language skills for business by exploring and discussing business-related topics. The teacher held various teaching activities in the course to help students achieve the learning objectives. Among the activities, the most engaging one for students was a learning game created by the teacher. The game aimed to familiarize students with celebrities in the current business and trade industry and their industries. In this game, students working in small groups had to guess the celebrities with limited clues. The groups that guessed the answers fastest

with the fewest clues earned the highest scores. Five business celebrities were included in this guessing game. After the game, the teacher invited the groups that guessed the answers correctly to share their interpretation of the clues and their guessing process. This was followed by a class discussion, allowing students to learn more about the business celebrities and their industries.

In this activity, the teacher used the mechanism of game, challenge and reward to stimulate students' learning interests. The strategies of cooperative learning and peer feedback were also adopted so that students worked as a group to discuss clues and comment on each other's guesses in the game. Through the peer discussions and feedback, they brainstormed and arrived at the final answer cooperatively. After the game, there was a reflection slot where students talked about the answer-guessing process, allowing them to ameliorate their future guesses.

During the activity, the teacher observed that most students' interest was aroused when they learned that there was a game to play in the class. Their attention was focused on the teacher, and they listened attentively to the clues of celebrities while playing the game. They actively engaged in the discussions with their group members about potential celebrities. However, a few students gave up because they found that they might not be able to get the correct answers.

After the activity, most of the students gave positive feedback. They found the activity enjoyable and could enhance their learning impressions and vocabulary acquisition. They felt it made it easier to understand the learning content, which implies an increase in their confidence in learning.

S4: The game brought fun to learning.

S25: Having fun with the game makes me want to learn more.

S21: The impression about the learning content is deeper after playing the game, compared to just attending class.

S35: I learned some vocabulary I didn't know before.

S18: It's easier for me to understand some concepts by playing the game.

The teacher reflected on this activity and found that the challenge and reward of games effectively sparked students' learning interest. While students were more willing to participate in the game, they had a better opportunity to learn

the content discussed in the game and the target language. They had a stronger impression about the learning content after playing the game than attending traditional lectures. This engagement may motivate students to become more active in learning the related content. Therefore, it is suggested that future learning activities can be designed based on students' interests to increase their learning motivation.

Course Three: English for International Communication (EIC)

English for International Communication is a course designed to help students develop test-taking skills, maximize TOEIC scores, expand their vocabulary, and enhance their English for international communication in real-life business contexts. To motivate and encourage language learning among students from non-English majors, it's essential to employ interactive and practical activities that connect language learning with real-world scenarios, and highlight the role of English proficiency in global career opportunities. The instructor incorporated the use of ChatGPT and offered an after-class tutoring session, along with the integration of a mobile and web-based study application, Quizlet.

Considering that the students enrolled in this course are not English-related majors, they often face numerous challenges on their journey towards language mastery. Acknowledging this, the course employed innovative teaching strategies, including the use of an AI language model such as ChatGPT. The instructor demonstrated the use of this model, easing the students into a comfortable familiarity with the technology, highlighting that proficiency in technology or language isn't a prerequisite to leverage this advanced learning aid. One of the major activities for this course is the integration of Quizlet into the curriculum. Quizlet enables students to study information via learning tools and games, from their cellphones or on computers. It's particularly efficacious in this setting as students are propelled to create vocabulary study sets—a task that directly contributes to their final grade. This strategy not only instills a sense of responsibility but also provides easy access to learning right at their fingertips.

The positive effect of these strategies is observable in student behaviors. After-class interactions often revolve around inquiries on creating study sets on Quizlet (S1) and navigating ChatGPT. This repeated clarification, seeking assistance to improve their grades, underscores their commitment to learning. Furthermore, using the paid version of Quizlet, the instructor observed signs of student activity, levels of

engagement, and the pace of learning. A student (S22) even posted a link to his study set in the class Line Group, sharing it because he noticed the absence of any study sets from the instructor, likely due to the instructor's unintentional forgetfulness. The above observation suggests that students have taken charge of their learning. During comprehension checks, students' responses frequently indicated they had checked prior or had had interactions with ChatGPT, showing a trend of independent usage of available learning tools before asking for teacher help. More importantly, reflective insight was present when they demonstrated assessment of the responses from ChatGPT, showing that students are not just resource users but also critical thinkers (S43).

S1: I want to make sure if I understand you correctly. Do I create the study set based on the new vocabulary or whichever new vocabulary I choose?

S22: Because the teacher has not been adding new study sets on Quizlet, I took the initiative to add today's vocabulary myself. Everyone is welcome to use it for review.

S43: When I checked with ChatGPT, the answer it provided didn't make sense...

This proactive attitude extends beyond the classroom. Even without the incentive of extra credits, several students signed up for after-class tutoring sessions. This voluntary participation is a solid sign of their internal drive to improve their language abilities. The introduction of ChatGPT and extra tutoring is new this semester. Currently, it's too soon to determine if these tactics will have a more substantial effect on student language learning compared to the instructor's previous semesters. What is certain is a degree of anxiety reduction, evident in the students' nods and smiles when they were reassured that using ChatGPT was necessary and the instructor's tutoring session was available for this course.

That said, given the unsatisfactory progress in Quizlet learning activities, the instructor recognized the need to change her approach. This change will ensure all students understand that evaluating Quizlet activities relies on continual interaction, not merely completing an assignment at the last minute. Also, the instructor should create study sets onto Quizlet in a timely manner and give a clearer instruction right from the start to enhance student learning. "English for International Communication" is more than a course; it's a carefully crafted journey that incorporates innovative tools and teaching strategies to foster an environment where students

are not just learners but active contributors to their educational experience. The course will routinely evaluate and recalibrate strategies to ensure these tools are not just innovative but effective in nurturing autonomous, confident, and proficient users of the English language.

Course Four: Language Translation (LT)

The teaching objectives of this course are to guide students in mastering the fundamental knowledge of "language translation," understanding translation techniques, text analysis, and text types, and gaining proficiency in the characteristics and differences between the Chinese and Japanese languages. The course aims to equip students with an understanding of the relevant job responsibilities for business translation in enterprises (in-house translators), operational skills, and the ability to collaborate in a team and conduct data mining. Thirty-nine students took this course.

The teaching strategy for this course involves classroom lectures and collaborative assignments. Classroom lectures are focused on basic translation skills. The teaching process involves presenting short texts or example sentences, allowing students to attempt translations, share their interpretations, engage in discussions, and receive feedback and suggestions from the teacher.

The assignments were carried out through a collaborative learning approach with groups of two to three people. In class, an ideal group collaboration method was explained in advance. During group discussions, members reviewed and discussed their respective translations sentence by sentence, making revisions to present the improved version. Group assignments were completed through collaboration outside of class and submitted before the class. Guided by assignment templates, students were required to address questions related to "pre-translation preparation" to prompt them to consider the characteristics of the original text and questions such as why they were translating and for whom. Finally, students were encouraged to reflect on their translation skills, the use of translation tools, problems and their solutions, and group collaboration methods.

During the classroom discussion assignments, the teacher began by discussing pre-translation preparations with the students. Then, the teacher listed two to three sets of translated works and asked students to point out the differences between their own group's translation and these examples, as well as offered relevant

suggestions. Active participation and contributions were encouraged in the classroom, and if necessary, the teacher would explain the meaning of the original text or provide partial reference translations. After the class concluded, students within the same group discussed and reached a consensus on their group's translation, made any necessary revisions, and then submitted the final version. At this point, it was emphasized that students should improve their translations based on their own understanding and the group discussion, with the teacher's suggestions as references but not mandatory. Students submitted the same assignment twice. While this submission process may seem complex, the purpose was to encourage students to reevaluate their translations after classroom discussions and to become aware of issues and work on solutions through group collaboration.

When the teacher explained how translation techniques could be used during lectures, a two-way interactive approach was employed. This allowed students to stimulate their thinking process through trial and presentation, first considering their own methods and then referring to their peers' approaches, ultimately receiving guidance from the teacher. In the classroom discussions for group assignments, it is crucial to have a few "mode makers" or active responders as this effectively fosters a positive classroom atmosphere. The method of requiring students to submit modified versions of their assignments for self-improvement seems to help promote autonomous learning in the students. After the teacher graded and returned the assignments, some enthusiastic learners occasionally approached the teacher to inquire about the meaning of the feedback and seek advice on how to do better.

The overall feedback of the students regarding the course was rather positive. When the students were asked to vote for their favorite activities in class, the ranking order is 'teacher's lecture', completing translation independently and resubmission, and translation after reading the articles. In terms of the students' feedback regarding the course, here are two of the students' comments:

S1: The course materials are interesting.

S12: T Among all the courses I have taken so far, this is my favorite!

Also, the students mentioned their preferences of learning. As the two students' feedback regarding the learning process in class:

S12: ...my favorite! The teacher is dedicated and passionate when it comes to

translation. The interaction with classmates is lively as well.

S23: I really enjoy the discussions in class! Thanks to the teacher's instruction this semester, I've learned a lot of things I didn't know before.

For the group learning activity, the students have expressed their positive feedback by illustrating how they liked the activities of in-class review sessions (S34 & S26) and group discussions (S25):

S34: I think the weekly translation assignments followed by in-class reviews are an excellent learning method.

S25: However, the teacher introduced group discussions for our translation assignments, which I found interesting. I think this approach could continue to be a great teaching method in the future.

S26: I find the assignment to translate a book to be a great way to learn, especially when the teacher provide suggestions during the in-class review. Translating well gives a sense of accomplishment, and when the translation isn't good, it helps us recognize our misunderstandings. I quite like this assignment.

Despite the positive feedback about the group assignments, one student mentioned the drawback of group discussion as group discussions could sometimes distract the student from paying attention to the teacher:

S17: I generally understand what the course material is about, but sometimes, during discussions, I missed some of the teacher's explanations.

When correcting translation assignments, the teacher noticed that some students did not seem to correct the errors they were supposed to. Furthermore, after returning the assignments, only few students approached the teacher afterward to inquire about the meaning of the feedback or seek advice on how to improve. As a result, it is difficult to gauge whether students fully understand their mistakes and the teacher's feedback. In the future, the teacher should consider ways to enhance this process, such as offering immediate feedback after returning assignments, allowing students to provide feedback on the teacher's grading and offer their thoughts.

Additionally, students mentioned in their feedback that the discussions were sometimes too enthusiastic, leading to missing out on the

teacher's explanations. While active interaction among group members is a positive aspect, it also highlights the need for the teacher to pay more attention to how students interact with each other and to better manage the timing of discussions. Both of these situations seem to indicate that the teacher needs a more comprehensive understanding of students' learning conditions to facilitate effective autonomous learning.

From the above discussions of the four teaching practices, it is found at least four different teaching strategies are employed in these language courses, which are collaborative group project/assignment, peer assessment/review, games for learning, and integrating technology into classroom activities. These teaching strategies seem to have helped the students to develop learner autonomy in various manners. For teachers who implemented group projects in class, the students showed a higher level of engagement in class. Besides, the learners have indicated that they enjoyed learning with their peers, reflecting the students' positive reaction to learner independence, an important supportive pillar of learner autonomy, as pointed out by Little (2000). In terms of the peer assessment/review activities, it was found that the students have become more critical regarding their learning needs and preferences. Regarding the use of games in class, it was found that the students' motivation and classroom engagement were both enhanced. In terms of incorporating technology into classroom activities, the students have employed various types of learning strategies such as seeking help from their peer and/or the teacher, indicating an increase in their language learning awareness.

Conclusion

Taking a constructivist perspective to the examination of teaching strategies in relation to the learners' development of learner autonomy, this paper illustrates four language instructors' reflections on their teaching practices. It was found four types of teaching strategies were employed in the courses, leading learners to develop greater learner autonomy in various manners. The students not only enhanced their level of classroom engagement but also developed language learning awareness. Most important of all, they had become more critical regarding their own learning, which is a key element of the development of learner autonomy.

Despite these positive effects, the challenges faced were also illustrated by the instructors such as the students' lack of confidence or ability in carrying out peer assessment. To deal with this challenge, providing appropriate training of peer

assessment may be needed. As to the issue of how to improve the teaching practice catering for learner autonomy, it has been stressed by Benson (2008) that the facilitation of learner autonomy does not imply any specific approach to practice. In this sense, any practice helping learners to take greater responsibility of their learning can be identified as a means of promoting autonomy.

Although this paper summarizes four language instructors' reflections on their teaching practice for learner autonomy, there are at least two limitations of this study. Firstly, the four courses are different subjects with students with different backgrounds. Therefore, there is a lack of consistency in the learners' traits and the subjects taught. The second constraint of the study is related to the small number of participants involved in the study. Accordingly, the findings could not be generalizable to a greater population. Nevertheless, the findings of the study are of value in the pedagogical implications of how different teaching strategies may be of benefit in fostering learner autonomy through classroom activities.

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