

# INDEPENDENCE

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE LEARNER AUTONOMY SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP



## October-November 2020

ISSUE  
**80**

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## Features

# Learner autonomy-promoting practices in a transition context

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## Transition to Learner Autonomy

I call the contemporary context of EFL education in Vietnam one of transitions to learner autonomy as conflicting views on this capacity have been observed both cognitively and behaviorally. The traditional perspective of teaching philosophy, which is mainly derived from Confucianism, resists changes, as has been confirmed by successive generations in Vietnam. It has been widely believed that knowledge should be transferred from teachers to students in class. This process is best done when students silently and unquestionably listen to teachers and do exactly what teachers say (Albright, 2019; Dang, 2010). More recent changes in the teaching philosophy have been spurred by contemporary research on knowledge construction and the younger generations' international

learning experience. A number of teacher practitioners have started to put more importance on building up their students' learning ability by supporting them in navigating the learning process and constructing their own knowledge. This process has been really challenging as teachers have to teach differently from the way they learned and succeeded in.

## My background

This transition has taken place over a 30-year period of my time as a student, starting with three years of learning EFL in a high school, my years as an EFL teacher in a high school, an EFL teacher in undergraduate programs, and a pre-service and in-service TESOL teacher training lecturer in higher education. I have experienced both Vietnamese and Western-oriented education systems during my student candidatures, but mainly worked in

Vietnam. This exposure to different education settings has facilitated a shift in my teaching philosophy towards a focus on learning capacity rather than on a body of specific knowledge to be acquired in a lesson.

Since I was a secondary school student in a disadvantaged village in Vietnam, I have questioned the difference between my scores and my classmates' scores. I started to believe that this difference should be from *how* to learn, particularly outside of the classroom, not *what* to learn. The learning strategies and approaches that could be developed during various learning processes would accumulatively help students to solve a problem of knowledge in a specific situation. Therefore, I was interested in asking myself about the alternatives that could help me solve a problem, such as how to remember a difficult long word in a different way than just repeating

the word many times, as instructed by my teachers.

## ***Growing interest in technology***

During the mid-1990s, the availability of the internet was limited in Vietnam, and I was among the very few students in my university to take advantage of it on a daily basis for my learning purposes. My interest in technology kept growing, and it became a crucial tool for my teaching practice in the early 2000s. I have developed a strong belief in the useful contributions that technology can bring to education particularly and life generally. As a result, the first version of my research proposal in an application for a PhD program was about integrating technology for better learning quality. During the first few months of my candidature, I was struggling with naming the capacity which drives learners' navigation skills during the learning process with technology and without technology. I was reading about self-study, learning style, learning strategies, learning motivation, self-directed learning, and so on (Robertson, 2010). I finally touched on the body of literature on learner autonomy when readings mentioned David Crabbe, Richard Smith, Sara Cotterall, and Zoltan Dörnyei. Their research neither originally started with nor solely focused on learner autonomy but concerned this concept to varying degrees. This variation, hence, directed me to learner autonomy nicely when I followed up on their research publications.

## ***Influence of context on learner autonomy***

I believe that contextual factors and their interactive influence on learners are most crucial for promoting or inhibiting the perceptions and behaviors of learner autonomy capacity. Students can think and behave

differently in the same classroom setting, depending a lot on their mental state, prior experience, and patterns of interactions with different features of the environment. They may not always exercise learner autonomy even when they are ready to do so in a specific environment (Dang, 2012; Murray & Lamb, 2019). This is particularly true in a context where cultural values significantly impose on social behaviors. In the context of Vietnam, for example, students tend to be afraid of explicitly demonstrating their understanding as this can be considered to be boastful. They are expected to show less than what they have understood and remain humble in public.

Understanding learners' patterns of interactions and factors associated with a learning context informs teachers' practices of promoting learner autonomy. I often start a class with a relevant news update and guide students' attention to the objective of the lesson. Building a learning objective from students' current knowledge and interest engages students in the process of knowledge enrichment and skill development. They tend to voluntarily discover the knowledge for themselves and improve the skills needed for their actual life. Starting a class session with questioning about students' life such as their clothes, some flowers at the school gate, or the traffic that they see on the way to school is also what I frequently do. I then support them to achieve their goals through interacting with the resources around them. The distinction between formal learning and social life is minimized to a large extent through social learning. The class becomes a community for socializing and achieving personal goals.

## ***Learner autonomy in my teaching context***

Promoting learner autonomy in my teaching context is becoming a norm as it has been stated as a goal in the national education reform agenda (Harman, Hayden & Pham, 2010). Therefore, the problem that I have encountered is not about the inclusion of learner autonomy promoted objectives but about the teaching strategies for doing it. Giving students no freedom in accomplishing a learning task is not acceptable, but giving them too much freedom may reduce their chance of achieving the learning goals specified in the curriculum. Determining a suitable level of control to be held by the teacher in a specific group of students is always a challenge for me, especially when the class time is always limited. I had to convince my colleagues that there is no unique answer for all students, and teachers should gradually release their class dictatorship to the extent which students can manage their own learning process under adequate support and supervision. Giving students more flexibility in a learning situation does not necessarily ruin the lesson as teachers can always adjust the degree of flexibility.

## ***Integrating virtual space with writing assignments***

As all of my undergraduate students use Facebook and consider their Facebook profile as a 'real' version of them, I frequently encourage them to put their writing assignment on their Facebook wall. After brainstorming the ideas and completing the first draft in class, students are required to post it on the discussion forum of the class on the learning management system and their own Facebook walls for comments and feedback. They are supposed to follow the comments and revise their paragraphs in both spaces. After a certain period of time, within two days normally, students



are required to submit a final version of their paragraphs. The assessment is based on the number of likes and shares on Facebook, the number of comments received and the final product. It is the interactive networking spaces that keep students engaged in the learning process. The young generation nowadays often refuses to stay on the same task continuously for some time. They frequently travel among the spaces. Their conversation with a specific space never ends, it is just disrupted and can be reconnected at any time if necessary. The learning activity, therefore, needs to be designed in the nature of frequent disruptions.

### **Student reactions**

Some students in each of my classes do not like the idea of integrating academic work into their social life in public. They want to maintain different versions of themselves in different domains of life. They consider their learning products as works-in-progress and hesitate to reveal them to those who do not share the same context. They only want to look perfect virtually in public although accepting the trial and error method in a learning space. Some of them even complain about the heavy workload that they receive at the beginning of the course as they are so familiar with solo learning and individual work. In my courses, a student would fail an assignment if their assignment draft received no comment and feedback from their peers. Students are frequently assessed by their comments on their peers and their responses to their peers' comments, not their own work only, as often seen in traditional assessments.

In spite of initial resistance, a majority of students become interested in the class activities after a few weeks and finish the course with a high level of excitement. They greatly appreciate the accumulative support generated from diverse

networks of contributors. The short but frequent interactions with each learning community enable them to tailor their learning process more actively and effectively. They can see their step-by-step achievement more clearly over time and enjoy it. The collaborations that they build up with the others, even virtually, make their life busier and more positive. The comments and feedback on the virtual spaces from me, along with those from their peers, bring students a strong feeling of being taken care of. This encourages them to work harder and attend the class meetings more regularly.

### **Challenges to promoting autonomy**

The greatest challenges that I have experienced when promoting learner autonomy in my context are understanding different groups of students, operationalizing the course objectives effectively, and giving personalized feedback. Most of my undergraduate students are of a similar age (between 20 and 23 years), but they have quite different personalities. Some tend to be more social and collaborative, while some others talk very little in class. The cohesion within each group is also different within classes of around 35 members. Getting along with the students and groups is not always simple, even for me with 15 years of experience working with this type of learner. To nurture learner autonomy capacity, I am constantly thinking of designing a series of tasks which are built upon one another. This is very challenging as it requires a lot of time and effort. The situation becomes more difficult when I need to monitor students' processes of dealing with the tasks and provide personalized support on different spaces. It is very time consuming, and 'lurking' becomes a very important skill.

### **Recommendations for teachers and conclusion**

Learner autonomy is a very common term in Vietnamese education nowadays. However, it is commonly understood as solo learning in the Vietnamese language. Teachers often neglect their roles when talking about measures for promoting learner autonomy. Therefore, I often tell my young colleagues about the fundamental differences between learning alone and learning independently. Humans in general and students in particular are interdependent in their learning journey, and it is the teachers who can design the development of learner autonomy in specific contexts. It is important to gain a body of knowledge or a set of skills in a course, but the methods of achieving those are much more important. Promoting learner autonomy requires skills in programming learning activities, and teachers can only do this when they can critically describe the process of how a student acquires a piece of knowledge or skill in a situation. Understanding the struggles that students have to deal with can provide ideas for teachers to design the lessons. Feel free to get students to share your teaching responsibility by encouraging them to take up their learning responsibility.

In short, promoting learner autonomy is challenging but rewarding to me. Most of the students upon completing my courses greatly appreciated the learning skills that they had gained. They showed interest in maintaining the social learning spaces generated from those courses although they agreed that it cost double the effort to complete my courses. Many of our alumni talk about the strategies that they practiced in my classes and how they are currently using them with their own students. Therefore, I have to say that working on methods of promoting learner autonomy is not only beneficial for

students' knowledge enrichment but also for their personal growth and life changing prospects.

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## Recent Publications of Interest for Review

*Independence* needs you to review recent publications with relevance to learner autonomy. Here are some titles of interest, but we welcome your own suggestions. Please note that reviews can include any of the following: **Critiques of individual academic papers, book chapters, or entire books, online resources, apps, etc. which readers have found useful for learner, teacher and/or personal development.**

Please contact **Diane Malcolm, Reviews Editor: [dianelm@gmail.com](mailto:dianelm@gmail.com)** for more information and guidelines.

1. *Autonomy in Language Education: Theory, Research & Practice*. Raya, M. & F. Vieira, F. 2020.
2. *Language teacher autonomy: Teachers' beliefs and practices in Asian contexts*. Barnard, R. & J. Li. 2016.
3. *Dynamics of a Social Language Learning Community: Beliefs, Membership and Identity*. Mynard, J., M. Burke, D. Hooper, B. Kushida, P. Lyon, R. Sampson & P. Taw. 2020.
4. *Theorizing and analyzing agency in L2 learning: An interdisciplinary approach*. Deters, P., X. Gao, R. Miller & G. Vitanova (Eds.). 2014.
5. *Supporting Learners and Educators in Developing Language Learner Autonomy*. Mynard, J., M. Tamala & W. Peeters (Eds.). 2020.
6. *Navigating Foreign Language Learner Autonomy*. Ludwig, C., M.G. Tassinari & J. Mynard (Eds.). 2020.
7. *Building Autonomous Learners: Perspectives from Research and Practice using Self-Determination Theory*. Liu, W.C., J.C.K. Wang & R. M. Ryan (Eds.). 2016.
8. *Fostering Language Learner Autonomy: Learners, teachers and researchers in action*. Ludwig, C., A. Pinter, K. Van de Poel, T. Smits, M.G. Tassinari & E. Ruelens (Eds.). 2018.