

Original Paper

Autonomy and Language Learning Behavior: The Role of Student Initiation and Participation in L2 Classrooms

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Abstract

There are many different views of what learner autonomy entails. But what does autonomous language learning look like in practice? In this short article we argue that student initiation and participation are crucial to and (one type of) evidence of autonomous language learning.

In this study we looked for evidence of student initiation and participation both in classroom and self-study settings. Over a period of 12 months, second language classrooms in several New Zealand language schools were investigated by audio recording classroom interaction at regular intervals. Focus on grammatical items initiated by the students was then matched with performance on post-tests for evidence of acquisition of those items. Also during this period, 42 language advisory sessions were recorded in one university self-access centre. The recordings were analyzed for evidence of student initiated focus on both linguistic items and learning-related issues. The results of these analyses show that student-initiated topics can significantly impact on students' subsequent learning. These findings corroborate our hypothesis that student initiation, as a measure of involvement in the learning process, can be one of the predictors of learning success. In addition, if active learner participation is seen as a component of autonomy, then this research provides evidence for a link between learner autonomy and learning gains.

Keywords

learner autonomy, focus on form, second language acquisition

1. Introduction

A great deal has been said and written about what autonomy might be and what it might mean for a learner to be autonomous. It appears to involve reflection, control, awareness and a host of other attributes or states that together lead to a particular approach to language learning. But what does

autonomous language learning look like? In this discussion paper we put forward arguments for an orientation in research on autonomy that prioritises language learning behaviour and draws on second language acquisition research. It is argued that such an approach will allow for greater transparency in and comparability between research findings, which in turn will transfer more easily to practical applications, and create more opportunities for assessment; in short will inform both theory and practice more convincingly. The paper identifies topics from the second language acquisition research literature which could inform studies in the area of autonomy and includes a case study as an example of such research.

2. Researching Autonomy

The field of autonomy in language learning has been productive for over a thirty years now. It has influenced language teaching practice by drawing greater attention to the role of the learner, to alternative types of language support (e.g., self-access, language advising), to learner strategies, as well as the various roles of the teacher (see Benson & Reinders 2011 for an overview). Autonomy as a goal seems to have found its way into many language classes, programmes, and policies. Despite these developments, its influence on research in second language acquisition (SLA), applied linguistics and language teaching theory seems to be much more limited. A brief look through some recent introductory textbooks in these areas (Cook 2001, Davies & Elder 2004, Ellis 2008) reveals very limited attention to the topic of autonomy and very little research in the area appears to be quoted. Articles that refer to the concept predominantly draw on research in other areas such as general education, social psychology, motivation studies, etcetera. A look through five main peer-reviewed journals (*Studies in Second Language Acquisition*, *Language Awareness*, *Language Learning*, *Applied Linguistics* and *Modern Language Journal*) over the period 2005-2010 reveals a total of only 5 papers directly related to autonomy, out of a total of over a thousand articles (even a topic-specific journal with clear links to the field of autonomy such as 'Language Awareness' registers zero papers in the last 6 years).

Suggesting reasons for this paucity may be contentious or simply spurious. We feel, however, that one characteristic of current research in Learner Autonomy (LA) may have an important impact, and that is the apparent lack of attention given to language *learning* and language learning outcomes in LA research. Below we will briefly review research on autonomy and language learning before proposing an approach to this area that is more grounded in SLA research. This is followed by a case study and a discussion of the implications of this and other SLA research for the study of autonomy.

3. Research on Autonomy and Language Learning

A look through the learner autonomy bibliography (http://www.innovationinteaching.org/autonomy_bibliography.php) does not show a great deal of

autonomy research investigating language learning. Many papers that have the word “learning” in the title deal with approaches to learning rather than the learning process. One exception is a paper by Dam & Legenhausen (1996) which describes a project called LAALE (Language Acquisition in an Autonomous Environment) in which they investigated vocabulary acquisition of beginning students of English learning in “the autonomous way” in a Danish comprehensive school (there are several other, similar papers by Legenhausen). Although the results were compared with learners taught in “more traditional classes” the authors make the point that there were no external measures of comparability. The study found that the total number of words introduced in the autonomous classes (either by the teacher or by the learners) was very large, and larger than that in other classes. Retention was comparable to that of other learners, in some cases slightly better.

Very few other studies exist that examine the relationship between autonomy and language acquisition. This is perhaps partly a reflection of autonomy research’s concern for learner strategies; however, a focus on language acquisition is not precluded by a focus on learner autonomy. Autonomy research offers little in the way of answers as to how “autonomous learning” differs from other types of learning and does not generally attempt to link findings to or compare them with areas of investigation in SLA research. If a full understanding of the concept of LA is aimed for, then language learning behaviour will need to be taken into account and be made part of any attempt to define or operationalise autonomous language learning.

In this article we view LA as a psychological construct, in some ways similar to motivation, that affects one’s a) disposition to learning in general, and b) one’s learning behaviour. The ultimate goal of all practitioners is to affect this disposition in such a way that it facilitates acquisition. For this reason LA needs to give a primary role to the process of language learning, and learning outcomes. In order to do this it needs to draw on SLA theory and research. Similarly, for theory building, it is important for LA to take into account, at least in part, cognitive aspects of language learning.

One possible connection point between LA and SLA is the area of learner attention and awareness. SLA researchers argue that learners must first attend to or notice linguistic forms before they can incorporate them into their inter-language (Schmidt 2001; Gass 1997). Schmidt argues that factors such as salience and frequency of the linguistic items can affect whether learners will notice those items. Furthermore, “attention allows learners to become aware of a mismatch or gap between what they can produce and what they need to produce, as well as what they produce and TL norms” (p. 6).

While noticing of linguistic items is crucial, learners may have difficulty allocating their attentional resources during language learning activities. Although learners need comprehensible and meaningful input in order to improve their L2, their linguistic accuracy may not benefit if they are exposed to meaning-focused input only. Van Patten (1990) has shown that students have a difficult time processing for both meaning and form at the same time and as a result limit themselves to one or the other. For example, when hearing the sentence “there are three books on the table”, the plural meaning may be

clear from the visual information, but the plural –s marker goes unnoticed. In order to focus learners' attention to form, as well as meaning, Skehan (1998, p. 4) argues that it is necessary to “capture learner's attention” in order to induce them to notice linguistic forms which they may incorporate into their inter-language systems.

When autonomy researchers talk about awareness they generally refer to this as conscious knowledge of oneself as a learner, one's learning, and the learning task, in other words, meta-knowledge of learning. However, awareness includes recognizing mismatches between one's language output and (native speaker) input. This type of awareness requires noticing. This is an example of the clear links that exist between LA and SLA. We will now look at one way in which this type of connection can be investigated.

4. Autonomy and Second Language Acquisition Research: A Case Study

One study that has examined the intersection between SLA research and autonomy in L2 learning is Loewen 2005. He investigated the following research questions: 1) Do learners initiate Focus on Form Episodes in meaning-focused language classes? 2) What is the effectiveness of student-initiated FFEs as measured by uptake, successful uptake and subsequent tailor-made tests?

4.1 Method

The overall design of the study involved the 1) the observation of meaning-focused classroom activities, 2) the identification and analysis of student-initiated queries about linguistic items, and 3) the testing of students' ability to subsequently recall the information provided about the queried linguistic items.

A total of 12 classes in a private language school in Auckland, New Zealand were observed. After the observations, focus on form episodes (FFE) were identified and transcribed. A FFE was defined as consisting of “the discourse from the point where the attention to linguistic form starts to the point where it ends, due to a change in topic back to message or sometimes another focus on form” (Ellis, Basturkmen, & Loewen, 2001a). Thus, a student-initiated FFE started when a student raised a question about a linguistic item. An example of a student-initiated FFE is shown in Episode 462 in which S1 is searching for a word to express the idea of needing drugs. The teacher provides the word *addicted*, and they continue their discussion.

Example 1: Student-Initiated FFE

Episode 462

S1: how can I say uh maybe if I had have drug

T: mhm

S1: have a drug, and I can't stop

T: addicted

S1: addicted

T: addicted, I am addicted

S1: ah

T: yeah, I am addicted, you can be addicted to exercise, addicted to chocolate, you can't stop, okay

S2: addicted to drugs

T: addicted to drugs, yeah you can't stop, can't stop, okay so this is saying some drugs like nicotine is a drug, and alcohol this is a drug are legal, okay, and the government says its okay so why are other drugs illegal

S2: mm I think um better if you uh lega ille- illegal drugs you maybe you sometime can't control your mind

After the FFEs were identified, they were coded for Uptake and Successful Uptake (Ellis et al., 2001a; Loewen, 2004). Table 2 defines the coding categories for these moves.

Table 1. Uptake

Characteristic	Definition	Categories
Uptake	Student response to feedback	<p><i>Uptake</i>: S produces response</p> <p><i>No Uptake</i>: S does not respond</p> <p><i>No Opportunity</i>: S does not have a chance to respond because the discourse moves on</p>
Successful Uptake	Quality of student response	<p><i>Successful uptake</i>: S incorporates linguistic information into production</p> <p><i>Unsuccessful uptake</i>: S does not incorporate linguistic information into production</p>

Once the FFEs were identified and analyzed, individualized test items relating to the linguistic items targeted in the FFEs were constructed and the students who were responsible for triggering the specific FFEs were tested on those items. Ideally, a pre-test would have been used to determine learners' prior knowledge of targeted linguistic items; however, with incidental focus on form such pre-tests are not feasible because it is not possible to anticipate which forms will be focused on (Swain, 2001). Consequently, the FFE itself, resulting from a student query, served as a type of pre-test, indicating learner difficulty with the targeted linguistic items.

The results showed that 365 student-initiated FFEs occurred in this data set, accounting for 26.6% of FFEs. A closer inspection of the student-initiated FFEs according to individual learners revealed that 88 of the 118 students initiated at least one student-initiated FFE. The average number of student-initiated FFEs per student was 3 with a range from 0 to 23. Furthermore, there were 7 students who asked 10 or more questions and these 7 students (or 6% of students in the observations) accounted for 28% of the

total student-initiated FFEs. Analysis into the effectiveness of student-initiated FFEs as measured by uptake and successful uptake showed that uptake occurred in almost 74% of the student-initiated FFEs and that 58% of that uptake was successful. The results of the testing indicated that learners were able to respond correctly to 58.7% of the test items in the immediate testing, and almost 50% in the Delayed testing. These results suggest that student-initiated focus on form does result in learners remembering some of the targeted linguistic items.

5. Discussion

In summary, this study has described student-initiated focus on form and considered its effectiveness in promoting second language learning. In addition, an attempt has been made to consider this classroom practice in light of its potential as autonomous language learning behaviour. The description of student-initiated focus on form has explicitly stated the defining characteristic which involves the initiation of queries about language forms by individual learners on occasions when they themselves deem necessary. This characteristic can be seen as reflecting autonomous learning because it involves learners in taking more control over their own learning by identifying particular linguistic forms and seeking more information about them

(Benson, 2001). Furthermore, these student queries were presumably raised because learners noticed a gap in their productive capability. That is to say, they wanted to express an idea, but realised they did not have sufficient linguistic resources to express it satisfactorily. This noticing of a gap is proposed to provide an opportunity for language learning as learners' attention is drawn to those particular linguistic items.

The test results indicate that learners can benefit from this initiation of attention to language items. Thus teachers may wish to encourage learners to take more responsibility for their learning by raising student-initiated FFEs. It involves learners in deciding when and how to seek information about linguistic items that they identify as being helpful for themselves. In order to foster such learning behaviours, teachers may wish to discuss principles of language learning and the potential benefits of student-initiated focus on form in an effort to enable students to make informed decisions about their own language learning. Furthermore, since one of the aims of autonomous classrooms is for learners to develop an awareness of the aims and processes of learning (Dam & Legenhausen, 1999), such a discussion would also contribute to promoting LA in the L2 classroom.

6. Conclusion

We hope in this short paper to have highlighted two points: 1) there is not enough interaction between LA and SLA research, and 2) such interaction is possible, and is beneficial. LA research can benefit from SLA research on attention and awareness, motivation, and a range of other topics, while SLA research can benefit from understanding the impact of different instructional techniques and learning

behaviours, not only on immediate learning outcomes, but also on the learners' attitudes to learning and their ability to manage the learning process. We hope future research will look more closely at the possible connections between autonomy and language learning research.

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