Improving Motivations through Autonomous Projects

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Abstract
English as a lingua franca has created motivational dissonances that have resulted in motivation problems with teachers as well as students because English is being taught not as a communication tool, but as a subject that needs validation through student performance on tests. Unfortunately for many teachers, removing standardized testing from the classroom is not an option. This qualitative study on EFL students studying at a tertiary setting demonstrates that in spite of limited flexibility for change, project work allows teachers to make minor changes to their syllabi and yet reap some of the many benefits that are often associated with autonomous learning. The findings here suggest that when given the opportunity to do project work as homework for assessment, students approach their out-of-class learning activities with enthusiasm and derive great pleasure from their chosen tasks. In addition, they become proactive learners who are prepared to invest at least twice as much time studying compared to the amount of time they will spend preparing for teacher-centered assessment via typical standardized testing.

Keywords: project-based learning, autonomous learning, motivation, EFL

Teachers need to be in the business of empowering students to take control of their own learning because once empowered, students will be better able to: one, harness the power of their curiosity; two, plan for new knowledge; and three, critically evaluate how and what was learnt. This ideology that is synonymous with autonomy theory illustrates why this paradigm is so prevalent in the literature. Unfortunately, research to date has yet to convince educators and institutions to aggressively promote autonomous learning practices like project-based learning (PBL) in the classroom. This study on the effectiveness of PBL at a tertiary setting demonstrates
that for those who are apprehensive about change or need to have standardized testing as part of their curriculum, classroom motivation to learn a foreign language (FL) can be raised and autonomous learning can take place when students have the flexibility to choose their own homework assignments. The results from this study suggest that student homework projects (SHPs) need not have much class time allocated to them to have students and teachers reap the benefits of autonomous learning. Furthermore, SHPs have the potential to re-motivate amotivated students and propel intrinsically motivated students into a flow state—something that is bound to make teaching a lot more rewarding and enjoyable.

Research Questions

While autonomous learning and the kinds of activities that promote it are valued among FL educators today, finding a way to motivate students to take responsibility for their own learning still remains a Pandora’s Box. Accordingly, this study seeks determine the efficacy of SHPs to promote autonomous learning as a teaching strategy by addressing the following research questions:

1. Are SHPs autonomy promoting activities that have the ability to empower students to take responsibility for their own learning?
2. Do SHPs have educational merit as a substitute for standardized testing?

Background to the Study

Learning a foreign language is a process that takes much time and effort, with the prerequisite being that learners need to be motivationally equipped to overcome the difficulties that arise during the learning process. Subsequently, the learners most capable
of overcoming the difficulties that come up during the learning of an FL are autonomous learners because they are not only the most motivationally equipped to overcome any and all motivational setbacks that arise during language learning, they are also self-regulated in that they know how to manage their own learning and are effective at utilizing metacognitive strategies (Oxford & Lee, 2008).

Further to this, Boud (1988) sardonically adds that students who do not know how to act independently from their teachers will not likely be any good at learning, nor will they be very employable if they cannot function autonomously. That is to say, it is imperative that students be given the opportunity to learn autonomously, which brings us to the learning paradox: “How do we affect a person by outside influences so that he will not permit himself to be affected by outside influences” (Nelson, 1949, p. 19)? Specifically, how do we create autonomous learners and at the same time have them be autonomous? The answer is the paradox; becoming autonomous and being autonomous cannot be separated.

As it is the purpose of this paper to provide an outline of some simple steps that can be taken so that sound theory can become practice, the background to the study begins with a brief examination of autonomy theory. This will hopefully bring clarity to a confusing concept so that when autonomy is discussed in this paper, the reader will have a clear understanding of what is meant by this term. This paper will then demonstrate why autonomous learning needs to be promoted in the classroom so that the autonomy paradigm can gain greater acceptance in academia, and, hopefully, develop into a universally accepted teaching practice. Finally, the background to the study will introduce the concept of project-based learning as an autonomy-promoting teaching strategy.
Autonomy Theory

Explication

Ever since Yves Châlon came up with the concept of autonomy in the field of language teaching in 1971, there has been much confusion and criticism about what constitutes autonomous learning (Benson, 2011; Hafner & Miller, 2011). To make it plain what definition of autonomy this paper embraces, and to bring clarity to a confusing concept, this review of the literature examines what exactly autonomous learning for foreign language students is, and it looks at what specifically learner autonomy is not.

Firstly, learner autonomy is not teacher-centered learning. That is, classrooms are not forums for teachers to transmit knowledge to passive vessels. Also, autonomous learning is not self-instruction or distance learning, nor is it a specific methodology or new methodology. So what is learner autonomy? To understand what exactly autonomy is, it is prudent to look at the first universally accepted definition of autonomous learning as a point of reference. The first definition to gain universal acceptance is Holec’s (1981) claim that autonomy “is the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p. 3). Little et al. (2002) have succinctly expounded on this concept by declaring that autonomy involves learner empowerment, learner reflection and appropriate target language use. In other words, learners need to be involved in setting classroom-learning goals, and they need to participate in choosing the contents, rate of progression, and method or technique of study. Furthermore, autonomous learning involves learning from authentic materials because, as McGarry (1995) points out, they have been purposely designed to convey factual information that elicits an affective response from students. Smithers (2013) demonstrated the importance of this in his quasi-longitudinal study of adult EFL learners. His study revealed that cultural interest and proficiency in an FL grow simultaneously.
That is, learners’ appetites for movies, print media, and TV programs enjoy a kind of symbiotic relationship with developments in competency.

The concept of autonomy, therefore, necessitates that pedagogical practices become learner-centered, with the goal being to empower students. The focus of classroom learning therefore becomes the active production of a body of knowledge, not the transmission of a body of knowledge. This does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant, but it does create a new role for the teacher. In the autonomous classroom, the teacher becomes the collaborator, with the success or failure of autonomy ultimately linked to the initiatives of the teacher. Unfortunately, the dearth of autonomy promoting initiatives found in the literature for inexperienced or pedagogically constrained teachers is likely inhibiting the universal acceptance of autonomy theory.

Progression

Although autonomy theory in language education literature is relatively young, its renown more than makes up for what it lacks in age. In fact, there seems to be widespread agreement on its importance, and its prominence can be seen in second and foreign language education literature, but, unfortunately, pedagogical practices that promote autonomy in the classroom are being opposed by tradition. Subsequently, the universal acceptance of the autonomy paradigm faces many challenges. Firstly, naysayers need to be appeased. These critics of autonomy theory see the promotion of autonomy as impractical and contrary to sensible education (Benson, 2011). This is most likely because they believe education needs to be validated quantifiably through standardized testing. Secondly, Esch (2009), highlighting a study conducted in the UK that examined 558 teachers’ pedagogical values and actual assessment practices, stressed that although
teachers value practices that promote autonomy, their practices are to the contrary. Thirdly, Rubin (2008) adds that “although many teachers and texts give a strong nod in the direction of learner-centered learning, changing the paradigm and providing the necessary knowledge and skills for teachers has proven to be quite daunting” (p. 13). Therefore, to help teachers who do not know what initial steps to take to create a learner-centered classroom, or for teachers who cannot abandon standardized testing, this paper proposes project-based learning as a way to revitalize the FL classroom and improve motivations.

**Project-based Learning**

Learner autonomy is the result of the interaction that occurs between the teacher and student(s), whereby the teacher’s pedagogical practices promote interdependence, not independence. It follows that the focus has to be on learners and their needs during the learning process. To be precise, learning a foreign language involves not only learning a foreign language, but also learning how to learn, which for many could mean the need for a paradigm shift.

Unfortunately, many educators feel that change and the unknown are best avoided if possible, but taking the first step towards creating an autonomous-learning environment need not be a conundrum. In fact, there are many language-learning activities that can help teachers transition to a learner-centered classroom (see, for example, lists of activities in Benson, 2011; Little et al., 2002). One such activity, “learning by doing” has been an approach to education since the idea was first promoted by John Dewey, the philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer, one hundred years ago (“Project-based learning”, 2013). Today, Dewey’s approach to pedagogy has been reborn in the
concept of project-based learning. In simplest terms, this pedagogy requires that students research something of interest to them and share what they have learned with their classmates and teacher—usually by way of a presentation.

Learning through projects not only challenges students to represent their newly acquired knowledge, but it also necessitates that they apply what they learn (Smithers, 2014). Furthermore, students engage in the study of authentic material, either collaboratively or individually and learn to excel at four aspects of foreign language learning that are embodied in the concept of self-regulated learning. That is, they develop a strong sense of self-efficacy and are good at using metacognitive, cognitive, and social strategies; the four best predictors of successful language learning (Takeuchi, 2013). Finally, in line with good autonomous learning practices, projects promote learner reflection by concluding with self- and group evaluations. Thus, this paper proposes that teachers start by giving students greater say in what is learned out of class by giving students the opportunity to study autonomously via SHPs.

**The Study**

**Subjects**

This study qualitatively examines the effect that SHPs had on students studying Basic English at a four-year engineering university in Japan. Two atypical fourth-year students were selected for interviews. One intrinsically motivated participant (Student A) was atypical in that he already had enough credits to graduate, but felt that his English skills were insufficient for what lay ahead of him once he graduated. The other, an extrinsically motivated student (Student B), was at the other end of the spectrum. He, as a result of a lack of motivation and effort during his freshman, sophomore, and junior years, found
that he was lacking the required credits to graduate. Specifically, he found that he needed to pass an English language course.

**Procedures**

As mentioned above, this study involves an atypical sampling of this demographic because atypical samplings, also known as critical case samplings, are known for their comprehensive and scrupulous representations of phenomena being investigated (Dörnyei, 2007). This means, in addition to being wide-ranging and thorough, the data will be, most importantly, relevant.

The interview, conducted jointly with both students, sought to discover the merit of implementing a PBL activity like an SHP in lieu of the kind of mid-term exam that is typical of a teacher-centered learning pedagogy—specifically, an activity that would not take up too much class time, but would allow for autonomous learning.

At the start of the year, during class orientation, the students were approached about the idea of substituting their mid-term exam for a PBL activity. At that time, the students enthusiastically requested that they be permitted to do SHPs and evidence their learning by making individual presentations in front of the class on topics of their choosing. Thus, the students and the teacher mutually agreed on a rubric (see Appendix A) that was utilized by the teacher and fellow students so that the students could be brought into the evaluation process as stakeholders. As well as assessing their peers’ presentations, they also conducted self-evaluations in order to engage in self-reflection because these two activities have been proven to promote autonomy and improve learner motivation (Brown, 2004), in addition to promoting higher order thinking (Cheng & Warren, 2005). The final score the students received was based on an aggregation of the student’s self-evaluation,
the teacher’s evaluation, and peer evaluations.

**Results and Discussions**

**Evaluations**

The evaluations, especially the self-evaluations, revealed some interesting results. There was a noticeable trend for students to evaluate themselves more critically than their peers. For example, both Student A and B evaluated themselves at 64 per cent, while their peers scored them at 92 and 76 per cent respectively. In the literature, low self-confidence and being overly critical of self has been viewed as a trait common to the Japanese (Heine et al., 1999; Kitayama & Markus, 2000), but this does not mean that this trend is immutable. In hindsight, the students likely could have benefited from a lesson on assessment, which may have helped to lessen the disparity between self- and peer evaluations. Accordingly, it is recommended that assessment training be given sufficient consideration during project orientation to help reduce scoring disparities.

In addition, the students were all influenced by the perceived complexity of the presentations, which also stresses the importance of assessment training. Student A’s presentation on ‘How to Appreciate White Wine’ was very complicated and overly technical. In fact, much of the terminology used to explain about wine and wine making (i.e. astringency, maceration, tannins, etc.) would have likely been new to anyone lacking exposure to such terminology. As a result, Student A’s presentation left his peers dumbfounded. Not only was this presentation perceived as having a high level of English fluency in the face of structural, grammatical, and pronunciation errors, but it was the first presentation and subsequently became the standard by which all other presentations were judged. This is especially apparent in light of Student B’s presentation on ‘Tips for Tennis.’
His presentation was grammatically and structurally much more sound and easier to understand, with his presentation receiving the highest mark in the class by the teacher, but a mean of only 76 per cent from the group, while his self-evaluation was 64 per cent.

Of note, one student in the class who clearly did not make a passing effort was not afraid to let his self-evaluation reflect his lack of effort. He rated his performance 40 per cent and was scored 46 per cent by his peers, which demonstrates the effectiveness of learner empowerment. This student who made a poor effort was able to reflect critically on his learning, and he accordingly accepted responsibility for the outcome.

**Interview**

In regards to the interview, Students A and B were subject to various questions about the PBL assignment. The interview took about 25 minutes to complete, with the students being given the freedom to answer in their mother tongue or in English. The following is the portion of the interview that is most pertinent to this study:

Teacher: How did you feel about doing this presentation?
Student A: Very tough!
Student B: Very tough!
Teacher: How much time did you spend preparing?
Student A: Two weeks.
Student B: I first wrote my speech in Japanese, then translated it to English... ten hours.
Student A: I spent about twenty or thirty hours. I had too much information to go through.
Teacher: Did you study more for the presentation than a mid-term test?
Student A: YES!
Teacher: How much time do you usually spend preparing for a mid-term test?
Student A: For a class in Basic English... less than 5 hours.
Teacher: How about for other subjects?
Student A: Five minutes.
Teacher: You don’t study very much.
Student A: No, but I get perfect marks.
Student B: For a mid-term test I usually spend about two or three hours in preparation.
Teacher: Which is more beneficial to learning, a typical mid-term test or a presentation like this?
Student A: Absolutely this presentation!
Student B: Absolutely! This was fun!
Teacher: Any other comments about this project?
Student A: It’s good.
Student B: It was fun. I have retained what I studied.

Some important information can be gleaned from these questions and answers. Firstly, looking at the students’ responses to the first question reveals that they both possess a strong sense of self-efficacy. They both felt that the SHPs they had chosen were very challenging, yet because they both took ownership of their respective projects, they formed a strong sense of commitment to their projects and conjured up the appropriate self images to see themselves through to the successful completion of the task, demonstrating that recent findings into the interrelation of motivation, identity and autonomy are valid (see, for example, Gao & Lamb, 2011; Ushioda, 2013). In addition, due to the fact that self-efficacy continues to develop throughout an individual’s life and is greatly enhanced when a difficult task is completed (Bandura, 1977), the successful completion of a SHP can therefore be seen as an effective way of strengthening one’s self-efficacy so that future challenges will be met with a higher probability of success. This is especially important in light of Smithers’ (2013) recent findings that drew attention to motivational rollercoaster ride that L2 learners experience during their initial years of learning.

From a more pragmatic angle, the data also reveals that SHPs create in students a desire to learn. Student A revealed that in regards to typical English mid-term exam
preparations he was prepared to spend up to five hours preparing, whereas with this project he was willing to invest between twenty to thirty hours over the course of two weeks to prepare for his presentation. In fact, his deep enjoyment and total commitment to his SHP could be likened to what Csikezentmihalyi (1990) calls a flow state; a state in which emotions and intrinsic motivation are combined to produce the optimal learning experience for a student. Student B, who started the class amotivated, also demonstrated a similar pattern of motivated behavior. He declared that because he enjoyed what he was studying, he was willing to spend three times as much time acquiring the knowledge necessary to complete this project than he would have if he had been preparing for a typical mid-term test, and he felt that he retained what he had studied. These findings validate similar findings from another study on PBL conducted in a tertiary setting with EFL students by Matsubayashi and Kawamura (2013). Their findings revealed that students enjoyed working on projects of their choosing because they were motivated to learn, and, as a result, the students also discovered the cliché that the more you learn, the more you realize how much you don’t know; and the more you realize how much you don’t know, the more you will want to learn.

**Limitations and Future Research**

The results from this study were limited in that conclusions could not be made about why the students tended to be overly critical of themselves and their abilities during self-evaluations. Is this truly a culturally specific phenomena? Also, is this something that can be remedied by assessment training so that self-assessment scores can be a better indicator of true abilities? Furthermore, research is needed to determine if assessment training can prevent student bias towards perceived language proficiency.
Conclusion

Teachers who are in agreement with the theory of autonomy in principle, but are not sure what initiatives to take, or are lacking confidence to transition out of a traditionally expository style of teaching may find that SHPs are a viable first step. As examined above, SHPs are a fruitful teaching strategy that can re-motivate amotivated students and propel motivated students into a flow state.

Furthermore, the results above concur with a growing trend in the literature that shows how project work, like SHPs, allows students to be empowered in the learning process so that students: one, commit more effort to learning; two, take responsibility for the ultimate success or failure for their learning; and three, owing to a strengthening of students’ senses of self-efficacy, become more motivationally secure to tackle increasingly complex learning tasks.

References


Project-based learning. (2013). Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Retrieved August 30,
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Appendix A

*Presentation Rubric*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<th>Name:_________________</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student spoke only in English</td>
<td>/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pronunciation</td>
<td>/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voice and eye contact</td>
<td>/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation was interesting</td>
<td>/10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation was easy to understand</td>
<td>/10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>/50</td>
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