

How to foster learner autonomy in country studies at Faculty of English - Hanoi National University of Education?

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Abstract. This study attempts to present what the authors have experienced and applied in fostering learner autonomy in Country Studies (namely British and American Studies) at Faculty of English, Hanoi National University of Education. Starting with some main definitions about learner autonomy and its conditions, and basing on authors' own experience and belief, the authors discuss four main strategies used in teaching and learning Country Studies. The first is designing an appropriate syllabus to help the learners acquire a very clear overview about the main content of the subject, the objectives, the requirements, the evaluation of the program, and the references which all later encourage them to determine the direction of their own learning, both inside-class and outside-class time. The second is keeping portfolio, which is considered as an act of self-exploration among the learners. Thirdly, it is necessary that teachers vary class activities, making use of group works and pair works effectively in order to successfully reinforce learner autonomy, so that the autonomous learners will be able to maintain their active learning attitudes and motivation. And last but not least, our students are highly advised to participate in extra-curricular activities like quiz games, fashion shows, field trips, culture competition, etc to enjoy new and more relaxing learning atmosphere and refresh themselves.

1. Introduction

Over the last few decades, the concepts of learner-centeredness and learner autonomy have gained a lot of attention and discussion among all the educators and trainers in the world, especially in the context of language teaching and learning. Being educated in a very traditional way of teaching and learning for 12 years at schools then later for 4 years at University, we have just encountered of the concept of learner autonomy when taking in

charge of teaching Country Studies for English Major Students at Faculty of English (F.O.E), Hanoi National University of Education (H.N.U.E.). In Vietnam in general and at our university in particular, both teachers and learners are so deeply attached to the traditional way of teaching, i.e. teacher is the person who decides everything to teach and the learning methods as well. Hence, it is quite challenging and takes us time to initiate any changes to this situation. Experiencing 2 years of teaching Country Studies to our students, we have realized that it is not a good idea for us to maintain our old way of teaching any more, especially teaching Country Studies. It is

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commonly known as the subject that not only teaches students language skills but provides them fundamental background about America or Britain, the countries of the target language they major at. It also helps students understand more about British and American people and culture with their own comments and analysis. Students taking part in the course are required to read recommended materials at home, do some research and make their own comment analysis since class hours are mostly spent for discussion and presentation both in groups and the whole class as well. The 45 class hours covered in 15 weeks is certainly not adequate for exposing students to fundamental knowledge about the countries of Britain and America.

Being aware of this important issue and brave enough, we have admitted, we have ourselves studied about learner autonomy and tried to apply it as much as we can in our teaching approach. There are innumerable definitions of learner autonomy and other synonyms for it. It is clearly defined by David Little (1991:4) [1] that learner autonomy, learners, autonomous learners, that is, are expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning. Learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant, he plays a role of transpiring in the language learning process. For all intents and purposes, the autonomous learner takes an active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988 [2]; Kohonen, 1992 [3]; Knowles, 1975 [4]). So to some extents, what we can understand about learner autonomy is not the shift from the teacher's responsibility to learner's one, but the more focus on the learner's need and self-study to help them become aware of and identify the strategies that they could use for present and further study. Learning can be considered as the result of learner's own interaction with the world.

However, it is obviously understood that learners themselves cannot build up their learning strategies without help and instruction from his teacher. And the teacher himself can not instruct his students without understanding the features of learner autonomy, its principles and conditions. As far as we understand, following are the conditions for learner autonomy:

- Learning Strategies
- Learner Attitudes and Motivations
- Self-Esteem
- Teacher's Knowledge and Experience
- Curriculum and Course Book
- Assessment

Basing on these conditions, we would like to share what we have applied to foster our students' autonomy in learning Country Studies, and we do hope that it will bring new effective teaching and learning approach to both teachers and English major students at F.O.E., H.N.U.E. in particular and other English as a foreign language (EFL) academic settings in general. The course no longer provides merely information, facts, and figures, it does stimulate the students to learn, self-explore and master it. The result is quite satisfactory to our expectation that during and after the course, our students were all motivated and enthusiastically involved in all activities or tasks assigned by the teacher. Let's share our story and all of your valuable comments and suggestions are highly welcome.

2. Approaches to foster learner autonomy in country studies

2.1. Designing an appropriate syllabus

There is no doubt that country studies are of the factual and eventful subjects so teachers are, at first, required to contribute their own efforts and time to their selection of major topics in the syllabus. As assigned in the curriculum of the

teacher training course at F.O.E, H.N.U.E, the time duration of 45 class hours covered in 15 weeks (one semester) is equally delivered to British Studies and American Studies each. Due to the time constraint, it is obviously a demanding task for the teachers to design an appropriate syllabus which must be delivered with the course introduction at the first week of the course. From our own teaching and learning experience as well as background knowledge of the country studies, we have decided that just major topics should be included and classified with sub-topics in the syllabus. From the detailed syllabus, we hope that our learners will be able to acquire a very clear overview about the main content of the subject. Also, the objectives, the requirements, the evaluation of the program, and some books, useful websites

in the references presented in the course introduction encourage the students to determine the direction of their own learning, both inside-class and outside-class time. Thus, the learners' extrinsic and intrinsic motivation toward the eventful subject will be promoted. Once the learners' motivation has been well-performed, they will be supposed to take good responsibility for their own learning process. It is clear that designing the appropriate syllabus, in general, can activate learner autonomy to the best performance, which remains one of the most effective learning strategies in EFL environment. Take one of the two tentative syllabuses of the country studies at F.O.E, H.N.U.E as an example. (Garwood et al, 1992 [5]).

The tentative syllabus of American studies

Weeks	Topics	Contents
1	Course introduction & Pre-test	General quiz about the united states
2	American people and geography	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Native Americans • The First Anglo Saxon Immigrants to the U.S. • People in 13 colonies • Unwilling immigrants
3		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • People in Roaring Twenties • Immigration Policy • Geography in Thirteen Colonies
4		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Geography in the 19th century expansion • Geography in Present geography
5	Festivals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • American holidays that the U.S shares with many countries • Uniquely American holidays • Two popular holidays in the U.S
6		<i>Independence Day</i> <i>Thanksgiving Day</i>
7	Education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S Educational system
8		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Primary and Secondary Education
9		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Higher Education
10	Midterm test	Comments on portfolios
11	Government	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Federal Government <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ø The U.S Constitution Ø Three branches in the government system Ø The two party system
12		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Presidency

13	Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The U.S. Mass Media • Freedom of Speech • Freedom of Press
14		
15	Revision	Questions and answers

As can be seen from the tentative syllabus, the content of the course is clearly presented in the syllabus with 5 major topics, namely American People and Geography (introduced in chronological order), Festivals, Education, Government, Media. We, the responsible and well-planned teachers, have worked out a very good outline for the learners to enhance their learning styles and strategies to master the eventful subject. The autonomous learners should, firstly, take an active role to study about the fundamental knowledge suggested on the sub-topics to explore about the States, and secondly, they will also become self confident enough to study entirely on their own and focus on other topics which are of their interests such as the U.S Economy, Entertainment, etc. Moreover, as mentioned above, this tentative syllabus is always attached to the course introduction which provides the learners the course objective, requirements, evaluation, and references. Thus, the learners can develop their own learning process from the recommended course-books or useful websites in the course introduction. Learner autonomy, therefore, will certainly be promoted both inside class and outside class time.

2.2. Keeping portfolio

One of the requirements presented in the course introduction is that it is compulsory for the learners to display one part of their own learning process of Country Studies in the form of portfolio. Each individual learner is required to complete his/her own task of freely searching for the relevant content about the weekly assigned topic in the syllabus from available and valuable resources (books, magazines, articles, websites, etc., then summarizing or synthesizing them into his/her own portfolio.

The learners' portfolios should be well presented and assessed with truthful, dominant, interesting, and up-date or latest news, facts, figures, events, and/or photos about the country. The practice of keeping portfolio has been applied in teaching and learning American Studies at F.O.E, H.N.U.E for one semester. Interestingly enough, it has resulted in fostering learner autonomy effectively. Our learners, the active students of the undergraduate course No-56, have not only covered essential information but also searched for interesting video clips about the country and kept them in a CD attached in their own portfolios. This is a significant proof revealing the crucial role of the autonomous learners who are very responsible for their outside class time activity.

Although the idea of keeping portfolio is delivered by the teachers, the learners are entirely self-determined in perfecting its content. The learners are in charge of exchanging what kind of information, news, facts, figures, or events they have gained to each other during the class hours every week. Moreover, portfolio accounts for 20% in the total grade of the course evaluation so the learners always try their best to perform their portfolios to the excellence compared with their peers, so their learning motivation is frequently developed, which leads to the learner autonomy improvement.

2.3. Varying class activities

In order to successfully reinforce learner autonomy in Country Studies at F.O.E, H.N.U.E, the teacher should be experiencing the various roles of a good organizer, instructor, assessor, facilitator during the class (Harmer, 1992 [6]). The autonomous learners will be able to maintain their active learning attitudes if

their motivation is well promoted with various and interesting class activities designed by the teacher. The following activities have been adapted and effectively activated in teaching and learning Country Studies at our faculty.

2.4. Group work

According to Brown (1994) [7], group work creates a favorable climate for communication by relieving students of the anxiety of having to talk in front of the whole class. In addition, group work makes students more responsible and autonomous. Basing on the advantages, we have instructed our students to work in groups both inside outside class time. The first group work is randomly established at the start of the class. It is the main duty of the teacher who has to check the learners' portfolios and group 4 students in one panel. The panel will have about 10 minutes to exchange all the information, news, facts, photos, etc. in their portfolios to one another. Each member in the panel is certainly self-confident about his/her portfolio so the active group work will be born during the class. The second group work is assigned by the teacher for every week. The students are allowed to select their own group and work equally at home to prepare for a good class presentation about one or two of the sub topics in the syllabus. The autonomous students are very creative and active in searching for not only facts, figures, or important events but also video clips, short documentary films about the target countries.

2.5. Group presentation

Group presentation is the class activity followed by the group's preparation at home for the assigned sub-topics. There is one group who will take in charge of presentation in front of class every week. When the members in each group work together at home, they can express their own learning styles autonomously. In class they should be more responsible for performing a good presentation than their work at home.

Once the learners' responsibility is highly encouraged, they will be able to form their own learning strategies and foster learner autonomy.

2.6. Class discussion

Group presentation will not be able to become an effective class activity unless class discussion is linked. After each group presentation, we always encourage the whole class to discuss the main items presented by adding their own facts, figures, or raising questions to the members in the group. In case, no member in the group can deliver the answer, the teacher will help. Sometimes, we give the correct answer directly. However, in order to develop learner autonomy, we usually recommend our learners to refer to course-books, other materials or surf the websites for the answer and then share it the next time.

2.7. Video watching

Apart from the mentioned activities, video watching is considered one of the most entertaining ways to promote the learners' motivation and attitudes toward the Country Studies, the subject containing numerous facts, figures, and events. We have collected and borrowed some DVDs about the target countries from our university library, the Information Resource Center of the U.S Embassy, the British Council located in Hanoi. Our main task is selecting the most appropriate video clips, movies about the countries for the learners to watch during the class or recommending them to watch at home in their free time. The activity of video watching urges our learners to search for more and more video clips or movies about the U.S or Great Britain in their outside class time. As a result, there exists an opportunity for the learner autonomy enhancement.

2.8. On-going evaluation (Qs & As)

The learners are able to maintain their own learning styles with the teacher's good

orientation. We are always aware of the fact that setting a good example for our autonomous learners, so we have to spend a great deal of time preparing our own presentation about the major topics with an aim to guide the students to the focused and essential information, facts, figures, or events about the countries. Besides, we have designed a set of questions for revising each major topic which help to evaluate our learners continuously. After each of the teacher's presentation, the questions can be given and orally answered by the learners during the class or the learners should do the task themselves at home. Basing on the questions, our learners will be able to know what they have mastered and what they should explore more about the countries. This will create frequent opportunities for our learners to practice, reinforce their own learning attitudes toward Country Studies.

3. Doing extra-curricular activities

Our students are highly advised to participate in extra-curricular activities to promote their learner autonomy in language learning generally and Country Studies particularly. There are two common types of extra-curricular activities which our students often join actively. The first type includes all the activities held by the faculty and university. There is an English speaking club that is quarterly organized by the Youth Union with various games, cultural plays, quizzes, etc., about English speaking countries. Our students at F.O.E, H.N.U.E are responsible for planning and performing the whole program for each of the club's quarterly organization. Also, the annually scientific research conference encourages many of the autonomous learners to participate in. It is interesting that investigations and projects in relation to Country Studies usually appeal most of the learners' attention. We all assume that these activities can create and positively ensure learner autonomy in learning languages especially Country Studies.

Joining free activities organized at British Council and IRC, the U.S Embassy located in Hanoi is another type of doing extra-curricular activities among most of the learners at F.O.E, H.N.U.E. There are sometimes cross-cultural workshops, online conference, film showing, or even programs of working as internship offered at the two organizations. Many of our students are regular members of the above programs and they are aware that their active participation into the activities benefits not only their communicational skills but also their fundamental knowledge about Great Britain and the U.S.

4. Conclusion

All the things considered, we can infer that autonomous learners are expected to assume great responsibility for their own learning. However, learner autonomy is by no means "teacherless learning". In other words, it can't be denied that teachers have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and promoting them to reinforce their active learning process. The approaches which have been well applied in our teaching and learning Country Studies (namely British Studies and American Studies) at F.O.E, H.N.U.E have brought encouraging results in fostering learner autonomy. We hope that our sharing experience about the practice of learner autonomy development will satisfy both teachers and learners of foreign languages in general and of Country Studies in particular.

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Tích cực hóa vai trò của người học trong hoạt động dạy học môn văn hóa văn minh Anh - Mỹ tại Khoa Anh, Trường Đại học Sư phạm Hà Nội

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Bài viết này tập trung vào việc trình bày những ứng dụng đã đạt được trong việc tích cực hóa vai trò của người học trong hoạt động dạy học môn Văn Hóa Văn Minh Anh - Mỹ tại khoa tiếng Anh, trường Đại Học Sư Phạm Hà Nội. Các tác giả mở đầu bằng việc ngắn gọn đưa ra các định nghĩa mang tính lý thuyết cũng như các điều kiện để có thể áp dụng được phương pháp dạy học tích cực trong dạy học nói chung. Các tác giả đã nghiên cứu và ứng dụng thành công 4 biện pháp chính nhằm tối ưu hóa vai trò của người học. Việc cơ bản cần đạt được là giáo viên cần soạn ra được khung chương trình hợp lý nhằm giúp người học có được cái nhìn tổng quan về nội dung chính, mục đích, yêu cầu, phương thức đánh giá, cũng như các nguồn sách tham khảo của khóa học khuyến khích người học hiểu và xác định được phương pháp học trong lớp cũng như ngoài lớp. Biện pháp thứ 2 mà các tác giả đã thực hiện là tiến hành cho học sinh làm bài thu hoạch, một hoạt động được coi là quá trình tự tìm hiểu và khám phá rất có hiệu quả. Biện pháp thứ 3 là đa dạng hóa các hoạt động trên lớp, tận dụng tối đa làm việc theo cặp và theo nhóm. Việc tổ chức các hoạt động ngoại khóa thường xuyên như đồ vui, biểu diễn thời trang, đi thực tế, hay các kỳ thi tìm hiểu về văn hóa cũng góp phần tạo nên hứng khởi cho người học về môn học mà họ đang tìm hiểu.