

Autonomy and reading abstracts of dental journals

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Abstract

This paper looks at the introduction of autonomous learning of English for Dental Purposes as a component of a university English language program. Students were encouraged and supported in selecting and then processing articles from English language dental journals.

Key words : Autonomy, ESP/EMP, Independent Learning

Introduction

This paper mainly looks into how language learners feel about and realize an autonomy supported learning environment. The university students in this study read abstracts of academic journals of their own major subject, dentistry, without much experience of that in the previous English language studies. Upon beginning to learn English in higher levels with their specific subject, they are expected to be aware of the uniqueness of ESP/EMP or in this case, English for Dental Purposes and importance of being independent learners in the future. It would be a good opportunity for learners to experience autonomous learning, which can foster their sense of volition.

Having classroom management which supports learner autonomy basically means valuing the learners' intention of learning, helping them to decide what and how they learn and allowing them to carry on with a sense of responsibility. It would be hoped that learners keep their learning motivation high and learn the target language effectively and efficiently.

As anyone would agree that individual learners have different learning habits, interests, needs and motivation, it does not seem to be realistic to expect all learners in one classroom to learn and acquire a foreign language in the same manner and pace as in the traditional style of teacher-centered learning environment. It is probably more motivating when the learners have decision making authority on what and how they learn to a certain degree.

Some may think that autonomous learning is a rather western concept which, therefore, might not be appropriate for Japanese learners. In fact, Jones says that methods of autonomy supported classroom are not familiar to non-western pedagogical tradition (Jones, 1995 : 229). However, there have been teaching methods that let learners study at their own pace in Japan, too. A good example is "Kumon", which advertise their good point as being that they encourage learners to decide what and how. Also, there are many personal tutors who visit learners' homes

and help them study individually, adopting autonomy supported learning. These days, there are more and more discussions in ESL/EFL about the learner-centered classroom and how to raise learners' motivations. Therefore, it is hasty to say autonomous learning is "alien" to Japanese.

Little and Dam (1998) cite some other terms which are similar in meaning or purpose like, "humanistic language teacher", "collaborative learning", "experimental learning", and "the learning-centered classroom". Thanasoulas (2000) also gives some other examples such as "independence", "language awareness", "self-direction", and "andragogy". They each must represent different initial ideas and methods respectively but this paper does not aim to review those. Williams and Deci (1998) write that autonomy literally means "the quality of being self-regulating" (304). Autonomous learning sounds like independent study but autonomy does not mean learning individually and separately. The important point is one's willingness to learn actively and not passively.

Little and Dam (1998) write "learner autonomy comes into play as learners begin to accept responsibility for their own learning". For this purpose, learners need to be aware what, why, and how they learn themselves and have a sense of volition. Namely, learners are encouraged to keep their learning active. Sitting in a classroom and listening to lectures are not what learners are expected to do. They need to participate and get involved in learning.

It is understandable that many people would agree that people are more willing to learn and achieve better when their teachers are supportive, encouraging, and humanistic than with those who are very controlling and giving pressure and punishment for failure. And yet, many other people may believe that their children learn better with teachers who are strict and formal.

Little (1991) points out some disadvantage of formally setting instructions that are based on the idea that learners achieve communicative competence when they get to an environment where they actually use the target language. It is felt that 1) most learners do not have opportunities to have "frequent and sustained contact with the target language community" (Little 1991: 28), that 2) analytical knowledge does not necessarily transform to naturally usable internal knowledge, and that 3) instruction does not always have a positive effect when learners are not ready to internalize the knowledge.

One more important aspect of autonomy is that learners are supposed to reflect on their own learning. They should reflect, evaluate, and set a new and realistic goal for better learning. Little and Dam (1998) write "individual learners will always differ in the degree to which they develop the capacity for reflective thinking that is central to the concept of learner autonomy", and "reflectivity and self-awareness produce better learning". Reflectivity is certainly useful to assure active learning and avoid learners just getting off by classes, and getting good enough scores on tests and moving on without thinking of the purpose of learning.

In the present IT age, using a computer to nurture autonomy among learners can be a good idea. For example, Imai and Kodama (2000) introduce their ideas. Basically, when one uses a computer, one needs to know the what and how producing the desired outcome of learning,

which should be motivate learners to be more active and enhance language ability, but not only for language learning's sake.

Not only in the English education field but at medical schools, some researchers are interested in autonomy support learning. Williams and Deci (1998) write that autonomy supported students "became less anxious, developed greater interest in the course material, and felt more competent" (306). They also introduced empirical evidence that learners under an autonomy supportive environment also achieved better scores on test grades so they seemed to learn more conceptual and factual knowledge than in a controlled and pressured learning situation. Autonomy supportive medical education may have advantages in both learning and psychological well-being (306) and it can "lead students to become more patient-centered in their orientation to care and promote greater conceptual understanding and better psychological adjustment" (306-7). Therefore, it actually helps students become more humanistic physicians. They quote from other researcher's studies that learners with more autonomy supportive teachers solved "five times as many as problems as" (306) those who were instructed by more controlling teachers. They write that autonomy provides "relevant information and opportunities for choice and encourage others to accept more responsibility for their own behavior" (303). As they say, feeling more understood and more involved promotes motivation levels.

Williams et. al. (1997) investigated medical students' career choice by using self-determination theory and concluded that supporting student "autonomy facilitates students feeling competent at and being interested in the corresponding medical specialty, which in turn predicts students being more likely to choose a career in that specialty" (1712). As well as on learners' motivation and test scores, autonomy has some influence on learners' career choice.

Basic idea of autonomous learning occurs when one (the learner) independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods, and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation. But this may give too much freedom to learners. Many learners do not always know where and how they can find appropriate learning materials and which learning methods to choose (Little, 1991: 49). Therefore, while learners need to be active in their learning process, some instructions are needed in many cases to help them to do so.

Some may say that teachers have it easier with the learner-centered classroom as they do not take lead in classroom management as they would in the traditional style of teaching and only seem to assist their learners, but this is not a fair criticism. It is, in fact, very difficult to monitor each individual learner who participates in autonomous learning methods and equally difficult to evaluate learning performance and give a grade. Little (1991) also writes that a teacher-centered classroom makes it easier to manage a class. Teachers who respect their student's autonomous learning may find "it difficult to make the transition from purveyor of information to counselor and manager of learning resources" (44-45) and to have learners solve problems in their own pace. Little (1991) writes that a teacher who "commits himself to learner

autonomy requires a lot of nerve” and “he must dare to trust the learners” (45).

To summarize autonomy supported learning, it is important for learners to reflect critically, evaluate a variety of processes and learning how to learn, make necessary adjustments (Little, 1991 : 52). To have learners to keep autonomous learning, they need to be encouraged to take a certain responsibility for their own learning and must not remain as receptive learners. It would be interesting to see what learners feel and notice about what is important when they learn English language. It would be also beneficial to know how learners reflect and assesses their own learning and renew their learning strategies in an autonomy environment.

Methods

Subjects were second year dental school students taking one of the English courses offered at their university. Because one of the course purposes was to develop English learning skills, the instructor decided to have the students to read abstracts of academic articles of dentistry. In the third year, they will be assigned to read articles in English themselves, so this is considered to be a preparation stage for that.

After the instructor gave lectures on reading abstracts in three sessions in a rather teacher-centered classroom, the students were asked to choose reading materials themselves, make groups consisting of up to 4 people, and, if they wish, give a free style 5 to 10 minute presentation. Deciding on what abstracts of articles of their own choice to read, trying to comprehend them, and guessing what the articles contain with regard to their future subjects was meant to hopefully raise their motivation level, both with regard to their major subject and to the learning of English at the same time. Also, it was hoped that it would be easy for them to compare the relative merits of teacher-centered learning and learner-centered learning.

At first, the instructor introduced two abstracts of dental articles in Periodontics and Endodontics, and showed how to search them online, consult online dictionaries and do research, taking advantage for classroom purposes of the extensive range of information available on the internet. The students could, of course, go to the library and do research in traditional ways, but it was also considered beneficial to introduce IT skills, too, as they would be useful for not only this purpose but also the learning of other subjects. What articles to choose, how to do research and give a presentation were basically free as long as they were within the scope of dentistry and they avoided too many technical terms, and the explanations were in general English, due to the fact that, they will have to become aware of important words and lay terms in the abstracts, so that other students or possibly their future patients can better understand explanations of conditions being dealt with and treatments offered.

After their presentations, they were asked to answer a survey on what they thought about the learning methods they experienced.

Results

The response rate was 79%, 110 responses out of 139.

Table 1 : Questionnaire and descriptive statistics

#	Items Queried	mean	SD
q1	Good that it was allowed to choose an article.	3.11	0.75
q2	I think we will learn more if we give a presentation.	2.88	0.76
q3	It is easier just to listen to lectures.	2.95	0.84
q4	I know that listening to lectures is not enough to acquire a language.	3.29	0.64
q5	One will be more motivated when one has some freedom to select learning materials.	2.97	0.77
q6	Good that we were allowed to give a freer style of presentation.	3.07	0.71
q7	Lectures and presentations can supplement each other's disadvantages in learning English.	2.75	0.69
q8	It will be useful to search articles online.	3.33	0.73
q9	It will be useful to check technical terms online.	3.52	0.62
q10	I realized there is a big difference between learning general English and Dental English.	3.31	0.74
q11	Selecting and preparing for a presentation help to see what language abilities one lacks.	3.14	0.76
q12	One can start over in learning English in Dental English.	2.60	0.88

Using the Likert scale 1 to 4 indicates 2.5 is a neutral position. The survey result shows that the lowest mean score is 2.6 so basically the subjects agree on every item. Out of 12 questions, 7 items, q1, q4, q6, q8, q9, q10, q11 received more than a mean score of 3. However, the other 5 items, q2, q3, q5, q7, q12 also received more than 2.5. These indicate that all the items showed an "agreement" side. However, as q3 is about asking if they prefer a receptive learning situation, which is contrary to autonomy, the quality of the question is in fact reverse-coded. Therefore a mean score 2.95 is not so good in terms of autonomy.

Discussion

The q1 and q6 were items designed to measure whether or not the subjects prefer freedom of choice with regard to materials and presentation methods. Q4 asked whether subjects were aware that only listening to lectures was not enough to acquire Dental English knowledge. They did know that they needed to participate in learning more, this being a very important aspect of autonomy. Q8 and q9 revealed that they found the internet useful for doing research. Also,

q11 shows that they thought they could recognize what language ability they lacked by preparing and giving a presentation in the classroom, and that the self assessment methodology was one important aspect of autonomy. Even though mean scores do not reach 3, q2 clearly shows that they think they will learn if they have expectations of this being productive. It was understandable to feel it would be easier just to sit and listen to lectures (q3, mean 2.95). However, they did realize the difference between general English and learning specific aspects of academic English (q10, mean 3.31), and that's probably why they thought they could start over learning English with Dental English (q12, mean 2.60).

This study looked into how subjects think of one type of autonomy supported learning methods, but there were many other ideas of tasks available to raise autonomy, such as those mentioned by Scharle and Szabo (2000).

As Cotterall (1995) writes, an autonomy-learning environment does not make learners automatically become autonomous learners. A teacher's encouragement will be required and learners' needs will need to be monitored, be evaluated, and be revised with changes in learning strategy from time to time. Teachers should be available to discuss what is the best. Even though mean scores are on the "agree" side, some individual subjects disagreed on some items, and they did not seem to like the autonomy style of learning. It might become an important issue for language instructors to help learners to see the significance of this. In order to achieve that, self-assessment, consultation, and helping them to set new, concrete learning targets might become necessary. Raising awareness of relevance between learning and demand in real life, which can enhance motivation levels, would also certainly be effective.

In a different classroom component of the program the students participating in autonomous learning were interviewed individually through the course of a single class session three weeks prior to the end of the term. The question: "Was working by yourself with English journal abstracts helpful, not helpful or have you no particular opinion". The results were as follows:

Helpful :	81
Not Helpful :	27
Ambivalent :	27.

Conclusion

The apparent result of the autonomy process was a learner appreciation of the value of autonomous study and heightened self-confidence in learning skills in a second language. In addition to the statistical evidence from questionnaires, the casual interviews with students confirmed that a majority thought the experience was advantageous. In light of these results, autonomous learning will be incorporated as a continuing part of the English language studies program.

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