

Assessing Learner Autonomy and EFL Vocabulary Acquisition: A Case Study

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Abstract

The importance of autonomy learning is widely acknowledged in teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Asian contexts. The present study attempted to report low proficiency level students' autonomous vocabulary learning. The first part of the present study focused on exploring how learners perceived and experienced their autonomous vocabulary learning, with a questionnaire and group discussion applied to collect data. During the second part of the study, the data were discussed collaboratively by six teachers to identify the different approaches utilized by learners. Priorities included setting weekly goals, self-planning and self-monitoring the process of learning vocabulary. Results also revealed that a weak 'top-down' approach in implementing learner autonomy is inadequate. Teachers need to provide scaffolding skills tailored to learners' context-specific needs, for which a strong 'bottom-up' approach is more appropriate in supporting autonomous learning. In this case, classroom time should be allocated to demonstrate the strategies and teachers should work collaboratively to develop resources and materials for learners' autonomous vocabulary learning. The present study also addressed the need for establishing an effective intervention for supporting learner autonomy.

Keywords: learner autonomy, vocabulary learning, self-plan, self-monitor

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Vocabulary is an important sub-field of language learning, with which learners are able to use four language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing (Nation, 2001; Richards & Renandya, 2002; Schmitt, 2010). This importance is recognized regardless of L1, L2, or EFL learning (Decarrico, 2001). However, learning words is an incremental process involving a variety of sub-processes. One process is primarily concerned with lexical entry, i.e., the enrichment, refinement of lexical information, which many EFL tertiary-level learners lack (Nan, 2004). In other words, with a limited vocabulary size, it is very difficult for learners to effectively engage in an intensive or extensive reading course. Accordingly, they need an effective way to improve their vocabulary size.

Concerning vocabulary acquisition, there are mainly two approaches: incidental learning and intentional learning (Schmitt, 2000, 2008; Teng, 2014a). In some studies, for example, Paribakht & Wesche (1993, 1997) fully supported the idea that intentional vocabulary learning yielded a better result than incidental vocabulary learning. However, when considering the limited classroom time for intentional and explicit teaching of every word, many researchers have resorted to incidental vocabulary learning. Incidental learning, which is learned in an implicit way, is a “by-product” of any teaching activity (Hulstijn, 2001, p.266). When learners try to understand the embedded meaning of the context, then the acquisition of words occurs subconsciously (Paribakht & Wesche, 1999). Many studies have been conducted on the effects of extensive reading on incidental vocabulary learning (Day, Omura, & Hiramatsu, 1992; Horst, 2005; Teng, 2015; Webb, 2008). However, incidental vocabulary gain is very limited (Teng,

2014b). Therefore, other factors that affect vocabulary learning have been suggested; for example, topic familiarity, time spent on learning, level of intake, and strategies (Nation, 2008; Pulido, 2004). The present study investigated how EFL learners perceive out-of-class autonomous vocabulary learning strategies, and reported some suggestions on how to encourage learner autonomy with the support of teachers.

Literature Review

The concept of learner autonomy (LA) is one of the major theoretical constructs in language learning. Likewise, the importance of learner autonomy is widely acknowledged in English language teaching. Indeed, a majority of teachers regards LA as an approach that positively impacts EFL students when learning English. Moreover, autonomous learners often have an enhanced ability to make decisions for their learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014).

Holec (1981) firstly pointed out the notion of LA, for which he stated autonomy is “an ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (P. 3). He was the pioneer in taking the idea of LA into second and foreign language teaching and learning. From late 1980s to the early 2000s, the notion of learner autonomy became increasingly popular as more and more new terms appeared, e.g., “learner-centeredness” (Candy, 1991, p.459), “intrinsic motivation” (Ushioda, 1996, p.19), “self-directed learner” (Winnie & Perry, 2000, p.533). Learner autonomy quickly entered a new stage, and was different from Holec’s (1981) concept that the learners should assume the responsibility for all the decisions (p.7). Teachers are required to develop skills and knowledge of LA because teachers play a scaffolding role (Dickson, 1995, p.167; Little, 1991, p.68; Nunan,

1996, p.15).

In regard to the learning outcome achieved from LA, Benson (1996, 2001, 2006) stressed that language learning proficiency could be improved when learners were encouraged to become more autonomous by developing effective strategies. He also called for a rethinking towards developing learners' LA, and the learner should be trained to control over the language, resources, and learning process. To put it in other words, EFL learners should be responsible for determining their objectives, contents, methodologies, monitoring the process of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired. While previous studies support and acknowledge the uncritical notion of LA, and accept it as a universally promoted method for learning English socially and culturally in Japan (Ogawa, 2012), and Vietnam (Nguyen, 2009), similar research is absent in China. In Ogawa's study, she analyzed Japanese EFL learners' perceptions of LA and the related variables concerned with vocabulary learning. In Nguyen's study, she also analyzed university students' perceptions of LA in Vietnam and the effects of metacognitive strategies in learning English. With regards to EFL learner's perceptions of LA in China, there is still a lack of attention or support, which is the first part of the current study.

As mentioned above, learner autonomy is an idea rooted in European philosophy (Benson, 2006). Thus some researchers argued that LA might not be appropriate to Asian contexts (Pennycook, 1997; Phuong-Mai, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2006). Nevertheless, Littlewood (2000) surveyed 2,600 students in Asian countries and found out that most of the students were unwilling to be merely obedient listeners. This raises the question of how to encourage EFL students in Asian countries to develop autonomous learning strategies.

Smith (2003) proposed a ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ approach to encourage learner autonomy. A top-down ‘weak’ approach proposes that effective training of adequate learning strategies should be provided for a learner who lacks autonomy. For example, offering technical practice in self-access centers. This approach is criticized for failing to engage with variations in individuals’ capacity for LA. In other words, a state of psychological readiness is the prerequisite for autonomous learning. Many EFL students entering a university may have already formed some personal habits of being heavily dependent. In this case, it would be difficult for them to adjust to a new system which requires autonomous learning. Therefore, teachers should adopt a bottom-up ‘strong’ approach, which focuses on learners’ needs. In other words, teachers should consider students’ current key ability level to work autonomously. For this, Nunan (1997) clearly pointed out five levels: ‘awareness’, ‘involvement’, ‘intervention’, ‘creation’, and ‘transcendence’. Ideally, teachers can attempt to help their students develop autonomous learning skills that they can sustain and manage.

Therefore, it is necessary to investigate how teachers can work collaboratively to understand what kind of autonomous learning that their students need, and how intervention should be planned. This is the second part of the present study.

Purpose of the Current Study

The first part of the current study attempts to investigate whether or not the weak awareness and acknowledgement of LA exist in university EFL students in Guangxi, China. The results will help present a clearer understanding of how low proficiency EFL learners perceive LA and identify their use of autonomous vocabulary learning strategies. The second part of the

current study will attempt to find ways on how autonomous learning strategies can be promoted with the collaborate support of teachers.

In order to meet the research aims in the present study, two questions were addressed:

1. How do tertiary-level EFL students perceive out-of-class autonomous vocabulary- learning strategies?
2. What strategies can be developed to improve levels of autonomy?

Methods

Participants

The 80 first-year students selected in the present study were from different majors at Nanning University. They were from six parallel classes. According to the scores of their final exam, these participants were considered to be at the low-proficiency level. Among the 80 participants, there were 50 males and 30 females.

Six English teachers were invited to a two-hour discussion as they all had teaching assignments in the classes mentioned above. They were all experienced teachers with a Master's Degree in English education. They also worked as an instructor at the self-access center. Thus they had a basic understanding of learner autonomy. In addition, they were familiar with their students' background.

Questionnaire

A five-point Likert scale questionnaire was used in the study. The questionnaire contained ten items eliciting learners' perceptions of out-of-class autonomous vocabulary-learning strategies; for example, goal-setting, self-planning, and self-monitoring (Appendix I).

To collect the data, the questionnaire was administered in class. Participants were not required to write down any personal information. Thus learners' identity was kept confidential.

Students' Group discussion

Ten students who filled out the questionnaire were also invited to participate voluntarily in a small group discussion. The discussion was to encourage participants to reflect on their experiences of learner autonomy, and to express opinions on sociocultural influences that might affect how they perceive the notion of learner autonomy (see some questions in Appendix II).

The group discussions were open. The author proctored the entire process and took notes. Participants were encouraged to express their own opinions. Although teacher involvement might have inhibited their willingness to talk, this factor was mitigated by the design of the discussion, which was based on voluntary participation.

Teachers' group discussion

Six teachers from the six classes mentioned above took part voluntarily in a two-hour discussion. Teachers were informed that their opinions were kept confidential. In order to conduct an in-depth discussion on students' autonomous learning, the author shared the data collected from students' questionnaires and their group discussion with the six teachers before the teachers' discussion. As mentioned above, all the teachers had a basic understanding of learner autonomy.

The discussion first attempted to provide an opportunity for teachers working collaboratively to identify the strengths and weaknesses of different autonomous learning strategies. Second, this discussion was also an opportunity to encourage teachers' collaboration in providing scaffolding skills for students' autonomous vocabulary learning.

Results and Discussions

Question 1

To answer the first research question of how tertiary-level EFL students perceived out-of-class autonomous vocabulary-learning strategies, the results of the questionnaire were presented in the following table.

Table 1.
Percentage of Conducting the Out-of-Class Strategies

After class, I will..	SA(%)	A(%)	N(%)	DA(%)	SDA(%)
find my own way of learning new words	4	6	10	32	48
read many reading materials to enlarge vocabulary size	15	25	10	20	30
review newly-learned words	12	18	15	15	40
check the meaning of any new words	8	12	12	27	41
ask for help for the meaning of a new word	2	8	10	35	45
set my own learning goals	10	15	5	26	44
have a plan of accumulating words	5	15	12	30	38
monitor my own learning progress	5	10	13	32	40
go to the self-access center or library	10	30	15	20	25
speak English with the new words	3	7	10	30	50

Note: SA=strongly agree A=agree N=Neutral DA=Disagree SDA=strongly disagree

As presented in Table 1, the results revealed that most of participants had relatively low levels of awareness and involvement in out-of-class autonomous vocabulary learning. For example, 70 % of the participants reported uncertainty on setting their own goal. This was done by combining the percentage of disagree and strongly disagree. It was found that 68 % of the participants felt they did not self-plan their vocabulary learning, and 72 % were also unsure of

self-monitoring their learning processes. This uncertainty was further demonstrated in that 80% of the participants reported a lack of confidence in speaking with new words and had a lack of a plan to find their own way of learning vocabulary. This is evidence that the specific focus on encouraging students' learner autonomy was to address the skills of goal setting, self-planning, and self-monitoring.

Regarding students' behaviors on conducting out-of-class independent learning, the figures appeared to show an unsatisfactory result. Although 40% of the participants reported that they would go to the self-access center and also try to read materials to enlarge their vocabulary size. This data was found by combining the percentage of agree and strongly agree. Only 30% reported they would review newly-learned words. This was further demonstrated by 20% of the participants reporting their willingness to check the meanings of new words and a lower proportion of 10% asked for help from others. This is evidence that participants seldom spent time on out-of-class autonomous vocabulary learning. This result is also in line with previous studies (Nguyen, 2009), wherein low-proficiency students are more unlikely to use autonomous strategies than advanced level students.

Group Discussion

The results collected from the group discussion first revealed that learners had a mixed feeling about autonomous learning. Some reported that autonomous learning is not necessary. For example, one said "We, do not see the value of autonomous learning because we have many English courses." However, some students regarded learner autonomy as an indispensable part of language learning. For example, one said "Autonomous learning is very important because it is

impossible to learn everything only from in-class learning, and I think I am confident in it.” This demonstrates a readiness for autonomous learning. Nevertheless, many of them reported it was very difficult for them to conduct autonomous learning after class. For example, one said “Although we are told to learn autonomously, we do not know how.” Accordingly, it is concluded that while some students have a level of awareness and involvement to explore autonomous learning, others hold negative views. This is evidence that a weak ‘top-down’ approach might not work for the low proficiency students, because this method does not focus on their individual needs. This is consistent with a previous study (Smith, 2003), wherein teachers are encouraged to adopt stronger forms of autonomy support for students.

As expected, students all reported that learning English at the university was very different from what they did in secondary school. Problems in conducting autonomous learning as a result of sociocultural factors were exemplified by comments such as “Chinese students are heavily dependent on their teachers. This is a tradition rooted in Chinese Confucian philosophy.” Moreover, some students regarded autonomous learning as a conflict with their traditional learning, arguing, “It is very strange for Chinese to learn autonomously.” Accordingly, making the transition from secondary school to the university level for first-year students can be difficult. This difficulty is also shown in other Asian countries, e.g., in helping Vietnamese tertiary-level students to become more autonomous (Humphreys & Wyatt, 2014).

It is widely acknowledged among these students that the role of their teachers in supporting autonomous learning was important. Without teachers’ instruction and guidance, they felt it would be impossible to learn autonomously. For example, they commented:

“Teachers need to give us more instructions.”

“Teachers should help us set a plan for learning.”

“Teachers should help us monitor our learning.”

“Teachers often explained the meaning of new words in class, but they did not tell us how to learn vocabulary autonomously.”

It appears that students need their teachers to be proactive in implementing autonomous learning. As proposed in Humphreys & Wyatt (2014, p.58), teachers cannot expect their students to make the transition by themselves. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers should focus on students' specific needs, and provide scaffolding skills. Put simply, in the pedagogy for autonomy, teachers should scaffold the development of autonomy (Smith, 2008).

Question 2

To answer the second research question of what strategies might be devised to improve levels of autonomy; resulting data were collected from discussion with teachers.

It is widely acknowledged that there is a need for applying a 'bottom-up' strong approach to scaffolding autonomous learning. Hence, teachers should provide more guidance with regards to students' individual, context-specific needs, as the following comments from teachers demonstrated:

“Teachers should take more time to instruct students on how to learn vocabulary autonomously.”

“Teachers play a dominant role in classroom practice, students are simply obedient listeners. Although teachers assign homework for students, that is not equal to autonomous

learning.”

“Teachers understand the importance of learner autonomy. However, we seldom monitor students’ performance in autonomous learning.”

In addition to the guidance that was required in scaffolding autonomous learning, some teachers also admitted that a lack of consistency occurred across their teaching. For example, while some teachers put more time on instructing students’ autonomous learning, other teachers did not. Moreover, some teachers might develop reading materials for students’ autonomous learning, while others did not.

It was appreciated that most of teachers spent much time in explaining new words to students and that they all agreed on the importance of teaching vocabulary. However, teachers also admitted that they did not guide students to learn vocabulary autonomously. One teacher commented:

“Teachers spent time on explicitly explaining and teaching every new word to the students. Students also followed, but it seems that the effect is insignificant. We need to guide them how to learn vocabulary autonomously. However, we seldom do this.”

All teachers acknowledged the effects of a strong approach on learners’ uptake of vocabulary, especially when the teachers needed to facilitate learners setting a goal, as well as planning and monitoring their learning. One teacher stated, “Setting a plan is an effective way,” while another said, “Monitoring can help learners understand how words can be learned.”

For future teaching, teachers suggested that the first step is to establish a rapport with students by which teachers can earn trust from students. This is a basis for starting discussions on

out-of-class learning. The second step is to motivate students' engagement on classroom decision-making. Teachers also suggested that class time be allocated to guide students on how to learn vocabulary autonomously. The third step is to encourage reflection on learning. Later, teachers collaborated on providing scaffolding skills for students' autonomous vocabulary learning. For example, materials for autonomous vocabulary learning should be developed collaboratively. It was suggested that a weekly autonomous learning plan be set by teachers and students. This also required teachers and students' cooperative efforts to monitor and reflect on the learning process. This is evidence that teachers should teach with, not at students. This is also proposed in other studies (Smith, 2001; Ushioda et al., 2011), that 'teacher-of-the-students' and the 'students-of-the-teacher' cease to exist and a new term emerges: 'teachers-students with students-teachers.' This means teachers are no longer merely 'the-one-who-teaches', but one who is himself taught along with the students, who in turn, while being taught, also teach.

Overall, teachers agreed on the importance of providing opportunities for learners to self-plan, self-monitor, and self-reflect on their vocabulary learning. Teachers also needed to show them the effectiveness of using autonomous vocabulary learning strategies. One stated, "Students should know how to monitor the extent to which they have learned from their weekly goal, work together to reflect on what they have learned, which strategies they have used, which things they have enjoyed doing." Another added, "Then learners are instructed to identify the useful strategies for next weekly goal with the support of their teachers."

In conclusion, with teachers' helping to tailor to individual's needs, and with specifically developed resources and materials, autonomous learning seemed achievable. In addition, while

in-class teaching based on the requirements of curriculum is necessary, allocation of class time to demonstrate the application of autonomous learning strategies and allowing learners to work together to reflect on their previous learning seemed worthwhile.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to address the problems of applying autonomous vocabulary learning among low proficiency EFL university students. The first part attempted to answer the question of how the students perceived their autonomous vocabulary learning. Questionnaires and group discussions were applied to seek insights into learners' view of teacher's role and their needs. Resulting data were shared with teachers in a small-scale discussion, which was the second part of the present study.

Results revealed that a weak 'top-down' approach in implementing learner autonomy is not adequate. Teachers need to provide scaffolding skills tailored to learners' context-specific needs, for which a strong 'bottom-up' approach is more appropriate in supporting autonomous learning. This means that the teacher's role in supporting learner autonomy is indispensable. Ideally, any change in instructional practice needs to be guided by the teachers themselves. Therefore, teachers should work collaboratively to develop resources and materials for learners' autonomous vocabulary learning. In this case, teachers are no longer merely 'the-one-who-teaches', but one who is himself taught along with the students, who in turn, while being taught, also teach. Although it was appreciated that teachers spent too much classroom time in explicitly teaching every word meaning, it was suggested that class time be allocated to demonstrating the application of relevant strategies.

Students' efforts were also crucial to autonomous learning. With teacher's guidance, students needed to form greater awareness in setting plans or goals, and monitoring their vocabulary learning process.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the present study proposed some possibilities for future teaching of autonomous vocabulary learning in this and similar contexts, an effective intervention approach was not suggested. As teachers reported, sometimes it was impossible to allocate class time in instructing autonomous learning strategies since teaching is driven by the curriculum requirements. In addition, it was also difficult to develop the uptake of autonomous vocabulary learning for all students. Therefore, an effective intervention approach that could help learners make a transition from their passive learning formed in secondary school towards a higher level of autonomous vocabulary learning is needed. This addresses the need for future research on this issue.

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Appendix I

This questionnaire is concerned with how you feel about learning vocabulary and all the information will be kept confidential.

1= strongly disagree 2=Disagree 3=Neutral 4=Agree 5=strongly agree

After class, I will...

1. try to find my own way of learning new words. ()
2. try to read many reading materials to enlarge my vocabulary size. ()
3. review the newly-learned words. ()
4. check the meaning of any new words that I encounter. ()
5. ask for help when I don't know the meaning of a word. ()
6. set my own learning goals. ()
7. have a plan of accumulating words and I will strictly follow my plan. ()
8. monitor my own learning progress. ()
9. go to the self-access center or library for study. ()
10. always encourage myself to speak English with new words. ()

Appendix II Questions for students' group discussion

1. How do you think of autonomous learning?
2. Do you think learner autonomy important for vocabulary learning?
3. How is English learning in university different from that in your secondary school?
4. What sociocultural factors might affect your autonomous learning?
5. How do you think the role of teacher in implementing learner autonomy?
6. How have the teachers here facilitated you in developing autonomous learning?