

Group Self-assessment and Goal Setting in English Discussion Classes

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the principle of autonomy and, specifically, how it relates to East Asian learners. It suggests these learners may benefit most from a form of autonomy termed ‘autonomous interdependence’, wherein groups of students support one another to reach their goals, due to a hypothesized emphasis given to the interdependent self and the group amongst East Asian learners. It tests this by allowing discussion groups to assess their own performance during discussions and then set goals for immediately subsequent ones. It assesses the self-perceived success rate of these groups in meeting these goals and finds a high percentage of success. However, it advises caution in the interpretation of these results and suggests ways in which the test can be revised in order to better ascertain its effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

Brown (2007) lists 12 principles for language learning which he designates as either cognitive, affective or linguistic. This paper will focus on one of his cognitive principles, autonomy, which he defines, citing Benson (2001), as “the capacity to control one’s own learning” (p. 290). This principle was chosen because as Little (2003) notes, if learners can become autonomous, the problem of motivation is by definition solved.

Within the context of Rikkyo University’s English Discussion Class (EDC) the opportunities for learner autonomy can appear limited. Each class must follow a standard pattern (Hurling 2012), starting with a quiz based on a homework reading and a fluency activity. These are followed by a functional language presentation and practice activities, and finally by two extended group discussions, the first of 10 minutes, the second of 16. The group size for each discussion is typically three to four students, given a class size of between seven to nine students. Each of these discussions is followed by formative feedback designed to help students to improve their performance in subsequent discussions. It is during these post-discussion feedback sessions that learner autonomy was introduced, specifically after the first discussion and preceding the second. This was done via the introduction of self-assessment forms (Appendices A, B and C) through which discussion groups could rate their own performance in the first discussion on a number of criteria before choosing one of those criteria as a group goal for improvement in the second discussion. For example, the criteria of the initial version of the self-assessment form (Appendix A) included use of the target function of that lesson in addition to the communication skills promoted throughout the course: agreeing and disagreeing; checking understanding; follow-up questions; and reactions (Hurling, 2012). This was done with 13 different classes across one entire semester of 14 weeks.

DISCUSSION

The classic definition of learner autonomy is that of Holec (1981) who states that autonomy is ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (p. 3). In this definition autonomy is clearly an attribute of the learner. However, some have suggested (Riley 1988; Schmenk 2005) that the concept of autonomy is culturally loaded, based on Western ideals of individuality and thus is not necessarily an attribute shared by learners of non-Western backgrounds, particularly Asian learners. Littlewood (1999), however, believes that the Western idea of autonomy can be adapted to non-Western contexts if teachers attempt to match different aspects of autonomy with the needs

and characteristics of their learners. Littlewood (*ibid.*) goes on to demonstrate this for East Asian learners by introducing the concept of ‘relatedness’ alongside that of autonomy, citing Ryan (1991, p. 210):

The achievement of a sense of autonomy [is] one of the most fundamental needs and purposes of human beings. Another fundamental need is... ‘relatedness’, that is, for ‘contact, support and community with others’. If this contact with others is felt to be ‘instrumental or controlling’ it can lead us to lose our sense of autonomy. However, if the contact is felt to be supportive, it does not interfere with autonomy but facilitates it. (p. 74)

This leads Littlewood to the term ‘autonomous interdependence’ (*ibid.*) to convey the idea that autonomy develops most effectively in an interpersonal environment which supports it.

Littlewood (*ibid.*) also identifies two levels of autonomy. The first he calls ‘proactive’ autonomy, which equates to the type of autonomy we usually see discussed in the West, whereby learners take charge of their own learning, determine their own objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been learned. The second is ‘reactive’ autonomy in which the teacher still sets the agenda for learning, but once this agenda is set, enables learners to pursue their goals autonomously.

Based on the hypotheses that East Asian learners see themselves as interdependent with other students, more so than independent, alongside viewing the teacher as the centre of learning, Littlewood (*ibid.*) makes a number of predictions. Amongst them are the predictions that East Asian students will have a strong inclination to form in-groups which work towards common goals and be eager to engage in activities which involve discussion within groups, but also still see the teacher as an authority figure whose superior knowledge should not be questioned. He draws upon these predictions to make a number of generalizations about autonomy in the East Asian context. Firstly, that students will have a high level of reactive autonomy, both individually and in groups, and be prepared to accept directions specified by the teacher and organize their resources towards working in these directions. Secondly, however, groups of students may develop high levels of both reactive and proactive autonomy via autonomous interdependence, given the strong importance attached to the interdependent self and the group amongst East Asian learners.

Therefore, we see that autonomy in East Asian contexts may not in fact be an alien concept, merely one that manifests itself best in groups rather than in the individual. Hence the self-assessment and goal setting activity was set up to be carried out by whole discussion groups in order to test for Littlewood’s (*ibid.*) autonomous interdependence. The self-assessment forms themselves represent a limited form of reactive autonomy, as the possible goals for selection are set by the teacher rather than the students.

Oscarson (1989) lists a number of benefits of self-assessment procedures, including the promotion of learning, as self-assessment gives learners training in evaluation, which, in itself, is beneficial to learning. This also improves goal orientation, as self-assessment tends to enhance learners’ knowledge of the wide variety of possible goals in a given language learning context. This raised level of awareness means learners are more likely to attempt to influence classroom activities in a direction which serves their perceived communicative needs. This second benefit is what the self-assessment sheets are designed to promote, with students influencing the direction of the second discussion in a way that is designed to meet their goal from the first discussion.

PROCEDURE

After the first discussion, the discussion groups are handed a self-assessment form (see Appendix A) and asked to rate, as a group, their performance using that lesson’s function and the course

communication skills. They are asked to rate themselves on each category with either a circle, meaning they used the function or communication skill often; a triangle, meaning they didn't use it often; or a cross, meaning they didn't use it at all. Students are then asked to choose one of the criteria they didn't use often/at all in the first discussion to set as a goal to use in the second.

The discussion groups are then split up and students are paired with a partner from another group in order to conduct the preparation activity for the second discussion. Once this preparation activity is complete, the original discussion groups are reconvened before being reminded of their group goals. The second discussion is then conducted, after which the students, as a group, once again rate their performance on the same criteria and decide whether they believe their goal has been met.

VARIATIONS

The above procedure was only followed during 'content' lessons, that is to say lessons in which a new function is introduced. Specifically, these are lessons 2, 3, 6, 7, 10 and 11 (of 14). During review lessons, of which there are three, lessons 4, 8 and 12, students were not given group self-assessment forms but rather individual self-assessment forms (see Appendix D) on which they had to rate their performance on all of the previous functions and communication skills and again choose a goal for the second discussion. This was done to determine if there was any difference in the rate of perceived successful goal completion between groups and individuals.

For lesson 7's self-assessment sheet, an extra criterion was added, that of 100% English use. This was due to the fact that some classes were struggling to keep their discussions L1 free and as such they were given the opportunity to reflect upon this fact and set appropriate goals during this lesson. This is important in the EDC context as discussions are expected to be in English only and students are penalised for L1 use in tests.

However, this additional criterion, along with all the communication skills were dropped from subsequent versions of the self-assessment form. Instead, they were replaced by all the previous functions from the course (see Appendix C). This was done for two reasons. Firstly, during lessons 2 to 7, not a single discussion group chose that lesson's target function as a point to improve. This means that across four lessons, every single group from all 13 classes, representing a total of 95 separate discussion groups, chose a communication skill as their goal for self-improvement as opposed to that lesson's function. This was a surprising, yet perhaps understandable result. After being presented with the new function and then given extended practice with it, it is highly likely that at the very least some, if not the majority of, students will use the function at some point during the first discussion. With students' focus on the new function, communication skills were often forgotten. Secondly, there was a desire to promote the integration of all functions, both old and new, into the groups' discussions, as this was essential for success in the course's discussion tests. With a growing number of functions to recall, it became increasingly important to remind students to attempt to bring all of them into their discussions.

CONCLUSION

During the use of the first variation of the assessment form, which included a single lesson's target function plus the four communication skills, the perceived rate of successful goal completion by students was 87%. During the second stage, when the assessment form included only functions, this rose to 96%, with only two groups out of 50 believing themselves to have failed to meet their target. In contrast, when students used individual self-assessment forms to set themselves goals, only 62% felt they had achieved their goals.

This data initially appears to support the concept of autonomous interdependence, with groups of students working together to meet their self-set goals a high percentage of the time,

while individually they felt they were unable to match this success rate. However, what these percentages hide is which of the students within the discussion groups were responsible for helping the group achieve their goal. It may well be that within the groups the same 38% of students who were failing to meet their individual goals may also be failing to meet the group goals as well. This is masked when only taking group performance into consideration.

One possible way to assess this problem is to design a self-assessment form which tests not only group performance but also asks individuals to indicate whether they contributed towards the goal themselves.

However, overall, allowing discussion groups to self-assess their performance and set goals based on that performance resulted in the vast majority of groups (131 out of 145) perceiving themselves as having met those goals. This is an extremely positive result and lends strong support to the use of group self-assessment and goal-setting activities in English discussion classes.

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APPENDIX A

Mon / Tue / Wed / Thu / Fri / Sat

1 / 2 / 3

Lesson 2

Discussion 1

X Δ or O

As a group:

Did you ask others to choose topics using <i>What shall we discuss first/next?</i>	
Did you suggest topics using <i>Why don't we discuss... or Let's discuss... ?</i>	
Did you agree or disagree with the previous speaker?	
Did you check understanding?	
Did you ask follow-up questions?	
Did you use English reactions?	

As a group, please choose something you didn't do (X) or didn't do well (Δ) as your group goal for discussion 2:

Our goal for discussion 2 is _____

Discussion 2

X Δ or O

As a group:

Did you ask others to choose topics using <i>What shall we discuss first/next?</i>	
Did you suggest topics using <i>Why don't we discuss... or Let's discuss... ?</i>	
Did you agree or disagree with the previous speaker?	
Did you check understanding?	
Did you ask follow-up questions?	
Did you use English reactions?	

Did you meet your group goal? (Yes/No)

APPENDIX B

Mon / Tue / Wed / Thu / Fri / Sat

1 / 2 / 3

Lesson 7Discussion 1

X Δ or O

As a group:

Did you ask for different viewpoints using <i>How about from {X}'s point of view/perspective?</i>	
Did you give different viewpoints using <i>From {X}'s point of view/perspective, ...?</i>	
Did you agree or disagree with the previous speaker?	
Did you check understanding?	
Did you ask follow-up questions?	
Did you use English reactions?	
Did you use 100% English?	

As a group, please choose something you didn't do (X) or didn't do well (Δ) as your group goal for discussion 2:

Our goal for discussion 2 is _____Discussion 2

X Δ or O

As a group:

Did you ask for different viewpoints using <i>How about from {X}'s point of view/perspective?</i>	
Did you give different viewpoints using <i>From {X}'s point of view/perspective, ...?</i>	
Did you agree or disagree with the previous speaker?	
Did you check understanding?	
Did you ask follow-up questions?	
Did you use English reactions?	
Did you use 100% English?	

Did you meet your group goal? (Yes/No)

APPENDIX C

Mon / Tue / Wed / Thu / Fri / Sat

1 / 2 / 3

Lesson 10

Discussion 1

X Δ or O

As a group:

1. Did you ask others to compare using <i>Which is <u>better</u> - {X} or {Y}?</i> And <i>How is {X} <u>better than</u> {Y}?</i>	
2. Did you compare using <i>{X} is <u>better than</u> {Y}</i> and <i>{X} is as <u>good as</u> {Y}?</i>	
3. Did you ask about and give different viewpoints?	
4. Did you balance you opinions by talking about advantages and disadvantages?	
5. Did you summarize your ideas?	
6. Did you choose topics to discuss?	

As a group, please choose something you didn't do (X) or didn't do well (Δ) as your group goal for discussion 2:

Our goal for discussion 2 is _____

Discussion 2

X Δ or O

As a group:

1. Did you ask others to compare using <i>Which is <u>better</u> - {X} or {Y}?</i> And <i>How is {X} <u>better than</u> {Y}?</i>	
2. Did you compare using <i>{X} is <u>better than</u> {Y}</i> and <i>{X} is as <u>good as</u> {Y}?</i>	
3. Did you ask about and give different viewpoints?	
4. Did you balance you opinions by talking about advantages and disadvantages?	
5. Did you summarize your ideas?	
6. Did you choose topics to discuss?	

Did you meet your group goal? (Yes/No)

APPENDIX D

Self-Check Sheet (Lesson 4)

Functions and Communication Skills	Discussion 1	Discussion 2
Choosing Topics (What shall we discuss first? What shall we discuss next?)		
Suggesting Topics (<i>Why don't we discuss {topic}? Let's discuss {topic}.</i>)		
Checking for Ideas (<i>Is there anything to add? Is there anything more to say?</i>)		
Summarizing (<i>So, most of us [agree/disagree] about {topic}. So, [all/most/some] of us think...</i>)		
Agree/Disagree (<i>I agree with you... I think so too... I partly agree, but... I'm sorry, but I disagree...</i>)		
Follow-up Questions (<i>What..? Why..? Where..? Who..? When..? How..? Do..? Have..? Are..? If..?</i>)		
Checking Understanding (<i>Sorry, I don't follow you. What do you mean? Do you follow me? So, are you saying...?</i>)		
Reactions (<i>Yes, Right, Okay, Really? Interesting, That's right, Uh-huh, Sure, Me too, Wow, etc.</i>)		

My goal for the next discussion

is _____.

Did you meet your goal for discussion 2? (Yes/No)