Promoting Learner Autonomy through Self-Assessment and Goal-Setting

Daniel Warchulski

ABSTRACT

This paper describes how autonomy was promoted through a self-assessment/goal-setting activity. This included a process whereby students were asked to assess their in-class performance according to three grading criteria – function use, communication skills use, and participation. Based on their perceived performance, students then set individual goals. As such, learners were given an opportunity for personal self-monitoring in a manner that allowed for self-reflection and immediate personalized feedback. Of particular interest was the ability of students to accurately assess their performance and abilities since this helps ensure that assessments and goal-setting are meaningful and beneficial in a variety of ways. Overall, both the activity and student performance were positive. The results indicate that although students tended to slightly underestimate their performance, they were relatively consistent and accurate when compared to the instructor's perception of students' performance, thereby benefitting from the activity.

INTRODUCTION

Within the field of language education, the notion that autonomy is or ought to be a component of everyday classroom practices is widely supported by researchers and instructors alike. Given the importance attached to autonomy, this paper outlines and describes a self-assessment/goal-setting activity that was implemented at Rikkyo University in the EDC department. The paper begins with a literature review where some current theoretical representations of autonomy are outlined and how they relate to self-assessment/goal-setting activities. Next, the activity, and procedure for its implementation, are discussed in some detail. Finally, the paper concludes with a brief discussion of its effects, including the results of students' performance.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Many scholars and researchers have attempted to articulate autonomy, as it pertains to language education, in a variety of ways. This has resulted in a wide range of definitions and theoretical frameworks, which in turn have contributed to and influenced much of the broader theory and practice in language education today. In other words, the concept of autonomy seems to have had a profound impact on theory and pedagogical practices, resulting in a radical restructuring of language pedagogy. Within this context, the basic notion of autonomy is often defined in terms of learners taking some form of responsibility for their learning.

The introduction of autonomy as a central feature of language education began with Holec (1981), who defined autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (p. 3). Inherent in this are the management of various aspects of the learning process, including, for instance, the monitoring of one's learning progress, setting goals, and self-assessment. Although numerous other definitions have been proposed since this time, many of them vary only in semantic terms and seem to be grounded in or tied to Holec's conception in some way. A key component of definitions of this kind is that autonomy is an attribute of the learner, as opposed to learning situations, since learners don't simply develop the ability to self-direct their learning by being put in situations where they have no other option (Benson, 2006). While much of the

literature generally seems to accept this definition as a starting point, there is, at the same time, a high degree of variation among researchers, and a considerable degree of difficulty defining the precise nature of autonomy exists (Little, 2002). This, in turn, has resulted in a range of potential meanings and theories regarding learner autonomy and how it should be represented in practice. Consequently, numerous definitions, models, and theories exist to account for learner autonomy.

The difficulty in defining autonomy is perhaps best demonstrated by the vast number of definitions that actually exist within the literature. For instance, Little (1991) defines autonomy as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action." (p. 4). Meanwhile, Dickinson (1995) views autonomy as "an attitude towards learning in which the learner is prepared to take, or does take, responsibility for his own learning." (p. 167). Despite the difficulty in reaching a consensus on a precise definition, there appears to be a general agreement within the literature that autonomous learners are those who understand the purposes of their learning, accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of their learning objectives, implement appropriate learning strategies, and regularly evaluate their progress (Cotterall, 2000; Dickinson, 1995).

Among some of the more important concepts related to the wide range of theories, models, and perceptions that have emerged are notions of varying levels of autonomy, cultural variation (i.e. Western vs. Eastern conceptions), and different versions of autonomy. For instance, there appears to be a dichotomy within the literature between strong versions of autonomy and weaker forms. Here, the stronger versions tend to be associated with some of the earlier theoretical frameworks, whereas the weaker forms have emerged more recently as a response and attempt to balance and account for variation among learners and educational contexts (Benson, 2006). For example, Smith (2003) points out that strong pedagogies view autonomy as a trait that learners already possess with the focus being the co-creation of conditions that allow students to exercise this autonomy. Conversely, weak pedagogies are based on the idea that autonomy is something that students lack in some manner and need training in.

The idea of cultural variation has also played an important role in some of the literature. Among the issues is the notion that we must be weary of implementing and promoting autonomy universally in all learning environments. Here, Pennycook (1989) warns us of some of the potential dangers of attempting to apply a theory that was conceived in a Western cultural context, in learning contexts such as those found in the East, pointing out that this can result in a form of cultural imperialism. In spite of this perceived risk, Littlewood (1999) argues that this view is largely unfounded so long as we match the different aspects of autonomy with the needs and characteristics of learners in specific learning environments. In fact, he goes on to point out that learners in Asian contexts are not necessarily passive learners and are often active and autonomous in a variety of ways, and we must be careful of setting up stereotypic notions of East Asian learners.

With respect to the extensive range of models of autonomy that exist within the literature, perhaps one of the more useful conceptions is that of Littlewood (1996) since it accounts for varying levels of autonomy and as such, appears to be appropriate in its application to most cultural contexts, including Japan. Within this framework, instructors are provided with a basis for developing practical strategies utilizing three broad domains that can be further broken down into more specific strategies that allow instructors to implement both stronger and weaker versions of autonomy. These main domains include autonomy as a learner, autonomy as a communicator, and autonomy as a person.

Most of the research in language education seems to support the position that autonomy ought to be promoted in classroom practices and in the wider educational context. In particular,

much of the more recent research holds the position that cultural variation is an indispensable factor in this process (Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008; Cheng & Dornyei, 2007). In this regard, different cultures appear to define autonomy in their own culturally-appropriate terms, including the degree of freedom that learners are given in the overall educational process.

Littlewood (1999) provides a useful conception that allows instructors and course designers in different educational contexts to decide what the optimal degree of learner freedom ought to be. A distinction is made between "proactive autonomy" and "reactive autonomy", the latter often being more appropriate in an Eastern educational setting, such as Japan. Whereas the notion of proactive autonomy puts an expectation on learners to be actively engaged in all aspects of the learning process, such as the design or choosing of instructional materials, and often requires a radical change on the part of teachers and learners, reactive autonomy does not necessarily create its own direction and allows for a more gradual and culturally-sensitive form of autonomy. Further, reactive autonomy is often seen as a preliminary step towards the proactive form or a goal in its own right since, "once a direction has been initiated, it enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal" (p. 75).

A particularly effective manner of promoting autonomous learning is through the use of self-assessment (Harris, 1997; Gardner, 2000) and goal-setting activities (Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008). Both activities are generally regarded as being beneficial for a variety of reasons and enable students to have a higher degree of control of their overall learning while encouraging them to reflect in a deeper and hence, more meaningful manner. This is especially true in formal educational settings, such as Rikkyo University's EDC program. It is widely believed that self-assessment helps learners to be more active through a process of self-reflection that allows them to locate their own strengths and weaknesses by urging them to think about what they need to do and helping them to view their learning in personal terms (Harris, 1997). In other words, students are likely to realize (or begin to) that they have the ultimate responsibility for learning. Another significant advantage of allowing students to assess their progress and set learning goals is the increase in their overall motivation – particularly intrinsic motivation (Guilloteaux & Dornyei, 2008; Cheng & Dornyei, 2007; Dornyei, 1994).

An example of a useful theoretical framework for conceptualizing self-assessment and goal-setting within the context of autonomy is Deci and Ryan's (2000) self-determination theory. A basic premise of this theory is that actions or behaviors that are self-determined become internalized within the learner and lead to higher levels of motivation. More specifically, various types of regulations exist in different learning contexts and these can be placed along a continuum between self-determined (i.e. intrinsic) and controlled (i.e. extrinsic) forms. Depending on which form is internalized by learners will lead to varying and different types of motivation. Here, more internalized forms lead to higher levels of intrinsic motivation. Conversely, less internalized types are believed to affect and lead to extrinsic motivation. In this sense, it would seem that allowing students to assess their performance and progress, as well as set goals, will lead to more internalized forms and thus, to higher levels of intrinsic motivation.

However, an important issue within the literature regarding the use of student self-assessment that requires consideration is the degree of students' accuracy with respect to being able to assess themselves in the context of language learning. The results in the literature are mixed with some studies reporting a high degree of accuracy, while others arguing that learners are generally unable to accurately assess their language abilities (Gardner, 2000; Harris, 1997; Blanche & Merino, 1989). However, it is also suggested that so long as teachers do their part where required by properly by, for example, explaining the purpose of self-assessments and providing the necessary guidance and awareness raising when required during the process, the

low levels of accuracy can be mitigated and students will likely be able to assess themselves fairly accurately.

ACTIVITY AND PROCEDURE

Allowing students to assess their perceived in-class performance in a manner similar to how their grades are calculated, as per EDC grading criteria, is in line with the overall notion of autonomy. In this sense, it was hoped that students would be given an opportunity to act in a self-deterministic way which is supported by much of the research and literature pertaining to autonomy as outlined above. It seems reasonable to think that the process of self-assessment likely helps facilitate students' self-reflection and judgment pertaining to their actual performance, thus acting as a form of student-generated feedback which enables them to set personalized and meaningful goals in an informed and accurate manner. Accordingly, beginning in week 2, all classes were asked to assess their overall performance after both discussions 1 and 2 using a self-assessment/goal-setting worksheet.

SELF-ASSESSMENT (Lesson 3)

How do you think you did? What grade do you think you deserve?

Please assess your performance in Discussions 1 and 2 according to the following grading criteria:

1 – Poor (Never/Rarely)

2 – Uneven (Sometimes)

3 – Good (Often)

4 – Excellent (Usually/Always)

Functions, Communication Skills, and Participation	Discussion1	Discussion2
FUNCTIONS		
Checking if Everyone is Finished (this week) Does anyone want to add something? Does anyone have any other ideas?		
Changing Topic (this week) What shall we discuss first/next? Why don't we discuss (topic)?		
Balancing Opinions What are the advantages/disadvantages (of…)? One/another advantage/disadvantage is (that)…		
<u>Overall</u> function use.		
COMMUNICATION SKILLS		
Reactions (Okay. I see. Yeah. Right. Uh-huh. Wow! Great! …)		
Agree/Disagree (I totally agree. I partly agree. I'm sorry, but I disagree. I see your point, but…)		
Follow-up Questions (Who…? What…? When…? Why…? Where…? Do…? Can…?Have…?)		
Checking Understanding (Do you understand? Sorry, I don't understand.)		
<u>Overall</u> communication skills use.		
PARTICIPATION		
Participation as a **speaker**. (Were you an active speaker?)		
Participation as a **listener**. (Were you an active listener?)		
<u>Overall</u> participation.		

I did the following well: _____

My <u>goal(s)</u> for Discussion 2 is/are: _____

My goal(s) for next class is/are: _____

Figure 1.

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When creating an assessment activity, to optimize its benefits Gardner and Miller (1999) suggest that they contain the following: the purpose of the assessment, benefits to the students, a procedure for conducting and marking it, a suggested marking scale, and a choice of follow up actions related to the score achieved. Accordingly, in both the creation and implementation of the self-assessment/goal-setting activity, the instructor ensured that these criteria were taken into consideration and included in the activity. Additionally, Harris (1997) suggests that to be effective, self-assessment must be practical in terms of time and should be integrated with everyday classroom activities. As such, the self-assessment/goal-setting activity was used as part of the regular procedure during the feedback stages of discussions one and two.

Using clear instructional language and providing guidance where necessary, students were asked to determine their scores for each of the items for which they normally receive weekly grades (i.e. function use, communication skills use, and participation). Students utilized a numerical grading system (i.e. 1 through 4) which is the same as the marking scheme that all EDC instructors use on a weekly basis to grade their classes. It is hoped that this process allowed students to self-monitor and reflect on their performance, thereby allowing them to set realistic goals that are directly related to their performance while allowing them to experience a sense of success and autonomy in their learning. To determine if this was the case, the instructor carefully monitored all students during all stages of the activity. In particular, an effort was made to ensure a balanced degree of guidance and facilitation on the instructor's part. Further, the instructor initially explained the overall utility of the activity, including the overall course objectives to ensure that students had a sufficient degree of understanding with respect to how the two are related. Additionally, students received various forms of guidance, awareness raising, and support throughout the process.

The following procedure was followed in implementing the student self-assessment/goal-setting activity:

1. After the completion of discussion 1, students received a self-assessment/goal-setting worksheet.
2. The teacher provided instructions, explained the purpose of the activity, and clarified any potential issues.
3. Students reflected on their performance in discussion 1 and assessed their performance as per checklist.   Based on this score, students chose one or two goals (i.e. areas that they believe need improving) to complete in discussion 2.
4. Students wrote their goal(s) on the checklist and if time permitted, discussed their results collaboratively in a group.
5. The instructor gave appropriate feedback and students prepared for discussion 2.
6. Following discussion 2, students reflected on and assessed their performance. Based on this, students chose and wrote one or two goals for next class.
7. The instructor gave appropriate feedback and asked students to remember and try to achieve their goals during the next class.
8. At the end of class, the instructor collected students' self-assessment/goal-setting worksheets to compare students' perceived scores with the instructor's scores.
9. The activity was administered for all weeks where students learned or reviewed a function or communication skill (i.e. weeks 2-4, 6-8, 10-12), but not during the other classes.

Although this activity was generally used with higher level students (i.e. levels 3 & 4), it can be used with lower level students with very few changes required in both the activity and procedure for its implementation. For instance, an instructor may need to change or omit some

of the function or discussion skill phrases so that they are in line with those that lower level students learn. Additionally, a teacher would be advised to spend more time explaining the activity and its objectives and perhaps a change in instructional language may be required to ensure that students fully understand the activity. It is likely that using self-assessment activities with lower level learners would be particularly beneficial in helping them self-reflect and monitor their progress while helping them focus on course objectives by allowing students to set meaningful and achievable goals.

DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

Generally, the students' performance was encouraging and they responded positively to the self-assessment/goal-setting activity, thus likely benefitting by being able to optimize many of the advantages inherent in assessment activities. In a sense, the students were given the chance to assess their own progress which in turn provided an opportunity for them to take some measure of responsibility for their own learning and thus allowed them to act as autonomous learners.

From the beginning, most students seemed to find the activity helpful and were quick in assessing their strengths and weaknesses, which enabled them to set personalized and meaningful goals by allowing students to focus on clearly defined objectives. In most cases, observations revealed that students were relatively successful in assessing their strengths while at the same time, identifying areas that needed improving. Consequently, in most cases, this process resulted in students being able to achieve their goals, thereby improving their overall performance in subsequent discussions. It has been suggested that combining self-assessment with teacher-fronted feedback means that the latter is likely to be more effective (Harris, 1997). As such, instructor-fronted feedback seemed to complement and help reinforce students' assessment and choice of goals. For instance, quite often the instructor-fronted feedback included goals that coincided with students' goals, which acted as a form reinforcement and enabled students to feel a sense of accomplishment and success during the activity.

Although this activity was generally successful and helpful to students in a variety of ways, the issue of students' accuracy was of particular concern. It has been noted that the lack of reliability with respect to students being able to accurately assess their language performance and abilities can potentially negate some of the benefits of using assessment activities (Gardner, 2000). To ensure that the activity had the desired effect, the accuracy of students' assessments was taken into consideration. Accordingly, students' assessment of their performance was compared to that of the instructor's to help make sure that the activity was indeed highly beneficial, as intended.

A comparison of students' perceived performance with that of the instructor's scores had very encouraging results. The students tended to assess themselves positively which was in line with the instructor's overall impression of their performance. Although the students generally scored their performance lower than the scores given by the instructor, the difference was minimal. In fact, over the duration of the semester, the students' scores appear to be highly correlated with the instructor's perception of students' performance for both function use and communication skills use, but not for participation. As such, the results seem to indicate that during the course of the semester, students were able to assess themselves consistently and accurately with respect to their language related performance, thereby likely benefitting from this activity in a variety of ways. And perhaps most importantly, it allowed students to choose goals in a meaningful manner in a way that promotes self-reflection and autonomy.

It is believed that most of the students benefitted from the activity in quite diverse ways.

For instance, Gardner (2000) suggests that some of the advantages in promoting autonomy through self-assessments include opportunities for the following: individualization, reflection, motivation, evaluation, monitoring, and support. Accordingly, the self-assessment/goal-setting activity likely benefitted the students in many of these ways. For instance, informal observations of students suggest that students were motivated during most classes as evidenced by their high levels of voluntary participation and effort. As well, it appears that students were able to reflect deeply with regards to their performance since they were quite accurate in their assessments and ability to set meaningful goals.

On a final note, Harris (1997) points out that since systematic self-assessment provides an individual focus by allowing students to view their learning in personal terms, learners are more likely to be active, as opposed to passive, because they will realize that they have the ultimate responsibility for their learning. It is the instructor's belief that the students' overall eagerness and active participation throughout all classes can be partially attributed to the self-assessment/goal-setting activity and the manner in which it was implemented. Indeed, students were given an opportunity to act as autonomous learners.

CONCLUSION

Assessment and goal-setting activities have become an important component of autonomous learning in the L2 classroom and are utilized and endorsed by many instructors. This paper has demonstrated that there are numerous advantages to using such activities as part of a daily routine. In addition to the benefits discussed, self-assessment activities can also assist teachers in other ways such as providing a guideline and assisting instructors in the formal grading of learners. Here, however, instructors would be well-advised to ensure that students are able to accurately assess their abilities and performance.

So while this paper examined some of the advantages of such activities in an informal manner within the context of EDC classes, future studies can be conducted to examine and better assess the effectiveness of such activities. For instance, using appropriate formal qualitative and quantitative data collection methods can be utilized to shed light on students' perceptions of such activities. As well, results can be measured and assessed numerically in a number of ways which can ensure that self-assessment/goal-setting activities are of the greatest benefit to learners.

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