Hybrid learning and Iranian EFL learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning

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Abstract

Hybrid Learning (HL) is a learning approach comprising traditional classroom learning, computer-assisted language learning (CALL), and self-directed learning (SDL) (Bärenfänger, 2005). The present study is an investigation of how Iranian advanced EFL learners improved in their autonomy level and vocabulary knowledge by attending a HL vocabulary course. In addition to class attendance, the participants planned, monitored, and evaluated self-directed activities done in SDL gatherings held during the course. The course also incorporated a course weblog, online dictionaries and various vocabulary-related websites. Data was collected quantitatively by means of a final vocabulary test and an autonomy questionnaire, as well as qualitatively via class and weblog observations, and also the learners' reflective essays. Based on the findings, the learners' autonomy level and vocabulary knowledge increased after attending this HL course.

Keywords: Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL); Hybrid Learning, Learner Autonomy; Vocabulary.

1. Introduction

Language learning has nowadays moved beyond its traditional form. This does not mean that learners no more attend classes or have teachers, but suggests that more autonomous forms of learning have taken the place of pure reliance upon teachers and class attendances for learning (Alshwiah, 2010; Bärenfänger, 2005; Blin, 2004; Kaltenböck, 2001; Pazio, 2010). Computer, as a typical example of technological aids, came to help language learning in the 1960s (Kern & Warschauer, 2000), brought changes in both the quantity and quality of teaching and learning with the passing of time, and its maximum use in learning is seen nowadays in distance learning courses. Even so, teacher-centered activities are still considered a guarantee for high quality learning since the instructor is "an expert in the structure of the information to be learned, the most appropriate methods of knowledge and skill acquisition, teaching and learning materials, techniques for planning (the) learning path(s), ways to motivate students, and the evaluation of study outcomes" (Bärenfänger, 2005, p. 15). Therein lies the dilemma of choosing between either a totally class-bound, teacher-centered way of learning a language, a merely distant type of learning it, or a combination of the two. What the present research has investigated is the effect of a hybrid course comprising traditional classroom learning, computer-assisted language learning, and self directed learning on a group of adult Iranian EFL learners' vocabulary knowledge and autonomy level.
1.1. Learner autonomy

In the context of foreign language learning, autonomy is defined as the ability to take responsibility for one's learning (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1994, as cited in Kaltenböck, 2001). In other words, it is the means by which learners transcend the limits of their immediate learning environment (Byram, 2004). An autonomous language learner is one who assumes responsibility for his/her own learning and can do so without teacher intervention or outside a formal curriculum (Dickinson, 1987, as cited in Kaltenböck, 2001). This responsibility is not only for determining the purpose, content, rhythm, and method of learning, but also for monitoring the learning progress, and evaluating its outcomes (Byram, 2004). In line with the effect of self-directed activities on learner autonomy, Breen & Mann (1997) brand as autonomous those learners who seek the opportunities to learn outside the classroom setting and create their own instructional settings freed from the teacher.

1.2. Blended vs. hybrid learning

A combination of face-to-face and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in a single teaching and learning environment is called blended learning (BL). Many researchers consider BL as synonymous to hybrid learning (HL) (Buzzetto-More & Sweat-Guy, 2006; Mason & Rennie, 2006; Thompson, 2003, as cited in Alshwiah, 2010; and Wong, 2008). However, some others like Bärenfänger (2005), Pöysä, Lowyck, & Häkkinen (2005), Paechter (2004), Arnold (2004), and Waddoups and Howell (2002) believe that hybrid learning "is not a simple combination of classroom instruction with e-learning, but comprises a standard instructional setting (class meetings) as well as offline activities outside the classroom (tutorials, classes from other institutions on the campus, peer-review workshops), and computer-mediated learning (online lessons)" (Bärenfänger, 2005, p. 15). The same stance is adopted through the remainder of this paper wherever the term hybrid learning is used. To put it another way, what is important in HL is not learning merely through CALL and face-to-face interaction, but also self-directed learning activities which take place in environments other than the classroom or the net.

1.3. Hybrid learning

As discussed earlier in the paper, hybrid learning involves self-directed activities in addition to the blend of traditional classroom learning and computer-assisted learning. In Waddoups and Howell's words, "hybridization occurs when on-campus educators adopt distance education technologies and practices, and when distance education organizations adopt/adapt campus-based educational practices" (2002, as cited in Bärenfänger, 2005). In approval of the benefits of involving various types of learning, Bärenfänger (2005, p. 14) states that "the integration of self-directed learning and/or e-learning with classical classroom instruction especially fosters some highly desirable developments, such as more individualized and flexible learning." In any learning process, the responsibility that learners take is of high importance. It is a common practice that teachers usually "carry the greatest burden of responsibility in the classroom, [but in hybrid learning] the idea of self-directed learning implies that the student is for the most part responsible for his or her learning" (Brockett & Hiemstra, 1991; Guglielmino, Long & Hiemstra, 2004; Houle, 1988; Littlewood, 1997, as cited in Bärenfänger, p. 17).

1.3.1. Self-directed learning

The term self-direction should not be taken as interchangeable with autonomy. Lee (1998) draws the distinction between these two terms by comparing the following definitions: self-directed learning means "the techniques used in order to direct one's own learning" (Pemberton, 1996). It refers to "learning in which the learners themselves take responsibility for their own learning" (Thomson, 1996). Autonomy, on the other hand refers to "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981). Considering these definitions, it can be concluded that autonomy is a capacity, while self-directed learning is a way of organizing learning (Pemberton, 1996). Moreover, attending a self-directed learning course does not in itself enable learners to become self-directed. Learner autonomy is advanced
when there is provision of such situations for language learners that encourage them to take charge of the whole or part of their language learning and that can more probably help rather than prevent the learners from exercising autonomy (Esch, 1996, as cited in Lee). Therefore, self-directed learning can be described "in terms of personal autonomy, which is a personal attribute, as well as self-management, which is the willingness and capacity to conduct one's own education" (Candy, 1991, as cited in Lee). Bayat's (2011) study of the effects of out-of-class use of English on learners' perception of autonomy further highlights the significance of out-of-class activities. Her research made use of an Autonomy Perception Scale used before and after a 10-week period in which participants were anonymously paired and exchanged letters with each other. As a result, the participants reported that the activity contributed to their autonomous learning experiences as well as their language learning.

In adult education and in the literature on learner autonomy in foreign/second language learning, what is referred to as self-direction is the deployment of the three strategies of planning, monitoring and evaluating one's learning. These are called metacognitive strategies which are general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate, and guide their learning (Lee, 1998). Nation (2001) has found the use of language learning strategies playing a significant role in enabling the learners to take control of their learning and therefore take more responsibility for their studies. The present study includes an observation of the learners' adoption of these metacognitive strategies during the SDL gatherings and other self-directed activities.

1.3.2. Computer-assisted language learning

CALL is a basic component of any hybrid learning environment. The claim that developments in technology have incontestably contributed to the spread of autonomy and self-success gains support from the related literature. According to Blin (2004), language learning CALL applications have always been designed in order to grant some level of control to the learners over their language learning. Earlier applications mainly allowed control over the pace of learning and a limited choice over the mode of interaction with the program (e.g. instructional, practice or testing mode). However, more recent CALL applications, such as the use of internet have offered far broader opportunities for exercising learner autonomy by facilitating learner control over interaction. Blin (2004) further quotes Shetzer and Warschauer (2000) as stating that "language professionals who have access to an Internet computer classroom are in a position to teach students valuable lifelong learning skills and strategies for becoming autonomous learners." Schmenk (2005) considers the popularity of learner autonomy as "at least partially related to the rise of computer technology and the growing importance of computers in language learning environments worldwide" (p. 107). Also criticizing the widespread use of CALL applications, Benson (2001), Kenning (1996), and Little (1996, as cited in Blin, 2004) are of the opinion that learners must be already significantly autonomous if CALL applications are to promote the development and the exercise of learner autonomy.

2. The study

On account of the mostly qualitative approach adopted in this study, the researcher has deemed appropriate to draw the sample from an accessible population. The accessible population was comprised of advanced EFL learners studying at Sabaye Sahar Language Institute in Tehran, Iran. Prior to the start of the course, an announcement was put on the bulletin board of the institute and flyers were also distributed among the advanced learners. Ten learners (8 females and 2 males) expressed their readiness to attend the course. All of them had previously been interviewed and placed in advanced-level classes.

In order to determine the difference in the learners' knowledge of vocabulary before and after the course, two vocabulary tests were developed and administered. The one at the beginning of the course consisted of a list of 200 words. The learners were asked to write Farsi equivalents for as many words as they could. This test was administered for the purpose of determining which vocabulary the learners did not know so as to include them in the course syllabus. Based on the learners' responses to the test, 60 words were selected to be taught during the term. For the final vocabulary test, the researcher developed a test of 30 items randomly selected from the group of words none of the learners knew the meaning of at the beginning (Cronbach’s Alpha reliability = .767). It should be
mentioned that the two tests were not considered as pre-test and post-test; rather, the results were obtained by means of analyzing the learners' responses to the final test only.

Changes in the learners' level of autonomy were studied both quantitatively and qualitatively. The learners responded to an autonomy questionnaire (Cronbach’s Alpha reliability = .748) which was an adapted version of a longer one developed by Chang (2007). Additionally, the learners' activities in class and on the weblog were observed. The researcher used forms called Observational Protocol (Creswell, 2002) and Weblog's Observational Protocol for recording her descriptive and reflective field notes.

On the subject of CALL, instruments used during this HL course included a computer with access to the internet for use in the class and a weblog with the address http://hlvocab.edublogs.com where each learner had a username, a password, and a category under their own name for publishing posts, comments, and reflective essays aimed at teaching, learning, and practicing new words.

The present research has adopted the triangulation mixed-method design where both quantitative data (tests and questionnaire results) and qualitative data (observations, reflective essays and comments) were collected simultaneously during the term. These results were then analyzed and compared to discover whether they support or contradict each other.

During the class hours, the selected words were taught in groups based on common central ideas with the help of the etymological approach. Exercises and the use of words in contexts helped the process of learning. The learners were assigned to publish posts and reflective essays on the weblog on a regular basis. Their posts included new vocabulary, introduction of vocabulary-related websites, personal experiences and suggestions for vocabulary learning, etc. Other learners commented on their classmates' posts. Interaction was both between the teacher and the learners and among the learners. In addition to the self-directed learning included and practiced in computer-assisted learning and drawing partially on the work of Bärenfänger (2005), there were SDL gatherings held for discussing and practicing the previously-learned vocabulary. Learners were given some of the class-time on the session before each SDL gathering to plan for it. During the SDL gatherings, learners used pantomiming, hangman, and other games to practice the newly-learnt words in different aspects of usage, spelling, pronunciation, part of speech, etc.

3. Findings and conclusion

The results of this study were chiefly obtained by means of qualitative analyses and fairly complemented via quantitative analyses. In this study, the researcher attempted to probe (a) whether practicing hybrid learning in an EFL course would help improve learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary; and (b) whether practicing hybrid learning in an EFL course would help improve the learners' vocabulary knowledge. The qualitative analyses of the two observational protocols which were mainly done to answer the first research question, led to far more findings. The findings were coded, contextually described and grouped into five themes. The evidences for the themes are based on multiple perspectives from several sources of data (Creswell, 2002) and are accompanied by contrary evidences wherever applicable. Quantitative statistical analyses were performed in order to substantiate the qualitative arguments related to the first research question as well as to respond to the second research question.

3.1. Learners' background

A few of the learners showed a considerable level of autonomy in learning from the outset. They were used to watching movies, reading books, listening to music, surfing the net, and gaming in English and outnumbered others in posts and comments they published on the weblog. The quantitative analysis proved that these already-autonomous learners achieved the most significant gains out of this HL course with regard to both vocabulary knowledge and level of autonomy.

3.2. CALL

Learner's views on the use of modern technology for the purpose of learning were mostly positive. However, such a viewpoint may be caused by the novelty value of the hybrid learning course. The necessity for learner training and the importance of computer literacy were both expressed by the learners and witnessed by the
researcher during the course. CALL and traditional classroom learning played complementary roles and each supplemented the handicaps of another. A few advantages of integrating weblog as a CALL application into this HL course were: (a) educational use, (b) non-educational use, (c) compensating for class time shortage, (d) all time availability, and (e) being the contact line between class sessions. The only drawback to the use of weblogs observed in this course was regarding the asynchronicity of communication in a weblog.

3.3. Self-directed learning

Adoption of the three metacognitive strategies involved in self-directed learning was observed during the learners' self-directed activities in this HL course. Learners shouldered almost full responsibility for planning what to learn in the self-directed learning sessions; and they showed almost every signs of monitoring and evaluating their learning process. The analyses also resulted in the necessity of learner training for SDL.

3.4. Growing autonomous

At the beginning sessions of the course, learners showed growing motivation by exhibiting behaviors which were indicative of their being motivated. As time passed by, behaviors such as self-reliance, responsibility, cooperation and activeness were also observed which proved the learners’ development of autonomy in learning. The qualitative analysis of learner autonomy level substantiated the statistical descriptions in that regard. The results of an independent t-test used to compare the learners' responses to the autonomy questionnaire at the beginning and end of the course showed a significant difference between the mean scores of the two sets of scores the learners got at the questionnaire. This means that there was an improvement in the learners' level of autonomy after attending this HL course. Therefore the first research question i.e. "does practicing hybrid learning in an EFL course have any effect on the learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary?" is supported.

3.5. Vocabulary learning

The results of the quantitative analysis showed considerable improvement in the learners' vocabulary knowledge after attending this hybrid learning vocabulary course. The improvement in the learners' vocabulary knowledge was calculated at % 83.33 which implies that the treatment was effective. This means that the second research question i.e. "does practicing hybrid learning in an EFL course help improve the learners' vocabulary knowledge?" is also supported.

Attending this hybrid learning course proved effective for the initial participants of this study to develop their autonomy and vocabulary knowledge. Taking advantage of CALL and SDL in a traditional learning environment, and therefore creating a hybrid learning environment, can be effective for other Iranian EFL learners with the same characteristics as the participants of this study.

References


