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# Building Capacity for Learner Autonomy

**practices that ensure learning continues outside of the classroom**

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### ***Abstract:***

Asked directly about the importance of self-study skills, almost any educator would affirm their desire to see students take a greater responsibility for their learning process and outcomes. Certainly most of us have had such students in our classes and we can readily attest to the positive effects learner autonomy had upon the attitude and the approach of the student towards language learning. Yet, what is it exactly that allows students to operate with a greater degree of motivation and responsibility – are students like these simply born or can they be made? Specifically, what are ways that we as instructors can foster self-study skills and direct our students to explore English more productively on their own?

This paper will review current research on this topic that highlights the relevance of learner autonomy across ages and cultures as well as pinpointing specific factors that help its development. Furthermore, the workshop will introduce specific practices and resources that can train students to operate with a greater degree of motivation and responsibility. Our goal is to explore a variety of approaches that strengthen the capacity of our students to study English for themselves.

### ***Introduction:***

Learner Autonomy is not in any way a new concern to the field of learning and teaching. In fact, the concept has been in circulation for more than thirty years. Holec was one of the first educators to define learner autonomy in 1981. He identified it as “the ability to take charge of one's own learning, having all responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of this learning” (quoted in Nunan, 1996, 14). Nearly every discussion of learner autonomy since that time references this classic definition.

Nonetheless, as more educators became concerned with learner autonomy, the definition of it became multi-faceted as teachers and researchers alike sought ways to understand why some students functioned with greater autonomy than others. Bergen, perhaps is representative of the distinction this process yielded. As he explained, learner autonomy flows from a “readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes - entails a capacity and willingness on the part of the learner to act independently and in co-operation with others as a socially responsible person.” (Chan, 2001, 506) (summarized from Dam, 1995) (Smith, 2008, 396)

### ***Evidence: Relevance!***

Still, the question remains as to whether learner autonomy develops solely within an individual or whether the actual context or circumstances in which learners find themselves has an influence upon their capacity and willingness. While Benson suggests in his recent article that “autonomy is an attribute of learners, rather than learning situations” (Benson, 2007, 22), this seems to negate the numerous studies that highlight the influence of the teachers in cultivating the discipline of inquiry for students of a particular field of study. (INSERT REFERENCE) Furthermore, the Bergen definition speaks of learners’ “readiness to take charge”, hinting at the role that educators can play in training learners for autonomy. This insight is what fuels the now so common phrase of “learner training” through K-12 and higher education systems around the world. What can we do to train students to have both the capacity and the readiness for autonomy?

Yet before we look at specific questions of how we can training our learners for autonomy, a more obvious questions begs our attention. Does learner training work in a variety of cultures, ages and stages of learning? Do it yield beneficial results for students as regards to their classroom learning or is it simply something to focus upon as they prepare to enter the real world of work and society?

Schmenk (2005) is one such educator who questions whether learner autonomy is relevant across cultures. Concerned for our vulnerability to cultural blindness, Schmenk argues that educators (1) neglect the fact that “origins can be easily traced back in Western ideologies” and (2) “largely ignore the specific cultural backgrounds of the audience”. (108) While every educator – particularly those working in intercultural contexts – must take great care to consider the cultural restraints and expectations of their specific context before generically applying a one-size fits all solutions to their students, Schmenk as language specialist herself seems to miss a key insight about the nature of communication in ANY language. It is fundamentally a process of expressing ourselves and negotiating meaning in partnership with other people. That is to say, communication is intrinsically connected to our capacity to “take charge” – to take responsibility for what needs to be said as well as what needs to be done to come to an understanding with another speaker.

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Numerous studies have in fact demonstrated the relevance of building autonomy in a diverse spectrum of cultures and classrooms. Willing (1988) found that adult immigrants did show any more or less preference for autonomy-based training than other ages and stages. Dam & Gabrielson (1988) in their study of eleven-year old EFL students in Denmark discovered that learners with varieties of aptitudes and abilities demonstrated themselves capable of making choices about what they studied and how they went about it. Widdows and Voller (1991) recount the distinct ideas and priorities that emerged when Japanese university students were given meaningful opportunities to evaluate their courses. More recently, Chan (2001) in their survey of Hong Kong students of English likewise found that students not only freely expressed a desire to contribute to the learning process (in choosing content, etc.) but could also define and explain the value of learner autonomy for themselves. Chang – a Chinese ELT professional – draws this conclusion after considering a spectrum of research specific to the cultural dynamics of east Asian students: “Asian learners could have every chance of becoming autonomous with the right kinds of support and environment.” (2007, 325)

Beyond the questions of the cultural validity of learner training, autonomy has also been strongly correlated with increased achievement both inside and outside of the classroom. Lim (1992) in her study of Singaporean Junior College students discovered that as students actively engaged with the content choices and learning approaches of their speaking classes, the appropriateness of their communication style increased dramatically. Yen & Liu (2009) found in their research of online community college courses that capacity for autonomy served to predict the strength of the final mark of the participating students. In a particularly curious study, Patall et al. (2010) discovered that simply increasing choice in homework assignments had a three-fold impact: students (1) enjoyed the work more; (2) scored higher on united tests; and (3) completed a greater amount of homework. (910)

Any remaining questions of relevance, however, evaporate quickly when we place a priority upon autonomy into the context of life-long learning. That is to say, the ultimate relevance of autonomy is not so much a question of its benefits for the classroom – despite the many demonstrated benefits in research – but rather a question of whether learning continues beyond the classroom. To help teachers identify its relevance, we often ask colleagues: how many of you would want to have your students dependent upon you for the development of their English skills for the rest of their lives? The answer is, of course, no one. In fact the whole point of language learning is to build skills for competent communication in another language.

Field, 2007, challenges educators to reflect again upon their responsibility “to ensure that students’ acquisition of L2 continues in the world beyond courses and classrooms”. (31) Specifically, he recommends that each teacher ask themselves as they prepare their lessons and walk into the classroom the following questions:

- “What steps do we take to ensure that learning continues at the end of the teaching day?” and
- “What do we do to ensure that, after completing a course, learners continue to develop as language users and achieve lifelong learning?” (31)

We agree with Field, who complains that “much of teaching does little or nothing to shape the way in which the learner exploits (language) resources outside the school walls.” (32) This has been true of ourselves and of many colleagues that we know and respect. It is this realization that drives our quest to better understand and apply the academic research surrounding the topic of learner training and autonomy.

### ***Evidence: Influence!***

What then are the particular factors or leverage points by which an educator can build capacity for autonomy among their students? Research again suggests that there are four general spheres of influence that can create the necessary conditions for autonomy to grow.

First, and foremost, autonomy grows when there are meaningful choices for students to make during the learning process. Patall et al. (2010) explores this in considerable detail, and their findings – referenced above – provide considerable support for the original emphasis that Holec put forth in 1981: autonomy is centered around the student’s capacity to take charge of – i.e. make choices about – their learning. This aspect of autonomy is among the most frequently referenced in the literature and between educators. Yet it is worth emphasizing here that choice alone is best combined with opportunities for reflection and self-evaluation. (Nunan, 1996, 20)

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Thus, secondly, and equally important, autonomy grows when students have realistic perceptions of themselves and the learning process. Yang (1999) found that among Taiwanese university-level EFL students, positive self-perception was highly correlated with the extent to which they used a variety of learning approaches. Lee, (1998) likewise saw a connection between “enthusiasm” for self-directed learning and the courage to experiment. This is perhaps not too surprising, but other studies – including Esch (1996) and Nunan (1996) helpfully connect matters of positive self-perceptions of capacity with realistic expectations about the language learning process. Both researchers emphasize the importance of an accurate understanding of both oneself as well as the difficulties of language learning in building capacity for autonomy. Nunan helpfully highlights the correlation between “opportunities to reflect upon the learning process” and the “ability to make effective use of the English they were learning.” (1996, 20) of reflective learning towards that goal – explaining that in doing so “all learners developed skills for articulating what they wanted to learn and how they wanted to do it.” (1996, 20)

Third, autonomy grows when there is constructive learning culture within the classroom and school of the learner. Chang’s study (2007) is particularly instrumental on this point. In his study of Taiwanese students, he discovered that while self-perceptions and even beliefs about a healthy learning process are not influenced by one’s peers, students’ willingness to act upon their beliefs – i.e. their behaviors – were strongly affected by group dynamics and norms. (324) A later study in 2010 had similar findings. Jin & Cortazzi (1993) in their research of Chinese graduate students in the UK discovered that collectivist cultures shape expectations such that individuals will conform to group norms regardless of what they believe. (quoted in Esch, 1996, 46) McClure in her 2001 study describes the way in which group dynamics – in which a small subset of students consistently dominated class time – left the other participating international post-graduates completely passive – despite the fact the course was specifically designed to build autonomy. (2001, 146) Dornyei summarizes the importance of group dynamics as follows: “the quality of teaching and learning is entirely different depending on whether the classroom is characterized by a climate of trust and support or by a competitive, cutthroat atmosphere.” (2007, 720) While not every class may be marked by this detrimental “cutthroat competitiveness”, certainly we could add to this a list of alternate, unhelpful classroom cultures.

Fourth, and finally, autonomy grows when students learn to collaborate with one another. Nunan reviews several pivotal studies that suggest the value of collaboration for autonomy. In one (Assinder, 1991) students who received training in teaching one another proved to be instrumental in the “success of student-initiated teaching and learning.” (quoted in Nunan, 1996, 17) In another (Heath, 1992) collaborative decision-making was found to have a direct impact upon what ESL high schools students discovered about the English language (quoted in Nunan, 1996, 18) More recent research remains to be incorporated into our own review – yet the currency of group work and collaboration undoubtedly means that further evidence in support of collaboration is forthcoming. Nonetheless, the value of collaboration is in many ways intrinsically connected to what we’ve put forth already. On the one hand, collaboration is fundamentally a communicative activity – requiring extensive negotiation through language. Thus, collaborative activities approximate the sort of settings in which learners will likely find themselves and use language in the future. Learning to function in collaborative environments is thus essential for their life-long learning and success. On the other hand, collaborative activities are representative of the sort of “laboratory” in which learners will test language and discover the need for further studies over the remainder of their lives. While our time in the classroom between students and teachers is typically bounded by a matter of years, there is no bound upon the opportunities that will come for learners to benefit from interactions with colleagues, supervisors, family members and more. Thus training students to collaborate effectively together is fundamentally relevant to overall goals of autonomy.

### ***Description: Vietnamese Students***

How are Vietnamese students perceived? If one were to listen in as Vietnamese colleagues discuss their students – at least their university students – and you will likely hear complaints of their lack of “motivation” and their likelihood to be “lazy”. The reasons for this are many and beyond the scope of this paper, but the tendency of Vietnamese educators to lay the blame quickly upon on the students coincide with typical perceptions that East Asian students are passive. (Murase, 2012, 69) For example, as criticized by Kubota (2001, 14), Asian students have been described as “reticent, passive, indirect, and not inclined to challenge the each other’s authority” (quoted in Palfreyman & Smith, 2003, 113). Similarly, in a recent article, (Pham,

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2007) several Vietnamese colleagues describe the difficulties they had in implementing CLT practices within the classroom:

*When asked to sit together to prepare for a role-play, a report, or to write a story, students usually use Vietnamese to do the work . ... Since the teacher is Vietnamese, the students are Vietnamese, there is no motivation, no reason for them to use English. (198)*

*I always want the students to interact more with each other; they should rely less on the teachers. But when I give them opportunities to do that, for example, when they sit in pairs or groups to exchange opinions about their answers to an exercise, they usually quarrel and cannot come to a compromise. One tends to think that his/her idea or way of doing things is better than his friends'. I wonder if this is part of our [Vietnamese] classroom culture. People of the same status are not willing to collaborate with each other, to accept criticism from their equal, while they feel more tolerant to accept ideas and suggestions from someone with a higher status. ... They just want me to tell them what I think, to show them my ideas, rather than listen to their friends. (198)*

These dynamics obviously would not seem to bode well for the development of learner autonomy. Perhaps there is some true exception to the wide body of research – attesting to the relevance and benefits of autonomy for other culture – that would somehow make the ideas presented thus far too theoretical or impractical for Vietnamese educational contexts. Yet, before we allow for that, we must remember as Murase indicates in his paper that “it is often the case that learner autonomy in the Asian context is discussed by teachers and researchers from the non-Asian, ‘Inner-Circle’ (Kachru, 1992) community, framed from their views of Asian students.” (66) Some of these descriptions may reflect the true nature of Asian students, yet others are rather biased, influenced by “native-speakerist” (Holliday, 2003: 115) views about Asian students held by those from the Inner Circle countries. More importantly, we must remember that it is our job as teachers to help students reach the goals that we have set for them – and thus in describing the challenges we face in the applying the implications of learner training and autonomy for ourselves we are simply confirming the obvious: we have difficult work to do – but it is still, in our opinion, our responsibility to do it well.

It is our experience that Vietnamese students – upon arriving at the university for their first year of study – often have the articulated goal of wanting to increase their fluency in Spoken English, both in terms of building better pronunciation and in terms of their communicative competence in a range of settings. They do so because they believe that in today’s globalized world - and certainly in today’s Hanoi – how effectively they communicate in English will determine what sort of job they acquire upon graduation. While certainly often more reserved to start, students will warm up over time, particularly as they begin to trust the environment promoted by the teacher to practice a variety of language skills. This practice is typically controlled to start and then, by the end of class, freer – with the hope that students will experiment more with the vocabulary they’ve just learned relating to the lesson’s respective topic. There are consistent opportunities for students to take responsibility and more often than not, they do. After having the good fortune of seeing a different kind of student, and different kinds of classes altogether at Hanoi University, we can confidently say that given the right environment for effective collaboration within a communicative classroom – and without it, most students will embrace the opportunity to contribute and in the process develop life-long habits for independent learning. Vietnamese EFL learners are hopeful for a space in which they can utilize not only that which they’ve learned, but also to learn more about what they’re utilizing.

### ***Application: Vietnamese Students***

During our presentation at the conference, we will explore the following next steps in more detail – suggesting specific applications that educators can take into their classroom. We propose three next steps that we believe will help to overcome the dependence of our students upon the teacher in the classroom and foster their competence as life-long learners.

1. Provide students opportunities to reflect. This is best done not only in private – as students write about their experiences of language learning but also corporately as student discuss one another questions and answers that have marked their own language study.

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2. Give students practice in decision-making. Begin by focusing upon decisions that will guide their self-assessment and their goal settings – as their skills grow, open to them the choices of contents and methods.
3. Coach students through the process of exploiting available resources – both online and in real life. A variety of resources and opportunities exist in Vietnam to both practice and to use English. Students need help to both see those opportunities and to take advantage of the language skills embedded within them.

Again, these are the simple, accessible next steps that provide a starting point for any educator wanting to build capacity for autonomy within their students. During our presentation, we will outline a more detailed continuum of how we can train students for life-long learning.

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