PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH SELF-ASSESSMENT AND REFLECTION

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Abstract: This paper describes how leaner autonomy was promoted through self-assessment and reflection activities. The research aims to help students explore their inner strength of working independently outside the classroom and self-assess their own skills with the ultimate aim to improve their listening and speaking performance. Based on the theoretical framework about self-assessment and reflection by Andrade and Valtcheva (2009), together with learner autonomy by Holec (1981), the author conducted a research project on 2nd-year students in three non-English major classes at a university in a 15-session learning program. These students were facilitated by self-assessment of their listening and speaking skills through practical tasks outside classroom to help them become more independent learners and reflect on and evaluate their own performance. From the results, the research demonstrates that self-assessment and reflection activities can be useful tools to encourage students to become independent learners.

Key words: learner's autonomy, self-assessment and reflection

1. Introduction

Traditionally, curricula have tended to focus on imparting knowledge and skills rather than the teaching of how to learn. In language teaching, we have focused on teaching linguistic forms by presenting the language items in carefully graded steps, at the expense of teaching people how to learn the language (Olivareas, 2002). However, the main issue is that the differences between students are not because of their studying specific books, having the same teachers, employing identical learning styles, or experiences, but because of the ways they have found out about how to learn a language more economically and productively. In fact, the most successful learners are the ones who take the responsibility of their own learning.

The objective of the study was for students to explore the potential of working independently outside the classroom and to assess their own skills with the ultimate aim of increasing their speaking and listening performance. The author aimed to discover relationships between autonomous learning and students' progress in speaking and listening skills through learning activities.

2. Learner autonomy through self-assessment

Many scholars as well as researchers have endeavored 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

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a profound impact on theory and pedagogical practices, resulting in a radical restructuring of language pedagogy (Warchulski, 2015). Within this context, the basic notion of autonomy is often defined in terms of learners taking some form of responsibility for their learning.

According to Holec (1981) autonomous learning is *'the ability to take charge of one's learning'* (p.3). Inherent in this is the management of various aspects of the learning process, including, 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. In relation to this concept, several authors including Gardner and Miller (1997) and Tudor (1996) have argued that an integral part of autonomous learning is self-assessment, as it assists learners to evaluate their success on specific learning tasks. As Gardner (2000, p.50) points out, self-assessment can potentially 'serve a number of purposes, such as confidence building, demonstrating learning gain, or motivation…' Furthermore, Harris (1997) suggests that students are usually willing to assess their own language performance if they are taught how to do it. Therefore, self-assessment is 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. 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.

An important issue 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. However, it is also suggested that so long as teachers do their part where required properly, 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.

In general, there are three underlying principles or steps in self-assessment, as suggested by Andrade and Valtcheva (2009) namely; (1) articulating expectations, (2) self-assessing, (3) revising. In the first step, the teacher not only clearly defines expectations for a task, but explains each criterion that would be used in the self-assessment as well. For example, in teaching English writing, the teacher can either outline the criteria or discuss it with the students in the class before carrying out each activity. These criteria can include ordering the importance of different aspects in writing, e.g., conventions as compared to organisation of ideas, and the allocation of marks for each aspect (Harris, 1997). With that, students can reach an agreement with the teacher on the criteria set in assessing task performance and what counts as quality work. In the second step, students come up with initial drafts of the task given, e.g., an essay, and continually monitor their own progress on their assignments by making comparisons between their performance against the expectations laid out, and if they find that they have not met the standard, they can write short notes to remind themselves to make changes when writing their final drafts (Andrade & Valtcheva, 2009). In the third and final step, students use the feedback to aid in their revision. Thus, students come up with a

final self-assessment, which can be compared with those of their peers and the teacher. Harris (1997) further suggests that the teacher can compile a list of common mistakes made by students which can be used as another checklist for self-editing in which students are able to refer to when revising their work.

There are various elements that need to be considered when designing self-assessment tools in order for self-assessment to be carried out effectively. Andrade (1999) suggests eight features of self-assessment which are (1) awareness of the value of self-assessment; (2) access to clear criteria on which to base the assessment; (3) a specific task or performance to assess; (4) models of self-assessment; (5) direct instruction in and assistance with self-assessment; (6) practice; (7) cues regarding when it is appropriate to self-assess, and (8) opportunities to revise and improve the task or performance.

Regarding the construction, self-assessment is typically centered around specific tasks whereby a set of criteria are introduced clearly and samples or models are provided so students can see how each criterion is linked to the task. In term of the task, teachers need to frame it in such a way that students are able to easily assess their performance after completing the task. When considering the criteria for assessment, using a rubric is suggested by Andrade and Valtcheva (2009), by this way they suppose that "a good rubric describes the kinds of mistakes students tend to make, as well as the ways in which good work shines" (p. 13). Therefore, students obtain valuable information about what is required of them from the task, rather than having to guess what their learning objectives are and how to best meet those objectives. In addition to having an assessable task and clear criteria, providing models of self-assessment to students would make the identification and familiarising process even smoother when it comes to actually doing their own assessment; students not only understand the criteria, but see how it is applied and done in

reality, which would help give them a better understanding of the assessment. Besides the task, criteria and models, the role of the teacher in implementing the self-assessment is another vital part. Before even getting started on making the criteria of the self-assessment clear to students, the teacher needs to first create awareness among students about the value of using self-assessment; otherwise, students might just see self-assessment as an additional and unnecessary task. Once students start seeing self-assessment as being useful, particularly in supporting learning, they can fully come to appreciate and want to self-assess. The teacher also plays a crutial role in giving assistance and guiding students through using the self-assessment, so as to ensure students understand the criteria clearly and are correctly assessing themselves against those criteria given. Finally, the teacher should give students plenty of room to practice self-assessing as well as more opportunities to revise and improve on the task that they have previously completed and self-assessed on. By allowing students to do that, they become more familiar with how to accurately assess themselves and subsequently know which areas they need to work on in order to improve the quality and accuracy of their work.

3. My position as a teacher and researcher

Because English language is important in modern life, I have tried to learn it since I was a little girl. To pursue my dream of becoming an EFL teacher, I got my bachelor degree in English Language Teaching from Vietnam National University and my master degree in English Linguistics from Darlana University in Sweden.

At the present, I am in charge of teaching English for non-English major students in the Faculty of External Economics, Laws and Business Administration in Foreign Trade University (FTU). Before that, for 7 years I taught English in Vietnam National University of Forestry (VNUF), one of the leading

universities in forestry and environment education in Indochina. However, the English proficiency of VNUF's students is lower than those in FTU. Although teaching in two different universities with different majors and teaching demands due to the different levels of students' English proficiency, I realize that one of the most important factors in language learning is learner autonomy to master language skills.

However, during the process of teaching English, the author, like many other language teachers, has experienced the frustration of devoting endless energy to designing interesting tasks, from the teacher's point of view, and organizing a variety of activities for students in the classroom, but getting little response, which is very common. In fact, when teaching in English classes for 1st and 2nd year students at Foreign Trade University, students often play a passive role in gaining language skills. They often feel unwilling to use the target language in pair or group work. They seem to not reflect on the mistakes and evaluate their own performance and, consequently, might not be able to learn from their mistakes. Even really motivated learners do not always have a tendency to promote their potential. One of the reasons is that many students have difficulty in getting familiar with new teaching and learning methods as well as requirements of English proficiency at tertiary environment, especially with the two skills, speaking and listening. In fact, students have little chance to access authentic listening materials and English-speaking skill has not been the main focus of language assessment at many high schools, both in one-period tests and end-of semester tests (Nguyen & Tran, 2018).

During the time of being an English instructor, I have observed many students being passive in acquiring language skills and not active in learning independently outside the classroom. Therefore, it is important for learners to be taught the skill 'how to learn' to become more autonomous. This brings me to a decision to implement some self-assessment

activities inside and outside class for students in my three EFL classrooms in Foreign Trade University to enhance their ability to study independently.

4. A brief overview of the course

The objectives of my study are 2nd year students in my three English classes at FTU. These classes are predominantly comprised of Vietnamese students, except for one or two from Laos, Mongolia, or Korea. There were 97 students involved in the project and most were in their early twenties. All of them from three different classes but with the same curriculum were aiming to pass the exams with high marks and improve their listening and speaking skills. The students in these classes were mixed level, not very motivated, quite passive and need to be highly driven.

The students were enrolled in a 15-session learning program (each session lasts for 135 minutes) offered by the Faculty of English For Special Purposes at Foreign Trade University, Vietnam. For these students, they are required to complete their first year learning English at FTU (pre-intermediate level, equivalent to A2 CEFR, 400 TOEIC or 3.5 IELTS). Students enrolling in this program at that time used the book 'Skillful Listening and Speaking Student's Book 1' (Macmillan Publishing House, Lida Baker & Steven Gershon) as their main textbook and guidance. All of the topics designed for activities 2 were drawn from that book in order to make sure that students can apply suitable and appropriate vocabulary of certain topics into real situations when making their dramas.

The curriculum focuses on the academic language and study skills that students will need to acquire in their undergraduate programs. They are assessed on both individual and group performance as well as on numerous skill-based tasks. However, in this course, listening and speaking skills were focused on because these two skills top the agenda of the first two years' curriculum.

5. Activities and discussion

With the aim to facilitate student self-assessment of their listening and speaking skills, the author wanted to encourage them to become more independent learners and provided them with practical tasks where they could participate in a range of activities as well as contribute ideas for their involvement, and, thus, reflect on and evaluate their own performance.

When creating an assessment activity, to optimize its benefits, Gardner and Miller (1999) suggest that it contains 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 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 activity was used as part of the regular procedure during the feedback stages of discussions one and two.

I utilized three learning activities in my English classes basing on the theoretical framework of self- assessment by Andrade and Valtcheva (2009). At the end of the course, I conducted a brief survey to find out whether students appreciate the three activities or not.

The questionnaire is designed for students to rank the level of difficulty, the degree of practicality of the project, and the possibility of applying each activity on their own. The answers to all of those questions are designed based on the Likert scale which is considered as a commonly used psychometric scale in research that employs questionnaires. Applying this method, respondents are expected to express their level of agreement or disagreement on the proposed activities and statements. Above all, choosing this questionnaire design, I hoped to get the most trustful evaluation from students so that it would be more practical to draw some experiences and reflections for further improvement in the next application.

The questionnaires were distributed to 3 sample classes with 97 students in total. The number of received questionnaires then was 97, it means that all of the students participated in completing the survey and there was not any questionnaire that was left blank or incomplete. Thus, the process of analyzing data is going to base on these to come up with final findings.

This is the way I implemented the activities in my English classes.

Activity 1

Due to the requirements of subject curriculum, listening practice in the classroom mainly concentrates on the completion of listening tasks in the textbook. This means that students have little chance to access different types of listening materials in the classroom; therefore, they were encouraged to listen to as many kinds of listening sources as possible. Every week in the first 7 weeks of the course, students were required to listen to at least one piece of news (flexible sources chosen by them) and fill in the listening log after that. This task was done as a self-study activity out of the class with the teacher's guides. For example, the teacher supplied students with listening logs at the beginning of each week. Students reviewed the tasks from the week before, discussed and reflected on their progress. At the end of week 7, students needed to choose and rewrite 3 pieces of news among them, record and attach the transcript in the listening Portfolio. The audio length is from 2 to 3 minutes. The sources of their own report should be provided as well for further reference.

LISTENING LOG
Task: Listening to news
Name: _____
Here is your task:
Keep this listening log in your portfolio. Fill it out each time that you finish listening to a piece of
news.

Date	Title of news	Source	Main ideas	Comment

The passage that I found the easiest to understand was _____
because_____

The hardest passage to understand was _____
because_____

In order to listen better next time, I think I should:
_____
_____
_____

Figure 1. Listening log for students' weekly practice

When I checked students' listening logs on the first two weeks, I found out that some students were weak at summarizing the main ideas as well as giving comments on listening articles. Some students even left it blank in the comment column. I, then, provided them with some guides to getting main ideas such as catching up key words and repeated words or paying attention to the structure of the listening pieces. In the following weeks, I could see the improvement in students' logs with the information fulfilled.

According to the data collected, there was a large number of students thinking that activity 1 was helpful or somewhat helpful for their listening practice at home and the majority of students agreed that they could do this activity independently outside the class. As well, many students confirmed that it was possible to use the activity in future by themselves to further improve their listening skill. Although there is not much evidence of students' listening skill improvement during the 7-week project, I suppose that this activity can be repeated to enhance learner autonomy because students can use listening logs as a tool to practice regularly and improve listening skill gradually.

Activity 2

Because of the large number of students in each English class (normally from 30 to 40), each student had a little time practicing speaking skill in the class. As a result, many students felt unconfident when communicating in English with their peers and teachers. This bought me to the design of the second activity to improve their speaking skill as well as the ability to learn independently outside the classroom.

From week 9 to week 13, students were divided into groups of 3 to 5 and asked to role-play with given topics in the textbook. Topics, task requirements such as duration and submission and the assessment criteria were given to students in advance so that they had enough preparation time before the teacher's assessment in the class on the final week of the course. Students were also required to hand in the transcript of the drama as well as evidences for group work before the performance such as pictures, schedule, etc. From my own observation and evaluation, most of performances were well-prepared. According to the survey at the end of the course, I found out that although it was seen as a helpful activity by many students for their improvement of speaking skill, this task was difficult to conduct. Therefore, except for some students feeling positive about the future implication of this activity, the rest was uncertain about the possibility of implementing this activity themselves. When I interviewed some groups informally, I discovered that one of the difficulties for this activity was the inconvenience of long distance among group members, which hindered them from gathering to practice together.

Activity 3

With the aim to speed up students' ability to speak English fluently and naturally, students were asked to video record a conversation from 3 to 5 minutes with foreigners. Each individual could choose topics randomly on their own (the teacher highly recommend such Vietnam-related topics as traditional cultures, food, or Vietnames people in comparison with other foreign countries). Task requirements and the assessment criteria were given to them at the beginning of the course. At the end of the course, students had to submit the transcript of the talk and video recording. With this kind of activity, students themselves had to decide when, where, who to talk to and what topic as well as how to initiate the conversation with foreigners.

As outcomes, when ranking the effectiveness of this out-of-class activity, the majority of students thought that it was helpful to their speaking skill. However, they also considered it as a hard task to complete. Surprisingly, despite the difficulty, most of the students claimed that they would further improve their speaking skill by continuing with this activity.

According to what students revealed when being surveyed, I can make sure that the students were provided with some strategies such as doing weekly listening logs, role-play on certain topics and initiating conversations with foreigners to learn independently. It means it is important for the teachers to ensure that they give their students enough instructions and tips or strategies to help them in self-study; consequently, their autonomy can be improved and reinforced.

It is also advisable for the teacher 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.

Developing learner autonomy, however, is not a matter of one or two techniques; rather it needs a planned approach. Using the discussed techniques should be repeated and modified to ensure that they are suitable to learners.

6. Conclusion

In undertaking this research, the author's main aim was to provide students with strategies to enable autonomous learning in order to improve their listening and speaking performance for general use and future study. The implication of activities confirmed the author's initial assumption that students consider listening and speaking important life and/or skills but lack independent learning strategies to improve.

The study results showed that many students felt that they made progress in the target skills and they intended to continue spend some of the strategies independently in their university study. That was certainly an encouraging outcome for the research. The author hopes to make the outcomes of this project a regular part of the EFL classes at FTU in future, with the findings used as a foundation for further development of the curriculum.

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THÚC ĐẨY SỰ TỰ CHỦ CỦA NGƯỜI HỌC THÔNG QUA VIỆC TỰ ĐÁNH GIÁ VÀ PHẢN ÁNH

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Tóm tắt: Bài viết mô tả cách thức thúc đẩy việc tự chủ của người học thông qua các hoạt động tự đánh giá và phản ánh. Nghiên cứu nhằm mục đích giúp sinh viên khám phá sức mạnh bên trong của họ khi học tập một cách độc lập bên ngoài lớp học và tự đánh giá các kỹ năng của bản thân, với mục đích cuối cùng là cải thiện hiệu suất của hai kỹ năng nghe và nói. Dựa trên khung lý thuyết về tự đánh giá và phản ánh của Andrade và Valtcheva (2009), và lý thuyết về sự tự chủ của người học của Holec (1981), tác giả đã thực hiện một nghiên cứu đối với các sinh viên năm thứ hai trong ba lớp học không chuyên tiếng Anh tại một trường đại học trong 15 tuần học. Những sinh viên này được trang bị các cách tự đánh giá kỹ năng nghe và nói thông qua các nhiệm vụ thực tế ngoài lớp học để giúp họ trở thành những người học độc lập hơn biết tự suy ngẫm và đánh giá hiệu suất của chính họ. Từ kết quả nghiên cứu, nghiên cứu cho thấy sự phản ánh và đánh giá có thể là công cụ hữu ích để khuyến khích sinh viên trở thành người học độc lập.

Từ khóa: người học tự chủ, tự phản ánh, tự đánh giá