



Teachers' Changing Roles in Developing Learner Autonomy

Ma Shuning^{1, 2}

¹ Inner Mongolia Honder College of Arts and Sciences, Hohhot City 010000

² Philippine Christian University Center for International Education, Manila City 1004

*Correspondence:shuningm@163.com

Abstract The idea of learner autonomy is not new in China, while to develop it in classrooms is always a tough work. For years much attention was drawn to how to fully develop learners' capacity to be autonomous in every aspect in learning, while the teacher's role in the discussion was considered to be less important. This paper takes a different stand based on the author's reflective teaching practice that the teacher plays at least three important roles in developing learner autonomy at present: they can act as the example, as the friend and as the adversary when relating to students. These roles a teacher plays help students develop learning autonomy by fostering students' motivation, discussing with them the learning strategies and monitoring their learning process. Future empirical studies can be conducted to further examine the effect in practice.

Keywords: learner autonomy, self-directed learner, teachers' roles

Introduction

Developing learner autonomy is a heated topic discussed in recent decades, with the spread of the learner-centered teaching belief. Many researchers have studied on the definition of "learner autonomy" and explored how an autonomous learner behaves. However, in reality, the ideal autonomy result is too difficult to achieve especially in Chinese traditional teaching culture context. One of the main reasons is that students themselves are not well prepared in many aspects to take the role as a full autonomous learner, while teachers' role is considered not as dominant and important as before. This paper takes a different stand that it considers teachers' role nowadays as more important than before in developing learner autonomy, such as the role as the example, as the friend and as the adversary to the students.

Literature Review

The term "learner autonomy" was first conceptualized by Holec in his seminal report *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* as "the ability (or capacity) to take charge of (or take responsibility for) one's own learning"^[1]. In the past decades, many definitions have been given to describe the term as a situation ^[2], a language pedagogy ^[3], a psychological attribute ^[4], and a methodological option ^[5], etc. For further understanding, Holec made a distinction

between "learner autonomy" and "self-directed learning", which is generally accepted by other specialists, that the latter is a desirable learning situation where the learner can utilize the ability (that is autonomy) to the full when he decides to learn.

In the last three decades, a great number of researchers have devoted into this field in the west revealing the nature and discussing benefits of learner autonomy and exploring the way to promote learner autonomy. Benson reviewed five kinds of models in the literature to describe the levels of autonomy including Nunan's five levels of "learner action" model – 'awareness', 'involvement', 'intervention', 'creation' and 'transcendence'^[6]; Littlewood's three-stage model – 'language acquisition', 'learning approach' and 'personal development'; Macro's three-stage model – 'autonomy of language competence', 'autonomy of language learning competence' and 'autonomy of choice and action'; Scharle & Szabo's three-phase model – 'raising awareness', 'changing attitudes' and 'transferring roles'; and Benson's three-dimension model – 'learning management', 'cognitive processing' and 'the content of learning'. All those models concerning autonomy in language education imply that developing the capacity of autonomy is a complex process and contains comprehensive contents and needs a long progress.

While the papers concerning learner autonomy in mainland



China mostly focus on the definitions and literacy reviews. Lu's study was regarded as the first one that advocated self-access learning in mainland China^[7]. In recent 10 years, the concern with developing students' learning autonomy has been well established in China because of the request for autonomous learners by the Chinese Ministry of Education. Though the overall researchers hold a positive view on developing learner autonomy in the Chinese context, the real situation is not as desirable. There is a long distance between the self-directed learning in ideal with the real state of learner autonomy development.

Self-directed Learning and Learner-autonomy Developing

A self-directed learner, who develops the full capacity of autonomy, in Holec's view is the one that holds the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning. Therefore, the role of the learner is supposed to be the decision-maker who determines everything concerning learning, such as the learning objectives, contents, procedures, etc. by himself rather than by the teacher or the school. It requires three conditions. First, one has to know himself very well. The objectives and contents listed by the school or teacher are fixed to all in one classroom, but each individual is different. Determining one's own objective should be based on the full understanding of oneself by looking at his strength and weakness and reviewing his life goal. Second, one should have the ability to judge long-term benefit from short one. He is not determined to defeat others but every time tries very hard to go beyond the present self. His objective is ideal but realistic in day-to-day practice. And he can clearly define what he will learn and to which degree he will learn based on the right understanding of the distinction between "useful knowledge" and "useless knowledge". Third, determination contains persistence and strategies, because learning is a lifelong activity. A decision maker can not only fix his objectives, but also insist in making efforts to attain the objectives. And he is good at summarizing and evaluating the learning process and progress for helpful techniques used in earlier studies and dares to consult other learners for the effective learning techniques which can be used in the items he has difficulties in. He owns the right rhythm for himself and has the way to monitor the procedures and evaluate the results by themselves. To sum up, a self-directed learner seems to be independent in learning and capable in critical thinking.

However, in real learning, to develop one's capacity to the full is far from desirable, especially in Chinese context. Zheng's paper points out the great difference in the development of learner autonomy between western and Chinese background because of the difference in cultures^[8]. Wang's paper claims that the university students' learning autonomy is generally low in that students learning planning

is not strong or the plans are not easy to implement; students don't do much self-evaluation and preview consciously; and students don't have the ability to access abundant information and materials for learning. Xu et al investigated the non-English majors from four universities in different areas of China and Lin investigated 526 non-English majors both found that students' learning autonomy are relatively very low in general. Both teachers and students don't have enough confidence in developing the learner autonomy, because they find it difficult in reality to implement the aspects, procedures and models mentioned in the literature about autonomy cultivating, mainly limited by the condition of the environment and the insufficiency of students' personal ability. On one hand, the Chinese tradition of teaching and learning culture determines that students seem to be inferior to the teachers and respect teachers in all the aspects. They dare not challenge the teacher and the school rule. They are used to be passive in learning and adapt to the role of being taught. On the other hand, students' ability in controlling their learning seems not sufficient. Teachers doubt in giving the rights to students and students feel uneasy about how to control their learning, such as to do learning plan, to make the schedule and to access to right materials. The ideal model of a self-directed learner as an independent decision-maker is discussed by many researchers and educators, but in Chinese context to develop the autonomy capability is still a difficult task. How to bridge the gap between the ideal and the real is the question. A key connector should be paid attention to is the teacher's role, which can mediate student as independent decision-maker in student's real situation where they are not prepared to be the self-directed learners.

Teachers' Roles

When studying learner autonomy, the concern about learner's role is always in the topic center. The researches develop around "what an autonomous learner should be" and "how to make the learner autonomous?" Chinese researches, besides, focus much on how to change student's role in the learning process by exploring the internal factors influencing learner autonomy, such as learner motivation, learning strategy, learner attitude, etc. However, it seems to develop learner autonomy by only studying learners is not adequate. The reason may be that learner's role is never isolate. In the activity of learning and teaching, teaching can never be neglected or positioned behind learning even in the popular learner-centeredness belief because learner-centered teaching is still talking about teaching only implemented in a different way. Thus, teacher's role in the teaching and learning relationship matters much. And in developing learner autonomy, teacher's changing role should be attached more importance.

Teachers' Traditional Roles

Teachers are dominant in teaching in the traditional

education mode. They mainly act as the planner of the overall learning objectives, rhythms, and forms, the controller of teaching practice and classroom atmosphere and the assessor of students' learning effects. First, teachers think themselves are responsible for passing on the knowledge to the students. They make the course plan and define the learning objectives for their teaching. They decide almost everything concerning teaching and learning, as what and how they should teach instead of students should learn. Second, teachers are definitely the center of the classroom when teaching happens. They control the rhythm of the learning process and the development of the learning practice. And teachers' performance and attitude always determines the classroom atmosphere. Third, teachers are the final assessor of students' learning result and also the evaluator of students' class performance, which in the Chinese exam-oriented education context becomes one of teacher's main roles. They judge their effects of teaching by assessing students output. In all, the traditional teacher's role is so explicit in the teaching process reflecting in every detail. Teachers are the authorities while students are the followers. Autonomy is so difficult to occupy some place. Therefore, teachers must change their roles.

Teachers' New Roles

In fact, there are already some studies mentioning teacher's role in learner autonomy development. However, the general view is to give teacher's role to students. This paper takes a different stand that the teacher still plays an important role in student-centered classroom for learner autonomy developing, even more important and complex than before. Teachers turn their roles from the center of the platform to the invisible rear, but bear more responsibility for the learners. In the culture of learner autonomy where students are considered as the independent decision-makers, teachers actually have to do more to make it happen. At least three more important roles of teachers should be further recognized for developing learner autonomy. This paper attempts to define them as the example, the friend and the adversary to the students based on the author's reflective practice.

Teacher as an example

In the reflections from the students, many students mentioned they gained a lot through the modeling of the teacher. They learned how to direct their learning by the exemplification of the teacher. The teacher's role as an example to the students should be more salient in developing learner autonomy. Before, teachers are considered as students' examples mostly in the aspects of performing their own language ability. Students tend to imitate teachers' pronunciation and skills of English expressions. Many studies have examined the influence of language teachers' oral English proficiency on students. However, this paper claims that teacher's role as the example to students reflects

in a wider scope now. First of all, teacher autonomy is the best example to learner autonomy. Autonomous teachers dare to challenge the unified teaching system and adjust the schedule of the school. They have the basic capacity to decide on objectives, methods, forms of activities and evaluation means independently or after discussion with the colleagues, but most importantly by taking students expectations into consideration. Students will be unconsciously influenced by the teacher's capacity and action of autonomy as an example. Besides, teachers' performance in class will easily affect students' performance in that if teachers themselves are very active and courageous in activity participation and mistakes correction, students would be braver in presenting themselves and expressing their ideas. A harmonious learning atmosphere is very helpful to develop learner autonomy and teacher's role as an example to create such an atmosphere is of great importance. Moreover, teachers' attitudes towards teaching can also influence students' attitudes towards learning. If the teacher treats teaching as a repeated job, not so enthusiastic and creative, learners are very possible to treat learning as a task, lacking motivation and tiring in thinking critically. Through the author's teaching practice in developing learner autonomy, this paper tries to illustrate what roles a teacher can play in helping students develop their learning autonomy in practice.

Teacher as a friend

As the author reflects in the teaching recording, to be a friend to the students is necessary to win students' trust, thus makes it easier to gain deeper understanding of each other. The relationship between teachers and students is always a concern in the field of language teaching and learning. Developing the teacher to adapt to the role as a friend to the students will make a difference to learner autonomy development. On one hand, being a friend to the students enables the teacher to get better understanding of the students including their expectations of learning, their interests, their difficulties, and their personal feeling towards learning, etc. Besides, teachers' suggestions given from the friend's stand are more easily accepted by the students when they make decisions concerning learning. On the other hand, students can also understand the teacher better. They will be clearer about teacher's belief in teaching, their objectives and their requirements and adjust their own plan through the discussion with the teacher. They will feel free to ask questions even challenge the teacher without considering much about the "face" problem. And such a kind of relationship will also benefit students' learning out of the class since they can be in touch with the teacher at all times as with friends. In all, a closer cooperation between students and teachers which can contribute to learner autonomy development lies much in the role the teacher plays as the friend to the students.

Teacher as an adversary

In terms of learning autonomy, teacher monitoring is an indispensable part as the author mentioned in the reflection. Teachers' role should not only be a friend, but also an adversary to students. Playing the role of an adversary, teachers direct and promote the way of students' learning process, rather than undermining their learning autonomy developments. For example, in an English classroom, students are encouraged to talk only in English in order to practice their English speaking skills. To attain its best outcome, it is necessary for teachers to monitor their students and make sure that they do not talk in their mother tongue. Moreover, students tend to get 'lazy' when there is no pressure, such as doing tasks inefficiently, being distracted from the lesson and so on. Therefore, it is important for teachers to play the strict role when it is necessary, in order to keep students active and efficient in learning. Taking this role, teachers and students can both make progress in teaching and learning under the supervision of each other. To sum up, this paper has mainly discussed three more important roles of teachers: as the example, as the friend, as the adversary, to develop learner autonomy. Teachers' role as an example to students influences in many ways, including themselves being autonomous to influence their students; being active and courageous in class to lead students to be braver in voicing their opinions and being enthusiastic to teaching to affect students' attitude to learning. Teachers' role as a friend to students will improve their relationships for better mutual understanding and more communications. Teachers' role as an adversary to the students, on the other hand, guides students to learn in a correct and proper way and pushes them to behave active and efficient in class learning.

Conclusion

Based on the author's teaching practice and reflection, this paper discusses three important roles of the teacher in

developing learner autonomy in that harmonious classroom atmosphere contributes to higher motivation for students to be autonomous and better environment for students to maintain the interest and develop autonomy; better mutual understandings and more communications help learners adjust their objectives and seek to more effective strategies and skills for learning; and teachers' supervision and evaluation ensures students' action in the process of autonomous learning and reminds them to insist on their decisions and make sustained efforts. This paper is basically based on theory and teaching experience, so the suggestions are better to be taken to be tested in more future practice. More empirical studies thus could be conducted in the future.

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