

IMPROVING VOCABULARY FOR STUDENTS OF ENGLISH MAJOR THROUGH DEVELOPING LEARNING AUTONOMY

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ABSTRACT

At the university level, learners are presupposed to have self-conscious effort to learn vocabulary outside of the classroom just because exposure to the target language is restricted to university categories. Consequently, the learning autonomy of learners plays an important role in developing and enhancing their vocabulary. This paper has its aims to explore the application of learner autonomy within the context of vocabulary learning for college students of English major at Thai Nguyen University of Education (TNU). It additionally proposes to clarify the importance of learner autonomy in vocabulary learning and learning methods and, moreover to clarify why lecturers ought to enhance learner autonomy in vocabulary learning by exploring the role of each the teachers and learner. However, teachers need to enhance learning autonomy in vocabulary and its expected effects on vocabulary learning.

Keywords: *vocabulary, students of English major, learning autonomy, learner autonomy, autonomy*

INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy has been a significant area of interest in foreign language (FL) teaching for the recent years. a lot of effort has been created to seek out what learner autonomy is, and its implications for teaching and learning. In terms of its principle (see, for instance, Camilleri Grima, 2007; Cotterall, 1995; Palfreyman, 2003) claims are made that it improves the quality of learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares students for life-long learning, that it is individual right, which it permits learners to form the best use of learning opportunities in and out of the room.

Learning autonomy in terms of vocabulary is becoming a necessity for any learners in higher education institutions that adopt either traditional or open education these days. The new trends in education that emphasize the learner's needs and motivations deserve additional attention from teachers of English.

Typically learner autonomy in vocabulary learning is desired in our universities. They lack the knowledge of a way to accomplish by themselves, which needs some guidance and support from their lecturers and tutors. therefore enhancing learner autonomy in

vocabulary learning features an effective impact on the causes of learning method. Some educators like Holec (1981), Emily Dickinson (1992), Little (1991), Dam (1995) and Benson (2003) hooked up the importance to the need of autonomy in education.

AIM OF THE STUDY

In this paper "improving vocabulary for students of English majors through developing learning autonomy", the author would like to emphasize that learners' autonomy is important in learning vocabulary so as to master their communication skills in English. Additionally, it's necessary to clarify the reasons to and the way to reinforce their learning autonomy in vocabulary learning.

1. Disadvantages of Learners' Vocabulary

If one student wishes to be a fluent English speaker, he has got to master wide range of chunks of lexical items. As an educator having been teaching English for ten years, the author is aware that the majority of their students at TNU are rather weak in vocabulary for the subsequent reasons, as follows:

- Living in an environment in which higher level of vocabulary is not usually used;
- Having level lower of education;

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- Having difficulties in reading due to non exposure to reading texts;
- Being not attentive to lexical items;
- Having perceptions that makes it troublesome to listen to the refined variations in words;
- Not having a decent understanding of the structure of language;
- Not only those students who are weak in vocabulary are encouraged to develop themselves but also the good ones have to be compelled to improve their vocabulary at university. They can not develop their autonomy alone; however, they ought to coordinate with their teachers so as to attain their desired results.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND OF LEARNING AUTONOMY AND VOCABULARY LEARNING

Definition of Learning Autonomy

Huge numbers of educators and researchers have tried their best in defining learning autonomy.

For instance, David Little defined it as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, deciding, and independent action. It presupposes, however, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning." (Little, 1991). Holec (1981) defines learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", that he then specifies as "to have, and to carry, the responsibility for all the selections regarding all aspects of this learning". Deci (1996) emphasizes that it is necessary to differ autonomy with independence: Independence means to try and do for yourself, not to rely on others for personal nourishment and support. Autonomy, in contrast, means to act freely, with a way of volition and selection. From the perspective of Deci's theory of self-regulation, the freedom that learners able to play sort of active role in their own learning that's implicit in the on top of a quote can be

aforementioned to be autonomous. Nunan (1988) aforementioned that learning autonomy is that the ability to require the charge of one's learning', and show that in language education the term is employed in at least five different ways:

1. for situations in which learners study entirely on their own
2. for a collection of skills which may be learned and applied in independent learning
3. for an inborn capability that is suppressed by institutional education
4. for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning
5. for the proper of learners to work out the direction of their own learning.

(Benson and Voller, 1997: 1 – 2). 1.z

(Benson, 2003: 290) 1.z

To the author, autonomy is concerning individuals taking additional control over their lives on an individual basis together. Autonomy in learning is about people taking more control over their learning in classrooms and out of doors and autonomy in language learning concerning people taking more control over the purposes for which they learn languages and the ways in which they learn them. Moreover, it may be described as a capability to require charge of, or take responsibility for, or management over your own learning. From this point of view, autonomy involves abilities and attitudes that individuals possess. There are totally different points of view, though, on what these abilities and attitudes are that explains why it is therefore difficult to clarify precisely what autonomy is.

Why Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning?

Some may wonder why particular autonomy in vocabulary learning and why vocabulary learning is very significant to English language acquisition. It is impossible for a learner to communicate without the required lexical items. No doubt that a learner cannot

learn all language vocabulary in university classes so he is forced to find other ways to learn vocabulary. Learner autonomy is a great relief for students in vocabulary learning because it provides the learner with many privileges as:

- Enhancing the learner's motivation;
- Providing more free opportunities for English communication in a non-native environment;
- Catering their individual needs of all levels;
- Having a long-lasting influence;
- Enhancing the learner's willingness towards active learning; and
- Enabling the learners to master the basic skills that are required for lasting learning;

Once learners become autonomous in vocabulary learning, they have acquired a lifelong learning skill and a habit to think and learn independently which will benefit themselves for long even after graduation.

How to be a Good Autonomous Learner in Vocabulary Learning?

According to Boud (1995), an autonomous learner is the one who is prepared to be significantly responsible for his own learning. And in order to be autonomous, the learner should make decisions about his/her own learning, he/she should be able to set realistic goals, plan program of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, evaluate and assess his/her own work, and in general, to learn how to learn from his/her own successes and failures in ways which will help him/her to be more efficient learners in the future. Autonomous learners willingly partner with faculty and peers in learning and are reflective about their own learning. Omaggio (1978), thinks that there seem to be seven main attributes characterizing autonomous learners, they

- have insights into their learning styles and strategies;

- take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
- are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;
- are good guessers;
- attend to form as well as to content;
- develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
- have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

According to Omaggio's characteristics, the autonomous learners can be considered as good language learners and it is clear that these characteristics can be applicable on the vocabulary autonomous learner as well.

VOCABULARY LEARNING STRATEGIES

It is important to mention that if the autonomous learner is willing to be a good learner in learning new words, he/she finds that there are many factors that affect their autonomy development as the previous learning experience, independent study methods, workload, role of the tutor, feedback and assessment and peer group. So, a learner should make a decision on what kind of learning strategies he/she would adopt for benefiting herself/himself. No doubt that learners need to be taught how to learn vocabulary properly, rather than simply learn it by themselves. In view of these, language learning strategies are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of vocabulary learning.

Learning Strategies Used

In order to achieve a goal, the researcher used 9 steps to develop learning autonomy suggested by Nunan (1996).

Step 1: Make instruction goals clear to learners: Whenever assigning homework to students, I always put much focus on the goal that the students are supposed to achieve after doing the given assignment.

Step 2: Allow learners to create their own goals: I allow students to set their goal by themselves for they come from different linguistic background so the level of English proficiency is varied among them.

Step 3: Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom: Because the learners have limited time to practice in the classroom, so it is a great idea to encourage them to practice more at home by themselves or with their friends.

Step 4: Raise awareness of learning processes: Emphasis the importance of learning process - in order to achieve knowledge, students must pay much attention to self-study.

Step 5: Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies: There are ideas of multiple intelligences - each student has his/her own strengths and weaknesses. Learners should be aware of their learning preferences and make use of them.

Step 6: Encourage learner choice: Whether the students' choices are right or wrong, the teachers should respect and appreciate them. They will recognize them after all.

Step 7: Allow learners to generate their own tasks: When the students are well aware of their learning, I let them decide their own tasks which are suitable to them.

Step 8: Encourage learners to become teachers: Each lesson, one group of five students is given a lecture to deliver then the author will provide necessary adjustment.

Step 9: Encourage learners to become researchers: To do this step well, the learners are required to study a great deal of material then they have to decide what content should be taught and what needs more emphasis.

There are levels and degrees of learner autonomy. In fact, dependence and autonomy are not categorically distinct. Rather, they exist on a continuum and over-lap. In my own classrooms, I work hard at pushing learners

along a continuum from total dependence on the teacher to autonomy. This is done by incorporating a series of steps into the educational process.

How to Enhance Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning

Thai Nguyen University of Education offers students of English a great variety of activities to enhance their motivation and independence in learning vocabulary. Moreover, there are several significant resources available on the internet that enhance vocabulary learning, they're absolutely free. It has been argued that new technologies, in particular, computer networks, have the potential to increase learner autonomy when they are used appropriately. Furthermore, the Department of Foreign Languages Education has invested an audio room and a library which offer more opportunities for students to self-study and develop their learning autonomy.

Learners sometimes find it overwhelmed by the large number of vocabulary that they inevitably meet in their textbooks. As a result, in order to enhance vocabulary learning, they tend to keep lists of single translations. To solve this, learning by translation is used, some educators say that if a learner tries to learn an increasing number of translations, this will tend to lead to both success rate and motivation. It seems to be like for short-term memory test rather than a long-term strategy. The longer such translation lists are, the more difficult they become. It's also easy to become frustrated by a slowly increasing level of passive understanding, accompanied by an inability to actively use new words - and the realization that many of the learned new words are later being forgotten. As a result, learners may soon start to devote less and less time to such a method - but often fail to replace it with anything really useful.

Learning single words by translation may likely lead to the habit of "word for word"

translations. This may cause second language grammar interference and fossilization of errors. Word surfing is employed to improve the vocabulary learning process. Teachers of English have to ensure that their students understand the basics of the target language, its grammar, phonetics, spelling, and vocabulary. Once this threshold is reached, learners are sufficiently autonomous to expand their vocabulary by extensive reading in particular, which has become possible given the acquisition of a basic vocabulary, and pleasurable, as the learner can take a new text and find it comprehensible and interesting.

For extensive reading, learners have to choose and read a wide range of materials that they are interested and are within their level of comprehension. Extensive reading, as defined by Carrell and Carson (1997), has two characteristics: a large number of materials, and focusing on the meaning rather on the language. Extensive reading helps develop sight vocabulary, general vocabulary and the knowledge of the target language. Krashen (2004) considered extensive reading as free voluntary reading and regarded it superior to direct instruction in terms of acquisition of reading, vocabulary as well as grammar and writing. Krashen's idea about extensive reading has been successfully implemented by educators. Herrell and Jordan (2004) reported that free voluntary reading supported not only vocabulary development but also spelling, grammar and writing development. For extensive reading to be effective, learners must be regularly exposed to large amounts of comprehensible text. The knowledge gained from a single encounter with a lexical item is likely to be forgotten unless soon followed by another encounter, hence repeated contextualized exposures are necessary to consolidate and elaborate word meaning.

Teacher's Role in Developing Learning Autonomy

In order to encourage students to become autonomous learners, teachers have to lessen

their roles and to become facilitators. But this does not mean that teachers become passive; they still have various roles: teaching vocabulary relevant to tasks in hand, judging and giving instruction in strategies...

Teachers should enhance autonomous learning because it is of great significance for their students in universities. Also, they should teach the strategies to learn vocabulary autonomously. Deep vocabulary learning strategies take more time but ensure greater retention and ease of retrieval from memory. These include learning lists, reading a variety of texts on the same theme so as to ensure multiple exposures to relevant items, making extensive use of dictionaries, building up deep knowledge through word associations and revising to ensure retention. Teachers may have little role to play where a learner is using shallow strategies appropriately. But they have a clear and ongoing role both in using deep strategies in class work and in training learners in their use. This is especially true for slow learners, who tend to use even shallow strategies ineffectively: they guess inaccurately from contexts and do not modify wrong guesses, and they do not read widely enough. But it is the teacher's responsibility to foster the students' ability of autonomous learning by designing class activities and create a positive atmosphere, a language context and make students want to learn and know how to learn.

Teachers should develop autonomy because vocabulary learning is unique to each student. In addition, the class time for vocabulary is extremely limited compared with the immense number of vocabulary items that learners need to acquire. All these points demonstrate that studying vocabulary on their own is a must for all learners, the best preparation the teacher can provide is to "help them become more autonomous" (Scharle and Szabo, 2000).

How Teachers Enhance Learners' Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning

When trying to find an answer to this question the following ideas can be considered:

1. It is not a straightforward process.
2. Teachers need stimulus and encouragement to attempt a pedagogy for autonomy.
3. Teachers must realize by themselves that they can do what at first seemed impossible.
4. Teachers should be able to work on a collaborative basis.
5. Teachers must be autonomous themselves to be able to develop their learners' autonomy.

So if teachers themselves are autonomous and motivated, how does the teacher promote greater autonomy in his students? There are some ways to promote learner autonomy which are great value in vocabulary learning:

1. Encourage students to be interdependent and to work collectively. The less students who depend on their teacher, the more autonomy is being developed;
2. Ask students to keep a diary of their learning experiences. Through practice, students may become more aware of their learning preferences and start to think of new ways of becoming more independent learners;
3. Explain teacher/student roles from the outset. Asking students to give their opinions on the issue of roles which could be beneficial;
4. Help learners to achieve gradual progress from interdependence to independence. Give the students time to adjust to new learning strategies and not expect too much in a little while;
5. Give the students extra projects outside the classroom. Such projects may increase motivation.
6. Give the students supplemental classroom duties to perform (taking roll, writing instructions, notices, etc. on the board for the teacher)
7. Assign students design lessons or materials to be used in class.
8. Instruct students on how to use the university resource centers;

9. Emphasize the importance of peer-editing, corrections, and follow-up cross-questioning in the classroom;

10. Encourage the students to use English in class;

11. Stress fluency rather than accuracy; and

12. Permit the students to use reference books, including dictionaries in class.

But sometimes teachers find that there are students who have a wide vocabulary range. Here teachers can use brainstorming extra vocabulary or example sentences, covering some topics that aren't in the textbook, concentrating on production of the language rather than explanation or grammar practice, and using authentic texts. This means that teachers have extra work to do with students to be more autonomous such as trying to find suitable online practice for them; finding, photocopying and giving out extra worksheets; giving out and taking back in graded readers and other books; keeping abreast of recent self-study books and where they are available so that teachers can recommend the right one; marking any extra writing they do; and answering any questions they have that came up in the extra work they did. Little (1995) and Smith (2000) stressed that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent, and that teachers wishing to promote greater learner autonomy need to "start with themselves", reflecting on their own beliefs, practices, experiences and expectations of the teaching/learning situation.

Learners' Role

Learner has a pivotal role in enhancing his autonomy in vocabulary learning, he should:

Decide which words are worth learning.

Learn to use the context, that is, the surrounding words, phrases, and sentences.

Hints provided by the context sometime give us clues to what an unknown word means. Such hints include:

- punctuation marks

- helping words and phrases such as "for example," "that is," "which means"

- a sentence that tells the opposite of the unfamiliar word

- a following or preceding sentence that explains the new word

- a sentence written expressly to define the strange word

- a list of examples and known words used to define unknown words

* A word's meaning is made up of both denotation and connotation. Denotation is the literal (dictionary) meaning of the word. The connotation is the emotional impact of the word, the reaction to the word that a reader or hearer has. Skillful writers choose words for their connotations.

* Organize vocabulary learning: if learners are not happy with their present method of noting down vocabulary and find that there just become too much to cope with, with longer and longer lists of vocabulary to learn as each week goes, organizing vocabulary learning would be useful for them.

* Remember vocabulary: if a learner forgets vocabulary that he/she 'learned' earlier, he/she will face one of the biggest problems in vocabulary learning. Remembering vocabulary gives some suggestions to help learned vocabulary stay learned.

According to Center for Teaching and Learning in the University of Alabama the following guidelines will help learners remember new words:

- Practice writing the word and its definition often.

- Practice saying the word. Use the pronunciation key in learner's dictionary to learn the correct pronunciation.

- Try to learn the word and its meaning the first time learner's see it.

- Make vocabulary flip cards from index cards. Write the word on one side and the meaning on the other.

- Make up a sentence a learner can understand using the word correctly.

- Vary the word: try to make it plural, to change the tense, to add -ly.

- Practice the word in conversation, being sure to pronounce it correctly.

- Use the word in writing assignments as often as possible.

- Repeat the word many times in his/her mind.

- Study a few words each day for several days to firmly learn them.

- Notice the words used by teachers, public speakers, people on TV, etc.

* Evaluate vocabulary learning: It's very important for most learners to have an idea of whether they're making progress or not. Finding that they are actually making progress can be a big help to their confidence. This advice sheet gives advice on evaluating learners' learning progress and checking their vocabulary size.

SUMMARY REMARKS

To conclude, it is not the teacher's responsibility to teach all vocabulary to the learners. Learners should depend on themselves by adopting strategies that suit their abilities in learning vocabulary. Vocabulary learning is not always easy. But with practice and time, learners should find that they are making progress. Learners should study items that appear in many contexts. Learning in rich contexts is valuable for vocabulary learning. Vocabulary words should be those that the learner will find useful in many contexts. When vocabulary items are derived from content learning materials, the learner will be better equipped to deal with a specific reading matter in content areas. Learners will feel that vocabulary learning is effective when it entails active engagement in learning tasks. Computer technology can be used effectively in learning vocabulary autonomously. Autonomous learners in learning vocabulary

should have a continuous desire of learning vocabulary and they should develop their strategic ways of learning. Learners should choose a private way that stimulates their enthusiasm and motivation.

As mentioned earlier in this context the learner who learns vocabulary autonomously should choose the objectives of his/her learning then he/she should choose the materials that will be used to reach the objectives chosen. He/she has to decide upon the methods and techniques he/she wants to use. All the previous decisions are usually taken concurrently with decisions about materials since means and ways are closely interdependent. The outcome is assessed and more decisions are made as to the degree of appropriateness of the chosen objectives, materials, methods and techniques.

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TÓM TẮT

NÂNG CAO VỐN TỪ VỰNG CHO SINH VIÊN TIẾNG ANH CHUYÊN NGÀNH QUA HÌNH THỨC TỰ CHỦ

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Ở trình độ đại học, sinh viên chuyên ngành tiếng Anh cần phát triển năng lực và ý thức tự học từ vựng ngoài giờ học trên lớp vì thời gian học trên lớp rất hạn chế. Do đó, phát triển năng lực tự học cho người học đóng một vai trò quan trọng trong việc phát triển và nâng cao từ vựng của họ. Nghiên cứu này nhằm mục đích tìm hiểu việc áp dụng quyền tự chủ người học trong ngữ cảnh học từ vựng cho sinh viên đại học tiếng Anh tại trường Đại học Sư phạm - Đại học Thái Nguyên. Nghiên cứu nhằm bổ sung, đề xuất và làm rõ tầm quan trọng của quyền tự chủ người học trong phương pháp học tập từ vựng và thêm vào đó làm rõ lý do tại sao các giảng viên nên nâng cao tính tự chủ của người học trong việc học từ vựng bằng cách phân định rõ vai trò của mỗi giáo viên cũng như người học để nâng cao tính tự học trong từ vựng và những hiệu ứng của nó đối với việc học từ vựng.

Từ khóa: từ vựng, sinh viên tiếng Anh chuyên ngành, tự chủ người học, quyền tự chủ, tính tự chủ

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