

# **\*REDESIGNING TEACHER'S ROLES TOWARDS A LEARNERS' AUTONOMOUS EDUCATION**

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## **Abstract**

*Rapid changes in information communication technology have urged the Malaysian Education Ministry to review the nation's curriculum to place more focus on English. In the year 2003 the ministry decides subjects such as mathematics and science in schools be taught in English in order to enhance students' ability and capability to cope with the advancement of learning strategies in the new millennium. This move forces Malaysian students to be proficient in the English language. Thus, this implementation requires English teachers to review their teaching strategies to be in line with the nation's aspiration and produce learners who can learn independently and effectively. This paper will look into a few strategies that English teachers are currently practicing in Malaysia to enhance learners' autonomy without jeopardizing their roles as facilitators and motivators in education.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Since Malaysia's independence in 1957, education has always been prominently figured as an integral part of the government's developmental policy. Over the past forty-six years the education sector has undergone tremendous changes and developments. The main agenda has been nation-building and enhancing national unity through the development of a unified education system, a national curriculum, and the use of *Bahasa Melayu*, the national language, as a medium of instruction and communication. However, rapid changes in information communication technology, where English plays a very important role, have urged the Malaysian Education Ministry to review the nation's curriculum to place more focus on English. Thus in 2003, the ministry decides subjects such as mathematics and science be taught in English in schools so that Malaysian students will not be left behind in their quest to cope with the advancement of learning strategies in the new information millennium especially in the field of science and technology. This move towards making English the medium of instruction for science and mathematics from year one in elementary school will indirectly force teachers to review their teaching strategies to be in line with the nation's aspiration and produce learners who can learn independently and effectively.

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In this ever-changing information era, Malaysian teachers certainly do not want their younger generation to lag behind especially when there is a need to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to make Malaysia a developed nation by year 2020. This paper aims to discuss a few strategies that English teachers are currently practicing in Malaysia to enhance learners' autonomy and look into how teachers in Malaysia can prepare and scaffold their students towards learner autonomy.

## **WHY MOVE TOWARDS LEARNER AUTONOMY?**

Learning is not a simple matter of unidirectional transmission of knowledge, skills, and expertise (Little and Dam, 1998). It is a bi-directional process (Little, 1998) where both the teacher and the students play important roles during the learning process. At present, majority of students are taught in ways which do not encourage them to be independent learners thus leaving them ill-equipped to apply their learned knowledge and skills to the world beyond their classroom. At school the learners were taught to be dependent on their teacher as they only 'absorb' knowledge without having the opportunity to use and apply what they have learned in the classroom. More often than not learners usually face difficulties in adjusting to a different learning environment. When students leave secondary education and enter a higher education such as tertiary level, they again face problems in adjusting to the new ways of learning. Some took two or three semesters to adjust and there are others who never adjusted but managed to graduate and these learners did not acquire the skills and capability to deal with the world beyond the confinement of their classroom.

Teaching is showing someone how something is learnt and learning is discovering what is being taught. Trim (1988:3) aptly puts that "No school, or even university, can provide its pupils with all the knowledge and the skills they will need in their active adult lives. It is more important for a young person to have an understanding of himself or herself, an awareness of the environment and its workings, and to have learned how to think and how to learn." Therefore, during the teaching process it is important for the teachers to provide avenues for his or her students to learn. Learning here means allowing the students to formulate, restructure, select and implement appropriate ways of acquiring knowledge that in turn will encourage students' autonomy particularly in language learning.

## **WHAT IS AUTONOMOUS LEARNER?**

By definition, an autonomous learner is *"one who solves problems or develops new ideas through a combination of divergent and convergent thinking and functions with minimal external guidance in selected areas of endeavour"* (Betts & Knapp, 1981 in Suzanne Cooper, 2001).

The goal is to extend educational experiences beyond what students will encounter in regular classroom while allowing the individual to pursue areas of learning, which are of intense interest to her and in the process encouraging her to become a life-long learner. The emphasis is on thinking (divergent, HOT, metacognitive, creative, etc.) and problem solving. More importantly, the aim is to enable students to make interdisciplinary connections and relate learning to real-world situation. The ultimate goal here is to prepare the student to become responsible, creative, and independent learners. This notion is in line with the Malaysian National Educational Policy (1988) which states " ... to further develop the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on the firm belief in and devotion to God. Such an effort is designed to produce Malaysian citizens of high moral standards, knowledgeable and competent, and who are responsible and capable of achieving a high level of personal well-being as well as being able to contribute to the harmony and betterment of the family, the society and the nation at large."

Learner autonomy comes into play as learners begin to accept responsibility for their own learning (Little and Dam, 2000). Little (1991) sees autonomy as “capacity – for detachment, critical, reflection, decision making and independent action” (p.4). Autonomous learners have a capacity for critical reflection and decision making, as well as the skills necessary to carry out a self-directed learning programme, i.e. the ability to define objectives, define contents and so on (Little, 1991:p. 14; Holec, 1985:p. 180). According to Knowles (1975:p.14) “... there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning (proactive learners) learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught (reactive learners) ... They enter into learning more purposefully and with greater motivation” (1975:p.14). Little (1995) asserts that learners who accept responsibility for their learning are more likely to achieve their learning targets; and if they achieve their learning targets, they are more likely to maintain a positive attitude toward learning in the future.

However, it must be noted here that learners do not automatically become independent learners – this is where the role of the teacher is essential in helping and guiding the learners to accept responsibility for their learning. Little (1995) supports this and believes that teachers must first provide the students with appropriate tools and with opportunities to practice using the learning strategies.

In this ever changing cyber world, it is important for individuals to acquire the knowledge and skills to be independent and hold certain amount of autonomy of what they want to do in their lives. Oceans of information are out there waiting to be discovered. Only those who are self-motivated will excel in their learning, and most probably in their personal lives. Students must also internalize appropriate skills in order to interact effectively with peers, siblings, parents, and other adults in a culturally diverse world. All these skills are not taught directly in any subjects in schools but sought by students through their intentionally learning experience. So an appropriate platform needs to be laid out to help students identify things that are important to them. George T. Betts and Jolene K. Kercher (1981) developed an Autonomous Learner Model and this model is one of the leading models used in classroom.

## WHAT IS AUTONOMOUS LEARNER MODEL?

The Autonomous Learner Model (ALM) which was developed by George T. Betts and Jolene K. Kercher (1981), was created initially for gifted and talented students. However due to its flexible design, this five-dimensional model has been expanded to allow for its use in regular classroom with every student. The main aim of the model is to meet the diversified cognitive, emotional, and social needs of all students. Ultimately, it is meant to facilitate the total growth of the individual. Emphasis is placed on meeting the individualized needs of learners through the use of activities in the five major dimensions of the models.

The five parts of the model are:

1. **Orientation**

This is a foundation setting part of the program where the process of learning and the understanding of various thinking strategies are taught.

2. **Individual development**

The second part of the program where the development of skills necessary for life long learning are taught.

3. **Enrichment**  
The third part of the program where students are given opportunities to explore content that is not in their school curriculum.
4. **Seminars**  
This provides platforms for the students to express their ideas as a group. They are encouraged to develop, do research, and present topics with their friends as a group.
5. **In-depth Study**  
This is a “long” term study by group or individuals determined by student. Students are encouraged to do presentations and evaluate what they have done.

The ALM advocates that the learner controls the learning process and the teacher acts as a facilitator. Success also will be based on how learners work together with their peers as a group, and at the same time this process will enhance their multiple intelligences.

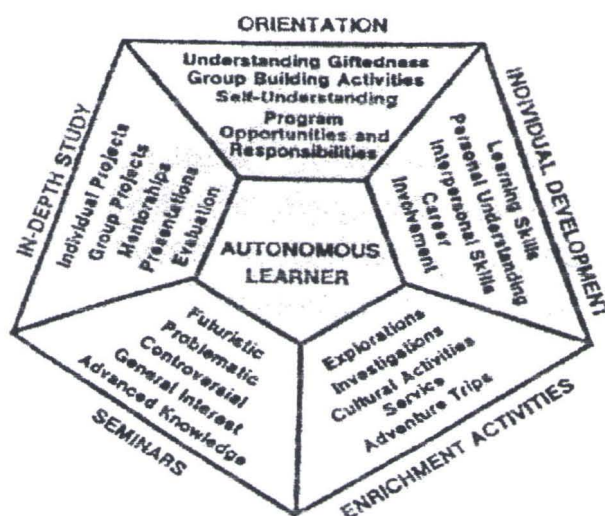


Figure 1: Autonomous Learner Model (Betts & Kercher: 1991)

In Malaysia, in a few subjects such as Geography and History, students are required to present their case study on certain topics and this presentation carries a certain percentage in their final examination marks. Students work in groups and are given a whole year to identify and carry out their research project.

## THE ROLE OF THE TEACHER

Any programs or strategies introduced to enhance learning will benefit students most when the teachers themselves have a good understanding of it. The suggestions listed below are strategies that teachers can help their students employ to become autonomous learners.

## **1. Change the meaning and shape of your traditional role as a student**

- i. Typical traditional students only wait for the teachers to “feed” them with information. Not anymore! Students should take charge of their own learning, only they are responsible at tailoring themselves to be what they want to become. They should search for information on what they want to know, and they should decide what they want to do. However, teachers need to provide as much input in the beginning of the teaching, such as the “why” are they in school. Why they should learn certain topics. Why they should pay attention in every teaching and learning session. But teachers need not tell them what to do or what to search for. Students should do the exploring for information themselves.
- ii. Aid your learning process by looking after yourself. Be positive and take charge of your own learning. Be responsible and remember, even if no other people are monitoring your learning, you should be doing it yourself.
- iii. Keep a planner to manage your time. Certain task needs a certain amount of time to be completed. Allow a considerable time frame based on the difficulties faced to accomplish it. Be realistic when setting the goals for learning.
- iv. Think of what you want to acquire from your learning process. Set realistic goals for learning outcome. Remember that every individual is special in his or her own way and different from others. Two people may set two different sets of goals for the same topic, because of the differences.

## **2. Accept responsibility for your learning process**

Students should be taught to become aware of their own strategies used to comprehend tasks given. Ask students to report their thinking while searching for solutions to complete the assignments given. In other words, ask the students to reflect on their learning. Remind the students to keep journals. Encourage the students to ask themselves “What do I want for this week/year/semester?” or “What do I want to learn from this topic?” They should be encouraged to express their feelings after accomplishing something “What do you think you know now that you didn’t know before?”

## **3. Accept a new working framework**

Students should be taught to establish a working framework once a task is given. They ought to be able to identify friends that can help them to achieve their learning goals. A network should be established and they work in groups through discussions and brainstorming sessions to determine proper strategies to complete their assignments.

## **4. Accept a new relationship with the tutor**

Students have now become the principal of their own learning. They determine what they want to learn using their own chosen strategies. Teachers are now their facilitator who will only facilitate, not telling them what to do. Therefore, students should be guided to establish and accept their new relationship with teachers.

## 5. **Accept a new relationship with the subject matter**

Students should be taught how to answer the question, “Why I should learn this particular topic/subject?” The answer to the question is because the topic or subject is important to them as they have to deal with it everyday in their lives, or they should know it before they can learn other things. Relate the usage with real world situations.

## 6. **Become an “aware learner”**

On top of everything, students should be taught to understand that “knowledge is everywhere and is accessible to those who observe and think”. Therefore students should be aware of what is expected out of them by their family, community, and even country.

It is often argued that the pursuit of learner autonomy requires a shift in the role of the teacher from purveyor of information to facilitator of learning and manager of learning resources (Little, 1995). In promoting learner autonomy a teacher needs to encourage students to take part in the learning process through reflecting and strategizing what they have learned.

Rich, stimulating environment allows the learner to develop cognitively and a deprived environment proved otherwise. In Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, he proposes that humans cannot be “given” information, which they immediately understand and use. Instead, humans must construct their own knowledge. While, Vygotsky (1978) implied that learners need assistance from the teacher in order to move from their current stages of language proficiency to where they could potentially be.

In a Piagetian classroom, students must be given opportunities to construct knowledge through their own experiences. They should not act as depositors where every bit of instruction is taught or told by the teacher. Learning can take place when students engage in experiences and experiments from which they derive their own knowledge, meaning and understanding (Cruikshank, Bainer and Metcalf, 1999). Thus, it is necessary for teachers to provide students opportunities to think independently in order to obtain knowledge for themselves. As Wyatt (1992) points out, as teachers we need to help learners see for themselves through collecting, organizing and manipulating data. We will illustrate here how the teachers can assist in preparing students to be learner autonomous. These strategies are widely used in Malaysia, especially in teaching English at secondary and tertiary level.

### 1. **Reading Comprehension Skills**

In assisting students to understand and comprehend a literary text, the teacher can use a task-based approach. This task-based approach is learner-centred. As students take part in discussions to complete the tasks, the negotiation of meaning of the text becomes possible. Thus, this enhances students’ ability to derive meaning of their reading skills. The tasks were divided into four components, which are goals, input, activities and roles (Nunan, 1989). According to Nunan, goals represent the aims of doing the task, role refers to the part of a teacher as facilitator and student as active participator in the task, and input refers to the selection of materials provided for the tasks. While activities refer to the choice of tasks in assisting students to fulfill their goals and settings involve the whole classroom such as by group work. A framework representing the task is shown in Figure 2.

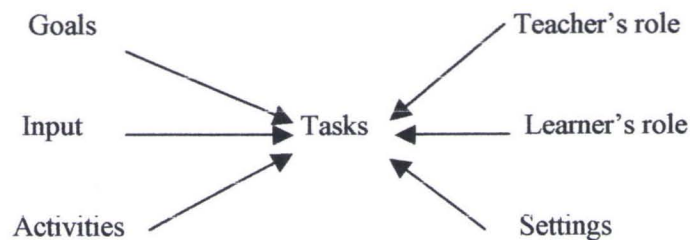


Figure 2: Task-based Approach Framework. Source: Nunan, 1989

Teacher as facilitator should be more flexible in designing the activities to cater for the needs of the students. The activities should move towards achieving the goal of the task, which is to improve the students' reading skills. The activities design may include concept mapping, deriving meaning of words, predicting text, jigsaw reading etc. All of these activities require the students to predict, skim and scan to locate information. The training and the exposure would enable the students to use and acquire the skills taught to be used beyond their classroom usage. The shifts from teacher-centred to learner-centred allow students to take control of their own learning. Therefore, the role of the teacher here is more of a facilitator; guiding and assisting students while simultaneously allowing them time to acquire the skills.

## 2. Writing Skills

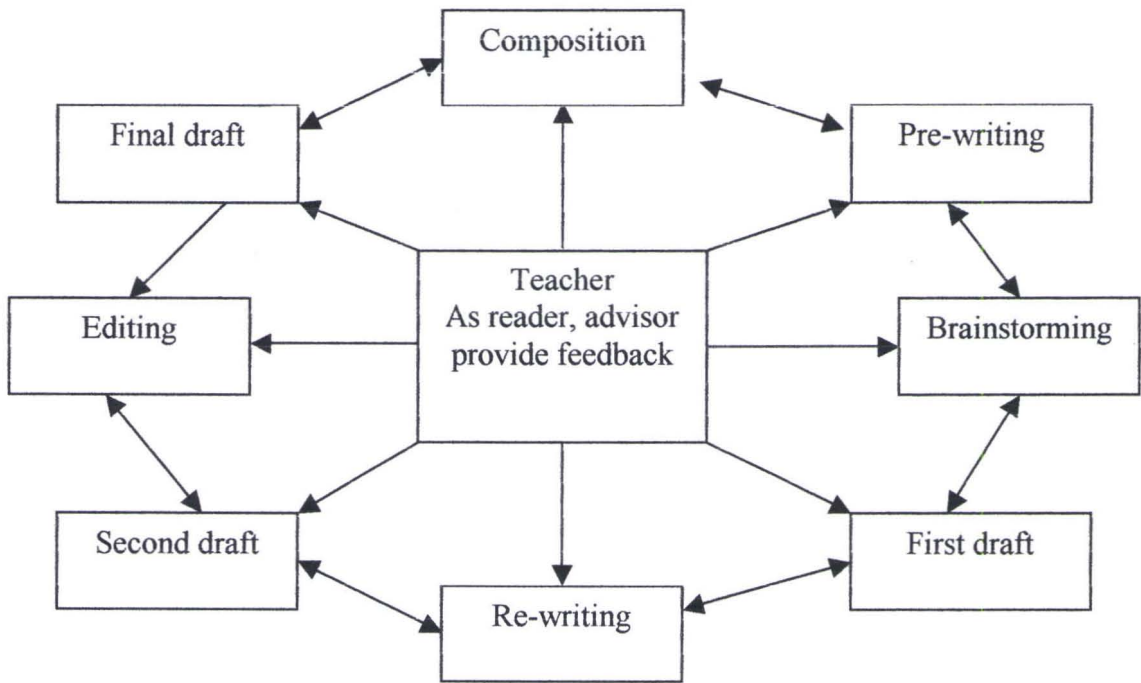
In writing skills, teachers can use the process approach in writing where the focus is not on the end product but on the process of writing. In the traditional approach in writing the teachers are more concerned with the written product of writing, whereby in a class students are assigned a task, and then the teacher collects, marks, and grades the papers. According to Emig (1971) the traditional approach to writing has not considered the composing process involve in writing. He further adds that teachers of composition tend to 'under conceptualize' and 'oversimplify' the process of composition. Gage (1986) asserts that writing is not simply a 'skill' to be mastered...but the ongoing reflection of students developing understanding of ideas. In the Flower-Hayes Model of composing, 'writing process' includes activities, which take place inside the writers' head. Murray (1978) refers to this recent process in writing as an act of discovery. Gage (1986) argues that writing class must be a place where students encounter ideas and where they are free to respond to them honestly and critically. Thus, in a writing class the teacher should assist students to concentrate on learning to write; the final product should be the last step in the complicated process of writing. The process approach to writing provides students with important "how to" scaffolding that allows students to discover writing strategies and practices that can lead to successful products. Students are given sufficient time to write and rewrite, to discover what they want to say, and to consider intervening feedback from teachers and peers as they attempt to bring closer and closer intention in successive drafts (Flower 1981). Revision becomes central and the teacher intervenes throughout the composing process, rather than reacting only to the final product (Siti Hamin 1998).

In this approach a teacher facilitates the students' learning, as he or she has multiple roles to play such as being a reader and/or an adviser. During the learning process the teacher provides feedback to students throughout their learning process from the initial stage of writing to the final product of the composition.

Process writing is a recursive process in which the writer begins to write, then make changes and re-write until the final composition is produced as shown in Figure 2. In the initial stage, which is the pre-writing stage, teacher would help students expand their ideas through class discussion. This is done through brainstorming activity. This activity encourages students to generate their own ideas while the teacher helps students to select and organize these ideas before they begin to write their composition. The students would repeat the process until they are satisfied with their composition and are ready to hand in their writing.

Through this approach, students will develop as writers more effectively. Figure 3 shows a flow chart on the stages of process writing.

**Figure 3: Developing a Process Composition in classroom**



(Source: Norlida & Puteri Rohani (2002) National Conference on School-Based Assessment Proceeding, 303)

## CONCLUSION

Many features that promote autonomous learning are already in place in Malaysian school curriculum. Generally students have to complete tasks given by teachers all by themselves, and some with a group of classmates. The following questions need to be asked: Are the significance of becoming autonomous learner made clear to students? Are they aware of how much they can do if they are in charge of their own learning? Do they know what are the long-term benefits of becoming an autonomous learner?

There are ways and means to encourage learner autonomy in a classroom. In this paper we only demonstrate two skills that are reading and writing skills. In speaking skills the same approach in using task-based approach can also be used to allow learner autonomy to take place in a classroom. However, to ensure the viability of learner autonomy to take place in a classroom, educators and learners need to establish an understanding of playing their parts. This understanding means that the teacher knows the learners' previous language learning experiences and attitudes to English (Underwood, 1987). This will allow for students sovereignty in learning subsequently encouraging the learners to take control of their own learning.

Studies also suggested that students who take control their own learning are better learners. According to Little (1991) all learning is ultimately autonomous learning in the sense that it depends on the efforts of the learners themselves. Allowing students greater freedom in learning and helping them to become more aware of their capacities for autonomy may therefore enhance motivation and the quality of learning. In order to allow learners to know something by themselves, external reinforcements such as teacher assistance are needed. Therefore, O'Neil (1992:4) suggests teachers to provide time and numerous opportunities for students "to explore phenomena or ideas, to conjecture, to share their hypotheses with others and, where necessary, to revise their original thinking". In Malaysia, the current practice is for teachers to encourage learner autonomy because teachers know that knowledge is out there and students need to learn how to search for them especially in the current information technology era.

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