* TOWARDS LEARNER AUTONOMY IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

Considerable researches worldwide have noted the importance of creating conducive learning environments that optimize student learning. Ideally, any educational program or policy hopes to bring out the best out of every student. In any process of learning it involves the teacher, the learner, the course material and methods of teaching. Nevertheless, of all these factors the learner takes the most important role. In other words for any student who wants to be successful in the learning process he needs to take charge of his own learning. Therefore, it is important for teachers to realize that there is a need to implement the cultures of learning where students' learning is maximized. Teachers' goal should be 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 him or her to become a life-long learner. Autonomy and independence are terms used interchangeably to imply that students take a greater degree of control over the content and methods of learning than is usual in classroom learning contexts. Taking control over learning also implies that students have or develop the capacity to learn independently. As stated by Little (1991: 4), learner autonomy is 'a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action.' 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. 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 to learning in the future. This is what education is all about, teaching students to love the act of acquiring knowledge. In this ever changing cyber world, it is important for individuals to acquire the knowledge and skills to be independent and at the same time hold certain amount of autonomy of what they want to do in their lives. Realizing this the Malaysian Education Ministry is gradually moving towards school based assessment and is encouraging Malaysian teachers especially those teaching English to review their teaching strategies and produce learners who can learn independently and effectively. This paper discusses the importance of promoting Autonomous Learning in order to enhance learning among students. As students become autonomous learners, they will be more self-motivated to learn as well as acquire new knowledge for themselves. In addition, this paper will also look into a few strategies that English teachers are currently practicing in Malaysia to enhance learner autonomy in learning English.

Introduction

Malaysia is undergoing economic transformation and is fast entering an era of rapid industrialization (Mani Le Vasan, 1994). The rapid development of progress with the widespread use of electronic media and the upsurge interest in the e-knowledge has brought about the new need for Malaysians to be competent in English. As indicated by Mani Le Vasan (1994) English has become an agent of social process and change for Malaysians. Realizing this the Malaysian Education Ministry saw the need to review the nation's curriculum to place more focus on English. The Ministry of Education has also from time to time stress on the importance of English. This is clearly stated in the Seventh Malaysian Plan (1996-2000):

> "... However while emphasizing the use of Bahasa Malaysia, competency in other languages will also be encouraged, particularly the English language which is recognized as an international and commercial language."

> (Seventh Malaysia Plan p.334)

According to the previous Prime Minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, to become a full-fledge industrial country, Malaysians need to be proficient in the National language and English language. Asmah (1994) supports this idea by saying that Malaysia will not be able to strive for excellence through the National language alone; it has to be assisted by the English language. In order to achieve progress and advancement, Malaysia must first strengthen itself in science and technology. Malaysians can only achieve this by acquiring the knowledge of science and technology through reading respective books, which are mostly available in English. This indicates the importance for Malaysians to be proficient in English language to assist the country in its efforts to move quickly into the science and technology fields.

Thus in 2003, the Malaysian Ministry of Education decided 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.

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. Hence teachers need to enhance learners' autonomy and look into ways on how they can prepare and scaffold their students' learning 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 learnt knowledge and skills to the world beyond their classroom. At school, 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. When teaching English is concerned many Malaysian teachers will complain that their students' proficiency is not adequate even though the students have been introduced to English since they were 7 years old. Many students who graduated from the Malaysian school system, could not apply the language skills learnt in school to the real world beyond the confinement of their classroom. Thus there is a need to train students to become autonomous learners in language as the teacher cannot be present all the time to aid students in their quest to become proficient in English language.

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.

Autonomy and independence are used more or less as synonyms in language teaching. Both terms imply that students take a greater degree of control over the content and methods of learning than is usual in classroom language learning contexts. Taking control over learning also implies that students have or develop the capacity to learn independently and that the institutional context in which they are learning allows them to do so. It has been claimed that all learning is ultimately autonomous learning in the sense that it depends on the efforts of the learners themselves. Autonomous learners can decide to take on more responsibility for their own learning. Learning languages autonomously can either mean that students revise what has been done in the classroom or that they prepare for an exam or, simply, their aim may consist of reaching a specific level of language proficiency. Mc. Garry (1995: 1) concisely sums up his arguments for autonomy:

> 'Students who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own work by being given some control over what, how and when they learn, are more likely to be able to set realistic goals, plan programmes of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, evaluate and assess their own work

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and, generally, to learn how to learn from their own successes and failures in ways which will help them to be more efficient learners in the future'.

Learner autonomy comes into play as learners begin to accept responsibility for their own learning (Little and Dam, 1998). 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). 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.

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". 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 to 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.

AN AUTONOMOUS LEARNER MODEL

The Autonomous Learner Model (ALM) developed by George T.Betts and Jolene K. Kercher (1991), 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 any regular classroom. 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 by placing emphasis 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. Activities included are group building and self-understanding activities.

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2. **Individual development**

The second part of the program where the development of skills necessary for life long learning are taught. These skills include Learning skills, interpersonal skills and career involvement skills.

3. **Enrichment**

The third part of the program where students are given opportunities to explore content that is not in their school curriculum such as explorations, cultural activities and adventure trips.

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 students. Students are encouraged to do presentations and evaluate what they have done in individual and group projects.

The ALM advocates that the learner controls the learning process and the teacher acts as a facilitator. Success 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.

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

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. 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.

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 with 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. The suggestions listed below are strategies that teachers can help their students employ to become autonomous learners.

1. **Help students change the meaning and shape of traditional role of a student**

    Typical traditional students only wait for the teachers to "feed" them with information. Instead students should take charge of their own learning. 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 why they should learn certain topics. But teachers need not tell them what to do or what to search for; students should do the exploring for information themselves.

    Students should have positive attitude and take charge of their own learning. They must learn to manage their time, as certain task needs a certain amount of time to be completed. Students must be realistic when setting the goals for learning.

2. **Help students accept responsibility for their learning process**

    Students should be taught to become aware of the strategies they used to comprehend tasks given. Ask the students to reflect on their learning or in other words ask students to report their thinking while searching for solutions to complete the assignments given. Remind the students to keep journals, as they should be encouraged to express their feelings after accomplishing something.

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 are now responsible for their own learning. They determine what they want to learn by choosing their own 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 this new relationship with their teachers.

5. Accept a new relationship with the subject matter

Students should be taught how to answer the question, "Why should I 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 lessons to real world situations.

6. Become aware of your own learning

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 of them by their family, community, and even country.

AN AUTONOMOUS MODEL TO TEACH READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS

In assisting students to understand and comprehend a literary text, the teacher can use a task-based approach as suggested by David Nunan (1989). This task-based approach is learner-centred and as students take part in discussions to complete the tasks, the negotiation of meaning of the text becomes possible. This enhances students' ability to derive meaning from their reading skills. The tasks were divided into four components, which are goals, input, activities and roles. According to Nunan (1989), 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 1.

Teacher as a facilitator should be more flexible in designing the activities to cater to 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 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 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.
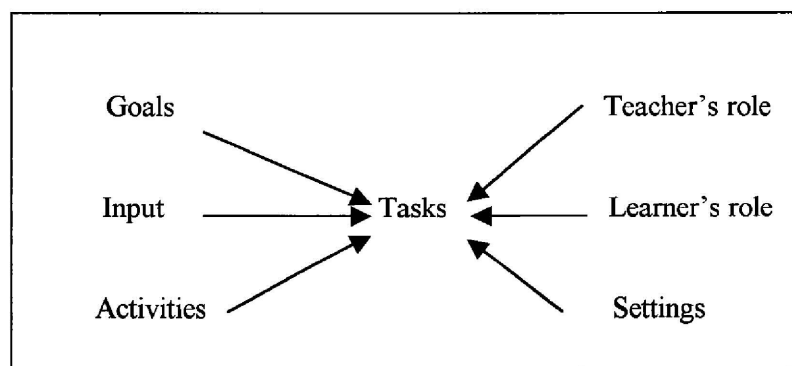
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Figure 1: Task-based Approach Framework. Source: Nunan, 1989

AN AUTONOMOUS MODEL TO TEACH 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 involved 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 (1980) 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. 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

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students expand their ideas through class discussion. This is done through brainstorming activity that 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 2 shows a flow chart on the stages of process writing.
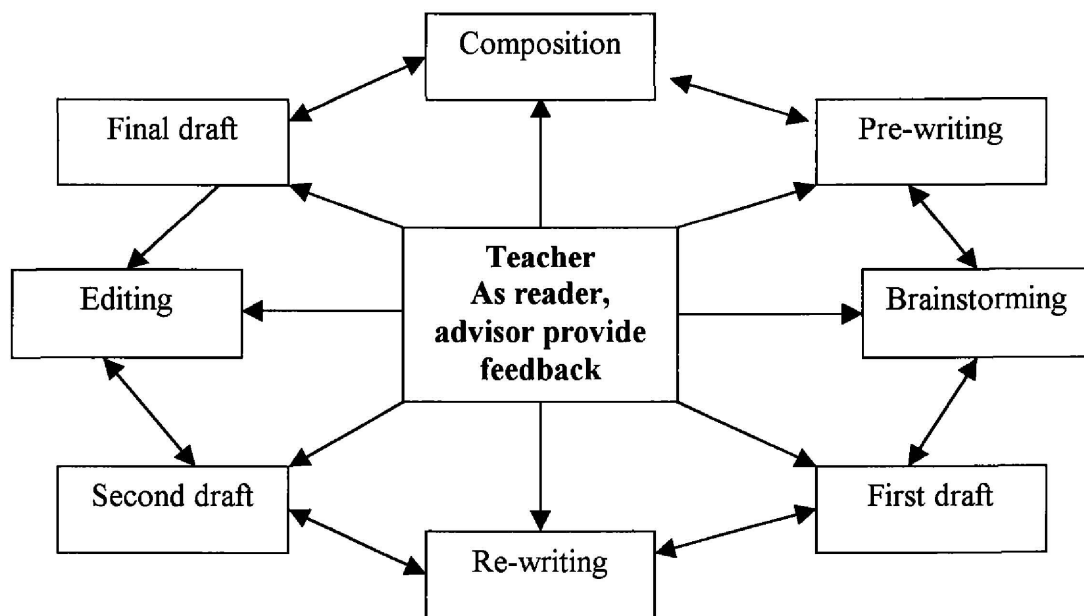

Figure 2: Developing a Process Composition in classroom
(Source: Norlida & Puteri Rohani (2002) National Conference on School-Based Assessment Proceeding, 303)

CONCLUSION

Many features that promote autonomous learning are already in place in Malaysian school curriculum. There are numerous 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 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 will encourage the students 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 the new role of the English language teacher is to promote and develop autonomous learning in the classroom by facilitating, helping, counseling, coordinating, guiding and fostering communication.

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