

MEASURING LEARNER AUTONOMY: CAN IT BE DONE?

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The difficulty with researching the development of learner autonomy is that it is problematic to "measure" in a traditional sense. In this paper, I offer accounts of research approaches in which evidence of autonomous learning can be effectively demonstrated through an interpretative approach. I argue that small-scale research using a combination of observation and first person narratives can provide a rich description of a learning context and a better understanding of whether autonomous learning is taking place.

Introduction

As teachers, with a particular interest in learner autonomy, we know that helping students to take control of their own learning will benefit them in their quest to learn a language. The problem comes when trying to document this development for research purposes. Action research is an extremely important way of informing educational practice and keeping a teacher active and motivated. I hope this article will provide some suggestions for teachers who would like to show evidence of the development of learner autonomy in their classrooms.

The difficulty with researching learner autonomy

Attempting to measure the development of autonomous learning in terms of product (i.e. how much are autonomous learning skills assisting the student in mastering the target language) is extremely difficult. Studies are likely to be limited as it is not clear from the results whether language learning has occurred because of the application of autonomous learning skills, or because of other factors such as previous exposure to language, particular interest in the

subject area or a change in personal circumstances (Dam & Gabrielsen, 1996). One approach for evaluating learner autonomy focuses on strategy use. One such study of strategy use among language learners in Australia was conducted by Simmons (1996). Simmons found that learners who had received regular strategy training demonstrated that they could use a larger number of strategies at the end of their training period. In addition, they felt that their learning had improved and were more aware of the strategies which suited them. Although a useful indicator of effective strategy training, tests such as these which involve teaching a strategy and then testing to see whether a learner uses that strategy could have limitations as a measure of how autonomous students are.

Demonstrating strategies is just one indication of how autonomous a learner is. Other indications which are not being evaluated include the ability to reflect, evaluate and plan. In addition, individuals tend to demonstrate preferences for particular types of strategies and may avoid using others because they are not the learner's preferred types. However, strategy training does appear to have a positive effect on the learners' awareness of different learning approaches and on their feelings of self-efficacy i.e. their beliefs about their abilities to learn.

Many researchers are in agreement that the word "capacity" is a crucial term when trying to assess a student's level of autonomy. The premise behind "capacity" is that even autonomous learners are not autonomous all of the time. Affective factors such as mood, psychological factors such as tiredness or hunger, motivational variables such as their attitude towards the subject matter and environmental factors such as noise, temperature or time of day all effect students' levels of autonomy in any given time (Sinclair, 2000). The question is how can researchers assess this capacity?

Interpretative research approaches

An interpretative approach is very effective at eliciting students' perceptions of their participation and progress. Using this approach, a researcher can investigate the uniqueness of a context according to participants' thoughts and perceptions so that interpretations can be offered (Ernest, 1994). Using an interpretative approach, a researcher can establish whether someone has the capacity to apply autonomous learning skills to the language learning process successfully.

Small-scale research and first-person narratives

Studying one class in an in-depth way and considering multiple data sources can be an effective way of coming to understand that context well. In addition to single class research, it is possible to look at individual learners or a small number of learners as a case study. In the first section of a recent collection edited by Palfreyman and Smith (2003), three separate chapters draw on a first person narrative approach in order to describe the learning taking place. The authors draw on accounts of learners' experiences and elements of the learners' environments which affected their access to learning.

Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) make the point that first person narratives are becoming more common and provide a "rich, compelling, and informative source of evidence about the process of adult second language acquisition" (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000:158). First person narratives are further discussed in a review by Kozulin (2002). He notes that such data are often marginalised in second language acquisition (SLA) research as "anecdotal", but can actually help researchers to "understand SLA and practice as meaningful components of the development of human personality" (Kozulin, 2002:143). First person narrative data can be collected through interviews or in written form such as in reflective journals. The researcher can also use observation techniques to assist with the analysis.

Interviews

Depending on the context, interviews can be an excellent way to obtain rich descriptions and participant perceptions. In particular, a semi-structured interview allows for spontaneity and flexibility and can encourage the students to describe their learning experiences and perceptions of activities. The process can be a form of introspection where participants are encouraged to examine their behaviour and thought processes and provide a first person narrative of their experiences.

Learner journals

Students' perceptions of the learning process can also be collected through a journaling process. Dam (2000) discusses how students in Denmark reflected on their learning process through semi-guided journals. The teacher would occasionally pose questions to the learners such as "are you satisfied with your outcome? Why/why not" (Dam, 2000, p51). The responses were collated and referred to during a joint goal setting discussion between the teacher and the learners.

Observation

Observation in a naturalistic setting is another data collection technique. One observation type is *participant observation* which is when the researcher immerses him or herself into a setting and experiences the setting as a whole. This approach involves taking copious notes, often in the form of analytic memos and journals, during and immediately after the activities, about whatever is observed and experienced. These notes can form the basis of interview or survey questions later.

Frameworks

Frameworks can be used to analyse the collected data. One framework was developed by Sinclair (1999) and was designed to identify the level of metacognition in adult learners through interviewing techniques. Students are interviewed about how they approached

tasks, what they learned and what plans they could implement in the future. Their responses were categorised in to one of three levels of metacognitive awareness: largely unaware, becoming aware and largely aware.

Researching without a framework

Using a tried and tested framework or model like the one in figure 1 is an excellent approach for conducting similar research; however there are times when an appropriate model does not yet exist. One way of doing qualitative research without an established model is to use an approach called grounded theory (see Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Grounded theory allows for important defining factors to emerge from the data. A researcher sorts these factors into categories which forms a theoretical framework. This approach does not have the restrictions that using an established model imposes i.e. having to fit new data into fixed categories. It is also a useful approach for researching a unique environment, or a context where few studies have been done and when a researcher cannot predict which categories will emerge.

I used a grounded theory approach to investigate evidence of autonomous learning within a virtual environment (Mynard, 2004). I started with a broad research question which allowed me to investigate the perceptions of the learners along with my observations and interpretations in order to build up a description of the learning experience that occurred during a series of activities. Strauss and Corbin (1998) refer to this kind of research as "theoretical sampling" where researchers are "looking for events and incidents that are indicative of phenomena" (1998:214). In my study, the aim was to describe the learning environment and not to measure, compare or make generalisations. Findings of such studies can later be usefully transferred to similar contexts for the purpose of comparison. This kind of transfer can lead to eventual generalisations. The validity of such studies comes from the richness of the descriptions, the in-depth

analysis, the trust established between the researcher and the participants, and the various research techniques.

Validation

Once the data has been collected and the analysis done, one validation technique is to show a summary of the researcher's analysis to the people involved in the study for comment and validation.

Conclusions

Interpretative research into learner autonomy can be conducted on a small scale with individual or small numbers of students or single classes. I have provided an overview of how researchers can provide descriptions of a learning environment through observation, journals and interviews which can show evidence of learner autonomy. You might remember that the title of this article is "Measuring learner autonomy; can it be done?" I am still unsure of the answer; however, in my opinion, it is far more beneficial to *describe* and *discuss* evidence of learning autonomy in a given context rather than attempt to measure it.

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GRADE 'B': THE CHALLENGE TO LEARNING INDEPENDENCE

John Eldridge

Introduction

In a recent edition of the Daily Telegraph (January 28, 2005), it was stated that:

'Pupils sitting GCSE maths last year had to achieve about 40 per cent to get a B grade. But with the new exam, designed by the Cambridge-based exam board OCR, those who got as little as 17 per cent were given a B, while those scoring 45 per cent were awarded an A.'

Now whilst this might not at first sight seem to be entirely relevant to ELT, or indeed the quest for promoting independence, I would like, nonetheless to suggest that this report should indeed provoke some profound thought.

Performance Standards

The current predilection for performance standards is already steadily infiltrating the world of ELT, not least at my own institution, where we have just been invited to provide performance descriptors to accompany letter grades. The problem occurs though when students fail in large numbers to perform to the idealised standards that are of necessity laid down in order to market 'quality'. Commercial pressures basically lead us to promise standards that we cannot realistically deliver, and the same commercial and political pressures then gently steer us into suggesting that the majority of our students have indeed attained them.

It is an irritating inconvenience that letter grades can be converted into numerical grades, and that transparency can still prevail, as in the case of the

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