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Autonomous Language Learning : The Importance of Metacognition, Goal-Setting and Cultures of Practice

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Abstract

This paper identifies and describes three interrelated concepts which were found to be central to the development of autonomy in a study of distance foreign language learners, namely metacognition, goal-setting and cultures of practice. One key aspect of metacognition, self-management, is discussed in terms of how it is deployed by learner to establish an autonomous approach to learning. It is argued that goal-setting is also central to autonomy and examples are given of how learners used metacognitive awareness to set explicit goals for the course and direction of their learning. Learners who did not set goals reported difficulty in engaging with the target language, and a tendency to browse through target language materials. The paper explores the wider question of how learners respond to the choice and control offered by a self-instruction context for language learning and two key influences are highlighted : prior experiences of learning and cultures of practice in different language classrooms. Implications for the language classroom and for teacher-learner interactions are discussed.

Introduction

Autonomous language learning represents a fundamental shift in ways of thinking about the roles of teachers and learners in the language classroom. Within this approach the learner is seen as "an autonomous, self-directed language acquirer" who is "the individual best suited to make and implement intelligent decisions about personally advantageous learning practices" (Ely, 1994:335). The role of the teacher is to advance the learner's ability and willingness to assume responsibility for his/her language learning.

Why is autonomous language learning of importance to language teacher? To answer this question we must consider briefly the process of language learning. A language is a highly complex system of sounds, words, structures and rules for appropriate language

use. To learn a language the individual must internalise this system and be able to use it in infinitely variable contexts, each of which requires the application of different elements of the system. That is, the learner has to be able to operate with the language in what may be unpredictable ways. No teacher can prepare learners fully for every context of language use which they will encounter. So it is important to foster a degree of independence in individuals both as language learners and language users. A further idea behind the autonomy movement is the recognition of the uniqueness of each language learner; a multitude of ways can lead to success and each learner needs to find his/her own way.

This article is a report of the findings from a study carried out with a group of adult language learners (average age 21) who were studying foreign languages at a distance. These learners had to manage the process of

developing skills in a foreign language without the support of a teacher or learning group. When the research was conducted they were half-way through their second year of distance language learning, and had developed independence and self-direction in their language learning. The research attempted to find out how they had managed to establish their own set of learning behaviours and what had helped or hindered them in learning on their

own. Their approaches to learning were also compared with those of learners studying the same course in a more conventional classroom setting. (For details of the study see White, 1995.) What emerged from the study were three concepts which were central to the development of an autonomous approach to language learning : metacognition, goal-setting and the influence of cultures of practice. Each of these will be discussed in turn (see Figure 1).

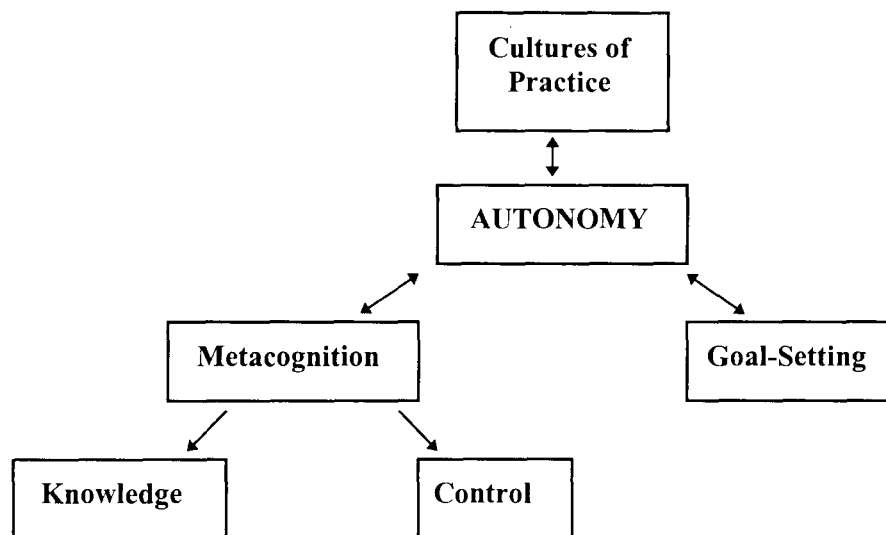


Figure 1 : The relationship between autonomy, metacognition, goal-setting and cultures of practice

Metacognition

Metacognition is individual to each person, and has two dimensions : knowledge and control. Metacognitive knowledge or awareness is knowledge about one's thinking processes while metacognitive control is the ability to regulate these processes as appropriate. Wang and Palincsar (1989:71) argue that metacognition entails "the student's ability to... consciously organize and use their knowledge, to know when they do not know how and where to seek assistance". Learners who do not have such an approach to learning "often equate the process of learning with 'being taught' - that is, doing what the teaching materials say to do" (Galloway & Labarca, 1990: 144).

In the study the learners who had managed to develop a self-instructional approach to learning were notable for the frequent use they made of metacognitive strategies. In particular, the self-management strategy was found to be the key aspect of

metacognition which enabled learners to develop autonomy. Self-management takes place when learners have thought about how they learn best and then use this knowledge to manage the environment to provide the learning conditions which they feel are best for them. This extract from the verbal reports of one of the distance learners in the study shows how he plans and manages his study sessions according to what he knows about how he learns best :

I have found that I learn best in the mornings and that I retain the language more easily if I study a little at a time. I choose certain material to work with and I work on that then I have a break. I find several shorter study sessions are more useful than one long one.

Another student revealed how she checks up on her understanding as she proceeds:

If I am not sure of something I underline it and put a question-mark in the margin. Then I wait to see if I can work it out later on. Usually I see the

structure or the word in other contexts and then I can understand. It usually becomes clear in my mind. If not, I wait and usually it falls into place. If not, I would eventually contact the teacher..... Now when I start to study I know how to proceed, so I don't waste time. But it took me a long time to work this out for myself.

In these two cases the learners draw on knowledge about themselves (such as the best time of day to study, the optimal length of study session, how to proceed when there is something they do not understand) and apply this knowledge to manage the learning process. That is, they make frequent use of self-management strategies to set up and guide their interactions with the target language.

The study also revealed that self-management strategies are individual to the learner and the ways in which self-management strategies were manifested in the behaviours of learners were indeed diverse. Some learners preferred to tackle difficult tasks first, others left them until last; some preferred to have long study sessions, others short ones; some had to see words written down before they could learn them, others liked listening to words in context first and so on. Thus self-management does not consist of a set of behaviours which can be taught to learners. Instead self-management requires learners to find their own way of learning by identifying which learning experiences are the most effective for them. Obviously this knowledge takes time to develop and involves a good deal of trial and error; without it the learner is dependent on the teacher to provide appropriate learning experiences. Also in such a case the learning experiences are not used fully to advantage since they are seen as ends in themselves, rather than as opportunities to develop both knowledge of the language system and self-knowledge about optimal ways of learning the system.

However, self-management in itself is enough for effective autonomous learning, since it is possible for learners to have highly developed metacognitive awareness about language learning, but for this knowledge not to be applied to the accomplishment of specific tasks. This is where goal-setting is important.

Goal-setting

Many learners in the study emphasised that it was important that they themselves set goals for what they would work on since there was no teacher to allocate specific tasks for each session. If they did not set goals, they reported difficulty in engaging with the target language or even in settling down to something. The tendency to skim over language materials in a rather unfocussed manner was related to the lack of specific goal-setting as in the following extracts:

I find that I need to decide what I am going to study, or practice or complete before I begin. Otherwise I find that I tend to spend a lot of time starting things and not working right through them. I seem to waste time and not achieve much. On those days it's hard for me to say what I did with my time.

I need to set goals for myself otherwise I tend to browse through the course-you could say I sort of graze and never settle to anything deeply.

The importance of goal-setting in self-regulated learning was highlighted in a study by Ridley, Schutz, Glanz and Weinstein (1992:295) who found that "the student who effectively self-regulates is one who bases explicit goals for his or her learning on high levels of self-awareness". This finding was confirmed in the current study. The learner needs to have a target goal and also needs to be able to use the appropriate self-management strategies to accomplish the goal.

While metacognition and goal-setting are central to autonomy, the formative influence of the learning history of learners must be recognised since it deeply affects how learners behave and are prepared to behave. This is the next point relating to cultures of practice.

Cultures of Practice

The ways in which students approach language learning are of course influenced by the environment from which they have come. Different language teaching methodologies, different curricula, different activities and forms of assessment lead students to view the mastery

of languages in different ways. Asian learners, for example, are reputed to excel in their rote memorization skills (see, for example, Tinkham, 1989) because of the way they have been taught, tested and rewarded in their learning efforts.

The distance learners in this study reported that it took time to develop new learning behaviours, since the ways in which they had learnt before did not serve them well in the independent study environment:

At first I found that I wanted to work with the materials according to how I learnt languages at school. It took me a long time to find my own way of learning, that built on my strengths as well as meeting the requirements of the course.

Distance learners often complained of the absence of a teacher and the fact that they had to rely on themselves to perform many of the tasks that would have been carried out by the teacher in a more conventional classroom setting, tasks such as clarifying meanings, correcting language and modifying difficult input.

Within the classroom learners have ingrained conceptualizations of their role and of the teaching-learning process based on their past experiences. They also have certain expectations of the teacher as someone who corrects mistakes, who identifies learning goals for the class, who guides the class through the language programme and who assumes responsibility for the progress of the class. Many of these beliefs which have been built up from their learning experiences in what Paris and Newman (1989) call "cultures of practice" may make it difficult for learners to adapt to an autonomous learning environment. In other words, the assumptions of independence, choice and control which underlie autonomy would appear to conflict with many cultural models of the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners.

However, it is important to separate overt behaviours and role prescriptions from underlying attitudes and thought processes. Autonomous learners are often described as "active participants in their learning". How do we know if this is the case for an individual learner? In my experience many Asian learners who prefer in class to conform to the role of the

quiet student who looks to the teacher for guidance, are frequently highly self-directed and capable of learning on their own. In other words, classroom behaviours are not necessarily a guide to the degree of autonomy learners assume for their language learning as a whole. A large-scale study of EFL students in China carried out by Dirksen (1990) revealed that while students appeared inactive and dependent on the teacher as they silently took notes in class, many were actively engaged outside the class in independent study.

Thus, any attempts to introduce autonomy in the language classroom should be based on understanding of the previous cultures of practice of the learners and their beliefs about the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners. Consideration should also be given to the degree of autonomy learners may assume in private study contexts.

Implications

The autonomy movement places new demands on language teachers since they must get the learners to engage fully with the learning situation, to learn about themselves as learners and eventually assume responsibility for their acquisition of the language. In the applied linguistics literature a number of ways of doing this are being put forward such as experiential learning (Kenny, 1993), counselling (Victori & Lockhart, 1995) and pedagogical dialogue (Little, 1995). From this study some tentative implications can be drawn relating to the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners in attempting to realise a more autonomous approach to learning.

To begin with, language tasks should have a dual focus in order to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the ways learners work with the language. That is, they should assist the learner to acquire the language system. Equally importantly they should either enable the learner to develop knowledge about him/herself as a learner or allow the learner to use this knowledge about how best to proceed while working on the task. In other words, language tasks should, wherever possible, permit the learner to exercise a degree of choice and control in deciding how to work on the material.

In the study reported here learners had to develop their own ways of working through the materials because they were working in isolation. How can this be achieved within the face-to-face classroom? There is no simple answer to this since we still have limited understanding of how and when self-knowledge develop among language learners. A number of approaches to learner training have been developed. However, there is possibly a danger that in devoting a good deal of class time to such courses learners could become experts on language learning strategies and prefer this approach to spending time on learning the language. We also do not know whether there is transfer from learner training to the ongoing process of language learning and whether any gains are long-lasting. The effects of learner training on proficiency are still being explored, and we have as yet no compelling evidence of cognitive gains from such approaches. Thus while learner training may be intuitively appealing to many teacher, at present it does not necessarily provide a solution to the question of how we get learners to develop their own ways of learning.

The findings from this study suggest that goal-setting is important for an effective autonomous approach to language learning. Thus learners need to be aware of the usefulness of having learning goals in mind during periods

of self-directed learning. A final point is that autonomy may frequently be at odds with learners' habitual experiences in classrooms, and as such may be rejected. Teachers should reflect on the degree to which the culture of the traditional foreign language classroom has shaped learners' perceptions about how they learn. They are then in a better position to find entry points in classroom routines through which learners can come to understand the importance of developing their own expertise in learning. This is the starting point for autonomy.

Conclusion

Autonomy is both an attitude towards learning and a capacity for independent learning (Dickinson, 1995). To be able to take responsibility for their acquisition of the language learners need to have developed a high level of self-awareness and need to be able to set and implement goals for their learning. In addition they need to understand how their perceptions of the learning process are influenced by the different learning contexts they have experienced. They also need to come to recognise the advantages and limitations of the roles they have assumed in those contexts and the strengths and weaknesses of the ways in which they continue to acquire the target language.

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