Autonomy and the open distance English language learner

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AUTONOMY AND THE OPEN DISTANCE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNER

by

Jasmine Selvarani Emmanuel
Rabikha Hasni Suparman
Vickneswarinee Ganisha

Wawasan Open University
Abstract
It is a well accepted fact that the development of autonomous learners is a vital goal for English language teaching programmes. However, the achievement of this goal to a great extent depends on the teachers themselves creating the atmosphere where learners can experience autonomy so that they can become managers of their own learning. This process is described by Little (2003) as ´autonomization´. In open distance learning (ODL), our course materials are the main mode for this process and this particularly brings about great challenges to the writers of our courses. This paper seeks to explore these challenges and demonstrate how this process of ´autonomization´ can be achieved through open distance English Language teaching materials by looking at the development of the mandatory English Language papers at Wawasan Open University. It describes the ways in which course writers in the English Language courses for adult open distance learners have turned their experience and expertise into practice in order to help students develop the capacity for managing their own learning which is essential for becoming autonomous learners. The paper also considers the ways of further enhancing ´autonomization´ and the implications it will hold for future English Language course writers and research.

Key Words: Learner Autonomy, Autonomization, Distance Language Learner, Course Design, Independent Learning, Open Distance Learning
1. INTRODUCTION

Language teaching has undergone revolutionary changes since the days of grammar-translation and audio-visual methods. Fundamental changes have occurred in the roles of the teacher and the learner and there has been increased discussion and research on learner autonomy in language teaching which has become a vital goal for English Language teaching programmes. Autonomy was the ‘buzzword of the 90’s’, according to Little (1991) and continues to be an essential concept in the 21st century. With the increase in opportunities for distance learning, it has become even more important.

Confessor (1992) suggests that there are four factors that provide a framework for describing autonomy in the context of learning, those being desire, resourcefulness, initiative and persistence. Holec (1981) describes it as ‘the ability to have and to hold the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning’ while Little (1991) says that it’s a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action’. While there are varying degrees of difference in the definitions, according to Sinclair (2000) there does appear to be a universal acceptance of the fact that autonomy is an ‘important general educational goal and can take on a variety of forms depending on learning contexts and learner characteristics’.

2. AUTONOMY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

According to Railton and Watson (2005) autonomy in higher education is seen as the ‘benchmark of graduatesness’. This according to Little (2003) means that autonomous learners ‘understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning and evaluate its effectiveness’. For learners to gain increasing levels of autonomy, much depends on their teaching environment and the commitment of the academic staff to create a learning environment where learners begin to learn how to learn. This is the process that Little (2003) calls ‘autonomisation’. In a face to face teaching environment, the responsibility of creating the learning atmosphere rests squarely on the teaching staff. But in a distance learning setting it depends on a great extent on the teaching/learning materials used. Hence, here it is the course designers and writers who bear the responsibility towards this goal. Though some researchers feel that autonomy can be a problem in distance learning, other researchers like S.R.B Davis (1997) have shown that distance learners have more autonomy that learner in face to face institutions.

White (2005) describes how researchers like Garrison (2000) have recognized the significance of interaction in distance education. According to her, distance learning is ‘a private form of learning based on self-instructional texts and this can be seen as transformed into ‘an emphasis on direct communication between teachers and learners, and interaction between a group of learners’. Of course in this instance the ‘teachers’ refer to both the course writers who design and write
the materials as well the tutors who support the learners via face-to-face sessions through telephone tutoring and online activities especially through the learner management system.

In many ways, it can be assumed that distance learners are learning autonomously because they are the ones who control a number of aspects of their learning, for instance, the time, venue, pace and what to study. When planning the curriculum for distance education, course planners and developers have to anticipate a whole range of potential language needs and cater for students who work alone, isolated from their peers and tutors. There are financial implications here as well and in an effort not to overload the students with materials. The focus of the materials can be more on language skills rather than learning skills. According to Little (1999) this may result in a very fine balance for the tutors between devoting time between language skills and other needs a student might have in tutorial sessions. This also forms a formidable challenge for course writers who try their best to make use of the ‘space’ they have at their disposal. This is because apart from developing communicative proficiency, the course materials used in open and distance language learning do also play an important role in enhancing learners’ capacity for critical reflection and autonomy by developing metacognitive strategies and helping learners make choices where learning is concerned.

Sussex (1991) explains that ‘languages are more difficult than most subjects to learn in the distance mode because of the complex combination of skills and information required for language mastery’. This knowledge and skills that entail self-awareness and self-management are known as metacognition which according to Chamot and Malley ‘may be the major factor in determining the effectiveness of individuals’ attempts to learn another language’.

Reflection for most learners does not come naturally and has to be developed. Through the course materials the student is shown how to develop awareness and reflect on learning, given advice on the use of strategy and encouraged to engage in self-evaluation as part of control over learning. Course writers also have to foster ‘pedagogic dialogue’ and collaboration, guiding learners to achieve the learning outcomes for the course and also stirring them on to reflect on what it means to learn a language. Dialogue can, to a certain extent be encouraged through materials but it is tutor feedback that can create the best ambience for learners to become good reflectors and develop self-management strategies. Keeping this in mind let us look at how Wawasan Open University supports the development of critical reflection and autonomy in its English Language course materials.

3. OPEN AND DISTANCE ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING AT WOU
According to Holmberg (1983), distance learning is a guided didactic conversation that ‘involves the student emotionally so that he or she takes a personal interest in the subject and its problems’. Many writers of open distance materials have used this as a basis for producing materials for ODL learning. These materials which are specially written play a core role in all courses offered at open universities because they are the teaching voice that form the link.
between the teacher and the learner. In a nutshell, we can say that the functions of a teacher in a more conventional setting are carried out by these materials.

This is the reason why particular attention is paid to the design of print materials to make them easy to follow and attractive to work with. If audio-visual materials are being used, they are carefully researched, designed and produced so that together these materials work as an integrated whole.

At WOU, each activity or sequence of activities that are provided in the course materials are introduced by an ‘organiser’ that explains the rationale for the activity or activities. The purpose behind this is to help students understand why they are asked to participate in the activities and how they fit into the entire structure. This can enable students to become more aware of the language learning process so that they can set their own personal goals and begin to learn how to monitor their own progress. Generally at WOU, we remember that any attempts at pedagogic intervention to promote autonomy must take place via the materials and tutor feedback. That is the reason why all language courses contain sections on learning strategies and study skills, language awareness activities and practical guidance in the development of specific language skills.

4. COURSES AND MATERIALS AT THE SCHOOL OF FOUNDATION AND LIBERAL STUDIES AT WOU.
The School of Foundation (and later on Liberal Studies as well) was set up in 2005 to offer the core university English language courses. In this school, English teaching is unique in that it is spread across the various schools from different academic disciplines. Students from the other schools take about three to four of the English courses during their period of study. In addition, students also take a course called Learning Skills for University Studies that helps prepare them for life as an open, distance learning (ODL) student. English courses are compulsory to all students at the university. Under the credit-based system, these courses are credit bearing, contributing to the final awards of diplomas and degrees. Because the credit based system would standardise curricula and assessment, throughout the various schools, the university is required to introduce common core language materials. The English courses that are currently taught are Foundation English, English for the Workplace, Writing Skills for University Studies and Communication for the Workplace. These English courses are designed to accommodate the various language needs of students at different levels of study. So far about 3000 students have walked through these courses. We have students from all over Malaysia and the typical ODL learner is in the 21-55 age range. They are working people. Many are married, hold jobs and even raise children. They shoulder educational responsibilities together with various other roles in life such as spouse, employee, parent and community member.

The English Language courses are ‘open’ in the sense that they do not have prerequisites. They are given course materials which include a file consisting of 5 units, textbooks or workbooks and audio CDs. A course guide is also provided for each course. The course materials are closely structured and integrated so that the students know what they are expected to do and when. Additional resources are placed on our Learning management system which every student has access.
to. This LMS or better known as *WawasanLearn* is moderated by the tutors and the respective course coordinators. Assessment questions for Tutor-Marked Assignments (TMA) are given at the beginning of the semester on the LMS samples of ‘good’ and ‘poor’ assignments are also uploaded. There are three TMAs per semester and these are formative in nature. They mostly assess the written skills and are submitted to the tutor for marking and feedback on a regular basis. As for the feedback component, detailed feedback is given in order to help students understand and correct their mistakes, analyse and address more serious errors. In this way, students develop the art of self correction and monitoring. Students can contact their tutor individually if they have queries about aspects of their studies Students also sit for a final examination which makes up 50% of the total marks. The other 50% is provided by formative assessments via the TMAs. Students are required to pass at least 40% of each component in order to pass the course.

5. **WAYS IN WHICH WOU LANGUAGE COURSE MATERIAL FACILITATE ‘AUTONOMISATION’**

In the area of the development of metacognitive strategies using reflection, goals are set by the course developments teams who list key learning points for each section of the course material. Long term language learning objectives are also determined. Numerous opportunities are given for students to engage in self-assessment. At the end of each unit (each course module consists of five units) models answers are provided for students to check their work. All the language courses include opportunities for students to evaluate themselves in terms of their academic progress against a checklist of key learning points. The course writers also include teaching students about reflection and how students can go about doing so. Course guides are also incorporated to give advice on how to reflect on the course materials and any feedback received from the assessment of formative evaluation Each section includes summaries that contain the key learning points which are used to explicitly prompt reflection on both the learning process and the language activities. To further enhance autonomisation, course writers also used explicit explanations and activities which enabled students to gain confidence and experience.

All courses include teaching points on the strategies and techniques for developing particular language skills, expanding and remembering vocabulary and grammar. Our Business English courses teach and give students practice in some specific strategies for academic study, for example writing letters, memos, preparing oral presentations, writing minutes and working out negotiations.

Where pedagogic dialogue and interaction is concerned, it can be said that all our course materials foster interaction. The materials are written in a style of a teacher speaking personally to the learner and leading him/her by hand through the course material. The materials also encourage interaction with the resources provided and create the learning environment by engaging the student in a variety of tasks and activities. The learners are guided with organisers which explain each section and what the learner is required to do. Explanations of grammar points or content areas are also provided. In this way additional scaffolding support is provided to the student in relation to cognitive processes.
Assignments at WOU also play a role in ‘autonomisation’. These assignments, better known as TMAs (tutor-marked assignments) have a double function. They not only assess student performance but also provide invaluable opportunities for learner-tutor interaction. For lower level courses, the assignment tasks are generally descriptive and closely prescribed the information that need to be included. Sometimes stimulus material is provided. For middle level courses, students are required to give and justify their opinions. Assignments also provide students avenues for critical reflection and decision making. Opportunities are provided for learners to interact with other speakers of the language to obtain information for their assignments. Learners are also encouraged to submit their assignments online through the OAS (Online Assignment System) as this will help them to become more computer savvy as part of their learning skills strategies.

The TMAs are marked by the student’s own tutor, who records the marks awarded on a form and gives a detailed commentary on the work submitted. Feedback on assignments is also very important because in distance education much interaction takes place when tutors provide feedback. Feedback is a generic term that embraces three types of tutor intervention:

- the correction of faults in students’ work;
- the specific feedback or guidance provided on particular faults or problems and their corrections;
- commentaries, which are general advice designed to help learners improve their overall linguistic performance, their ability to handle certain assignments and focusing on the actions a student must take e.g. remedial work, sources of information, learning strategies, and so on.

Considerable importance is attached to these commentaries because along with the annotations on the scripts, they are an integral part of the learning process and are the distance learning equivalent of the feedback that teachers in face-to-face institutions would give to their students in seminars or tutorials. Commentaries go a long way in helping students because they tend to be discursive, carefully tailored to individual student's needs and the context and accentuate the positive features of the assignments.

6. CONCLUSION

In this paper we have looked at what autonomy is and how the designers and writers of distance learning materials have incorporated this into the English Language course materials at WOU, an open distance learning institution. It is a formidable task because each cohort of distance language learners have been and will be non-homogenous in nature but by definition less accessible. This presents a real challenge to all involved in distance language teaching—the course designers, developers and tutors who continuously have to devise new and better ways of supporting their learners in developing skills of self-management and self-regulation that are so central to autonomy. They will also have to consider the need to understand further the competencies required of them, in both traditional and emerging paradigms for distance language learning.
REFERENCES


