



Employing Project Work in a Vietnamese EFL Undergraduate Class to Promote Autonomy

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Article history

Received: May 26, 2022

Accepted: June 6, 2022

Published: June 18, 2022

Keywords

Learner autonomy, EFL, pedagogy, project work

ABSTRACT

This paper investigates an attempt to stimulate autonomous practices among EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners in Vietnam. While recent educational policies have advocated the development of learner autonomy in English language teaching and learning, approaches taken to support autonomy can sometimes be limited. In this paper, we reported the participation of one teaching colleague and twenty-six students in an action research project. Data sources included two rounds of interview and test between which a project work was conducted. Autonomy-supporting priorities included goal setting, planning, implementing and evaluation. The findings indicated that traditional pedagogy impacts on language learner autonomy to some extent. However, there was strong evidence that the development of project work can help Vietnamese learners to take greater control over their own learning. Pedagogical practices of autonomous learning through the use of project work in Vietnam and the region are suggested.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concentration of this paper is the practical pedagogy to foster language learner autonomy (LA) in an East Asian context. Research has shown that LA and language proficiency are the two sides of the same coin (Benson, 2007; Nguyen, 2009; Phan, 2015). Although the era of globalisation and the learners themselves require the competency of communication in English, current English language education in Vietnam does not appear to meet the demands. The fact shows that our students have limited ability to communicate or use English in their study or at work after years of studying at tertiary level (Vietnamese Prime Minister, 2008). Students are accustomed to depend on teachers. The “good” student is viewed as the one listening to the lectures, taking notes and reproducing their memorized knowledge in exams. Vietnamese teachers are regarded as the knowledge provider, and students are not allowed to confront the teacher directly (Le, 2013; Nguyen, 2014). As a result, due to the factors supporting the development of autonomous learning such as freedom, choices and negotiation (Dang, 2010), it appears to be quite challenging to foster LA in English language teaching and learning at tertiary level in Vietnam.

The study was conducted with an EFL class consisting of one teacher and twenty-six students to investigate the current English teaching and learning and its relationship to LA. Participants experienced a project to enhance LA. The purpose of this research is to investigate an attempt to stimulate autonomous practices among EFL learners in Vietnam through a project work. The study aims to answer the following research questions: (1) What are participants’ reflections on their current English learning and how does it impact on LA?; (2) What could be the suggestions for the utilization of project work to enhance LA?

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Learner autonomy

The concept of autonomy has received much attention from researchers worldwide for the past three decades (Benson, 2011; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). It is often claimed to be a complicated construct associated with social, cultural, political, philosophical and psychological aspects, which could greatly impact personal development. Holec (1981, p. 3) defines LA as “the ability to take charge of one’s learning”, which is regarded as the most influential. Scharle and Szabó (2000, p. 5) later define *autonomy* as “the freedom and ability to manage one’s affairs which entails the right to make a decision as well”. The researchers further conclude that to foster LA, it is necessary to develop a sense of responsibility and encourage learners to participate in making decisions about their learning.

Studies in Vietnam have also proposed a definition of the term. For example, LA is regarded as self-learning independently and voluntarily combining with others to study together (Dang, 2010; Nguyen, 2014). It is viewed as self-access learning, which emphasizes the situational conditions in which learners can access authentic materials, learning activities, and technical supports to achieve personal learning targets. Some other authors regarded LA as self-regulation (Trinh, 2005; Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen, 2014) and self-management (Le, 2013). Self self-regulation is divided into skills such as planning, operating and planning, monitoring and evaluating that learners need to implement learning choices and activities. Meanwhile, self-management refers to the knowledge of learners to be able to manage and implement learning effectively.

This study applies the definition in Phan’s 2015, which conceptualizes language LA as the learner’s attitude and ability to take responsibility for his or her learning in the target language. Accordingly, LA relates to the attitude toward responsibility for learning; it does not mean learning without a teacher. It is associated with the ability to set a goal, plan, implement and evaluate one’s learning. Here, it is required that the communication is in the target language.

2.2. Using project work to promote learner autonomy

Promoting LA is claimed to increase learning independence, motivation and learning engagement (Crabbe, 1993; Dickinson, 1995; Holec, 1981; Ushioda, 2011) and to prepare learners for lifelong learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

Phan (2015) conducted a case study on the teachers’ and students’ understanding of language LA regarding attitudes and ability and their perceptions of pedagogical approaches to foster LA at a Vietnamese university. The findings indicated that the teachers’ and students’ understandings of LA aligned with the Vietnamese government policies on education, and the teachers and target language use were considered mediators to enhance language learner autonomy in the Vietnamese higher education context. The study has also suggested project work as a model to develop language learner autonomy.

Project work

From the view of the constructivist theory, project work is a pedagogic model for the development of language LA, represented in Figure 1.

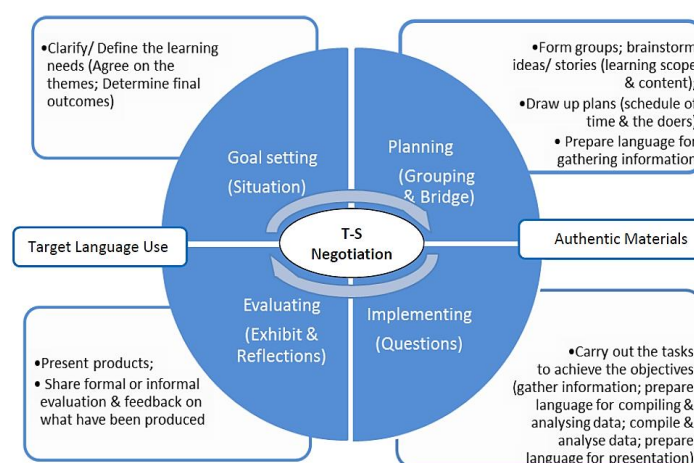


Figure 1. A Pedagogic Model for Language LA from The Constructivist Theory adapted from Gagnon and Collay (2001) (key: T = Teacher; S = Students) (Phan, 2015)

The procedure to carry out the project work requires learners' skills and knowledge of *goal setting*, *planning*, *implementation*, and *evaluation*. In the *goal-setting* stage, the students are required to organise their learning episodes by clearly defining their learning purposes. The students then discuss in their groups, negotiate with teachers and their group members, and agree on the final products for the project. Then the students *plan* the learning content. They brainstorm ideas and draw up plans for group members to fulfill the tasks. Next, students *implement* what they have planned for their project work. In other words, they are required to be responsible for carrying out the tasks in order to achieve the objectives. In this stage, the teacher plays the role of a supporter by allowing them to question and help them to synthesise their ideas. The final stage of the project work is *evaluating*, which requires students to present their products. In contrast, the others work on an evaluation sheet based on the criteria both teacher and students agree on at the planning stage. In this stage, the discussion may appear to provide feedback from peers and the teacher.

In summary, project work is a learner-centred approach designed according to the needs of learners. When implementing project work, learners play a central role which involves performing tasks while the teacher acts as a guide, providing bits of help if necessary. Consequently, project work has been observed to build student confidence, self-esteem, and autonomy, as well as improve students' language skills, content learning, and cognitive abilities. In addition, through project work, students are encouraged to communicate in English and to be active in their language learning as it involves topics of students' interests and real-life tasks. Moreover, conducting project work stimulates the student to be decision-makers when learning how to achieve their goals.

Furthermore, project work is suited to the current Vietnamese higher education context, which consists of large classes of students with mixed abilities. Finally, while conducting project work, in order to complete the task, students can work individually or in groups to share their resources and exchange their ideas and professional skills. In fact, they can be like family members sharing their experiences, which is entirely appropriate to Vietnamese learners' identified values and characteristics.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

3.1. Methodology

The study employed action research as the main data collection instrument. Data sources included two rounds of interview and test between which a project work was carried out. The process of data generation was summarized in the following Figure 2.

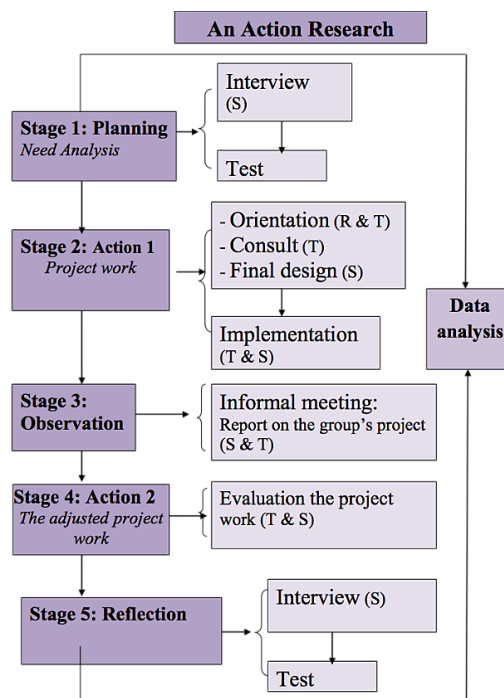


Figure 2. The research process

- *Stage 1 - Planning*: The purpose of this phase is to collect the initial data for the action research. An interview was administered to five students chosen randomly. The questions focused on the way they studied outside the class and their preferences for the activities/ the teaching methods both inside and outside class. Besides, an integrated test was conducted to know their English level prior to the project work.

- *Stage 2, 3, 4 - Action 1 - Observation - Action 2*: The aim of these steps is to implement the action plan. From the hypothesis based on the initial data analysis and the knowledge gained from the literature review, an action plan was carried out. The students were divided into five groups by themselves and then participated in a project work, named Going out, which was in the existing syllabus. This project aimed to ask students to research a particular place of tourism interest. Their end products were expected to be an oral presentation(s)/ a guidebook(s) to describe a place(s). The teacher played as a consultant during the project work to give help or advice. Students were asked to report on their group's project. After having the adjusted project, students performed the stories within class learning and shared feedback with each other.

- *Stage 5 - Reflection*: Following the project work, an interview was conducted to explore students' attitudes to the project work, the teacher's role during the project, students' evaluation of their ability to complete their tasks in the project work, etc. Additionally, an integrated test was also conducted to know students' learning achievements. In this phase, the collected data were carefully analyzed.

3.2. Participants

The study was conducted in a Vietnamese university in the North of Vietnam. The participants included one EFL teacher and twenty-six students in action research. These students are teachers from different majors whose English proficiency is at a pre-intermediate level. Their attitude toward English learning is high. They are aware of the necessity of acquiring enough proficiency in English communication. Before attending the course, all the students showed their desire to accomplish their limitations of English proficiency. Furthermore, most of them have a background in military service, and obedience is regarded as the main characteristic. As a result, they appeared to be commanded by the teacher's orders. In other words, they depended on the teacher.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. The students' current English learning

The data from the interviews and tests showed the students' current English learning.

When asked about the way they studied outside class, most of the students said that they learned English alone at home without any plans, and vocabulary and grammar were mainly learned. In class, they experienced the learning when the teacher lectured the lessons from the textbook in Vietnamese. Most of the learning activities were whole class or individual work. To answer the questions about their learning, most students said that group work encouraged them to be involved in lessons. The students wanted their learning to involve interacting in groups with authentic materials and communicative activities.

The result of the prior test revealed the students' current English levels, which are illustrated in Figure 3.

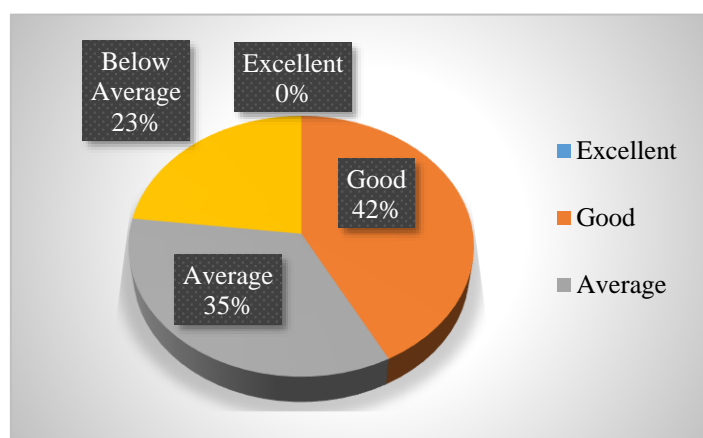


Figure 3. Students' current English

The figures show that the results were not entirely positive. There was no one getting excellent marks, and the number of students getting average results (58%) was higher than those who achieved good marks (42%). Six students of 26 ones had average marks, which made up a pretty high percentage in the test result.

Obviously, it was revealed from the initial data results that traditional pedagogy impacted English learning in the class in question. The students were under teacher dominance, and they got familiar with textbook-based learning as well as high-frequency use of their mother tongue. Consequently, they lacked the ability to take charge of their own learning. It was also found that students expected to take part in such interactive, communicative and independent learning.

4.2. The English learning during the project work

During the project work, it was clearly seen that students were motivated to join the project. They showed their responsibility for completing the tasks. Table 1 summarises aspects of pedagogy for autonomy as defined in this study, evident in two actions during the project work.

Table 1. The task achievements of the class during the project work

Elements	Defining Activities/ Tasks	Action 1		Action 2	
		T	Ss	T	Ss
Goal setting	Agree on the topics	✓	✓	✓	✓
	Determine final products	–	✓	–	✓
Planning	Structure the project/ Brainstorm ideas		✓		✓
	Prepare language for gathering information	–	–	✓	✓
	Draw up plans for group members	–	✓	–	✓
Implementing	Gather information	–	✓	–	✓
	Prepare language for compiling & analysing data	–	–	–	–
	Compile & Analyse data	–	✓	–	✓
	Prepare language for presentation			✓	✓
Evaluating	Present products				✓
	Share evaluation			✓	✓
Target Language Use	Interact in the TL (organising language activities, giving explanation or asking for clarification)	Viet	Viet	Viet & Eng	Viet & Eng
	Access & explore information through the TL			✓	✓
Authentic materials	Use raw or primary sources (real objects, photos, maps or videos)	✓	✓	✓	✓
Groupings	Form groups		✓		✓

It is confirmed in the table that several elements of language LA were achieved during the project. According to the table, the planning and implementation stage of the project seemed to be the time that the students were most autonomous. Although there was consensus that the teacher and students agreed on the themes as well as the structure of the project in both actions, the students had their own right to decide the learning outcomes which were appropriate to their competency level.

The students conducted their learning in teams by deciding for themselves how to complete the tasks, such as allocating particular tasks amongst team members, deciding on the materials to be used and setting a timeline for completion.

However, in action one, students hadn't determined the final outcomes until they came to action 2. Due to the lack of experience and English competence, the student hadn't prepared sufficient language for gathering information and presentation as well. The language they preferred to use was Vietnamese, their mother tongue. After receiving guidance from their teacher, the missing elements were fulfilled. The language for presentation is compulsorily English, which is considered to be a way to enhance students' use of English in an EFL class. Students had chances to evaluate their own work and other teams for evaluation, which was taken as a part of the total evaluation. Such data indicated that the use of project work met students learning needs.

4.3. Students' learning achievement following project work

Following the project work, data from interviews expressed the students' positive learning attitudes. Most of them showed approval toward the project. They also expressed their desires for more opportunities to conduct future projects. Furthermore, the students showed that they know how to conduct their own learning through project work, such as setting a goal, searching for information, and so forth. The test results also indicated the positive aspects, which were clearly synthesized in Figure 4.

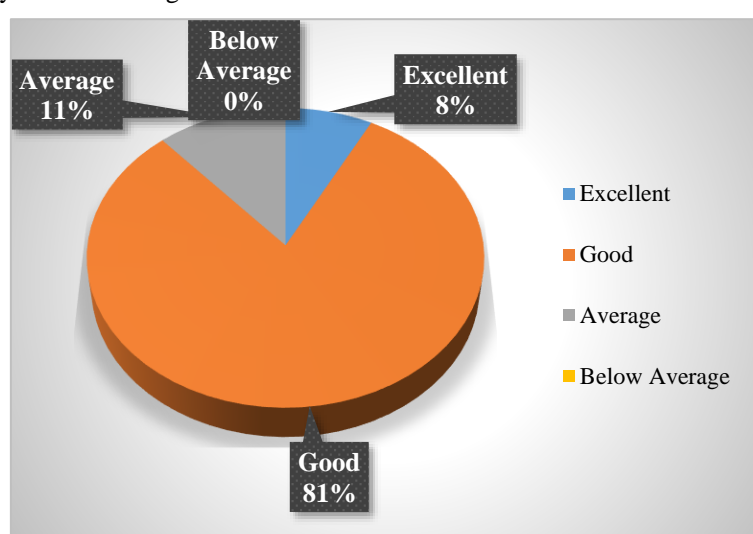


Figure 4. Students' learning achievement following project work

The test result indicated that student English proficiency improved. Twenty-one students (81%) were at a good level, which nearly doubled the figure in the initial stage. Besides, instead of having no excellent marks in the initial stage, there were two students achieving excellent scores after the intervention. Moreover, in the second test, no student's result was below average. In conclusion, the research results indicated that LA and language proficiency were closely related.

5. CONCLUSION

This paper reports an action research study exploring the potential teaching method to foster language LA in a particular Vietnamese higher EFL educational setting. Language project work was chosen as a means for such development. The findings from the study suggest that similar studies in language autonomy in other disciplines can be carried out by giving a model for teacher development concerning promoting LA outside the classroom.

In addition, the study reveals the aspects of effective pedagogic action that promote LA in East Asia, such as (1) how to make use of authentic materials, (2) how to make appropriate use of the mother tongue to support the use of target language in EFL education, and (3) how to use peer assessment exercises effectively in order to reduce the concerns about less competent students. Finally, the study helps to evaluate the effectiveness of more extended periods of project work in both the acquisition of language and the skills of a language learner and the application of project work in other disciplines.

Conflict of Interest: No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

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