Promoting Autonomy in a Reading Classroom

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Abstract

This paper presents an overview of the Basic Reading skills course at a university of international studies in Japan. The curriculum, which is designed to guide students in becoming autonomous learners, has a very important learning goal – to encourage students to take control of their own learning. Instructional materials alter the traditional roles of learner and teacher in the classroom, facilitating the process through which students become managers and planners of their own route of learning throughout the year. After defining fundamental principles and curriculum goals, a summary of the first and second semester curriculum will be presented, ending with a discussion on collected student feedback and the future direction of the course.

Reading and Autonomy

The foundations of reading and the teaching of reading are based on the definition that reading in the most simplistic manner is the interaction between the text and the reader (Rumelhart, 1977). This interaction is affected by the reader's own experience with their community, school and cultural experience and how these relate to the text, as well as their individual personality. Combine these reader factors with textual features, such as rhetorical structures, syntax, grammar and vocabulary, into the equation between the reader and the text, and one can see myriad factors which affect the interaction between the reader and the text.

Teaching reading involves approaches which can fall into several categories. According to DeFord (1985), there are three approaches to teaching reading in an L2.

- The phonics approach has a gradual movement into word units and comprehension by establishing the sound-letter correspondence. Also included in this approach is the sight-word instruction for words not decodable by phonics and emphasis on small word-level language units.

- The skills approach introduces vocabulary words using initial and ending consonant sounds and focuses on a hierarchy of word skills such as affixes, word configurations, root words and context clues while building sight-word vocabulary.

- The whole language approach aims to provide quality materials from the onset of instruction, encourage student generation of extended response in materials, develop a framework for teaching smaller units of language and integrate phonics in the reading experience.

Barnett (1989) summarised reading approaches into three different categories: (1) the bottom-up theory, which argues the reader constructs or decodes the text from the smallest units; (2) the top-down theory, which argues the reader brings their assumptions and expectations to the text and continues to read as long as the text confirms these expectations; and (3) the interactive school theory, which argues that

both of these approaches are happening at any given time dependent on the text and the reader's knowledge. Reading and the instruction of reading are reliant on the level of cognitive development and style at the time of beginning L2 study, language proficiency in L1 versus L2, meta-cognitive knowledge of L1, linguistic differences between L1 and L2, and cultural orientation (Alderson, 1984; Grabe, 1986, 1991; Scarcella & Oxford, 1992).

Aebersold and Field (1997) state that when it comes to designing a reading course, one must consider the above reader variables when deciding the course goals based on student needs, interests and proficiency. After this has been decided, choices can be made to take an extensive or intensive reading approach, to use fiction or non-fiction materials and to use authentic or modified texts.

In order to promote autonomy in a reading course, an instructor must first define autonomy within the context of a reading classroom. In the broadest sense, language learning autonomy can be referred to as promoting the learner to develop a sense of responsibility for their language acquisition. Benson (2001) states that it is preferable 'to define autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own learning, largely because the construct of "control" appears to be more open to investigation than the constructs of "charge" or "responsibility"' (p. 47). However, it is also important to keep in mind that "autonomy is a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times" (p. 47). Keeping these things in mind, the current study will use Benson's definition of autonomy as a guideline:

> "[A]n adequate *description* of autonomy in language learning should at least recognise the importance of three levels at which learner control may be exercised: learning management, cognitive processes and learning content" (p. 50). [italics in the original]

In a reading classroom, learning management would refer to the students controlling in what way they would read, such as setting their own reading pace or deciding what comprehension tasks to complete. Cognitive processes would refer to how the students perceive their own reading and the 'psychology of learning' (p. 50). Finally, learning content would refer to students controlling what they would read in terms of topic and text.

Learner autonomy is a characteristic of modern communicative language teaching which encourages the learner to be an active participant and manager of their own learning (Broady & Kenning, 1996; Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). It is a practice in a language classroom that allows students the freedom of choice in selecting learning resources and activities, as it perceives students as individuals with their own histories and needs (Nunan, 2000). Hart (2002) classified autonomy as either proactive, 'where learners take charge of their own learning', or reactive, 'where learners aim to organise their resources autonomously' (p. 37). Hart based his definitions on Littlewood (1999), who examined the development of autonomy in an Asian context.

Sinclair separated autonomy into two different stages, the first being reactive autonomy, in which students are guided in accessing the target language, followed by proactive autonomy (1996). This is especially important in the context of Japan, as students generally come from a teacher-centered classroom and have little experience autonomously accessing anything beyond what is required for entrance examinations and, therefore, lack the ability to self-manage (McVeigh, 2002). A major part of developing this self-management practice is using course materials which enable and encourage students to take degrees of control for their self-directed acquisition of self-selected learning targets (Nunan, 1995, 2000). These activities should challenge individual students to reflect upon their self-awareness of their individual learning strategies, their previous learning experience and their individual beliefs of instructor and learner roles.

Because of this focus on how an individual learns rather than how a class learns, autonomy has been promoted as a fundamental part of humanistic language teaching, collaborative language learning, experiential learning and the development of a learner-centered classroom. At the same time, it has also been criticised as a foreign concept which carries or forces western cultural ideology (Jones, 1995). A possible retort may argue that autonomy in Japan is complementary to group dynamics, since the central aim of autonomy is to build a social group of cohesive learners who are responsible and self-directed in accessing the target language (Littlewood, 1999). From either perspective, regardless of their cultural background, students will need a certain amount of coaching to become autonomous in their language learning, especially when it comes to reading instruction.

Background

The English Language Institute (ELI) at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS) was founded by Dr. Francis Johnson, whose mandate was to promote learner autonomy by focusing on individual differences and achievement-based proficiency. It was his earnest belief that in order to accommodate for all the needs of the students, a personalised curriculum must be developed for each student, tailored to their interests and needs. Such a curriculum would provide each student with their own individual route through the school system and their own individual rate of progress.

In order for this personalised curriculum to become a reality in a university environment, Dr. Johnson believed that the following were necessary: (1) flexibility of route, rate and mode of learning; (2) learner choice in determining the tasks to be accomplished; and (3) giving the students the responsibility to ensure their own progress and achievement by transferring roles in the classroom from being teacher-centered to student-centered. The Basic Reading course incorporates these three components by providing modified and authentic texts and resources, by guiding students to access them autonomously and by creating a social community which encourages group work and pair work. We believe this is reactive autonomy in practice, as outlined by Hart (2002). The goal of the year-long course is that at its end, students will be able to apply the idea of organising materials according to their needs in other environments, such as in a self-access learning centre. This would be proactive autonomy in practice (Hart, 2002), i.e., the development of an end-product skill that students would be able to take with them even after entering the work environment.

Students of Kanda have come from a background of teacher-led, form-focused and test-focused instruction in which they are offered little opportunity to talk in class, let alone negotiate the content of a course. This often results in shock during the first sessions of the Basic Reading course. As Dr. Johnson says, Basic Reading is intended to break down preconceived notions of reading comprehension and to rebuild them with the building blocks of meaningful reading.

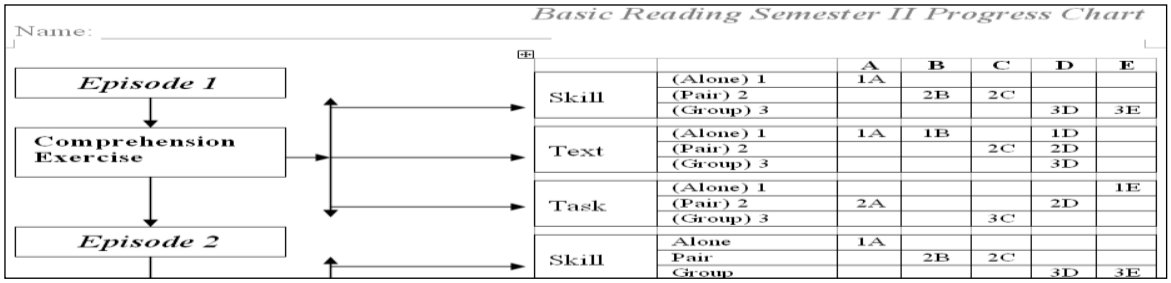
Course Overview

During the first semester, students are introduced to reactive autonomy through the use of modified texts and a combination of the whole language and skills approaches to teaching reading as they complete a reading episode with comprehension, text and vocabulary activities. These activities are interactive in nature, combining top-down and bottom-up approaches to instruction with the goal of developing L2 proficiency and L1 cognitive development. Initially the class is directed by the instructor, since students lack experience managing access to reading and negotiating meaning with classmates. For example, students may complete activities in a small group, and when they agree upon the answers, they each get an answer sheet from the instructor to fill out individually.

The second semester continues the progression from reactive to proactive autonomy, involving more variety utilising both authentic and modified textual sources.

There is a wider range of activities to choose from, and the completion time line is entirely up to the student. Again, the whole language and skills approaches are relied upon. As seen by the arrows in Figure 1, students first read a story episode and then complete the comprehension activity. Then they are free to either continue reading another episode or begin working on the completed episode's skill, text or task activities as represented by A, B, C, D and E in Figure 1. Students complete activities alone, in pairs or in a small group, but it is up to them to decide which activities to complete, when to complete them and with whom. Note that in some cases there is only one available activity (e.g., episode 1 Skill 1A), but the objective of the ongoing curriculum development is to design additional activities which either enable lower-level students or challenge higher-level students.

Figure 1: Basic Reading Semester II Progress Chart



Assessment of the students differs somewhat from the first to the second semester. During the first semester, student work is either periodically collected, or teachers have students arrange a reading portfolio to be handed in at the end of the semester. During the second semester, students arrange a portfolio of their completed activities and also keep a journal in which they record what they have learned to encourage reflection. Activities are worth credits with one credit roughly equalling one hour of work, and a passing grade requires 30 credits.

It should be noted that after completing one year of the Basic Reading course, students enrol in the year-long Advanced Reading course. Half of this course has an extensive reading component in which students take control of planning and managing their reading content, reading what they choose throughout the semester and creating their own projects around their reading. Therefore, the goal of the Basic Reading course is to prepare students to self-access materials for – and beyond – their second year.

Student Perspective

What do the students think about the reading course? In order to evaluate the perception of learner autonomy in Basic Reading, a questionnaire in Japanese was given during the middle part of the second semester to high-, medium- and low-level students in the authors' classes. A basic Likert scale was used, with 1 meaning strongly disagree and 4 meaning strongly agree. The questions and results can be seen in Figure 2.

Though survey participant numbers were low, some notable results include student responses for questions three, six and eight. Regarding question three, a majority of students did think that the Basic Reading class was different from their high school reading class. This means they are accessing reading in a different style rather than the same kind of 'read then regurgitate' methodology of high school. For question six, students reported being responsible for their learning, which is another indicator of developing autonomy (Littlewood, 1999). For question eight, students reported that

Figure 2: Results of student opinion questionnaire

	Mean	SD
1) I enjoyed the Basic Reading class.	3.2	.76
2) I became a better reader in this class.	3.1	.81
3) Basic Reading is different than my high school reading class.	3.4	.81
4) This class had a flexible time schedule.	2.9	.73
5) I worked with classmates to complete activities.	3.5	.70
6) I am responsible for my learning in Basic Reading.	3.2	.69
7) I did not rely on the instructor in Basic Reading.	2.7	.80
8) I had a choice in Basic Reading.	3.1	.62
9) I know my reading strengths and weaknesses.	3.1	.66
10) I like the learning atmosphere in Basic Reading.	3.1	.81

(N-79)

they have a significant matter of choice, which is an integral part of autonomy (Benson, 2001; Nunan, 2000). This development of responsibility for learning is probably most evident in the second semester, the first semester curriculum requiring merely a small portion of the responsibility required for the second. This being said, a better picture of how students developed their reading autonomy throughout the year could have been elicited by more detailed pre- and post-course surveys, which would have provided more extensive evidence of their attitudes toward their developing autonomy.

Discussion

Taking into consideration the backgrounds of students in secondary schools, the Basic Reading curriculum of Kanda University strives to promote language learning autonomy. The first semester can be considered as training for the second semester, at which point students are able to take control of their own learning (Benson, 2001). There are general guidelines for the course, but after these are established, students are able to work at their own pace on activities of their choice and with self-chosen partners. In terms of learning content, though students are not free to select their own modified readings, they are able to choose which authentic-text-based activities they would like to complete. They will also have more control of content in the extensive reading component of the second year of the reading course. Therefore, the Basic Reading curriculum achieves continuity in terms of promoting varying degrees of autonomy.

As for learner control of cognitive processes, at the moment, students are asked to complete a weekly student journal on what they have learned from the tasks and any other thoughts or feelings they may have on the story, activities, course, etc. Although the students compile a portfolio of completed activities, there is no systematic reflection for individual activities that reflect the cognitive processes of the students, which could be of significant benefit for the students and instructors alike. The benefit for the students would be a deeper realisation of their individual learning patterns, a record showing how they have perceived their learning, and a record of the learning from week to week. For instructors, it would provide a detailed document of the cognitive processes of the students throughout the course, allowing students to give their opinions regarding the usefulness, difficulty and relevance of the activities. In addition, it would provide a valuable record for research and materials development for the future (and also act as a measure to prevent students from cheating by simply copying answers from the key).

As for the above questionnaire, we believe that it preliminarily shows that students are aware of their learning environment – how it is different from when they were in high school and how they manage their learning themselves. However, we need to gauge cognitive processes in the future by fine-tuning the questionnaire to include more pointed items, such as ‘I took control of my own learning in Basic Reading’, and ‘there was enough choice in the Basic Reading activities’. Also, the

questionnaire needs to be administered twice to the same group of students before and after they take the course in order to see if there are any significant differences.

Conclusion

As seen in this paper, we believe autonomy can be gradually developed in students when they are provided with proper guidance to manage and take control of their own language learning, as we propose has been done in the ELI Basic Reading course. That said, autonomy in a reading classroom cannot be expected to occur overnight, especially with students who come from a highly teacher-centered background. A successful process of introducing students to learning autonomy requires several steps. It should be noted that possibly the greatest obstacle to developing autonomy is the underlying educational philosophy of the teaching institution. With this in mind, Dr. Francis Johnson, the founder of the ELI at Kanda University, took the first step when he envisioned a learning philosophy based on interdependence, individualisation and interaction. Next a curriculum for a first-year reading course, Basic Reading, was designed so that it specifically promotes autonomy. In this context, the whole language and skills approaches are relied upon, incorporating a mixture of real and authentic texts. With some guidance at the beginning, students access these materials with classmates of their own choice and complete the activities according to their own plan, thereby becoming evermore proficient managers of how they access the material. Ultimately, students will exercise complete choice over which materials they want to access during the second-year Advanced Reading course, thus becoming more autonomous learners.

We believe promoting autonomy can be accomplished in a series of stages which can be seen in the Basic Reading course, and though there is room for improvement, it is a step in the right direction.

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