

Should Learner Autonomy Be Assessed?

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Abstract

Assessment influences the decisions students make about how as well as what they learn (Boud, 1995; Ramsden, 2003). Learner autonomy is defined as learners' ability to take charge or control of their own learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 1990; Benson; 2001 & 2007). Little (2000, p. 69) argues that autonomy in language learning is dependent on 'the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection and independent action'. Kohonen (1992) stresses that learner autonomy involves interdependent as well as independent learning. Encouraging learners to take responsibility for their own learning, as well as to develop an ability to collaborate effectively, is regarded as a key feature of higher education in the 21st century (Dearing, 1997). If we regard learner autonomy as an educational goal per se, should we attempt to assess it and if so how?

This paper will examine the issues and benefits of assessing autonomy through the existing literature, and explore how assessment approaches which demand self-awareness, reflection, metacognitive knowledge and collaborative learning might contribute to the development of autonomy in final year languages' students at Sheffield Hallam University in the UK. It concludes that some approaches to assessment, such as portfolio work, may have the potential to act as a vehicle for learner development, and points to the need for more research in this area.

Introduction

Assessment influences the decisions students make about how as well as what they learn (Boud, 1995; Ramsden, 2003). Learner autonomy is defined as learners' ability to take charge or control of their own learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 1990; Benson; 2001 & 2007). Little (2000, p. 69) argues that autonomy in language learning is dependent on 'the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection and independent action'. Kohonen (1992) stresses that learner autonomy involves interdependent as well as independent learning. Encouraging learners to take responsibility for their own learning, as well as to develop an ability to collaborate effectively, is regarded as a key feature of higher education in the 21st century (Dearing, 1997). If we regard learner autonomy as an educational goal per se, should we attempt to assess it and if so how?

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Autonomy as a Construct

The concept of autonomy in an educational context is predicated on the students' innate capacity to take control of their own learning, and their propensity to

take charge of that learning in a supportive and enabling environment (Benson, 2001; Little, 1990). Little (2000, p. 69) describes autonomy thus:

Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action; autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes.

Autonomy, as described above, is therefore a psychological capacity which the students may or may not choose to exercise (Holec, 1985; Benson, 2001). However, Benson (2001) notes that the term 'autonomy' can also be used to refer to situations in which learners are responsible for all the decisions and actions involved in their learning, for example Dickinson's (1987) definition of autonomy. Although the concept of autonomy was originally closely associated with individual self-directed learning in self-access learning centres (SALCs) (Holec, 1981), Kohonen (1992) stresses that learner autonomy is as much about interdependent learning as it is about independent learning. Little (1996) and William & Burden (1997) also emphasise the importance of collaboration and social interactions in the development of autonomy.

The notion of learner control, which is central to the construct, has close associations with the politically inspired educational thinking of the 1970s (Benson, 2001), particularly the concept of transformative learning (Freire, 1974) which involves the ability to transform reality as well as learn about it.

Assessing Learner Autonomy

Issues

The measurement (and therefore, assessment) of autonomy is problematic because autonomy is a multidimensional construct (Little, 1991; Nunan, 1997; Benson, 2001).

First of all, autonomy is a matter of degrees (Nunan, 1997). Nunan's model of five levels of 'learner action': 'awareness'; 'involvement'; 'intervention'; 'creation' and 'transcendence' to inform the sequencing of activities in language text books offers a linear description of the different stages of learner development. However, Benson (2001) notes that our ability to measure degrees of autonomy is limited - 'we know little about the stages that learners go through in developing their autonomy in different contexts of learning other than that the process is highly uneven and variable' (p. 53).

Secondly, determining and observing the characteristics displayed by autonomous learners, whatever their stage of development, is complex: 'Although we may be able to identify and list behaviours that demonstrate control over learning . . . we have little evidence to suggest that autonomy consists of any particular combination of these behaviours' (Benson, 2001, p. 51). As a psychological capacity to be exercised by the learner, autonomous behaviour can adopt different forms depending on age, prior learning experience, perceived learning needs and even the learning context (Little, 1991; Benson, 2001).

Thirdly, and this is particularly relevant to assessment, Benson (2001) argues that autonomous behaviour should be self-initiated rather than 'generated in response to a task in which the observed behaviours are either explicitly or implicitly required' (p. 52). Breen and Mann (1997) warn against tasks which require a display of autonomous behaviour because the students are likely to manifest any behaviour they think the teacher perceives as autonomous. Voller (1997) observes that an approach which fosters autonomy necessitates 'a transfer of control to the learner' (p. 112).

Benefits

Despite the difficulty in measuring autonomy, Benson (2001) argues that the measurement of autonomy should be attempted, if only to judge the success of interventions relating to its promotion. In terms of assessment, autonomy is a capacity that the students may or may not choose to exercise. If autonomy is not included into the assessment programme, the literature on assessment (Boud, 1995; Ramsden, 2003) and my own experience suggest that the majority of students will not see its importance. Furthermore, within an institutional setting, learner control implies a power shift both within and outside the classroom, with the tutor moving from a directing role to being more of a partner in the learning process. Assessment needs to reflect this change in emphasis.

Assessment does not simply provide information on the students' progress in the form of a grade, rank, and/or feedback; it can also be used to improve students' approach to learning through shaping how students view the curriculum (Boud, 1995; Ramsden, 2003). Assessment for, or as, learning, which focuses on the process as well as the outcome of the learning, can therefore enhance the student learning experience, and foster the development of autonomy. For instance, the ability of the learners to monitor their own progress can be developed through the use of peer and self-assessment (Oscarsson, as cited in Benson, 2001; Council of Europe, 2000; Nunan, 1996).

Evaluating the Development of Autonomy in Languages: Previous Studies

Measuring Autonomy: Rating Scales

Lai (2001) reported the successful development of two rating scales: one relating to process control, at task level using a listening journal and the other on self-direction. The Process Control scale focused on two aspects:

- task aim i.e. the extent to which the aim was relevant to the programme and conducive to training aspects of listening skills/ strategies;
- self-assessment i.e. the extent to which the self-assessment was relevant to the set aims and related to the learner's listening process or performance.

Based on the students' design of a personal course for self-directed language learning, the self-direction scale focused on:

- the learner's ability to set long/short term goals;
- identifying relevant materials and skills or strategies to practise;
- engaging in appropriate activities;
- adopting an approach for personal learning and conducting self-assessment throughout.

Benson (2001) observes that a number of rating scales have been developed to measure the capacity for autonomous learning, such as the Self-Directed Learning Readiness Scale (SDLRS) by Guglielmino (as cited in Benson, 2001) and Cotterall's (1995) survey using learner beliefs as the basis for measuring readiness for autonomy. However, according to both Bonham and Cotterall (cited in Benson, 2001) these scales have, since then, been the subject of controversy.

Assessing Autonomy through Students' Output and Feedback

Champagne et al.'s (2001) action research study looked at performance (c-test to measure attainment in language proficiency) and process through qualitative analysis of portfolio entries/observations and interviews. The study highlighted the

need for learners to participate in self-assessment, and for assessment of the process to be an integral part of the programme.

My own study (O'Leary, 2006) used Benson's (2001) three key psychological concepts namely: attention, metacognitive knowledge and reflection (p. 86), to analyse students' self-evaluation reports from portfolio-based assessment between 1999 and 2002, for evidence of autonomous learning behaviour. A number of learner diaries were also examined to try and identify the most common approach adopted by students. The study concluded that the nature of the assessment activity clearly plays a key role in the development of autonomy.

The above studies suggest that assessing autonomy can benefit students' development as autonomous learners. They also testify to the possibility of assessing autonomy in practice, despite the pitfalls covered in the literature.

Assessing Learner Autonomy in Practice: The Case of Sheffield Hallam University

Methodology

Cohen & Manion (1994) describe the case study researcher as typically observing the characteristics of an individual unit to examine in depth a complex phenomenon with a view to 'establishing generalisations about the population to which that unit belongs' (pp. 106-107). The following case study, focusing on the criteria and portfolio entries of a cohort of 21 students in 2006/7, illustrates a possible approach to the assessment of autonomy in a specialised area of language skills, namely translation and interpreting, within a post-92¹ university context in the UK. Its application in other areas of language learning, as well as other contexts, is therefore limited. However, it clearly highlights the need for further research and 'experimental' development in this area.

Context

This case study is based on final year language students, studying French Stage 6 (equivalent to CEFR² -Effective Professional Proficiency) on the University Language Scheme in 2006/7, at Sheffield Hallam University. Following a more traditional approach of tutor-led seminars culminating in a time-constrained negotiation oral and written report in Semester 1, the Stage 6 curriculum in the second half of Semester 1 and Semester 2 focuses on the development of interpreting and translation skills, assessed through a portfolio of learner-centred tasks (process) and a time-constrained translation and interpreting oral (product), worth 20% and 80% of the overall mark respectively.

Much of the second half of Semester 1 is devoted to preparing the students for the portfolio tasks, with a strong focus on the development of metacognitive skills and collaborative working through workshops, and small group discussions with the tutor. Wenden, (as cited in Benson, 2001) stresses that 'learners . . . need guidance in improving and expanding their knowledge about learning' (p. 96). This preparation is therefore key to the successful completion of the portfolio.

Portfolio-based Assessment Design

The Languages Student Portfolio consists of group translation and interpreting tasks and associated self/peer evaluation activities selected by the learners based on needs and a reflective piece of writing. The assessment criteria are subdivided under four headings, namely:

¹ Polytechnics which offered vocational degree and sub-degree education in the UK became Universities in 1992.

² Common European Framework of Reference for Languages which is divided into 6 levels with Effective Professional Proficiency being the penultimate level.

Planning:

This section focuses on the student's ability to assess learning needs, define objectives and plan work accordingly. It corresponds to Little's (2000) definition of autonomous learners taking responsibility for determining the purpose, monitoring progress and evaluating outcomes, be it theirs or others, through the collaborative tasks. It assesses control over learning management, described by Benson (2001, p. 76) as 'behaviours that learners employ in order to manage the planning, organisation and evaluation of their learning', and control over learning content. Benson (2001) views control over content as fundamental to autonomy. Furthermore, he suggests that, in an institutional context, learners need to learn how to exercise control over the collective situation, using skills for social interaction which are different from the ones required for individual learning.

Reflection

This section covers the student's ability to reflect on and assess progress made, and the extent to which feedback given to peers is detailed and constructive. It focuses on the learner's ability for critical reflection, decision making and independent action in Little's (2000) definition, with some unavoidable overlap with the Planning criteria. It assesses control over cognitive processes (Benson, 2001) both from an individual and a collective perspective.

Performance:

This section deals with the quality of the tasks (group and free choice activities) included in the portfolio. It aims to encourage students to select materials and/or perform tasks to the required standard for their level of study.

Progression:

This section focuses on evidence of development and progress (e.g. acting on feedback through resubmission of work). In the same way as the performance criteria, it seeks to encourage students to focus on the output, in this case its improvement, as well as the process of their learning as a formative activity to the summative time-constrained tasks. All the sections are weighted equally.

Illustrative Extracts from Students' Work

The following extracts from 2006/7 portfolios are typical of the entries found in the majority of student portfolios over the last seven years, and as such are illustrative of the type of evidence used to apply the Planning and Reflection criteria. It is worth noting here that, although there are opportunities for discussions and some direct input from students through peer feedback/ self-assessment, the judgement relating to performance and progress remains ultimately with the class tutor.

Planning

The following entries show evidence of students' sequencing their activities and of defining objectives based on their perceived learning needs.

Timing

'These are the dates I propose to have each task done by. I have specifically left the interpretation exercises until last because I want to get as much practice as possible (..) I am less confident in this area.' (S1)

Defining objectives

'In order to improve my interpretation skills, I am going to choose tasks that will enable me to practise my note taking techniques.' (S3)

Reflection

My own experience suggests that the type of evidence grouped under this heading is less predictable than is the case for planning. This may be due to the fact that it is possible to perform actions based on 'received' self-management of learning that is read from textbooks or picked up through classroom sessions, and/or that there is more of a consensus with regard to self-management. The cognitive capacities to make these actions systematic or effective, covered in this section, need to be developed for individuals to be described as autonomous (Benson, 2001).

Reflection on successful learning

'Of all three translations completed, I found the group translation most useful..... The main reasons for this is because I was in a group of three whereby each group member contributed significantly to the final version. Each point discussed was debated enthusiastically and each view was well justified by all group members.' (S6)

Assessing progress made

'I found that I almost forgot important grammatical structures on the spot. I knew that I had said something wrong once I had said it.'(S8)

Feedback to peers

'Once again in the third paragraph which Sarah interpreted I only found a couple of things to question. I was unsure if saying 'nous attendons' which literally means ' we are waiting' gives the correct message that 'they are expecting'. However it was a good attempt to get around the word if she did not know what expecting was in French.'(S9)

Conclusion

From the above examples, the portfolio work appears to have the potential to encourage students to develop and use their capacity for autonomy in order to demonstrate this capacity. The portfolio-based assessment, in this context, becomes a vehicle for learner development that is an assessment *for* autonomy as opposed to a measuring tool which would be an assessment *of* autonomy.

Previous studies and the existing literature mentioned earlier suggest that the effectiveness of such an approach depends on curriculum design, particularly with regards to aspects of learner development such as metacognitive knowledge. The opportunity to make choices also plays an important role.

More research is needed to examine the possible impact of various approaches to assessing autonomy on the development of autonomy itself.

The Author

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