

Developing Autonomy in Lower Proficiency Students

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Abstract

Lower proficiency students are often nervous about making mistakes and many tend to withdraw from the opportunities available. These same students also struggle to find effective ways to improve their English skills. Good language learners are those who have developed effective learning strategies (Dickinson, 1987a). Moreover, they are aware of their needs, learning styles, and interests. Good language learners are also autonomous learners who have developed a degree of control over their learning management, managing their time, seeking help, and coping with pressures and stresses (Oxford, 1990). The author worked with lower proficiency students for one semester to introduce the concept of learner autonomy and how to become a good language learner. The study demonstrated that among other factors, face-to-face communication was the most important in providing the students with the necessary instructional and affective support.

Introduction

'I don't know how to study...' 'I want to improve my speaking skill, but I don't know how...' Good language learners are ones who have developed effective learning strategies (Dickinson, 1987a). They are aware of their needs, learning styles, and interests. Good language learners are also autonomous learners who have developed a degree of control over their learning management, managing their time, seeking help, and coping with pressures and stresses (Oxford, 1990). For one semester, the author worked with lower proficiency students to introduce the concept of learner autonomy and how to become good language learners. This paper discusses the key elements that led to a successful learning experience for the students.

Knowing How to Study English

At Kanda University of International Studies, the Learning Advisors (LAs) offer a non-compulsory independent study course called the First Steps Module (FSM) to freshmen/first year undergraduates. The goals of the FSM are (1) to help the learner become a better language learner, (2) to help the learner become a good independent learner, and (3) to help the learner learn how to use the Self-access Learning Centre effectively. This course covers topics including needs analysis, time management, learning styles, study systems, affective strategies, learning strategies, and resources which are all important aspects in becoming an autonomous learner. Students are asked to work on the activities, write a reflective diary after each unit and submit a portfolio including a future learning plan. In this course, each student is assigned to a LA who receives the students' work each week and returns it with written advice and comments.

Every year, over 500 out of 700 freshmen/first year undergraduates sign up to take this course. Despite its popularity, LAs have noticed that lower proficiency students rarely participate. Even when the lower proficiency students participate, they struggle through the FSM, often dropping out in the middle of the course. In this study,

some students were completely lost as to what the point of the course was and how it related to themselves and their learning.

Workshop Version of the FSM

In the light of this evidence, the author decided to offer the FSM in a workshop format. In the standard FSM, the major communication method between an LA and a student is through a reflective diary submitted by each student. Students are also welcome to talk to an LA anytime, but face-to-face contact isn't required.¹ On the other hand, in the workshop version, students have regular face-to-face contact with an LA. Instead of doing the Module alone, students attend weekly workshops throughout the semester with their classmates and with a LA.

There are no differences to the content covered between the standard FSM and the workshop FSM. However, in the workshop version, the author placed importance on the following:

1. to introduce students to ways of studying English.
2. to nurture learner autonomy.
3. to support lower level students in understanding the contents of the FSM.
4. to make learning English fun and accessible.
5. to introduce SALC resources in a way that was more relevant to the students.

Workshop Participants

In her aim to offer the workshop to lower proficiency students, the author selected a freshmen/first year English class for non-English majors. As their English proficiency level is low these students hesitate to ask their teacher questions because they are not sure how to form the interrogative in the target language. Students prioritised and showed most interest in the language they were majoring in: Chinese, Spanish, or Korean.

Almost everyone in the class - 21 students - signed up for the Module, but only 18 showed up for the first workshop, and 11 for the second workshop. By the third workshop, only nine came, and those nine became the core students who participated in the workshop for the rest of the semester.

Below (Table 1 and Table 2) are the results of a questionnaire completed by 11 students at the beginning of the second workshop. Most of the participants showed anxiety towards performing in English.

1 Face-to-face contact wasn't required at the time of this research for standard FSM students. The outcome of this research led to a change in the policy. The new policy requires students to come and see the LA at least twice during the semester.

Table 1: Anxiety Outside of Class

		strongly agree <----> strongly disagree				
		1	2	3	4	5
1	I get nervous when a NES speaks to me.	8	3	0	0	0
2	I get nervous when I have to approach a NES to start a conversation.	9	2	0	0	0
3	I get nervous when speaking English outside of class.	10	1	0	0	0
4	My heart pounds when I speak with a NES alone.	8	2	1	0	0
5	I feel self-conscious when speaking English with my friends outside of class.	8	2	1	0	0
6	I am afraid that others will laugh at me when I speak English with a NES.	3	5	3	0	0
7	I feel that my friends are better than me at speaking English with NES.	9	2	0	0	0
8	The more I study English, the more I get confused.	3	3	5	0	0
9	I usually keep quiet around NES.	1	3	6	1	0
10	I worry when I have to speak English in a large group outside of class.	9	2	0	0	0

Table 2: Anxiety in Class

		Strongly Agree <---->Strongly Disagree				
		1	2	3	4	5
11	I get embarrassed if the teacher corrects me in class.	10	1	0	0	0
12	I get so nervous in class that I forget everything.	1	5	5	0	0
13	I worry if I can't understand every word the teacher says.	10	1	0	0	0
14	When doing pair-work, I worry if my partner is better than me at English.	6	4	1	0	0
15	I get nervous if I haven't prepared for English class.	2	3	5	1	0
16	I worry about taking English tests.	2	5	4	0	0
17	I worry about failing English class.	1	1	2	7	0
18	English class makes me more nervous than other classes.	1	2	8	0	0
19	I don't look forward to English class.	0	1	6	4	0
20	I feel anxious even if I have prepared for English class.	0	1	5	5	0

Workshop Outline

Students used the same module pack as the standard FSM students, but the workshop style allowed the LA to give the students more introduction and context to the topic that each unit covers. For example, at the start of the learning styles unit, the LA asked students to list how they usually memorise new vocabulary and whether they like that method or not. This is one way of enabling students to become aware of the existence and importance of learning styles and how they can make use of their own preferred styles in studying English effectively. In the process of this discovery, students can also find out how each person has different preferences for the ways in which they carry out certain activities, for example memorising words. The 50-minute workshop reflected Kelly (1996)'s contention that:

learners need to undergo a considerable transformation of their beliefs about language and their role as learners in order to be able to undertake

independent learning effectively. This process of reorientation and personal discovery is directly or indirectly an outcome of learner training (p. 94).

Roles of the Learning Advisor in the Workshop

The interactions that took place in the workshop version of the FSM became the vehicle for making the transition to independent learning. The workshops provided the LA with ample opportunities to introduce new directions and options to the students, to offer advice and information, direction and ideas, and to connect the learner's goals and tasks to wider issues. These helped students to focus on what their current problems were with regard to their learning, to establish the link between their goals and needs for studying English, their preferred learning styles, and their interests. They also enabled students to think about how they could improve their study from then on, and to make decisions based on a new understanding of self-responsibility and self-help.

The difference between the standard FSM and the workshop version is in the amount of interaction that can take place. Conversations between the LA and students and among students themselves occur far more in the workshop version. In the standard FSM, students have communication with an LA through their written diaries, but in the workshop version, students can have a live 'dialogue' with the LA to further their understanding and make the transition to becoming a more autonomous learner. As Esch (1996) says, it is a:

system of interventions which aims at supporting students' methodology of language learning by means of "conversation" i.e. by using language in the framework of social interaction to help students reflect on their learning experience, identify inconsistencies and steer their own path. (p. 42)

Kelly (1996) extends this notion of a learning conversation and defines it as a 'form of therapeutic dialogue that enables an individual to manage a problem' (p. 94). Riley (1997) defines counselling (advising practices) as one category of a communicative situation, and considers it a complex skill which cannot be acquired overnight.

For the purpose of this paper, the author does not probe further into what constitutes advising skills, which, in brief, require advisers to listen attentively to their students, hold back and not become too directive, so that they can provide an 'opportunity for learners to clarify their needs and attitudes, develop their independent learning skills, and encourage them to trust their own judgment on what works for them' (Stickler, 2001, p. 43).

Use of Japanese

In the hope that the use of Japanese will help students feel at ease, break down any barriers towards English and more easily understand the FSM, students were given the option of using the L1. The use of Japanese allowed the LA to establish an atmosphere in which students found it easy to talk about their learning problems. Use of Japanese also helped the LA understand their learning backgrounds and their current needs better, and be in a position to encourage and support the students through the language that they felt comfortable with. Thus the use of Japanese helped in building closer relationships with the students.

Japanese also allowed the author to explain the contents of the FSM thoroughly to the students. As Dickinson (1987b) says, the use of learner's L1 in order to be able to communicate with learners without difficulty and with minimum risk of misunderstanding is important. The student surveys bear this out. Since one of the goals of the workshop was to make sure students understood the content, in this respect it was also beneficial to use Japanese.

Workshop Outcome

At the end of 8 week-long workshop, a questionnaire was distributed for participants to give feedback on their experience of participating in the FSM workshop.

Understanding

The results of the survey showed that all agreed that the workshop was easy to understand and a majority of students had a clearer understanding of themselves as learners and how best to pursue their language study. For instance, 88% of students strongly agreed/agreed with 'I was able to find my needs'. 73% said 'I know how I can effectively study the skills I would like to improve.' 72% said 'I can decide how to study based on my learning style'. 87% strongly agreed/agreed with 'I know how I can use materials in SALC and other resources for my study'. 80% of students strongly agreed/agreed with 'I can write a learning plan as an autonomous learner'. Students' understanding of the contents of FSM is reflected in their final project, the learning plan. In the learning plan, students must demonstrate their ability to set a goal, choose resources, write their study plan in a step-by-step format, and decide on ways to evaluate their own learning process. All of the nine workshop participants received either 4 or 5 on a 0 to 5 scale (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Grading Band for First Steps Module Learning Plan

5. Learner has submitted a fully completed learning plan. The plan is relevant, well documented and would need little or no revision in order to be used as the basis for independent learning.
4. Learner shows characteristics of bands 5 and 3.
3. Learner has submitted a learning plan that demonstrates an ability to apply concepts presented in the module. There may be some omissions, but with some revisions the plan could be used as the basis for independent learning.
2. Learner shows characteristics of bands 3 and 1.
1. Learner has submitted a plan, but it shows little or no link to work done in the module. There may be serious omissions, and the plan would be unsuitable as the basis for independent learning.
0. The learner has not submitted a plan or there is insufficient material for assessment.

Usefulness and Interestingness

The questionnaire results from the workshop show that students found the workshop to be very useful:

- I think the workshop was very useful in understanding how to study English.

They also show that students decided to participate and continued to participate because they thought that what they were learning was useful.

- Because I believed that this workshop would be useful to me. Also because the instructor (LA) was good!
- Because I can get a new useful information.

Furthermore, when students were asked if they were confident that they would be able to apply what they had learned in the workshop to their future study, all of them said yes, although they had some concerns.

Students gave positive feedback on the workshop which they found fun and enjoyable:

- The workshop was cozy!
- Cosy??
- Because I can study different topics every time and because it was fun.

All the students who were regular comers said they will recommend the workshop to next year's freshmen/first year undergraduates. One even said, 'I strongly recommend'.

Motivation

The questionnaire at the end of the Module showed that 85% of the participants said that they felt less intimidated about learning/using English after participating in the workshops. In comparison with the anxiety questionnaire result (Table 1) conducted at the beginning of the semester, students had gained confidence and were motivated to pursue their English study. Students also expressed their feelings towards English in writing:

- There are many ways to study English and I am motivated to learn English.
- I became to want to learn English more than ever. I think this is because I understand now how to study English.
- I became to think that I want to study English actively.
- English became closer existence to me. I think I became to use English more than before!
- I was able to discover that I can study English with fun and enjoyment. Not only English, but I was also able to learn how to study effectively.

Did the Workshop Meet the Goals Set in the Beginning?

The questionnaire results and the author's reflections demonstrate that these goals were achieved through the workshop. Each student also gained a sense of self-discovery and their comments reflect that they were satisfied with what they had accomplished.

- There are lots of different ways to study and that within those, I choose the ways that fit best to me.
- I have never learned about my English proficiency and how to study English, so every workshop was full of discovery.
- I discovered that there are lots of worksheets in SALC.
- I was able to discover that I can study English with fun and enjoyment. Not only English, but I was also able to learn how to study effectively.

Conclusion

The FSM was offered to prepare students to become autonomous learners. This study suggests that for these particular participants, the workshop version of the FSM was possibly more meaningful to them than the standard FSM would have been. Students found the workshop to be (1) easy to understand, (2) useful and interesting, and (3) helpful in increasing their motivation to study English.

The face-to-face contact opportunities with live conversation involving an LA and the use of L1 in the workshop helped students begin to make the transition into the world of autonomous learning. In addition to the above three positive outcomes, the

workshop version was beneficial for the students' in terms of their learning process in the following respects:

1. It established trust between students and the LA and supported the affective side of their learning.
2. It provided opportunities for scaffolding where the author could assist the students to become consciously aware of their needs, their current learning processes, their preferred learning styles, and new techniques to study English effectively.

It could be argued that the workshop style takes away the 'independent learning' aspect of the FSM. This study shows that not every aspect of carrying out the FSM should be completely independent:

There is no reason for the self-instructing learner to work in isolation; equally, there is no compulsion to work in a group. For most learners, however, being a member of a group of peers who are all striving towards similar ends, and who are struggling with similar difficulties and problems, can be a tremendous help in maintaining morale, and in motivation. (Dickinson, 1987a, p. 101)

It is at the end of the FSM that the students will be able to study independently. In the preparation stage, students need support from their peers and some scaffolding from Learning Advisors.

The Author

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