Section 2. Pedagogy

MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO DEVELOP THEIR AUTONOMY: AN EXPLORATORY ACTION RESEARCH

Dilafruz Sarimsakova [1]

[1] Namangan State University, Uzbekistan

Abstract

Developing learner autonomy has always been one of the core ELT issues for many years. Many studies on fostering learner autonomy promote what students need to develop autonomous learning skills in language classes in order to reach the outcome of the course. This chapter aims to explore how to motivate demotivated students to become active autonomous learners in their own learning and offers practical recommendations for practitioners who are facing the same challenges in teaching English.

Keywords: *exploratory action research, learner autonomy, demotivated students, autonomy development, autonomy building tasks*

Introduction

Most people say, teaching is an easy job but teaching well is not. I have been teaching EAP to undergraduates who are future English teachers since 2013. I am currently teaching the groups of students (second year courses) who have transferred their studies to our faculty from local regions and from the neighboring countries (Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan) for the academic year 2021–2022. During a semester, I conduct classes to 32 students whose current level is B_1 and B_2. Their ages ranged from 20 to 24. However, some students were passive, could not complete tasks individually. There were some students who performed reluctantly, used to keep L1

during the class and did not feel the responsibility to submit tasks on time. All these issues triggered my attention as a course teacher. I realized that I could never reach the outcomes of the course I was delivering unless I solve these challenges in my classroom. I found out that my students were demotivated, lack autonomy towards doing tasks, lack of support, and collaboration as well.

There are many similar definitions of learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is defined as motivated learners who are active participants in their own learning (Ushioda, 1996). In other words, Benson (2003) refers to autonomy as the capacity of taking control of one's own learning based on his/her moti-

vation, ability and freedom. In fact, students will improve their language practices both in the classroom and out of the classroom if they are trained and motivated to be autonomous. This does not happen automatically, because some students need teachers' external support, and encouragement/motivation to help them develop their autonomy in a new way of teaching (Hu & Zhang, 2016). Many studies indicate the role of teachers' responsibility as a facilitator should assign students with more effective activities in fostering learner autonomy which in turn leads to more success in their learning onsite and offsite. Gibbs (2012) points out that the aim of teaching should be focused on assisting students learning and taking charge of their learning. Hu & Zhang (2017) indicates that the learner autonomy from dependence to autonomy needs planning, and implementing an action according to learners' needs in EFL.

How to motivate students to develop their autonomy is the focus of this exploratory action research, which was carried out in two parts: exploratory level and action level. This study aimed to answer the following questions.

Exploratory phase

1. Why do I think my students should be more autonomous in their learning?

2. What are my colleagues' perceptions of learner autonomy?

3. What are my students' perceptions of autonomous learning?

4. What do they do when I give them activities or assignments that require self-regulated learning?

Action phase

5. What effect did new self-regulated learning activities or assignments have on students' autonomy and motivation to study?

Literature Review

There have been quite many studies on defining the concept "learner autonomy and how to develop learners' autonomy or autonomous learning". (Holec, 1981, Little, 1991, Littlewood 1996, Ushioda, 1996, Benson, 2001, Wang, 2002, Gibbs, 2012, Hu & Zhang, 2017, etc.). Learner autonomy is defined by many foreign researchers as quality of personality. Learner autonomy is seen in the student's ability to be an active and re-

sponsible recipient of knowledge, the ability to set goals, the ability to independently and consciously choose self, pair and group strategies, techniques and tactics to achieve the goal, the ability to self-reflection and self-assessment of their own educational and cognitive activity, as well as the ability to transfer received results in other learning and life contexts. Littlewood (1996) refers that learner autonomy is formed from two components: *ability* and *desire* to make choices independently. Harmer (2001) argues that learners never learn unless they are determined to learn independently. There are some strategies, which will help to build and develop learner autonomy in a positive and cooperative learning environment.

The positive learning effect is enhanced by the exchange of opinions and experiences if learners have common learning interests and are aware of what they need to learn the language. Harmer (2001) suggests that learners need to be trained to be able to make classroom decisions and carry on out-of-class learning. Teachers should promote intrinsic motivation in their students for autonomy development (Dornyei, 2005). Teachers should be aware of how and when to use strategies to enable their students to become autonomous learners. (Williams & Burden, 1997). An autonomous learner is perceived as one who can make a critical reflection, make decisions and independent action (Little, 1991). They feel responsible for their own learning, monitoring progress and evaluating the outcomes (Holec, 1981). Gibbs (2012) defines that autonomous learners possess cognitive and metacognitive strategies (planning of studies and analysis of language and its use respectively), motivation, knowledge about language learning, external support and a raised consciousness as to the importance of being responsible for one's own learning in which leads confidence and further increased motivation.

According to Tamjid &Birjandi (2011), self-assessment/pair assessment will raise learners' autonomy. Gurbanov & Mirzayeva (2018) highlight pair and group work activities will increase students' autonomy where the facilitator instructs students and maintains collaboration. They also promote homework plays a significant role in the progress

of developing learner autonomy. Patall, Cooper, and Wynn (cited by Gurbanov & Mirzayeva, 2018) argue that it is important to give choices for homework as it increases a sense of competence and intrinsic motivation. All these ideas refer that teachers should promote students with a positive environment, motivating, encouraging collaboration, and social interaction on-site and offsite to develop their autonomy. These studies recommend a wide range of activities, which will contribute to developing learner autonomy such as seatwork (individual/pair work), self-assessment/pair assessment, homework (individualised), long-term/short-term projects and extracurricular activities: contests, festivals, holidays and any extra clubs for autonomy development. In addition, the strategy "Think, Pair and Share", problem-based learning situations, keeping reflective notes about students' progress, using rubrics for checking self-checklist, peer-assessment and group work evaluation forms and keeping portfolios of students' progress are highly recommended for teachers and indicated the role of teachers' responsibility as a facilitator should motivate students to develop their autonomy to be successful in their future careers.

Research Methods

This research study was conducted among five teacher-colleagues and 32 B_1/B_2 (pre-intermediate/intermediate levels) sophomore students of Namangan State University in Uzbekistan. The study allowed me to identify the problem at the exploratory level and made a plan of new actions based on the identified findings in order to motivate students to develop their autonomy during the first semester of the academic year 2021–2022.

Various types of data collection tools were applied in this study: 1) my own reflections, 2) informal discussions with colleagues, 3) questionnaires in the form of students' reports and 4) follow-up discussion and 5) observation by a colleague.

Data collection tools
Reflection

Firstly, it seemed vital to explore my own perceptions about learner autonomy as a teacher and as a student responding to the research question "*Why do I think my stu-*

dents should be more autonomous in their learning?" and to identify the problem with my students and observe the behaviour of my students during my classes and keep a reflective diary for collecting data.

Informal discussion with colleagues

In order to explore my colleagues' perceptions of learner autonomy, I initiated a small-scale discussion to collect ideas/feedback from five colleagues on the questions below:

1. What does learner autonomy mean to you?

2. What do you think we should promote learner autonomy?

3. What kind of autonomy building tasks do you think can foster learner autonomy?

4. What kind of assessment tools can help to develop learner autonomy?

Questionnaire

The questionnaire was conducted among 32 students to identify their needs and explore the main reasons for being reluctant in their autonomous learning. Students were expected to answer the questions in the form of reports individually.

1. What does 'learner autonomy' mean to you?

2. 'What do you like and dislike about classroom activities?

3. What kind of independent learning tasks would you like to do in the classroom?

Follow-up interview

The interview was conducted in the same group to follow the questions in the questionnaire

– *Do you think are you an independent/ autonomous learner in your own learning?*

– *Do you feel comfortable in collaborative activities (pair, group work)?*

– *Do you use self-assessment, peer-assessment or group assessment rubrics in other classes?*

– *What kind of independent learning tasks would you suggest doing in our class?*

– *Would you like to attend extracurricular activities outside of the class?*

Lesson Observation

At the exploratory level, I asked one of my colleagues to observe my class to explore the

behaviour of my students. I wanted to answer the question: *what do students do when they are assigned activities that require self-regulated learning?*

At the action level, the colleague observed my class to identify the changes in my students' behaviour. "*What effect did new activities or assignments require them to do on their own and on their autonomy.*

Data Analysis

After collecting the data from the questionnaire, it was statistically analysed through Excel. The qualitative data that was collected from informal discussions with colleagues and follow-up discussions with students were coded and thematically analysed.

Findings and Discussions

The collected responses in the exploratory phase from the informal discussions with teacher-colleagues, the questionnaire in the written form of students, follow-up interviews, observation by a colleague and my own reflections helped me to explore each of the research questions. Based on the identified exploratory level findings, I planned to implement some changes in the action level focused on motivating my students to become autonomous in their learning.

Exploratory Phase
My reflections

Based on my own reflections, I found out that I always believed my students should become autonomous learners who are active in their own learning, able to set goals in their learning, be aware of their learning styles, self-assessed, self-corrected, use the target language appropriately, join common interest groups and keep lifelong learning. They should be able to work independently due to the teacher's instructions and be able to use 21st-century skills (communication, collaboration, creativity, critical thinking, etc.) in sociolinguistic settings. From the perspective of being a former student of a university, I wanted to reflect on how I could develop my autonomy. My teachers often assigned us variety of tasks required working in pair/ small groups which helped me to build my confidence and learn effectively, control my learning paths based on my strong and weak points, and set

realistic goals to be successful in my learning, and used to develop my language skills under the guidance of those teachers. Besides, I was encouraged to join common interest groups (Reader's group) and clubs of teachers (Tea chat) where I was used to training my personal and professional skills to become a competitive teacher among teachers.

From the perspective of being a teacher, now I feel that as a facilitator I should encourage my students to feel a sense of responsibility for their learning and become autonomous learners so that they would be able to develop their skills such as communication, critical thinking, collaboration and creativity as future teachers. Because, today a modern teacher is viewed as able to apply 21st-century skills (communication, critical thinking, collaboration, creativity) in intercultural and sociolinguistic settings where the target language is used for daily purposes. Therefore, my students should become autonomous learners so that they will accept responsibility for their learning, reflect and evaluate their learning effectively and apply skills in meaningful contexts. They need to foster their autonomous learning so that they will also guide their future learners to improve independent study skills and become autonomous learners.

Informal discussion

Based on my informal discussions with my colleagues, an autonomous learner is perceived as someone who takes control of his/her own learning, is able to identify weak and strong sides of his/her learning, is able to set goals and make decisions, and self-assessed, self-disciplined, and be able to work independently under the guidance of their instructor and be able to use 21st-century skills (communication, critical thinking, creativity and collaboration). The responses to the next questions claim that teachers always need to promote autonomous learning onsite and offsite through various autonomy-building activities such as short term or long-term projects to work collaboratively, having discussions on extensive reading tasks, listening and writing logs, using rubrics, checklists, peer-assessment /group work evaluations are focused on fostering learner autonomy. My colleagues' perceptions of learner autonomy and their responses approved my own

beliefs during the informal discussion (Appendix 1).

Questionnaire

My students provided similar responses to the questions in the questionnaire, which emerged with two main themes. 75% of students understand that autonomous learning is taking responsibility for one's learning. 25% of students found learner autonomy as individual learning out of the classroom. (Appendix 2). The responses to the next question show that 65% of students mentioned that activities such as case studies, interviews, logs, reflective essays, book reviews, and projects in small groups are favourite activities. 35% of students pointed out they prefer pair work activities rather than self-regulated learning tasks. 85% of students noted that tasks should focus on integrating collaboratively onsite and fostering their life skills (communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, and self-assessment) offsite and 15% of students would like to have individual tasks be completed as home assignments.

Follow-up discussion

The responses collected from the follow-up discussion show that 60% of students ensure that they consider themselves autonomous learners in contrast 40% of students feel that they need to develop their autonomy. The majority of the respondents conformed working in a collaborative manner is beneficial and fun for learning whereas only 35% of students mentioned that they prefer individual tasks to collaborative activities. Besides, students showed great interest in doing a wide range of individual, pair and group work tasks including projects based on small research findings, real-life tasks (travelling brochures, advertisements, job interviews, surveys), designing teaching tasks, evaluating course books, recording micro-teaching, writing reading logs, reviews on films, cartoon, songs, authentic video materials, playing role plays, interactive games and participating in extracurricular activities such as contests, clubs as well.

Observation by a colleague

Once I asked a colleague to observe my class, her key points from her perspective helped me to have a clear picture of identifying the behaviour of my students during the class. My colleague mentioned that group interview activity helped students to feel motivated when working in groups and communicating collaboratively. However, she noticed some challenges where some students were keeping L1, some were not participating actively when I assigned them to take an interview on 'Importance of studying in groups in the library. She suggested me to change the interaction pattern of this task, to work in pairs rather than working in groups so that all students would work in pairs.

Action Phase Findings

I planned the content of my Action Plan (AP) based on my main findings from students' and colleagues' suggestions and literature, and planned the following main actions to improve the situation towards motivating students to develop autonomy (Appendix 3). I selected and created some autonomy building activities (seatwork: individual/pair/group; self-assessment/pair/group assessment) short-term projects, and extracurricular tasks (extensive reading, public speech contest) according to the needs and suggestions of my students. I showed all teaching materials, handouts and rubrics to my colleagues, I piloted new autonomy building activities in order to increase students' active participation and use rubrics after each task following my action plan. I collected data on students' progress through observation and rubric (self-assessment, peer-assessment, group work evaluation form). In addition, I organized a Public Speaking Contest to motivate students to develop their autonomy (offsite). By following my action plan, I implemented changes, observed and collected data on innovations through research methods that focused on the research questions and objectives of the action plan.

Based on the data from my reflective diary, I have noticed some new changes in terms of motivating my students to develop their autonomy. I feel that I have changed students' attitudes towards responsibility for assigned tasks. I noticed that students are keeping target language (regardless of few mistakes) during the whole class. I noticed that they

are motivated to work collaboratively in pair/group work and students become accustomed to evaluating their own performance/peer/group work assessments, at the end of class. My students still remind me that I was the first teacher who asked about their needs, and interests which urged me to pay more attention to their concerns.

Based on the results from lesson observations, students found it interesting working/learning individually, in pair and in group works as they are keeping English. They feel more independent in their learning, feel comfortable in working/discussion in pair/group work projects, feel they have developed their independent study skills and feel they are autonomous learners. Students have performed well in pair/group discussions, wrote reflective essays, reading logs, reviews, presented solutions to case studies, evaluated each other's presentations, project works, and performed role-plays, interviews, survey results using rubrics, developed their autonomy by doing autonomy building tasks (seatwork: individual/pair/group work, short/long term projects, homework assignments.

The responses to the rubrics provided by students after the group work activity show that 80% of students feel more independent in their learning, feel relaxed in collaborative tasks and feel that they have developed their independent study skills. Only 22% of students indicate that they need to develop their autonomy.

Students' performances in the contest were evaluated in the form of a Public Speaking Contest Rubric by chairs/ peers and a self-assessment rubric completed by contest participants. 50% of the group participated in the contest and 50% were observed and evaluated the speakers' speech as the audience. Students were assigned to choose a topic out of the five to make a 4–5 minute speech. A few were performed with the help of visual aids/ presentation/draft of the speech. The three were announced as winners according to the summary of the chairs and were gifted. All contest participants were encouraged by presenting certificates of active participation. The responses to the rubric of the contest show that 100% of the contest participants feel that the contest helped them to develop their autonomy.

Colleague's observation

The colleague who observed my class noticed changes in my classroom. She confirmed that my students' attitude toward attending the lessons has changed (from passive to active learning), almost 95% of students are active/ keeping target language during the lesson, using rubrics after each task and highlighted that students have developed independent study skills and their autonomy.

Conclusion

Nothing changes until we notice to change. Now I see myself as an active agent in my classroom where I could explore the problem and take action plan and see some important changes regarding motivating my students to develop their autonomous learning. I noticed that my students' intrinsic motivation caused the changes in their active learning. As I cited Harmer's views before a learner never learns unless he/she is determined to learn independently.

What I still realize is that learners always need to be motivated to learn in a positive learning atmosphere. I noticed changes when I assigned my students to work collaboratively in pairs/group work tasks; they used to support each other, contribute to presentations/perform well. My target group of students' attitudes towards feeling responsible for each assigned onsite/offsite task has changed.

Now, they feel motivated to work collaboratively in pair/group work activities and projects and perform better, keeping English (regardless of a few mistakes) during the whole class. Even, students become accustomed to evaluating their own performance/peer/group work assessments, at the end of class. They felt their progress towards autonomy. I feel encouraged when my students remind me that I was the first teacher who asked about their needs and interests, and assigned tasks according to their interests.

The autonomy building activities, which I have piloted in my classes, could affect students to feel that they have developed their independent study skills and become more active/autonomous in their learning. The Public Speaking Contest also influenced them to develop their autonomy and feel motivated to have a nice speech on the selected topics. While being presented with the certificate of

active participation and small gifts encouraged them to learn more in their own learning. The colleague, who observed the class several times, noticed that students' attitudes towards attending the lessons have changed (from passive to active learning) and noted that almost all of my students become active/ kept target language during the lesson.

Appendix 1: Questions for informal discussion with teacher-colleagues

1. What does learner autonomy mean to you?

2. How do you think we should promote learner autonomy?

3. What kind of autonomy building tasks do you think foster learner autonomy?

4. What kind of assessment tools can help to develop learner autonomy?

Appendix 2: Questionnaire for students (anonymously)

1. What does 'learner autonomy' mean to you?

2. What kind of independent learning activities have you often experienced in other modules provided by the course teachers?

3. What do you like about those independent learning activities? What experiences have you gained?

4. What challenges have you faced in your autonomous learning?

5. What kind of independent learning tasks would you like to do in our class?

Appendix: 3 Planned Schedule (Action Plan)

Details	Date/Time	Tools/Materials	Tick (done)
Develop more autonomy building materials: seat work (individual /pair/ group activities), role- plays, discussion on the required readings, short-term projects, presentations, webquests, etc.) (onsite) Organise a contest (offsite)	Day 1–8	books, handouts, rubric, padlet, websites, contest rubric and topics	☑
Show to colleagues	Following day	handouts, rubric,	☑
Pilot new autonomy building activities	Day 3–8	See Appendix	☑
Collect data on students' progress through observation and rubric (self-assessment, peer-assessment, group work evaluation form)	Day 3–8	• rubrics: • observation by a colleague	☑
Analyse the collected data	Day 9	• my reflections • findings	☑
Draw findings	Day 9–10	A quick discussion with students My reflections	☑

Self-assessment rubric (how would you rate your performance?

I feel more independent in my learning yes no

I feel comfortable in collaborative tasks yes no

I feel to develop my independent study skills yes now

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Contact: goodluck_0714@mail.ru