

PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY ON A UNIVERSITY COURSE OF ENGLISH FOR ACADEMIC PURPOSES: A BRAC UNIVERSITY CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Promoting 'learner autonomy' on a course of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) seems to be widely problematic as they, 'learner autonomy' and EAP course, are expected to supply both skills and knowledge to the learners to pursue studies of other subjects in English within a controlled academic setting. Additionally, the course is different in type as, unlike most of the regular academic courses, it has great impacts on the learning style to study other subjects. Based on the assumption that ensuring 'learner autonomy' would contribute to an EAP course effectively, this study tries to explore the key areas that to be considered while designing a learner-autonomous EAP syllabus. The paper compiles the findings through investigating the EAP course of the Master of Education (MEd) programme at the Institute of Educational Development (IED), BRAC University, and tries to put some recommendations together for further consideration.

Key words: EAP, learner, learning, autonomy

I. INTRODUCTION

Presently, in teaching, particularly in English Language Teaching (ELT), 'learner autonomy' has become a 'much-talked' issue. The ideas relevant to this concept are also being discussed under different banners such as 'collaborative learning', 'experiential learning', 'humanistic language teaching' and 'learner-centred classroom'. Although these different terms illustrate different approaches, all of them treat the 'learning' as a completely integrated part of the learner's identity where some degree of autonomy is essential (Scharle and Szabó, 2000). However, providing sufficient autonomy to learners of an English course such as English for Academic Purposes (EAP) might become widely problematic for many reasons. One of the difficulties might be that EAP is not only focused on the 'undifferentiated, unitary mass' but it also deals with 'a variety of subject-specific literacies' (Hyland, 2002: 389). In fact, the primary objective of EAP is to provide the language support to students for pursuing studies of other subjects in English (Jordan, 2002) whereas the course is often designed through assessing learners' needs (Gillett and Wray, 2006). Thus, fulfilling both the needs and expectations of learners and establishing their

autonomy on an EAP course might be a complicated task.

Considering the above mentioned problems this paper tries to demonstrate the practical state of 'learner autonomy' on an EAP course within BRAC University perspective. Although the study is based on a Bangladeshi private university context, it can be expected that the findings would help any ELT researchers and practitioners concentrate on a number of areas while designing and implementing a learner autonomous effective EAP course in a similar situation.

II. THE CONTEXT

Institute of Educational Development (IED) of BRAC University has conducted the first batch of its Master of Education (MEd) programme in the 2009/10 academic session which included a sixty-six contact hour EAP course. The course was divided in three phases and distributed in three consecutive months, starting from September, with twenty-four, twenty-four and eighteen hours respectively. Three faculty members, including this writer, of the Centre for Languages (CfL) of the same university conducted the sessions for twenty

participants, most are government education officers along with other NGO professionals.

According to the course outline, designed by the CfL faculty members, the core objective of the EAP course was to equip the learners with the following essential knowledge and skills so that they can successfully pursue other academic activities, such as assignment and paper writing, in English:

- researching, fast reading, data collecting
- note taking, paraphrasing, summarizing, quoting
- drafting, editing, proof reading
- writing of effective introductions, supporting details and concluding remarks
- citing and referencing
- lexical choice
- conciseness
- avoiding grammatical mistakes
- writing for presenting
- presenting a paper

It can be realized through the list of objectives that the course was mainly focused on academic reading and writing skills. Although speaking received a little importance, listening skills were not incorporated at all (according to one of the course teachers, it was not in the list of priority).

Although, many of the learning objectives had been set before the commencement of the course, in each phase learners were given opportunities to decide the contents and their delivery plan. However, in terms of decision making, phase one was mainly dominated by the course teachers whereas the final phase was entirely learner-driven. It was estimated that for a successful transition of the autonomy, learners required to gain some essential skills and knowledge within a controlled learning environment.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To gauge how the EAP course in IED MED programme accommodated learner autonomy and the advantages/ problems it received, the following three research questions were chosen to explore,

- a) Was it possible to ensure learner autonomy in the IED EAP course? If yes, what were the advantages and difficulties in doing so?
- b) Could some new teaching/ learning strategies be applied to minimize learning difficulties?

- c) What should be the considerations to ensure 'learner autonomy' effectively on an EAP course at a University in Bangladesh?

IV. METHODOLOGY

To find answers of the above research questions an extensive reading was done for the theoretical understanding, and an empirical study to realize the practical aspects. Additionally, the academic performance of the MEd students at IED was continuously monitored with the help of Wolter's flow chart (2000: 312). It was rationally granted that with sufficient autonomy learners would be able to generate their own ideas and decisions to construct a strategic framework for their own learning. Moreover, the perceptions of the course teachers were also counted for better understanding.

The empirical study followed the qualitative research method. The investigation included a questionnaire (see the appendix) and a semi-structured interview with five randomly chosen learners. The questionnaire consisted of thirteen questions to measure the confidence and capacity of the students in maintaining their own strategies in learning. The interview questions are given below:

- a) How has the EAP course helped you decide necessary plan for studying other subjects?
- b) What will you do if you face any difficulties studying other subjects in English?
- c) What else should be taught/ learnt in the EAP course? What should be excluded?
- d) What issues will you consider most important for writing an academic paper?
- e) What issues will you consider for preparing any academic presentations?

For better communication the interviews were taken in Bengali. For better clarifications some supplementary questions, such as 'why do you think so?' or 'what else can you think', were asked.

V. LITERATURE REVIEW

The term 'learner autonomy', first brought into light by Holec (1981), is quite self explanatory and it combines two vital components of the educational concepts: 'learner' is possibly the most important issue regarding teaching / learning

situations and the term 'autonomy' generally demonstrates an idea of empowerment. Holec defined 'Learner autonomy' through its characteristics which try to help an individual decide self-responsibilities in the learning process. For this reason, 'autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning' (Little 1991). As 'learner autonomy' shows a complex relationship of a learner's thoughts and actions, it can be described from philosophical, political, psychological and social points of views which is; according to Josi, Gremmo and Riley (1995), a distinct development of theories that prioritised 'learner-centeredness'. Moreover, these kinds of individual-focused ideologies have been contributing greatly to the development of 'learner autonomy' theory which has perceived different dimensions with individual naming such as 'self-directed learning', 'learner-managed learning' and 'independent learning' by Knowles (1975), Long (1990) and Knight (1996) respectively.

Although the aspects of 'learner autonomy' are focused differently, the common aim of it might be generalised through referring to the explicit and conscious behaviour of a learner in the learning or making use of the learning strategies. It can be rationally assumed that this autonomy provides freedom to the learners in the whole learning process such as in selecting teaching methodologies and contents, and to decide what to learn or what not to. Thus, 'learner autonomy' might possess huge potentials, and recognising these may change the entire scenario of traditional teaching-learning concepts. The possible primary change might be the shift of the focus from teaching to learning and learner will consider this as an 'incontrovertible goal' to achieve (Cotterall, 2000).

The most obvious advantage of promoting 'learner autonomy' in teaching and learning circumstances is its unique phenomenon of shifting the learning process from theoretical toward more practical concerns (Wolter, 2000). As students share their own experience and learning among each other, including their teachers, their perspectives constantly change. From setting the learning objectives to evaluating the learning outcomes students get the opportunities to get involved. Thus, the ownership in learning process develops and transmission of the knowledge and skills becomes faster.

On the other hand, some critics consider the very idea of 'learner autonomy' as a part of western cultural tradition. They also think that the definition of 'learner autonomy' is unfamiliar to non-western learners (Jones, 1995). According to this argument, 'learner autonomy' does not fit non-western pedagogical traditions and only promotes an imposed behaviour against national culture. Moreover, in most of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) situations teachers are not well prepared to ensure complete autonomy to their pupils. As in a learner-centred environment learners develop their individual speed of learning and unique strategies those may lead their learning to different directions; monitoring the development of individual learning, choosing suitable approaches to support them, setting up different assessment plans for every student and, most importantly, maintaining academic standards become difficult to establish. This difficulty may become serious in the formal classroom setting where students and teachers have to depend on each other for learning through maintaining their individuality. Moreover, it can be predicated that 'learner autonomy' may not work with children or adults of low educational attainment, nor for difficult languages or in an examination-focused learning environment in some cases (Josi, Gremmo and Riley, 1995).

According to Cotterall (2000), five general principles namely learner goals, the language learning process, tasks, learner strategies and reflection on learning can be set to ensure 'learner autonomy' on a course. Initially, course tasks and strategies need to be included in such a way that learners can reach to the learning goals which are set according to their priority. It is important to consider that 'he (a student) is not going to learn anything unless he has an idea of what he is trying to achieve' (Breen and Candlin, 1980: 95). Ownership building is also needed for developing the learning (Kennedy, 1988). After all, there should be enough opportunities to develop creativity in the EAP course as innovations are developed within language learning environment (Holliday 1994). Here, the flow chart, proposed by Wolter (2000: 312) for a participant-centred teacher training course, can be applied to a learner-autonomous EAP course where the learners gradually take the ownership during their course progression:

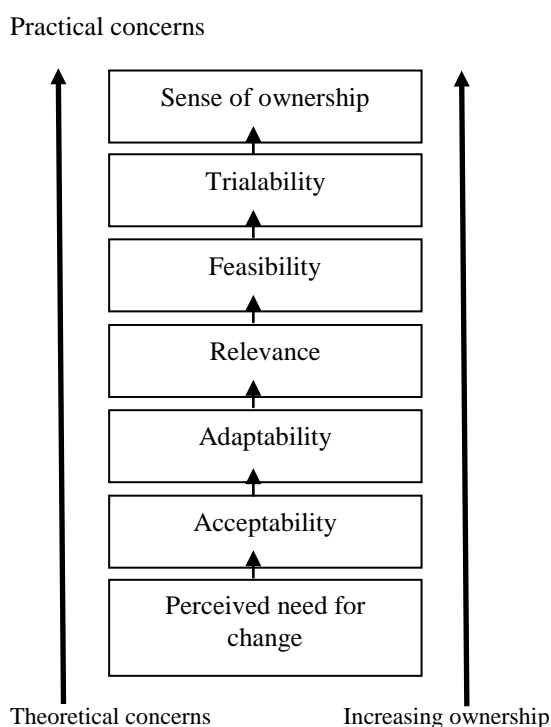


Figure 1: Hierarchy of conditions necessary for change (Wolter, 2000)

However, besides ownership building, there might be some other key considerations too. As learner-autonomous courses are set for those who will go through a specific academic setting and will study subject-focused learning materials, it is the responsibility of both students and teachers to maintain the pre-course planning procedures along with contents, methodology and assessment criteria.

The pre-course planning part generally starts with the assessment of learners' capacity and proficiency levels. To do this, learners' age, academic interest and educational background are needed to be understood (Nunan, 2001). This stage is crucial in EAP course designing as it helps compare and combine learners' academic needs and their learning expectations.

The next key stage is to decide contents for suitable EAP lessons. Traditionally the contents of a language course are mainly decided by material developers or teachers. It is observed that the majority of examples given in the texts are expressed as teacher objectives (Brindley, 1984). However, to ensure autonomy on an EAP course learners should be given the opportunity to personalise the learning to set their own examples.

It will be an effective idea if the contents are categorised orderly (Rowntree, 1981) and derived from learner data (Nunan, 2001).

Regarding methodology it can be expected that an EAP course would equip the learners with every possible skill and knowledge to pursue further academic activities. By empowering the learners through facilitating them to be self directed it can be assumed that they would be able to transfer their learning, which is developed in an artificial environment, to new contexts in the broader academic world. Besides, if the learning turns into acquisition it might become more effective (Krashen, 1982).

In a learner-centred EAP course assessment and evaluation are also needed to be directed by learners. Students' multiple intelligence, their ability to use the target language and individual developmental process in the language acquisition should be taken into account. According to Carroll (1981),

Different patterns of communication will entail different configurations of language skill mastery, and therefore a different course or test content. From the use point of view, language loses its appearance of unity and must be taught and tested according to the specific needs of the learner (p. 8).

VI. FINDINGS

The findings of the study can be described from three different sources: observations, responses of the questionnaire and information collected through interviews.

During course progression, it was observed that prioritising the learners in learning process and handing over the responsibilities to them caused both advantages and problems to learners. It was noticed that because of the individuality and independence, learners experienced the fastest progress while they were developing their own learning strategies. Conversely, it was also seen that the provided autonomy sometimes isolated some learners from other interpersonal and social interactions such as group work, peer review or just taking help from a classmate to prepare a difficult assignment.

The responses found by the questionnaire revealed some interesting facts. The following table is an attempt to summarize these findings.

Table 1: Responses received by the questionnaire

Areas	Responses %
Respondents who were entirely unfamiliar with the EAP course materials used in phase one and two	30%
Respondents who were not familiar with some of the learning materials before attending the course	45%
Respondents who have found the EAP contents always difficult and stressful to learn	25%
Respondents who helped their teacher in designing the course plan and materials	65%
Respondents who can now take help from books and internet to overcome their learning difficulties.	75 %
Respondents who are now able to prepare their own checklist for producing and editing academic papers	60%
Respondents who are now confident in doing other academic activities following a new set of criteria	70%
Respondents who think that EAP course is essential for pursuing other studies in the Master of Education programme	85%

The interviewees shared their views on the EAP course and gave a broader idea about their capacity to handle future learning activities. They informed that now they can understand the study requirements and can collect necessary study materials to perform required academic tasks. Only two interviewees could explain the considerations to write a paper and prepare a presentation. However, all of the participants mentioned that to overcome any academic difficulties they are now able to take help from both printed and electronic sources. Although most of the interviewees showed confidence to undertake any academic assignments to complete independently, two participants still wanted to be informed about the learning strategies so that they can participate in the classes, mainly facilitated by foreign teachers, effectively. They also suggested to include writing process and pronunciation skills in the course. Interestingly, all participants wanted grammar to be included in the

course. Moreover, they all appreciated the segmentation of the course in three phases.

VII. LEARNING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the literature review, responses of the questionnaire, interview results and observations the following understanding and recommendations can be made:

As a specialised and purpose-based language course, EAP requires to maintain both general and academia-focused principles in its course design for the successful inclusion of 'learner autonomy'. In an autonomous EAP learning situation the focus should be on the learners; not on teachers, methods or textbooks. The fundamental principle in this type of learning should be to recognise that every student has his or her own personal experience and interests along with emotional, educational and communicative necessities. Moreover, learning should be a bidirectional process through which a learner will be taught which he or she already knows or, at least, can predict their implications in future. It means that learners must get the opportunities to exploit their knowledge and skills of English language to develop their own capacity that they would be able to utilize in further studies.

To set learners' goals, objectives, resources and strategies learners' awareness needs to be raised so that they can formulate their own decisions regarding texts, activities, methods and strategies. To promote 'learner autonomy' in a language course students must have a general understanding about the language learning process. Additionally, the course tasks need to replicate the real-world necessities. If learners prepare, practise and share feedback of their learning that they may face in their future then learning may become more effective. Through acknowledging learners' basic knowledge about the language an EAP course should also be designed in such a way so that learners may comprehend the suitability of the course. That is why, in pre-course planning stage, learners need to be aware about their academic goals. They are also needed to be familiar with their individual strategies required to reach the academic aims.

In a learner-autonomous EAP course knowledge building should be done through a negotiation between teachers and students based on some set

requirements. As the topic and lesson contents are chosen by the students, these become more interesting and provide the stimulus in a learning period. A learner can decide his or her own speed of learning along with personal learning strategies to make the process convenient, encouraging and fruitful. Through the learning strategies and ability to revise the learning process learners can avail the opportunities to learn authentic language which can be used beyond academic purposes. 'Learner autonomy' also creates a scope for collaborative learning which helps learners develop an individual as well as mutual way of learning. In a nut shell, ensuring 'learner autonomy' in an EAP course has the potential to prepare the learners to accept the future challenges in academic or in professional life, can increase learning effects through personalisation and higher motivation, enables learners to evaluate their own learning styles, cultivates self-confidence and prepares the learners to take control of the entire learning process.

The rapid extension of technology is triggering the growth of autonomy and self-success. The use of technologies such as computer, tape-recorder, television, video-recorder, photocopier, fax and e-mail should be increased so that learners can decide their own learning strategies.

To make a university EAP course effective the beginning should be lengthy and controlled, and the other phases should be short and more learner-autonomous. A regular gap between the phases seems to be helpful.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS

Analysing both advantages and problems of promoting 'learner autonomy' in an EAP class a decision can be made that although this approach requires meeting a number of criteria, it is not impossible to be implemented. For better utilization of learner-centeredness teachers are needed to be well trained so that they become motivated to share the responsibilities with the students within formal classroom settings. As the learning materials and learning strategies vary, through enabling 'learner autonomy' it may become difficult to design a unified curriculum for common learners. Integrating differentiated lessons may solve this problem. The EAP course should also treat learners' freedom and empowerment as a general and natural behaviour of developmental and experiential learning. After all, an EAP lesson

should be designed in such a way that teachers and learners can negotiate, construct and manage the knowledge in a collaborative way. To sum up, it can be said that 'learner autonomy' should not be considered as a goal only for highly committed mature students intending to finish optional courses, or for those who are undergoing a selected educational or cultural context, it should also be seen as an important goal for total learning (Littlewood, 1993).

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APPENDIX

Dear recipient,

This questionnaire is designed only for a research purpose and your data will never be used for any other reasons. For anonymity you do not need to mention your name or student identification number here.

I sincerely appreciate your kind cooperation in this regard.

Thank you-

Md. Golam Jamil
Lecturer, CfL, BRAC University

Please read the questions carefully and encircle a suitable number for each. The numbers represents the following meanings:

	1: never	2: rarely	3: sometimes	4: always
a) Do you have to write academic papers following a given format?	1	2	3	4
b) Do you have to give presentations on research based papers?	1	2	3	4
c) Do you consider EAP course essential to pursue academic purposes?	1	2	3	4
d) Did you help your teacher decide the EAP course plan?	1	2	3	4
e) Did you help your teacher decide content for teaching/ learning?	1	2	3	4
f) Has the course dealt with the areas you were not familiar with?	1	2	3	4
g) Has the EAP course taught you how to continue learning English for academic purposes?	1	2	3	4
h) After completing two phases of EAP course, do you understand the guidelines and requirements of any academic papers?	1	2	3	4
i) Do you feel stressed with the content of the EAP course?	1	2	3	4
j) Can you solve any learning difficulties by yourself?	1	2	3	4
k) To overcome the difficulties of using English in other subjects can you now take help from external books and internet?	1	2	3	4
l) After completing two phases of EAP course, can you decide a checklist to edit your academic paper?	1	2	3	4
m) Can you apply the learning of this course to study other courses now?	1	2	3	4