Online Learning and Autonomy

Developing Language and Study Skills Materials for ESL University Students

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Abstract

The concept of autonomy in learning is often seen to be an ideal encompassing learner independence and responsibility, which seems particularly appropriate for the development of online learning support at university level; after all, learning materials online are available if and when students choose to access them. Promoting autonomy also seems appropriate for higher education because students are expected to manage their own learning in their own time. Furthermore, it has been argued that autonomy can be conducive to students having control over their learning and knowing what to learn. There is, however, no automatic connection between accessing language and study skills materials online and being an independent learner who has power over learning. Computerised language and learning materials can be at a learner’s disposal, but they can also impose standards from a faceless authority, and they are more likely to be teaching technical skills rather than stimulating awareness of what is needed for effective learning in academic studies. In this paper I explore some of the understandings of autonomy and consider the electronic interface, so that I can deliver online language and study skills materials which will help students to learn how to learn. The students in this case are university students who use English as a second language and who, in studying in Australia, are likely to be confronting a new educational culture. From a practical perspective, I present a number of activities suitable for online self-access language and study skills development and explain how they support autonomous learning.

Keywords: Autonomy, Online learning, English as a second language, Study skills, University students

Introduction

In this paper I consider how online language and study skills pages can be used to support the development of autonomous learning in university students who use English as a second language (ESL). Surprisingly, proponents of autonomous learning have not always been enamoured of computer-assisted learning. Holec, in opening the Council of Europe’s 1988 collection of papers on autonomy in learning, rejects computer-assisted teaching because he claimed it regards the learner as ‘a basically passive and supine being’ (p. 7). In the 21st century, learners using computers are more likely to be seen as active decision makers, and as teachers we can take advantage of computer technology to enable students to construct their own knowledge. Nevertheless, I am not uncritical, unlike the prevailing attitude of many proponents of autonomy. The proceedings from the ‘Autonomous Learning Symposium’, Autonomous Learning: here and there, here and now, held in 2002 (Hobbs), demonstrate overriding support for the concept of autonomous learning.

The concept of autonomous learning is defined in a number of ways. It is often claimed to be an ideal learning approach and a goal of education (Nunan 1997). A teaching approach with such a goal aims to develop responsible and independent students (Boud 1988). Perhaps this is unattainable, but many learners, at some point, will employ some degree or elements of autonomous learning (Nunan 1997, p. 193). To be an autonomous learner, according to Lenni Dam (1990, p. 17), one is ‘characterised by a readiness to take charge of one’s own learning in the services of one’s needs and purposes.’ I argue that this can be taught, and that implementing an autonomous learning approach supports a student’s right to be responsible. Such responsibility can lead the learner to have greater understanding of how to learn and so to be a more successful learner (O’Malley and Chamot 1990). Another definition, which is impressive and even confronting, has autonomous learners doing more than managing their studies. According to Candy (1988, p. 61) autonomous learners ‘know and understand enough to be able to distinguish plausible from implausible knowledge claims or convincing from unconvincing evidence’. Similarly, Benson (1997) acknowledges students’ perceptions by pointing out that learning is reached through a process of construction and it is socially mediated. These student-centred approaches are compatible with an awareness that education should meet student needs, and accordingly might need to be changed (Benson 1997, p. 22). Such interpretations of autonomous learning are in line with the emancipatory ideals of critical theory. Habermas, for example, in 1972, wrote that reflecting on learning was both self-formative and emancipatory (p.197), and that self reflection and its
Awareness are congruent with ‘interest in autonomy and responsibility’ (p. 314).

Autonomous learning approaches are realised in different ways: they are claimed for classes in which students can take their own path to achieve a predetermined outcome; activities which teach students how to learn, not just what to learn; and teaching stances which are more political and advance critique and change.

My interest in this area developed not only because it is appealing to inspire responsibility and expertise, but also because autonomy of learning seems conducive to students having more power over how they learn and how they are taught. The latter is a particular challenge in the development of language and study skills materials for university students. Many of the students I work with are motivated to do extracurricular work in order to do better in their studies. Some students seek skills help because of fear of failure or pressure to succeed, and some struggle to adapt to the university’s requirements. It is not unusual for these students to want me as a language and academic skills adviser to ‘fix’ their work. As an adviser and teacher of language and academic skills I want the students to have more control over their own work and to be self-motivated rather than be responding to social pressures. According to Riley (2002, p. 15) such progress towards autonomous learning is possible.

The web pages of my university provide a place where students can find information about how to improve their language and study skills, and this context is conducive to teaching students to be more autonomous. In this paper, I will explore the notions of learner and teacher responsibility and learner interaction in order to best understand how the online environment can support ESL university students to take autonomous learning approaches. To illustrate these points I will consider a number of language and study skills activities.

Responsibility for Learning and Teaching

A key component of autonomous learning is taking responsibility for one’s own learning, which can mean different things to different people. Pennycook (1997), in his analysis of the cultural context of the concept, points out that we are subject to prevailing discourses, so we can never have complete self-responsibility and independence in what we do. Even with this limitation, taking responsibility could be understood from the perspective of decision making for successful learning, and so implies self-direction and self-motivation. While this might seem reasonable to many Australian university lecturers, such a perception is culturally bound, and as Chanock explains, the teacher and learner could differ in their understanding of the meaning of ‘taking responsibility’ (2003). For Australian lecturers taking responsibility could mean deciding how to critique a body of knowledge. For the many international students in Australian universities who are from Confucian background cultures (typically Asian countries), taking responsibility could mean being diligent and seeking understanding of what is being taught (Lee 1996). Littlewood, while careful not to generalise about Asian learners, used the term ‘reactive autonomy’ (1999, p. 75) to define the behaviour of Hong Kong students who were responsible about achieving pre-determined goals.

Students who apply ‘reactive autonomy’ to learning will certainly know how to work, but this may amount to an acceptance of prevailing circumstances, whereas a proactive response could change circumstances to better meet student learning needs. Recently, I was alerted to an example of reactive autonomy when a student explained that she was a responsible learner, because, despite her lecturer’s disorganised lectures and unhelpful explanations, she would persist by studying harder and reading more. If this student were able to be autonomous in a proactive way, she could have done more to improve her learning situation. For example, she could make an early judgement and move to another subject, seek help from an academic skills adviser, ask for lecture notes and subject guidelines (perhaps with other students for support), and similarly with other students she could ask for change by articulating where her learning needs are not being met. Underpinning these behaviours are three assumptions: this student would be confident, aware of her learning needs, and aware of her learning rights. She would be the ideal of an autonomous learner as characterised by Dam (1990) and Candy (1988) in my introduction. While not all students can be so confidently responsible for their own learning, all students can learn how to improve their learning opportunities.

Some lecturers stimulate and support their students to be responsible for their own learning. These lecturers are not only explicit about what is being taught and why, they make it possible for their students to construct their own knowledge. I suspect that students are often not involved in what they are being taught because their opportunities to discover knowledge are limited when expertise resides with the lecturer or course designer. Consider the accepted practice of the enthusiastic, well-intentioned and well-organised lecturer who presents a well-organised, well-presented package of learning. Candy (1988, p. 70) cites a revealing example in which lecturers, who believed they had put together an exciting package where they had made clear all the concepts in their course, were disappointed in the learning responses of the students. In this example, the people doing the planning, reviewing, evaluating, and the interesting sorting out of ideas were the lecturers. In order to motivate student learning, university lecturers need
not only take responsibility for packaging content knowledge, they could also give students opportunities to discover.

Some of the claims made for autonomy in learning seem to be based on belief in ideals. Sometimes, it seems that if students were totally responsible for their own learning, they would hardly want the guidance of their lecturers. After all, autonomous learners are supposed to know what they need to learn, and they know how to go about learning this (Candy 1988; Dallow 2002; Dam 1990; Little 1996; Riley 2002). This leaves me with only limited ability as an autonomous learner. My own learning often seems frozen by personal and socially imposed limits, and any breakthroughs in understanding I have experienced have been directed or stimulated by others. Furthermore, I am uncomfortable about setting a standard that seems unattainable. Pennycook’s insights (1997) into the idealism of autonomy have enabled me to understand why I could aspire to being autonomous and could teach for autonomy, yet find myself in a mire of self doubt about my autonomous learning ability. Pennycook is critical of how autonomy in learning has been absorbed into the mainstream, and that its theory and practice ‘seem to claim a moral high ground’ (1997, p. 39). He argues (as do Benson 1997 and Benson & Voller 1997) that an unquestioning attitude has seen a proliferation of texts on techniques, when there should be less uninformed “belief” in autonomy.

Interaction

It would be easy to misunderstand the notion of taking responsibility for one’s own learning as leading to the individual working in isolation – according to Esch (1997, p. 165) a common misconception of autonomous learning. In fact, autonomous learning is more likely to be associated with knowledge sharing as an element of successful learning.

Typical reports of autonomy in practice detail cooperative actions in which students interact to achieve a particular outcome. Nunan (1996) reported a number of teaching examples which demonstrate that students who interact with each other and participate in their learning are positive about the learning experience, unlike those who are expected to receive the knowledge of experts. These findings co-relate with Vygotsky’s notion (1978) that cognitive learning results from social interaction leading to internalisation by the learner who is then able to do and/or understand. Similarly, Wenger (1998) argues that we are social beings and that learning takes place through interaction. While there are those who claim that not being able to participate in classroom discussions is a serious disadvantage (see Crabbe 2002, p. 64), I argue that students can work alone and still be involved with interactive learning. This learning can happen when students decide what they want to learn, based on an understanding of their own learning styles, and then it involves thinking, talking, doing, reflecting and applying.

An individual can experience interactive learning online. Within the classroom, either real or virtual, it is obvious that interaction can take place, but when a student is looking for instruction online in his/her own time, opportunities for interaction might seem less obvious. Interaction might traditionally mean learners asking for help from a teacher and sharing with other students, but it can also encompass the learner interacting with text. Interaction does not have to be face-to-face, or synchronous or with others; it can also take place between the self and text. Hence, the active learner working alone online can be having an internal interaction with the task or text. Such a learner is trying to make his/her own sense of the words imbued with meaning from someone else. When we work out a message from a text we are not simply passive recipients of information; according to Bakhtin we are engaged in something of a dialogue (Danow 1997, p. 121), and in turn we can reflect on the outcome of this dialogue.

Consider that there is always a voice commenting in your head and that this internal (and eternal) conversation is the means for making and articulating thoughts which can lead to learning. The research of de Guerrero (cited in Barnard 2002, p. 55) demonstrates the value of inner speech in successful language learning. This inner speech can also be about self reflection, and because some people need to have longer internal conversations or listen to their inner speech for longer than others, self access materials are ideal for the self reflective learner. In practical terms to encourage self-interaction, the lecturer designing online learning activities should provide tasks which require students to make decisions and reflect on what, why and how they want to learn.

Self-reflection aside, for some students being engaged requires activity, and designers can use technology so that the electronic interface provides interactivity. Online, students need to move the mouse and they can click and use the keyboard; there are also possibilities to drag and drop, receive feedback, mouse over text and access multiple texts. These possibilities can support an autonomous approach, but this is not inevitable (see discussion below in the section, ‘The online environment’). Building interactivity into online learning requires technical ability – an area of expertise outside the realm of many language and academic skills lecturers. Cheng-Choo (2003, p. 155) revealed that when she used Flash to develop her interactive language activities she ‘experienced a rather steep learning curve particularly in the acquisition of scripting skills.’

One way that students can interact with tasks is to make decisions about how much support and task
explanation they access, in other words, choosing the appropriate level of scaffolding. While the notion of scaffolding is not unique to teaching autonomy, Barnard (2002, p. 54) argues that through scaffolding, students can learn how and where to develop the skills needed for task achievement. This emphasis on scaffolding leading to independence can also be understood from the classic humanistic approach of modelling, leading to controlled practice, and then to free practice with the aim of expanded application.

While the online medium is ideal for written communications, university students accessing study skills pages are unlikely to interact this way. Typically, materials on the study skills pages of universities present useful information which helps students meet the prevailing academic requirements, and students could take opportunities to communicate their evaluations. In reality students do not often give feedback or respond to postings, because in a demanding study timetable, study skills advice usually serves only as a means to successfully complete assessable tasks.

**University Context**

Typical of most universities, my university delivers study skills pages developed by language and academic skills lecturers. When I contribute to these pages, I have in mind an imaginary student who is keen to know how to do a particular task or how to do better in his/her studies, and I want that student to benefit from a visit to my university’s site. While feedback is asked of students, it is voluntary, and I have little way of knowing exactly how students respond to the material and activities they access. My considerations of how such students are likely to respond come from my face-to-face experience of teaching language and academic skills.

Australian universities today are host to students with a range of skills levels, from a number of language backgrounds and cultures, and there is pressure to deliver skills development to all students. While international students must meet minimum English language entry requirements, they are likely to need language advice and support in dealing with a new academic culture. This support is only useful if it can be made appropriate, convenient and ‘just-in-time’ for students who are often overloaded with assessment tasks. From a university management perspective, if this support teaches learning skills it has the attraction of demonstrating that action has been taken to develop Graduate Attributes.

University teaching can facilitate students to make effective study decisions, in the same way that certain tasks will encourage students to make autonomous learning decisions. On this topic, Boud (1988, p. 34) reminds us that different students will react differently to the same task. So, students bring their own predisposition to a task, and in turn the task provokes a reaction. These attitudes and responses can be categorised as deep or surface. In the deep approach, students are interested in the meaning of what they are learning and try to relate this to what they already understand. In the surface approach students only focus on (superficial) task requirements. Pierson (1996, p. 52), gives examples of how this is a reported characteristic of Hong Kong students, but in the same text he quotes Biggs (p.53) who reports that such behaviour is a reaction to teaching which generally denies students the choice, control and opportunity to be independent learners. It is not unusual for students to be expedient and apply the approach appropriate to the demands of work, teaching style and assessment.

The Online Environment

In the classroom, the teacher and/or peers can guide students to learn a specific skill or understand a particular perception. Similarly, the motivation of assessment and/or social forces can lead the learner to the online environment. Whatever the source of the motivation, once online, the learner has a choice of pathways and immediate access to levels of information which can be made to support individual decision making, an important component of autonomy.

Technology has meant that students can use the computer as a learning tool to direct their own learning, but the online facility while rich in information does not of itself necessarily stimulate autonomy, and technology does not always meet our aspirations (Sturtridge 1997, p. 67). In fact as discussed earlier, Holec (1988) advises us of the opposite state. Just picture the luckless learner who is forced to follow a predetermined path and for whom such ‘pre-programmed instruction is a more insidious form of learner dependence on authority’ (Barnard 2002, p. 52). Of course, early computer-assisted language learning (CALL), limited by the technology, was not always interactive or individualised; today CALL is more likely to be limited by the abilities of the materials designer (Beatty 2003, p. 10). In 1997, Milton claimed that while much computer learning has ‘been of poor technical design...[and] is also bad pedagogy’ (1997, p. 239), there is the promise that CALL can develop in a direction which stimulates autonomy.

The electronic interface of CALL determines a number of features. There is the availability of a variety of media. Games technology, animation, sound, video, pictures and text can be used to support student learning. Another feature is the facility to make connections between ideas and to
信息，特别是有用的大学学习。在线任何页面，学生可以访问连接和解释的列表形式的pop-up-boxes，mouse-overs和链接的新窗口。当然，这不能被假设为学生将从更深入的知识中受益，总是使用链接的连接的想法和背景知识，而且有危险，如果用户可以被丢失和侧转。

不幸地，有序和娱乐的CALL活动不必要地刺激自主和语言学习。尽管学生是忙碌的在线和做练习，他们可能在努力解决某些问题或考虑需要学习的内容（Stevens 1996, p. 288）。研究显示，跟踪用户对自助CALL的程序表明，在众多的例子中，学生只是看着任务并且很少回顾未成功尝试的尝试（Stevens 1996, p. 291）。同样地，在那些情况下，当填空练习更多地被尝试时，学生倾向于遵循默认的模式，在线方式，不考虑任务的完成来满足他们自己的语言需要。提供的机会是不够的，培训自主学习需要被建立。

在线学习活动可以为学习者提供帮助，引导他们思考需要完成的项目。因为电子技术允许灵活的访问，过程可能不是线性的过程，而且学生的自主学习需要可以被学生移动。不幸地，在Steven的研究中学生使用语言学习游戏（1996），有证据表明学习者并不总是应用帮助以满足目的。更有效地评估他们自己的需求和选择适当的指导，学生在键盘上尝试直到正确的答案出现，或者他们通过所有提示直到答案是证据（Stevens 1996, p. 296）。这些学生似乎在学习如何得到游戏中的高分和使用表面的策略，而不是自主学习语言。

在线，学生将找到许多专家，但是这些有局限。这些‘专家’可以是机械的，例如拼写检查，语法检查，正确的答案为测验，以及指南，研究指南。他们也可以是人类的。在真实的时间和在实际的情况下，学生有优势是能够要求即时的帮助从讲师，他可以与学生进行问题。机械专家有有限的能力去处理和报告在一片的文本（Beatty 2003, p. 11），而且，从她的分析学习在线，Swan (2004) 也指出，自动的解释可能不会总是取用学生到问题。在某些情况下，不与人类专家打交道是学生的优势，学生可以对选择和删除站点，以及，回答或同样地，或许，所谓的机械专家是最好理解为工具，学生可以使用。技术已经创造了完美的人工语言专家是两个限制和一个优势（Milton 1997, p. 239）。

在某些方式上，电子技术支持自主学习的途径，研究技能的开发者需要考虑限制和广度技术。在线需要可能是被最小化（Krug 2000），所以空间为的扩展的解释是有限的。在另一些案例中，有时候学生可以面对他们要了解的更多而不是他们已经知道的，而且他们可以移动到任务而没有必要的能力。更加不用说，扫描模式的网络用户谁处理大量的信息，不邀请小心的分析和反思。在最终，材料的开发者使用在线可能不会总是认为最好的是被放出来为学生使用在他们自己的时间。

学习策略和活动

自主在线语言和研究材料可以使学生开发到满足的自主学习的途径。研究技能和语言材料哪些教导他们如何实现的预期的限制使学生决定他们学习的途径。即，控制学术的讨论，学生将不会听见他们的声音。这是学习者兴趣，知道如何和使用语言的规则，以及教学学生关于他们的自主学习，和教学学生来计划和监控。我从研究使用电子的成功语言来发现，和写关于自我反映的学习。最终，材料的开发者使用在线来改变，和我写关于力量的自我反映。最后，我给一个清单的活动的特性，鼓励自主的响应。

沟通的在线需要是被清晰的，通过采取纳入用户界面和用户需要。显示器为学习者需要的是被不被乱，有清楚的导航按钮。一个一致的简单显示是重要来保证用户熟悉化，和将学生聚焦到问题。保持文本到的最低程度使用标题和颜色也可以帮助学生来参与的工作。同样地，链接和鼠标-覆盖使用的谨慎地提供信息，对学生的学习反馈。一种的优势的共同设计是学生可以很快地熟悉与指导。

这种熟悉化与电子的界面可以提供最小的文本和支持系统地...
explicit instructions. Similarly, the content and task interface need to be purposeful and explicit. Sinclair (1996, p. 15), who points out that it is not always easy to be explicit and that most text books do it badly, gives useful directions for being clear about learner training tasks. An explicit task would not only be explicit about what a learner is to do, it would also make clear to the learner:

- the focus skill
- what strategy is being used and
- why this strategy is useful.

The organisation of learning pages and their content can support students to learn about learning. The opening pages could invite students to consider their strategies by selecting from an inventory of learner strategies. Mouse-over responses could explain why and how particular strategies develop learning capacity. Similarly, after doing a quiz about learning style, students could be asked to reflect on how they can accommodate their learning preference. Such activities already successfully implemented on paper (see Willing 1989), can work well with computer technology.

Planning and monitoring can be well supported by electronic technology, especially with the availability of database tools. With a database, students can record concrete events necessary to achieve a goal, and they can monitor and review such data. Students not only make their own learning goals, they can track their progress while their data is automatically saved and scored. I am impressed by this facility, because despite knowing that I should map my time with my learning needs, I have rarely found the time to do this on paper.

Some popular learning activities are enhanced by electronic technology. Mind maps, for example, are a way that students can connect information. Just as a pen and paper mind map graphically connects ideas, with mind mapping software this can be done with the added dimensions of multiple connections. Another useful tool, for university students developing their academic English vocabulary, is a concordancing program which shows key words in context, so is particularly useful for displaying patterns in how certain words are used. While the advantage of these tools is that students can go to information independent of teachers, it will need to be clear to students that such effort is in their learning interests.

Some of the research into successful English language learners reveals strategies that are those of autonomous learners. Willing (1988) collected data on 517 learners in order to identify the strategies of good language learners. From this he produced the handbook ‘Teaching How To Learn’ (1989), which applies strategies used by ‘good’ learners. Some of these effective strategies for teaching learners how to be responsible and engaged can be adapted for online activities. O’Malley and Chamot (1990) also analysed success in language learning. In their review of research into second language acquisition, they reported that the strategies used by effective students can be classified into three groups: metacognitive, cognitive and affective. Metacognitive strategies are about planning, reviewing and evaluating; cognitive strategies include predicting, deducing, building on and transferring knowledge; and affective strategies work on confidence and include cooperation, questioning and self reflection. Tasks which encourage these ways of learning would support learner autonomy.

Questions which ask students to reflect on what they are doing encourage an autonomous learning attitude. When students are learning about their learning they could be asked:

- What has helped you before to learn?
- What other ways are there?

Students can also be supported to take responsibility for specific learning areas by being asked:

- What areas do you need to work on to improve your ability to learn?
- What are you currently doing to improve your ability in this area?
- If you keep doing this what is the likely outcome?

Questioning is also a way of critiquing:

- How could this task be made better to suit your needs?
- What would happen if you apply this approach to other learning activities?

The following list makes a summary of the types of materials I have described. Online language and study skills materials which encourage autonomy:

- are explicit
- provide scaffolding
- do not impose linearity
- include sorting activities
- include planning tasks
- support a questioning attitude
- encourage self reflection and
- are interactive.

Conclusions

Language and academic skills activities online can teach students about taking responsibility for their own learning, but there are considerations for both the user and the developer. Choosing their own pathway through a university’s language and study skills pages does not mean students are necessarily autonomous learners. Thoughtful design is needed so that students will plan, reflect and make appropriate use of scaffolding. Furthermore, interactivity needs to be built into the interface, the content and the task, and in order to do this, a
language and academic skills lecturer will need technological expertise. Taking an autonomous learning approach to online teaching is one way to develop useful English language and study skills materials for university students. I also conclude that computer technology presents language and academic skills lecturers with an opportunity to teach students to learn how to learn.

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