



DOI: 10.22144/ctu.jen.2017.057

Promoting learner autonomy: Lesson from using project work as a supplement in English skills courses

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Article info.

Received 20 Jan 2017

Revised 30 Jun 2017

Accepted 31 Oct 2017

Keywords

learner autonomy, project, project-based learning, self-regulated learning

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to report the impact of project work in teaching English language skills on the learner autonomy of students in an English Language Teacher Education program. Fifty English teaching-majored second-year students in project work over two semesters. Two instruments employed to assess their learner autonomy include a self-assessment questionnaire and two group interviews. The results showed that the students gained a higher degree of learner autonomy after participating in project work. However, the gain was largely due to increased self-decisions on learning. Other aspects of learner autonomy such as self-regulated learning actions, self-responsibility, and attitudes to social interaction remained unchanged.

Cited as: Loi, N.V., 2017. Promoting learner autonomy: Lesson from using project work as a supplement in English skills courses. Can Tho University Journal of Science. 7: 118-125.

1 INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy (LA) plays an essential role in language education since it can help promote learning achievements. To this end, various approaches to developing LA have been put forward, and project-based learning claimed to develop learner autonomy (Skehan, 1998) has been documented as an approach which could develop autonomous learning skills and foreign language skills (Section 2.2). This is why project work has been integrated into foreign language education. Despite this, integrating project-based learning into a training program or curriculum should be considered in the practical educational context for its degree of effectiveness and feasibility. This, however, has been understudied in the context of Vietnam, especially in training prospective teachers of English. A doctoral study by Trinh (2005) relied on a project-based approach to curriculum design to stimulate LA in terms of self-regulation. In this study, project work was used as the central tasks and contents for teaching

and learning, but little progress was observed about learner self-regulation levels after the intervention.

This current paper reports the results of an institutional project which seeks to stimulate and develop second-year students' LA by using project work as a supplement to English-skills courses. It discusses the position of project work in training English-majored students so as to provide implications for integration of project work in the educational context of Vietnam.

2 LA IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

2.1 Nature of LA

LA is a complex concept which embraces diverse facets related to language teaching such as teachers, learners, training facilities and learning purposes, and the educational context (Benson, 2001). Therefore, LA is interpreted in different ways since Holec (1981, p.3, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997) first defined it as "learners' ability to take charge of their own study," which involves making decisions about learning objectives, defining the content and

learning process, choosing learning strategies, implementing and managing their learning, and self-evaluating. It is also defined as the capacity for critical thinking, decision-making and independent actions (Little, 1991), the status or situation in which learners take full responsibility for all decisions related in their education and execute those decisions (Dickinson, 1995), or learners' identification of their needs and goals, and work to meet their needs and achieve their goals (Dam, 1995).

Such definitions identify the multiple-dimension nature of LA. First, it includes learnable skills such as independent working, critical thinking, decision making, and collaboration (Benson & Voller, 1997). These skills can be acquired either naturally and unintentionally or through training (Dickinson, 1995). Second, LA entails self-control and self-responsibility of learning activities, which can be completely independent from the teacher, or the school; in this respect, LA depends upon the different learning conditions although it is the property of human, not that of learning environments (Dickinson, *ibid.*). For LA to develop, the learning environment must allow a certain level of freedom in learning activities (Benson, 2007). This relates to learner control of learning, i.e. students are allowed to participate in decisions and choices relating to learning objectives, methods of teaching and learning materials in the classroom. The concept also has a social attribute, which means skills and attitudes related to social interaction which allow learners to work collaboratively (Benson, 2001).

Determining the LA of students entails identifying their autonomous learning characteristics. Shared characteristics of autonomous learners have been identified including learner awareness of learning needs, learning strategies; taking an active approach such as planning, selecting learning strategies, and adjusting learning strategies when necessary; a responsible attitude to learning; and making decisions in learning (Hedge, 2000). Wenden (1998, cited in Thanasoulas, 2000) has further noted that learner negative attitudes towards their role and their capability as learners, may deteriorate their cognitive performance, which in turn affects their view of themselves as incapable learners. Such lack of self-confidence is part of the self-esteem that underlies the ability to function as autonomous learners.

Measuring LA is not a simple matter since it is a multidimensional construct (Murase, 2015). However, recent attempts have proposed models for assessment and measurement using self-report questionnaire. LA is measured in terms of self-regulated learning behaviors (metacognitive as-

pects), intrinsic motivation, self-initiation, and social interaction skills and attitudes (Dixon, 2011; Nguyen, 2012; Tassinari, 2012; Murase, 2015), independence of learning and study habits (Macaskill & Taylor, 2010). Drawing on these models and the characteristics of autonomous learners mentioned above, the researcher designed a self-assessment questionnaire with five components which aim to elicit students to report their characteristics, behaviors, and attitudes which in turn map the construct of LA. These components include learners' self-confidence, self-regulated learning behaviors, self-determination and decisions about learning, attitude towards self-responsibility in learning, and attitude towards social interaction.

2.2 Promoting LA by project work

There are multiple ways to promote LA. Ikonen (2013) summarizes six approaches to promoting LA. These include resource exploitation and use of technology for self-study; study skills training; allowing decision making in the classroom; granting learners the right to participate in curriculum design; and promotion of teacher autonomy. The five pedagogical principles of Dam (2011), however, could be applicable in the classroom. They involve providing learners with choices for learning contents and activities; providing clear guidelines and expectations to facilitate self-responsibility; focusing on learning process, and not transmitting knowledge; creating authentic communication and actions in the classroom; and encouraging learners to reflect on their learning. Such conditions can be optimized through project activities as applied in this current study.

The application of project work has a long history dated back to 1577 in Europe when it was utilized at the end of a vocational training program to permit students to apply their knowledge and skills learned in resolving real-life problems (Knoll, 2014). Three models of using project work have been suggested. The first model is *accumulative* as projects are used for applying accumulated knowledge and skills at the end of a program. The second model is called the *holistic* model which allows students to work in teams under the guidance of teachers, make a construction project and evaluate it within the implementation process. The *universal* model sees projects as any learning activities or tasks to be completed with a clear goal and specific product, not restricted to industry training. Although this model was criticized by many educators including Dewey (Knoll, 2014) as a diversion from the real nature of projects, it has created a

wide range of project applications for teaching and learning including foreign languages.

The position and nature of a project is an important issue. In fact, proposals labeled as project-based learning take project work as the centre for teaching and learning activities and contents (Fragoulis, 2009). Through conducting projects, learners construct their knowledge. Some basic features identify the nature and role of project work in project-based learning. These include:

- a focus on content learning through project work,
- a series of progressive tasks increasingly more complex and structured to give students the opportunity to reproduce and use their knowledge and skills,
- choice during implementation process,
- inspiring learners,
- equal opportunities for learners to use the individual skills during group work,
- ensuring that all learners are responsible for their assigned tasks,
- supporting activities to help practice skills and focus on language, and
- teacher feedback and opportunities provided for self-assessment and reflection.

(Cusen, 2013, p. 163)

Nonetheless, consideration should be taken into applicability of project-based learning in the educational context where traditional teaching styles remain dominant (Pham, 2010; Verspoor & Nguyen, 2013), teaching programs are centralized, and autonomy is insufficient for curriculum development and classroom practice. Integration of projects into a program should even be considered in terms of its value and feasibility. In the current study, project work was employed as a support activity or task to create supplementary practice and a facilitative environment for learning English. Unlike in project-based learning as described above, projects used in the current study have a broader denotation. They are seen as major tasks that learners complete in groups over an extended period (10-13 weeks) to produce a specific product like a video, a handbook, etc. The criteria of a project in this study are:

- creativity in product performance,
- focus on one issue or topic relevant to real life or the course content,
- integrated language skills,

- active and independent choice and decision about products, content presentation, etc., and
- criterion-based assessment of project work.

A body of research in teaching foreign languages has documented the impact of the project approach on learning outcomes (Fragoulis, 2009; Simpson, 2011; Baş, 2011; Cusen, 2013). Project-based learning has shown to be an effective way to enhance motivation, and create positive attitudes towards and independence in learning (Levine, 2004; Ke, 2010; Maftoon, Birjandi, & Ahmadi, 2013; Zhang, 2015). Research on project-based learning in teaching General English, English for Communication, English Tourism and Information Science English, Business English skills has also documented learner progress in social communication skills and collaborative abilities (Levine, 2004; Simpson, 2011; Janjua, 2013; Affandi & Sukyadi, 2016).

In short, projects used as the central teaching and learning activity have shown a positive impact on learning attitudes and motivation, achievements, and skills related to learner autonomy. For this reason, projects were integrated into the skills courses for students of English Language Education, School of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University (CTU). However, they were employed alongside regular classroom activities (e.g., lectures, discussion, language practice) to provide the opportunity to develop autonomous learning skills. By doing this, the current research aims to further examine the role of project work in enhancing students' LA. The extent to which a project-integrated model of teaching language skills impacts LA will be presented so that implications can be drawn for integrating projects into teaching and learning foreign languages in Vietnam.

3 METHODS

3.1 Context and research aims

Training programs for English language teachers at CTU began to change in the academic year 2014-2015. Accordingly, project work was integrated into language skills modules to achieve dual purposes: (1) to improve students' English skills and autonomy and (2) to provide an opportunity for students to experience project work in order to prepare them for using projects in teaching English at school. The report in this paper is based on an institutional project which aims to investigate the effectiveness of project work in teaching language skills to second-year students. Specifically, the report focused on the question "To what extent does inte-

grating project work in English language skills modules affect students' autonomy?"

3.2 Data collection methods and procedures

Since the students followed their own study plan to enrol into classes, it was hard to design a two-group experiment. To ensure equality, project work was used with the whole cohort of second-year students. The study employed a self-assessment questionnaire on LA as a pre-test and post-test, and a group interview to supplement qualitative data. The early version of questionnaire was based on 45 questions selected from Dixon (2011) and Tassinari (2012) and adapted to suit the context of research. Then, the instrument was piloted on 142 second and third-year students of English; factor analysis was run and 27 items (loading index >.40) were loaded on five key factors: (1) students' self-confidence (2) self-regulated learning behaviors, (3) attitudes to self-responsibility, (4) attitudes towards social interaction, and (5) self-determination and decisions in learning. The internal consistency reliability of the questionnaire was $\alpha = .737$, with one question being deleted. The last version consisted of 26 questions. The post-test questionnaire also incorporated a sub-section of 17 items to obtain students' thinking about project work at the end of the intervention.

Self-assessment of students was conducted before and after the project activity at two points of time: Onset of semester 2, academic year 2015-2016 (yielding $\alpha = .75$) and end of semester 1, 2016-2017 (yielding $\alpha = .745$). The sub-questionnaire about students' opinions on project work yielded $\alpha = .87$. Two group interviews were conducted in Vietnamese with two groups of students at the end of semester 2 to obtain qualitative data.

Two group projects were integrated into two courses: English for International Communication, and Pre-intermediate Reading and Writing in two successive terms of 2015-2016 and 2016-2017. The first course (semester 2 of 2015-2016) focused on basic issues and skills in communication in English. In this course, the project work required the

students to generate a video-taped skit, report, story or any production regarding an issue or topic in the course. The second course (semester 1 of 2016-2017) focused on basic reading and writing skills, and the project was a booklet, manual or a guide-book on a topic of the course. In the first week, project requirements were introduced to the students, and assessment criteria were discussed and negotiated. In the third week, each group discussed and chose a topic, and planned their work under the teacher's supervision. Every other week, orientation and feedback sessions were held and report briefings were done with each group. Two weeks before showcasing their products, the students submitted their drafts for the teacher feedback. The final products were showcased to the whole class, and peer and teacher evaluations were conducted, using the assessment criteria introduced at the beginning of the courses.

3.3 Sample

Fifty second-year students (who had completed the third semester of their academic program) were selected from the total of 82 students on English Language Teacher Education Program based on their completion of the questionnaire and participation in the proficiency test. There were 45 females and 5 males; 11 students started their English study since Grade 3 (22%), and 39 since Grade 6 (78%). Twenty students had graduated from district schools (40%), 16 from small district town schools (32%), and 14 from city schools (28%).

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 LA of second-year students before and after project work

Table 1 shows a slight increase in the overall means on the learner autonomy of the second-year students of English Language Education. The difference in mean scores between the LA level before and that after the implementation was -2.115. The nonparametric t-test result produced the significance level of .034 ($p > .05$), which means that in general this increase was statistically significant.

Table 1: Means of LA of second-year students of English education

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre learnerautonomy	50	3.487	.426	2.42	4.42	-2.115 ^b	.034
Post learnerautonomy	50	3.576	.427	2.50	4.50		

a. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test

b. Based on negative ranks

As further revealed in Table 2, the LA of the students was almost the same after the intervention program except for the aspect of self-decision

about learning. The statistic results revealed a non-significant mean difference between pre-test and post-test scores in three categories ($p > .05$). Only

the levels of self-confidence and self-determination about learning increased, but the nonparametric test results confirmed that only the mean of self-determination increased significantly ($p < .05$).

Further exploration revealed no difference among students in terms of different demographic varia-

bles except for the number of self-study hours ($p < .05$). The students who engaged in self-study an average of over three hours a day reported a higher level of self-confidence than those who spent less than three hours a day for self-study activities.

Table 2: Mean difference of second-year students of English by aspects of LA

	Mean	Std. Deviation	Minimum	Maximum	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-self confidence	2.69	.798	1.00	4.60	-1.840 ^b	.066
Post-self confidence	2.87	.783	1.40	4.80		
Pre-self responsibility	4.23	.634	2.40	5.00	-1.342 ^c	.179
Post-self responsibility	4.12	.668	2.20	5.00		
Pre-self regulation	3.34	.632	1.70	4.90	-.831 ^c	.406
Post-self regulation	3.32	.506	2.09	4.36		
Pre-social learning attitude	3.83	.857	1.67	5.00	-.394 ^c	.693
Post-social learning attitude	3.78	.973	1.33	5.00		
Pre-self determination	3.69	.804	2.33	5.00	-2.071 ^b	.038
Post-self determination	3.95	.686	2.00	5.00		

(1=not like me, 2=partly like me, 3=not sure, 4= almost like me, 5= truly like me)

4.2 Students’ opinions about project work

From Table 3, it is obvious that the students had a positive attitude towards the project work. They agreed that the project activity benefited them in several ways. Specifically, the mean range of 2.86 to 3.32 revealed their agreement that project work motivated them to study English, created an environment for authentic use of English, helped them

control their learning better, self-regulate their learning, promote their independence, raising their awareness of and responsibility for self-learning and especially developing their willingness for collaboration in group work. They also disagreed that the project activity was a waste of time (mean range from 1.58 to 2.1), and that it was feasible to do one project per semester, with the mean score of 3.08.

Table 3: Students’ opinions about the effects of project work

Contents	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Increasing motivation for using English	50	2.0	4.0	3.08	.488
Creating an environment for authentic communication in English	50	2.0	4.0	3.22	.581
Motivating students to learn English	50	2.0	4.0	3.12	.594
Helping students to self regulate learning	50	2.0	4.0	3.20	.495
Developing students’ independence	50	2.0	4.0	3.10	.707
Raising awareness of self-study	50	2.0	4.0	3.32	.653
Providing a better way of learning English	50	1.0	4.0	3.08	.724
Helping students control their learning better	50	1.0	4.0	2.86	.756
Being ready to negotiate in group work	50	2.0	4.0	3.26	.599
Developing responsibility for working in groups	50	2.0	4.0	3.10	.646
A waste of time	50	1.0	4.0	1.58	.758
Studying better without doing projects	50	1.0	4.0	1.84	.791
Taking much of students’ time	50	1.0	4.0	2.10	.839
Possible to do a project per semester	50	2.0	4.0	3.08	.600

(1=totally disagree, 2=disagree, 3=agree, 4=totally agree)

The interview data further lend support to the benefits of project work. Although group work was sometimes difficult for students, they managed to negotiate with one another. One student said,

“There was some conflict, but we managed to negotiate to come to an agreement, and it trained us skills to work in groups.” Another student reported, “I felt if I studied alone, then I wouldn’t feel moti-

vated, compared to studying with others. We could develop skills which we haven't got," or "First, I didn't feel like it, but then everything started, and gradually the process of doing the video project motivated me." Especially, using English became more authentic and motivated by the activity as one student stated below:

"It was a different way of learning; if following the textbook, we just practiced according to certain models; but with the video project, I felt my study..., like my view of studying English was widened; not just learning from practising certain models of conversation, but by using English in real communication, not just turn to your partner and practice a model; I felt that I had a real interaction with my group members."

When asked for their suggestions, one student expressed the importance of learning beyond the classroom, and especially learning by doing projects. She believed it would provide real learning opportunities, and add enjoyment to learning.

"I think the course activities should make students feel more motivated to study English. Practice should not be restricted in the classroom,...Activities beyond the classroom expand our learning space; for example, when we had a project like this video, I felt like both studying and enjoying."

4.3 Discussion

The data presented above show that students' autonomy slightly increased after two semesters of project work as an additional activity of the skills course curricula. This result is similar to that of a previous study also conducted in a comparable context which reported little progress in students' self-regulation levels (Trinh, 2005). The difference is that although project work was implemented in the current study in two consecutive semesters, the effect was not highly significant; actually, the increase in the students' overall LA is largely due to gain in the students' self-determination. Students' assessment of their behaviors of self-regulated learning, attitudes towards self-responsibility as well as social interaction in fact remained the same. The students assessed themselves to be more self-confident after the intervention, but the improvement was not substantial.

Such a result may be due to several factors. Firstly, unlike many previous studies which focus on projects as the core component of a program, the project activity in the current study is only an additional, instead of central element of the course curricula. As a result, although the treatment was ra-

ther long, the students had insufficient exposure to independent as well as collaboration work and opportunities to make choice, exercise self-regulated learning, and self-evaluate their learning.

Another reason could be the complexity of LA as a capacity which poses challenges to valid measurement. Although the tool draws on previous instruments well-grounded in the literature and pilot tested, due to the complex nature of LA, measuring it by students' self-assessment may have failed to touch base, and thus need triangulation from other measures (Nguyen, 2012). In fact, evidence from the students' explicit judgment of the benefits of project activities has revealed that the students acknowledged the effects of projects on their self-regulation, learning responsibility, independence, and collaboration. Nevertheless, when self-assessing their LA as a capacity, they actually reported little change in behaviors, skills and attitudes. The overall slight gain could also be because the students were not familiar to the new learning environment and style, and they remain affected by their learning habits and mindsets established through schooling years. One of the students mentioned in the interview that "I lost confidence and intended to stop studying because I felt so demotivated...Maybe because everything was new to me; I was used to the way of learning at school, and suddenly everything was totally different." As Candy (1991, p.124, cited in Thanasoulas, 2000) asserted, "it [learner autonomy] takes a long time to develop, and - simply removing the barriers to a person's ability to think and behave in certain ways may not allow him or her to break away from old habits or old ways of thinking."

The fact that the students increased motivation for learning English confirms the true effect of project doing as presented in previous research (Lee, 2002). This effect is due to the opportunity given to students for making choice and decisions about their product performance, and the intrinsic feature of the project itself which adds joy to their learning. Growth in confidence also confirms what was claimed in previous research (Fried-Booth, 2002) although the gain was not substantial.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The findings from the current study provide insights into the position of project doing in fostering LA. For educators, project work can be seen as a potential measure, but the way it is integrated into a training program or a course needs consideration. The findings from this study show that when used as a supplement, project work has little effect on students' learning skills and behaviors, but it defi-

nity enhances their intrinsic motivation. Teachers need to further train students in learning skills, especially self-regulated learning skills, and allow them to exercise these during the process of learning by doing.

It could be concluded that the effect of learning by doing project is more likely to be substantial in increasing motivation. However, evidence about improvement of LA as a capacity needs further corroboration from future research. It is possible that the ability to take control of learning takes much time to grow, and intensive training as well as opportunities for exercise are essential to foster LA. As the students do more projects in their training program, the skills and behaviors related to LA will probably develop. Therefore, a regular integration of project work into the training program is suggested to create extensive opportunities for exercising, and thereby promoting learners' ability to control their learning.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author acknowledges thanks to CTU for their funding and to his colleagues for their collaboration in the project.

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