

Examining Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning and Instruction

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Abstract

Problem Statement: In the field of 21st Century education, curriculum designers are increasingly focusing their attention on quality of learning and learner development in foreign language instruction. The movement towards learner-centred approach has led to an emphasis on the value of learner autonomy in promoting learner development. According to Cottorall (2000), although learner autonomy is a vital part of language learning, it is not sufficiently supported in language learning program designs.

Purpose of Study: The purpose of this case study is to examine freshman Law students' perceptions as regards their autonomy in writing classes and their teachers' perceptions of the writing skill area of the curriculum in promoting learner autonomy in the Foreign Language and English Preparatory School. The investigation of the existing situation in these classes provided a comprehensive analysis of the instructional processes in promoting autonomy in writing skills and shed light upon the themes to be reconsidered in the writing skill area of the curriculum.

Method: Two-hundred freshman Law students enrolled in English I course and six English language teachers teaching these students formed the study group of the research. As a research method, mixed-method approach was adopted and data were collected through a questionnaire and interview protocols. The validity of the questionnaire was ensured through expert opinion and pilot testing. The factor analysis for the questionnaire was done and the Cronbach's Alpha reliability was measured as .92. The data gathered via interview protocols were subjected to content analysis through thematic coding. The credibility and objectivity of the

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qualitative data were sustained through method triangulation, expert opinions, and an inquiry auditor.

Findings: The findings exhibited that students tend to have positive attitudes towards language learning, yet they do not perceive themselves as autonomous learners in both learning and writing skill. As far as teachers' perceptions are concerned, instructional environment, materials and strategies were found to be inhibiting students' autonomy. What is more, students' problems in language use and their dependence on teachers were reported to be impeding their autonomy in learning.

Conclusion and Recommendations: Although students reported having positive attitudes towards language learning, the data triangulated from students' and teachers' perspectives suggest parity in that students are not autonomous learners of English. In this regard, the writing skill area of the curriculum and the instructional processes were reported to embrace problems in promoting students' autonomy in learning and writing. Further studies, through qualitative research methods should be conducted for the thorough examination of learner autonomy in language learning and the problems students face during this process through qualitative research methods.

Keywords: *English language curriculum, writing skill, learner autonomy, autonomy in language learning.*

Introduction

In the field of 21st Century education, curriculum designers are increasingly focusing their attention on quality of learning and learner development in foreign language instruction. The movement towards learner-centred approach, in which students acquire foreign language proficiency more quickly and effectively (Kajiura, 2006), has led to an emphasis on the value of learner autonomy in promoting learner development. Learner autonomy is one of the key goals of higher education (Baume, 1992). Research shows that development of learner autonomy positively influences the growth of target language proficiency (Little, 2008).

Since 1970, learner autonomy in English language learning has been debated among teachers as regards the ways of promoting learner autonomy and increasing learner independence. According to Esch (1996), learner autonomy is developed if supportive circumstances and contexts are provided to learners. Breen (1984) states that this support can only be given with the process syllabus and learner centred approach.

There are a great number of definitions for the term autonomy and, as Gremmo (1995) suggests, the debates on its definition is still alive. For example, Little (1991) describes autonomy as a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It is an ability which learners should act independently, reflect on their needs critically and make their own decisions. Candy (1991), on the other hand, states that autonomy is an essential way of effective learning. She says that it is not the total detachment of the teacher, but the teacher and student col-