

Promoting Learner Autonomy in Reading Comprehension Skills

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Abstract

The paper aims at identifying the current situation of first year students' autonomy at School of Foreign Languages – Thai Nguyen University (SFL-TNU) in reading comprehension skills and finding out the effect of selected activities in an action plan. The results show that after the intervention, learners can make decisions, set goals and plan their own learning process. Besides, the learning strategies have encouraged students to build up learner autonomy through their learning style to achieve their goals. Moreover, the use of effective reading strategies motivated students in reading as they can read faster.

Key Words: *learning autonomy, motivation, reading comprehension, learning strategies*

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I. Introduction

English is the most widely used language in the world and its important role in today's life of industrialization and modernization is undeniable. In fact, English has been considered as a bridge for economic, political and cultural activities between many countries of a multilingual world.

In Vietnam, due to the wide application of the learner-centered approach to teaching foreign languages, more pressure is currently put on the learners in their learning process. Learners are not considered as passive recipients of information, but they are active in acquiring knowledge, which they learn based on their own interests and needs. According to Ellis & Sinclair (1989), there are three reasons for helping learners to promote their role in their learning process. First, learning can be more effective when learners take control of their own learning. Second, learners who are more responsibility for their own learning can carry on learning outside the classroom. Thirdly, learners who know about learning can transfer learning strategies to other subjects. Little (1991) supposes that if learners are proactively committed to their learning, it is likely to be more efficient and effective than otherwise. From the above ideas, learner autonomy plays an important role in language learning. Hence, in the process of language learning, teachers have a significant role to convince students about the value of what they are learning, and seek for other answers about the subjects themselves.

Carrell & Eirshold (1989 cited in Paweena, 2012) argue that there is a significant relationship between autonomous learning and reading skills. Poor reading proficiency can thus be a factor that may hinder students from gaining full language progress (Paweena, 2012).

The study aimed at identifying the current situation of students' autonomy at SFL-TNU in reading comprehension skills; proposing an appropriate scheme of action to improve the situation; and finding out the effect of selected activities in an action plan.

The participants of the study were 72 first year students at SFL-TNU. Particularly, the study was carried out to find out the answers for the following research questions:

- *Can the uses of the three implemented reading strategies improve reading comprehension skills for students at SFL-TNU?*
- *Can the uses of the three implemented reading strategies enhance learner autonomy for students at SFL-TNU?*

II. Methodology

To reach the mentioned goal, an action research with action plan in form of an autonomy-raising project was carried out in 12 weeks of the second semester of the course. To collect the data, tests, questionnaire, and observation were used.

Data analysis procedures

Data collection instruments were used to investigate students' level of autonomy as well as students' level of proficiency. To enhance students' students' level of autonomy as well as students' level of proficiency,

an intervention has been made by implementing them with three reading strategies using the theoretical background from the literature review. During the intervention, observations of the class for every two lessons were made. Then, the data collection instruments were used to analyze and reflect the results of the study.

III. Literature Review

Learner autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy has been widely accepted in the past few decades. Nguyen (2005:21) defined learner autonomy as “learner’s willingness and ability to take responsibility, to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning with tasks that are constructed in negotiation with and support from the teacher”.

Learner autonomy is mainly defined from the perspective of learners’ ability (Holec, 1981); learners’ psychology (Little, 1991), and political-social context (Benson, 2005; Nguyen, 2005).

Holec (1981:3) defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning”. He states that the learners should plan, monitor and evaluate the learning process in such a way to support their autonomy so the learner will be able to gain his own learning opportunities.

Nunan (1995) states that learners who are able to define their own goals and produce their own learning opportunities become autonomous. According to Leni (1995), autonomy is learner’s willingness and capacity to control or oversee their own learning, and that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he/she independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses the criteria for evaluation.

Dickinson (1995) believes that the learners is considered as the center of learning process and learning is considered as a self-initiated process that is different from behaviorist perspective in which the learner has a passive role and learning is synonym with rote memorization. Hence, autonomy is an attribute of learners rather than learning situation.

Characteristics of learner autonomy

Scharle and Szabo (2000) stated that an autonomous learner must have built four characteristics: motivation and self-confidence, monitoring and evaluation, learning strategies, and cooperation and group cohesion.

To sum up, autonomous learners should take responsibility of their learning and control over their learning management, cognitive process, and learning content. Last but not least, learners need to learn independently; on the other hand, they cannot learn well without communication and interaction with others, so both independence and dependence are closely related to learner autonomy.

Factors affecting learner autonomy

- ***Learning motivation***

The importance of motivation in language learning has been considered the prime focus of linguistics for many years. According to Dornyei (2008), motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate second or foreign language learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process. Without sufficient motivation, individuals with the most remarkable abilities cannot accomplish long term goals.

According to Masgoret and Garder (2003), a motivated learner “expends effort, is persistent and attentive to the task at hand, has goals, desires, and aspirations, enjoys the activity, makes attributions concerning success and/or failure, is aroused, and makes use of strategies to aid in achieving goals”.

Gabre (2009:192) states that:

“Motivation for reading is essential so that students choose to develop their reading skills and persist and make strong effort to overcome any limitations. Students only become skilled readers when they read a lot, and motivation for reading is critical for addressing this challenge”.

According to Gabre (2009:191), there are eight factors that support reading motivation: (1) opportunities for learning success and gains in conceptual knowledge; (2) real world interactions; (3) autonomy support, student self-direction; (4) interesting texts for instruction; (5) opportunities for extended reading; (6) strategy instruction; (7) social collaboration and relationship building for academic tasks; (8) evaluation collaboration and feedback that support learning.

- ***Teacher’s role***

The teacher plays an important role in making learners autonomous. According to Karlsson & Nordlund (1997), language skills can best be developed if the learner develops awareness of his or her own learning, and of the strategies and styles that are available. Strategic competence means being able to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate one’s learning, and making use of all available opportunities both inside and outside the classroom.

Students should not be considered as empty vassals that need to be filled with knowledge. Teachers have to prepare learners for this by teaching them the skills needed to come over difficulties during the learning process. Learners can reach the proficiency of the four skills if they can generate a sense of autonomy in language learning process.

Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension is the process of making meaning from text. The goal is to gain an overall understanding of what is described in the text rather than to obtain meaning from isolated words or sentences.

According to Harris & Hodges (1995), reading comprehension is the construction of the meaning of a written or spoken communication through a reciprocal, holistic interchange of ideas between the interpreter and the message. Van den Broek & Espin (2012) states that reading comprehension is a complex interaction among automatic and strategic cognitive processes that enables the reader to create a mental representation of the text.

Reading strategies

Skimming

Skimming is a type of rapid reading which is used when the reader wants to get the main idea from a passage (Richards, 1992). It deals with getting the main ideas of the text without reading every single word. Nuttall (1996: 4) defines skimming as “glancing rapidly through a text to determine its gist”.

Scanning

Williams (1996:107) states that “scanning is reading for particular points of information. It is a selective reading, and its purpose is to achieve very specific reading goals”. Hedge (2003: 195) defines that scanning has to do with looking for “specific information, for example, the relevant times on a timetable, items in a directory, or key points in an academic text”.

Inferring

According to Anderson & Pearson (1984:), “the ability to make inferences from given information in a text and from background information has been described as the heart of the reading process”. Making inference often considers as the ability to read between lines. It requires readers to interpret the content of the text using their critical thinking with their prior knowledge, intuition, and imagination.

IV. Findings And Discussions

Data analysis of students’ responses

Table 1. Self-evaluation of reading comprehension skills before and after the project

No.	Evaluation	1 Strongly disagree		2 Disagree		3 Agree		4 Strongly agree	
		Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
1	I often read outside the class.	41%	8%	51%	8%	4%	51%	4%	33%
2	I can recognize the specific information in texts.	37%	8%	48%	4%	11%	51%	4%	37%
3	I often guess the meanings of unknown words before using dictionary.	33%	4%	51%	8%	8%	51%	8%	37%
4	I can make inferring about content and vocabulary in texts.	30%	8%	55%	11%	11%	48%	4%	33%
5	I can understand the main idea in texts.	33%	4%	55%	11%	4%	48%	8%	37%
6	I can summarize texts in my own words.	30%	4%	55%	11%	11%	55%	4%	30%
7	I feel confident when doing reading tests.	37%	8%	55%	8%	4%	51%	4%	33%

As can be seen from Table 1, before being equipped with the strategies, 84% of the students often rely on dictionaries to look up unknown words. In addition, 85% of them were not confident in making inferences about content and vocabulary in texts. Besides, 85% of the participants could not summarize texts in their own words while the number of those who did not understand the main ideas in texts counted for 88%. 92% of the students were not confident when doing reading exercises. After equipped with the three strategies, most of the participants improved their reading skills in which 88% of them can recognize specific information in texts, 81% of the students can make inferences about contents and vocabulary, and 85% of them understand the main idea in texts. Besides, 85% of the students believed that they could summarize the main idea of a text after reading, and 84% of them agreed that they could deal with reading tests confidently. Another good side of the project was that the number of students read outside the class rose up to 84% compared to 8% before the project. The result showed that 100% of the students have improved in their reading skills in which 59 students

(82%) have enhanced significantly and 13 students (18%) have improved slightly in their reading proficiency after the interventions.

Students' attitudes towards learner autonomy before and after the project

Table 2. Attitude towards learner autonomy before and after the project

No.	Attitude	1 Strongly disagree		2 Disagree		3 Agree		4 Strongly agree	
		Before	After	Before	After	Before	After	Before	After
1	I know what my strengths and weaknesses are in learning English.	41%	11%	51%	8%	4%	51%	4%	30%
2	I like reading outside the class.	37%	4%	51%	11%	8%	55%	4%	30%
3	I will do the exercises even if I don't have to hand it in.	37%	8%	48%	4%	4%	51%	11%	37%
4	The best way to learn is not by asking for teachers' explanations.	51%	11%	37%	4%	4%	59%	2%	7%
5	I can learn on my own and improve without class.	33%	4%	55%	11%	8%	55%	4%	30%
6	I often plan my learning and set goals.	30%	8%	62%	8%	8%	51%	0%	33%
7	I like the teacher let me find my mistakes and correct them.	37%	4%	48%	8%	11%	55%	4%	33%
8	I had purposes in mind when choosing what to read for my assignments.	30%	4%	55%	11%	11%	48%	4%	37%
9	I check and read the assigned readings again to complement what I have gained in class.	37%	4%	48%	8%	11%	55%	4%	33%
10	I can monitor and overcome any difficulties in my learning process.	30%	4%	62%	15%	4%	48%	4%	33%

The pre-project self-evaluation questionnaire showed that most of the students were independent learners in which 11% of them managed their learning and solved their problems without teachers' help. 8% of them had purpose to set learning goals and plan their learning process whereas 85% of them did not have learning goals and could not choose the reading materials to practice. Besides, 15% of the participants were willing to do other reading tasks, and the same number of students agreed that they often checked and redo the assigned readings.

Students' attitudes towards the activities

Table 3. Attitudes towards activities

No.	Attitudes	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Agree	4 Strongly agree
1	I find the selected activities interesting.	0%	8%	70%	22%
2	After doing the activities, I liked reading.	0%	15%	55%	30%
3	My friends seem to be interested in doing the tasks.	8%	8%	62%	22%
4	Reading materials are not suitable with my proficiency.	0%	11%	55%	33%
5	The strategies help me read faster.	0%	4%	51%	45%
6	I believe that the use of strategies is helpful in reading.	0%	4%	66%	30%
7	The activities make me feel motivated.	0%	8%	59%	33%
8	I kept a record of my assignment to check and read again.	4%	11%	48%	41%

From Table 3 we can see that, positive attitudes of students towards the activities were motivating factors in learning process. According to the collected data, 92% of the participants found the activities interesting, 96% of them found the activities interesting and the strategies were helpful, and 92% of the students were motivated after doing these activities. Only 3% of the students chose that reading materials were not suitable for their proficiency.

Students' attitudes towards the benefits of self-directed learning

Table 4. Attitudes towards the benefits of self-directed learning

No.	Attitudes	1 Strongly disagree	2 Disagree	3 Agree	4 Strongly agree
1	The self-directed learning strategies project helps me improve my reading comprehension skill.	0%	8%	59%	33%
2	The self-directed learning strategies project helps me set learning goals and make plans to achieve the goals.	0%	11%	56%	33%
3	Learner autonomy helps me learn on my own by variety ways.	0%	11%	52%	37%
4	Learner autonomy helps me recognize the importance of autonomy in learning English as well as other subjects.	0%	8%	66%	26%
5	Learner autonomy plays a significant role in language learning.	0%	3%	40%	57%

The number of students agreed that theories on learner autonomy provides them variety ways to learn counted for 89% and the same number of students believed that they know how to set learning goals and make plans to achieve their goals. Moreover, 92% of them highly appreciated the important role of learner autonomy in language learning as well as in other subjects, the same number of the participants agreed that their reading skills were enhanced by the project. Only 8.4% of the students disagree with the benefits that learner autonomy brought about.

V. Conclusions

The use of three reading strategies is a motivational process that guides learners to study in an autonomous way in which they can make decision to set goals and plan their learning process. Moreover, these strategies encourage students to build up learner autonomy through their learning style to achieve their goals. Besides, the use of effective reading strategies helps learners feel more excited while reading because they can read more easily and faster. Another things creates motivation for students is that they have the priority to decide what to read by choosing the topics they are interested in, so they were able to identify specific and general information, and make prediction about the text. Therefore, learners' improvement in reading comprehension skills is helpful in generating students' awareness of the importance of learning autonomy in reading skills as well as other subjects.

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