Promoting Learner Autonomy: Student Perceptions of Responsibilities in English Language Classrooms of Myanmar

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Abstract

The main objectives of the research were 1) to explore what students in Myanmar, think about learner autonomy regarding their responsibility in learning English and 2) to investigate how students would like to be involved in classroom activities in the past and future. The samples of this research were 361 EFL students, consisting of 218 undergraduate students and 143 postgraduate students, selected by using stratified random sampling. The instrument used to collect the data was a questionnaire with 5-level rating scale, including Recognition of Responsibility for Learning (RRL), Past Learning outside Classroom (PLC), and Future Learning out Classroom (FLC). The study was carried out during the academic year 2018-2019 to investigate university students' perceptions of learner autonomy in English learning in Myanmar. The data were analyzed to discover what students in Myanmar think about learner autonomy regarding their responsibility in learning English and to discover how students would like

to be involved in class management. The findings were found that the participants understood the purpose of their learning program, explicitly accepted responsibility for their learning, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly reviewed their learning and evaluate its effectiveness.

Keywords: English language classrooms, Learner autonomy, Myanmar, Responsibilities, Student perceptions

Introduction

Developing learner independence has an important role in the theory and practice of language teaching. Language learning is a lifelong endeavor, not one that begins and ends in a language classroom. Most learners and teachers feel that language learning consumes a considerable amount of time. Learners have to work within and beyond the classroom to develop their language skills. The notion of learner independence or learner autonomy moves into an area where learners can direct their own learning. It could mean those learning activities which take place without the immediate intervention of the teacher. In this scenario, learners set their own objectives and follow strategies devised by themselves to fulfil them. This is, in turn, facilitates the learner to become more efficient and effective when they study independently. Learners are compelled to assume responsibility for their own learning. Learner independence demands learner involvement, and such involvement may lead to a deeper and better learning. Thus, it can be said that the fostering of learner independence may start in a classroom environment and extend beyond it.

Literature Review

Autonomous learners are able to learn from their own successes and failures by strategies that will help them to be more competent learners in the future (Crabbe, 1999). Umeda (2000, cited in Onozawa, 2010) gives three reasons for the importance of autonomy in education; developing a lifelong ability

to cope with the rapid social changes, fostering the learner's individuality, and developing the diversity of the learner's educational and cultural background. Benson (2001) indicates that developing such a capacity of taking control over one's own learning is always helpful. With the advent of communicative language teaching in Myanmar, the idea of learner autonomy has become a topic of discussion and a goal among language teachers. The idea of autonomy raises important questions that needs to be further explored, particularly in terms of students' taking responsibilities for learning. Autonomy has been characterized in different ways by researchers, but Littlewood (1999, p.71) summarizes two main features of learner autonomy included in the definition proposed by previous researchers. (i) Students should take responsibility for their own learning. This is because all learning in any case only be carried out by the students themselves and also because they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of their formal education. (ii) 'Taking responsibility' involves learners taking ownership (partial or total) of many processes which have traditionally belonged to the teacher, such as deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods, and evaluating process. Autonomy is a multidimensional construct of capacity that will take different forms for different individuals. It will also take different forms for the same individual in different contexts and at different times. The three basic pedagogical principles which underlines autonomy in language learning is learner involvement (engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process), learner reflection (helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning) and appropriate use of the target language (using the target language as the principal medium of language learning). In other words, there is a consensus that the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others. If the learning environment is comfortable, where the learners feel encouraged, they are more likely to experiment with different learning strategies and not be afraid to ask questions and to ask for assistance when necessary. Learners also need to be given the skills to be able to seek out materials and resources outside the classroom to enable them to improve

their recognition of what is relevant and what is not. In the relevant literature, there are many theoretical research articles and books on the roles of language teachers while empirical studies are quite limited (Han, 2014). Additionally, most of the studies on learner autonomy were mainly conducted in universities. Therefore, studies on university students' perceptions of learner autonomy in English learning in Myanmar contexts deserve much investigation.

Research Objectives

There were two objectives in this study. The objectives were:
1. To explore what students in Myanmar, think about learner autonomy regarding their responsibility in learning English, and
2. To investigate how students would like to be involved in classroom activities in the past and future.

Methodology
1. Research Design

This research design was quantitative research. There were three scales in this study: Recognition of Responsibility for Learning (RRL), Past Learning outside Classroom (PLC), and Future Learning outside Classroom (FLC). These scales were designed to investigate university students' perceptions of learner autonomy in English learning in Myanmar.

2. Population and Samples

A total number of 361 subjects were invited from selected universities of Myanmar using stratified random sampling to participate in the study. Table 1 illustrates the gender distribution of the research cohort.

Table 1

The Subjects (n=361)

SN	Participants	Gender		Total
		Male	Female	
1	Undergraduate students	52	166	218
2	Postgraduate students	31	112	143
Total		83	278	361

All of 361 subjects study English as a foreign language; 83 were males and 278 were females. 218 were undergraduate students and 143 were postgraduate students.

3. Instruments and Procedures

The questionnaire was developed based on the questionnaires proposed by Chu (2004), Sakai, et al. (2008), and Spratt, et al. (2002). The questionnaire was on 5-point Likert Scale and consisted of two parts. In section one, the students were asked ten items to obtain their responsibilities towards learning. In section two, thirteen items were given to the participants to obtain the data on their responsibility for past learning and the other sixteen items were also given to identify their responsibility for future learning. As the subjects were students who study English as a foreign language, the questionnaire items were given in English language. There are also five themes in all sections of the questionnaire.

Table 2

The Number of Items Composed of the Factors

SN	Three Scales	Total items
1	Recognition of Responsibility for Learning (RRL)	1 to 10
2	Past Learning outside Classroom (PLC)	11 to 23
3	Future Learning outside Classroom (FLC)	24 to 39

4. Data Collection

The questionnaire was distributed to the students during class by the author in January 2018. It took them about fifteen to twenty minutes to answer the questions.

4. Data Analysis

The simple descriptive analysis was used to analyze the quantitative data collected by the questionnaire.

Results

The movement towards learner-centered approaches has resulted in more emphasis on the benefits of learner autonomy in the success of language education. This study was carried out to find out the factors related to learner autonomy with regard to the subjects' perceptions of responsibility using one set of questionnaires and to discover whether there were any English learning activities outside of class. The results were as follows:

Section One: Recognition of Responsibility for Learning (RRL)
Learner Autonomy

Table 3

Recognition of Responsibility for Learning (n=361)

SN	When you are taking classes, how much responsibility should you take concerning the following items?	Responses				
		Not at all	Hardly	To some extent	Mostly	Totally
1	To decide your goal of study in one semester	75 (20.78%)	84 (23.27%)	106 (29.36%)	91 (25.21%)	5 (1.38%)
2	To check how much progress, you make	53 (14.68%)	88 (24.38%)	79 (21.88%)	75 (20.78%)	66 (18.28%)
3	To decide the textbook and materials you use in class	159 (44.04%)	119 (32.96%)	42 (11.63%)	34 (9.42%)	7 (1.94%)
4	To decide topics and activities you learn in class	168 (46.54%)	106 (29.36%)	41 (11.36%)	35 (9.69%)	11 (3.05%)
5	To decide the pace of the lesson in one lesson	115 (31.86%)	88 (24.38%)	109 (30.19%)	39 (10.80%)	10 (2.77%)

Table 3 (Continued)

6	To decide the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work	94 (26.04%)	102 (28.25%)	103 (28.53%)	56 (15.51%)	6 (1.66%)
7	To decide the amount, type and frequency of homework	116 (32.13%)	92 (25.48%)	80 (22.16%)	65 (18.01%)	8 (2.22%)
8	To decide ways of assessment, such as attendance, essay and self-evaluation	129 (35.73%)	83 (22.99%)	72 (19.94%)	67 (18.56%)	10 (2.77%)
9	To assess your study	77 (21.33%)	85 (23.55%)	93 (25.76%)	92 (25.48%)	14 (3.88%)
10	To evaluate the course	94 (26.04%)	81 (22.44%)	73 (20.22%)	71 (19.67%)	42 (11.63%)
	Avg	29.92%	25.71%	22.10%	17.31%	4.96%

Table 3 shows the items of the students' recognition of responsibility for learning most in class. Five themes were mentioned by more than 15 percent of the respondents. The themes that resulted from a content-analysis are shown in items one, two, three, four, and nine in total.

The first theme is "having a clear focus." Students feel that they can have a clearer focus once they set their own goal. The second theme is "checking their progress". Most students totally think that they have improvements in their study. The third theme is "to decide the textbook and materials they use in class." Students respond that they hardly decide the learning materials they use in class. The fourth theme is "to decide topics and activities they learn in class." They did not do it at all. The last theme is "assessing their study." They mostly think that they can assess their study.

Section Two: Past Learning outside Classroom (PLC)

Table 4

Past Learning Outside Classroom (n=361)

SN	How often have you done the following English learning activities voluntarily since you entered the university?	Responses				
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Usually
11	To read English newspaper	42 (11.63%)	63 (17.45%)	122 (33.80%)	71 (19.67%)	63 (17.45%)
12	To read web pages in English	40 (11.08%)	70 (19.39%)	92 (25.48%)	114 (31.58%)	45 (12.47%)
13	To watch and listen to English learning TV and radio programs	29 (8.03%)	44 (12.19%)	102 (28.25%)	114 (31.58%)	72 (19.94%)
14	To watch and listen to TV and radio programs in English	20 (5.54%)	48 (13.30%)	80 (22.16%)	90 (24.93%)	123 (34.07%)
15	To listen to English songs	7 (1.94%)	67 (18.56%)	107 (29.64%)	77 (21.33%)	103 (28.53%)
16	To watch English movies without subtitles in your language	3 (0.83%)	74 (20.50%)	122 (33.80%)	102 (28.25%)	60 (16.62%)
17	To talk to foreigners in English	18 (4.99%)	126 (34.90%)	76 (21.05%)	74 (20.50%)	67 (18.56%)
18	To practice speaking English with your friends	18 (4.99%)	127 (35.18%)	78 (21.61%)	61 (16.90%)	77 (21.33%)
19	To learn English grammar	35 (9.70%)	106 (29.36%)	74 (20.50%)	88 (24.38%)	58 (16.07%)
20	To learn English vocabulary words	10 (2.77%)	109 (30.19%)	78 (21.61%)	79 (21.88%)	85 (23.55%)
21	To prepare for proficiency tests such as TOEFL, and IELTS	50 (13.85%)	120 (33.24%)	85 (23.55%)	59 (16.34%)	47 (13.02%)
22	To prepare and review for classes	3 (0.83%)	42 (11.63%)	82 (22.71%)	115 (31.86%)	119 (32.96%)
23	To attend a course and seminar provided by a university	10 (2.77%)	54 (14.96%)	76 (21.05%)	118 (32.69%)	103 (28.53%)
	Avg	6.07%	22.37%	25.02%	24.76%	21.78%

Table 4 shows the activities the students would like to get involved in most outside classroom in the past. Five themes were mentioned by more than 20 percent of the respondents. The themes that resulted from a content-analysis are shown in items 14, 15, 20, 22, and 23 in total. The first theme is "to watch and listen to TV and radio programs in English." They mention that in the past, they usually listen to English programs. Students also prepare and review for classes and usually attend a course and seminar provided by the university. They also listen to English songs and learn English vocabulary words.

Section Three: Future Learning outside Classroom (FLC)

Table 5

Future Learning Outside Classroom (n=361)

SN	How often would you like to do this from now on?	Responses				
		Never	Seldom	Sometimes	Often	Usually
24	To read English newspapers	14 (3.88%)	19 (5.26%)	115 (31.86%)	102 (28.25%)	111 (30.75%)
25	To read magazines and books in English	17 (4.71%)	46 (12.74%)	100 (27.70%)	114 (31.58%)	84 (23.27%)
26	To write an e-mail in English	28 (7.76%)	42 (11.63%)	100 (27.70%)	115 (31.86%)	76 (21.05%)
27	To keep a diary in English	21 (5.82%)	35 (9.69%)	78 (21.61%)	126 (34.90%)	101 (27.98%)
28	To watch and listen to English learning TV and radio programs	7 (1.94%)	40 (11.08%)	71 (19.67%)	114 (31.58%)	129 (35.73%)
29	To watch and listen to TV and radio programs in English	10 (2.77%)	78 (21.61%)	110 (30.47%)	94 (26.04%)	69 (19.11%)
30	To watch English movies without subtitles in your language	14 (3.88%)	109 (30.19%)	79 (21.88%)	75 (20.78%)	84 (23.27%)
31	To talk to foreigners in English	25 (6.93%)	111 (30.75%)	78 (21.61%)	60 (16.62%)	87 (24.10%)
32	To practice speaking English with your friends	21 (5.82%)	78 (21.61%)	90 (24.93%)	98 (27.15%)	74 (20.50%)
33	To practice English in an English conversation school	42 (11.63%)	79 (21.88%)	92 (25.48%)	101 (27.98%)	47 (13.02%)

Table 5 (Continued)

34	To learn English grammar	4	53	113	128	63
		(1.11%)	(14.68%)	(31.30%)	(35.46%)	(17.45%)
35	To learn English vocabulary words	10	39	74	121	117
		(2.77%)	(10.80%)	(20.50%)	(33.52%)	(32.41%)
36	To prepare for proficiency tests such as TOEFL and IELTS	19	42	78	116	106
		(5.26%)	(11.63%)	(21.61%)	(32.13%)	(29.36%)
37	To learn in a self-study center at a university	7	68	77	107	102
		(1.94%)	(18.84%)	(21.33%)	(29.64%)	(28.25%)
38	To attend a course and seminar provided by a university	109	98	50	57	47
		(30.19%)	(27.15%)	(13.85%)	(15.79%)	(13.02%)
39	To go to see your teacher in order to discuss your work	25	46	87	115	88
		(6.92%)	(12.74%)	(24.10%)	(31.86%)	(24.38%)
	Avg	6.45%	17.02%	24.10%	28.45%	23.98%

Table 5 shows the activities the students would like to get involved in most outside class in the future. Five themes were mentioned by more than 25 percent of the respondents. The themes that resulted from a content-analysis are shown in items 24, 28, 35, 36, and 37 in total. The first theme is watching and listening to English learning TV and radio programs in the future." Students wish to choose programs suitable for them in level, content, and purpose of their learning English. The second theme is "learning English vocabulary words." It reflects on language learning. Reading English newspapers also gives the students an opportunity to reflect on their learning. The next theme is "to prepare for proficiency tests such as TOEFL and IELTS as their future plan." Students also report that they want to adjust their learning by making a future study plan. The last theme is "learning in a self-study center at a university." The reasons why students chose this item (To learn in a self-study center) mention their own preference for promoting learner autonomy and indicate a preference for specific types of autonomous learning.

Discussion

As responses of the students towards the questionnaire items were analyzed to see which items the students would like to take responsibility for most in the English classes, the results show that students would like to get involved in various aspects of decision-making in class. Most of the items were chosen by more than 20 percent of the students. More than 20 percent of the students had chosen were all related to their making decisions. In other words, students would like to get involved in decision-making in class. Providing learners with the chance to make decision in learning is essential for getting the students actively involved in their own learning (Lee, 1998). Students in Myanmar are not provided with enough opportunities to make their own choices and develop individual and proactive autonomous behavior. This probably due to the educational tradition in Myanmar which promotes a high degree of teacher authority and control. However, students' perceptions on the selection of textbooks and materials are not consistent. Thus, we can conclude that teachers should give students more choices in such decisions as the selection of textbooks and materials; types of classroom activities; the amount, type, and frequency of homework; and topics and activities in class.

"Being motivated" is a theme that frequently arose in several items (Item 14 and 15 in Table 4 and Item 28 in Table 5). They show that learners' active and independent involvement in their own learning (autonomy) increases motivation to learn and consequently increase learning effectiveness. Interestingly, students in this study do seem to be aware that involvement in some aspects of learning in class increases their motivation to learn a language.

In the discussion section of section one of the study, the data state that the students felt reluctant to be involved in class management (Item 5 and 6 in Table 3). The results revealed that students did not want to be involved in class management tasks such as to decide the pace of the lesson in one lesson and to decide the type of classroom activities, such as individual, pair and group work. Class management activities need experience in order to do

them well. The results of our research imply that the main reason why students feel reluctant to manage class is that they are not trained properly in using these strategies with skill. In addition, our study showed that the students in Myanmar tended to express a strong belief that their teachers should have the responsibility of class management. This also explains why subjects felt reluctance to take a role in classroom management.

Recommendations

Based on the results, we decided to investigate in more detail students' perceptions of teachers' responsibilities toward learning in classes as well as their own responsibility as to whether they would like to get involved in future classes. Research on the promotion of Myanmar students' autonomy in language classes has been conducted by students; but further study should follow up on practitioners' perceptions of autonomy. It would therefore be useful for practitioners to understand what kinds of perceptions Myanmar students have before they implement activities to enhance learner autonomy in class, particularly as teachers' assumptions may be inconsistent with students' real perceptions. It is hoped that this study offers some advice to practitioners who are willing to promote learner autonomy in their classes in the Myanmar context. Although these results supported the value of the questionnaires to some extent, we found that some revision of the instruments was necessary. In addition, we learned that we needed to explore the questions of students' perceptions of their role in learner autonomy more deeply. Thus, for the present study, the authors revised the questionnaires and conducted a survey with a larger number of students to improve the reliability of the questionnaire.

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