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Promoting Cultural Awareness and Autonomous Learning in Higher Education: A Case Study

Igballe Miftari-Fetishi

Abstract

The main aim of this paper is to promote autonomous learning and cultural awareness among professors and students in higher education. The issue of whether students should be actively involved in the learning process and regarded as collaborators in course materials, topics and plans is an ongoing issue. In regard to the assumption that the professors are in charge of the educational process and in regard to the cultural awareness issue that accordingly, the student should not be asked to participate in course content or suggest topics, the case study, in fact, explores ways how autonomous learning can be introduced and the outcomes of the process.

Participants in the case study are 30 students of IBU, of various fields (ELT, PCG and VA) who were enrolled in the course Program development in the previous semester (Fall 2024). The implementation of autonomous learning was simultaneously conducted through the different tasks and projects that the students were asked to complete along the course. The first phase consisted of determining the goals and defining students' needs. The second phase consisted of student support and empathy. Students learned to trust the process and to work on their own and in groups and to provide feedback. They designed their own plans, presented and taught their peers and reflected on the process afterwards. The last phase consisted of course-material experts. In this phase, students were asked to modify course materials, more specifically, to develop an additional chapter for the primary source (the course book). Students were additionally advised to complete personal portfolios. The portfolios provide students' feedback and reflections on the process, alongside their progress in the course. The procedure along with the outcomes of the process will be presented further in the paper.

Keywords: autonomous learning, cultural awareness, higher education, reflection, collaboration

Introduction

In contemporary teaching, the learner is required to actively partake in the learning process and to undertake responsibility of his/her own learning. Hence, “learner autonomy as a concept “erupted” as a necessity of defining the shift from traditional teaching to interactive teaching i.e the shift from teaching to learning (from teacher- to learner). The process hereby takes into consideration factors that help foster and maintain better learning, self-motivated learning and helps learners’ in the discovering of who they actually are, what they actually like and how they learn best” (Miftari, 2015, pg. 101). The term autonomy therefore not only refers to the teacher and teaching instruction i.e. “how I teach” but also includes the learners’ reflection i.e. “how I learn best and what can I do for improvement?” Additionally, it is a way of thinking about your own learning, reflecting on the process and on achieving overall success. Dickinson (1993) states that autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions. She also states that autonomous learners are capable of selecting appropriate learning strategies and making use of them; they are able to selfaccess, to assess their use of different strategies, and to evaluate their own learning (Dickinson, 1993, pgs. 330-331). Accordingly, we should therefore regard autonomous learning as a two-way process, on the one hand it includes the teacher and how well he/she knows the learners needs for both material and strategy adaptation and on the other, it involves the learners who partake as active participants in the process, ensuring that their preferences and suggestions are heard and implemented. This issue, as we will see later in the paper, is time-consuming, requires flexibility, patience and is quite challenging, however, the outcomes of the process are interestingly successful. According to Little (1991): “Autonomy is essentially a matter of the learners’ psychological relation to the process and content of learning...a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action (1991, pg. 4). Additionally, Benson & Voller (1997) state that the term autonomy has come to be used: 1) for situations in which learners study entirely on their own; 2) for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in selfdirected learning; 3) for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education; 4) for the exercise of learners’ responsibility for their own learning; 5) for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning (1997, pg. 2). Benson et. al. (2003) proposed that developing learner autonomy is a socio-cultural process in which cultural background and learning experiences play a crucial role. Accordingly, learner autonomy refers to the capacity

to self-monitor one's learning process to participate actively in culturally accepted ways within a community of practices. (Benson, 2013)

Benson (2013) also suggests that the word capacity implied learners potential to be involved in autonomous learning, such as setting goals of learning, selecting appropriate learning materials and conducting reflection. This would not be possible without taking into consideration the learners needs, therefore, learner autonomy is also perceived as the representation of the inherent psychological needs of an individual.

Autonomy and the Cultural Awareness Issue

Teacher accountability is a term quite often used to describe the role of the teachers in the everyday profession; teachers should have expertise, additional qualifications, teacher trainings etc. in order to be employed. The role of the teacher in the overall success of the learners or group of learners is crucial. As a result, teachers are responsible for the scores, for student satisfaction and are also responsible for the teaching. In terms of introducing autonomous learning, the cultural awareness factor plays a major role.

Hence, prior to introducing the issue and implementation of autonomous learning in my course, it is important to brief you on the cultural assumptions related to teachers and teaching. Namely, in the Balkans and the region, the matter of including learners in the process of planning, teaching and design is regarded as negative. This is due to the stereotyping (or hypothesis) that defines the teacher as the sole collaborator in the teaching process and including the learners in the decision-making process is regarded as lack of the teachers' fulfillment towards the obligations of the chosen profession. As a result, teachers who are willing to promote autonomous learning should introduce it slowly and in small tasks. The procedure of events, along with student feedback and comments, which are original sources from their portfolios, are provided below. They serve as evidence of students' reflection on the process and their overall satisfaction. Along the way, you will notice that the students' reflection asserts that they did not have any previous experience with autonomous learning, referring here to needs analysis, students learning styles profiles etc. Additionally, the students were introduced to the notions during lectures and along the course. This implies that in their previous learning experience, students did not have a say in what they wish to learn, they could not provide suggestions and they were not actively involved in the learning process. The saying

“learning by doing” was not practiced previously and this was a new matter for them. The bitter truth made it even more challenging for implementation, however, the results proved the process to be worthwhile.

Accommodating Learners to the Teacher, the Peers and the Tasks

For effective collaboration to occur, it is very important for teachers to establish a rapport with the learners. The first step is accommodating the learners to the teacher, the course and to one-another. It is crucial for the learners to feel secure and to be able to communicate their needs, to provide suggestions and to collaborate together. The learners need to trust the process and need to be aware of the benefits that autonomous learning has and its' positive outcome.

Hence, the procedure began firstly as an introduction to the course and to the goals, along with the learners needs. The students were asked three basic questions:

- What do you know about planning?
- What is it that you need to learn about planning?
- How can we get there? Any suggestions?

The students were quite surprised with the set of questions. Apparently and according to their personal experience, they lacked previous brainstorming activities that would “predict” the course relevance or content. Later, in their portfolios, they made sure to mention this fact:

“We also wrote down what our expectations were from the class and the professor told us that we would need to make this portfolio by the end of the course- a monument to everything we did throughout the course...we were introduced to Exit tickets and could only exit class when answering the exit ticket question.”(Student portfolio source, 2024)

The group as previously mentioned, consisted of 30 third-year students, of three different departments. The variety in the department fields meant that the needs and goals would normally differ; hence, the materials along with the instruction were a challenge as of day one. Another feared obstacle was group acquaintance level i.e. how well would the group get along and collaborate in the tasks and activities and also, the readiness for them to partake in projects and presentations together. At the beginning, the group was very quiet, they were uncertain about what to expect, most of them did not know me (it was a first acquaintance) and were therefore shy to participate.

"I remember during the first week of coming back to classes, sitting down with friends and discussing the potential of this course. New course with a new professor, we weren't quite sure what to expect. I think a few of us weren't expecting to have two pedagogical classes in the first semester, but it turned out to be a lot better than we expected." (Student Portfolio source, 2024)

I gradually began to give them more authority but also required more. At some point, the students began to actively provide support in the decision-making process and provide suggestions. They began to perfectly work together in peers and groups and were not afraid to present. I explained to them that we would make portfolios together- that they would be collecting every single task or assignment in a folder and that we would get back to the overall progress by the end of the course. I then took advantage of the group differences and required from the students to choose any one specific skill that they wished to present and teach to the group. In peers, students of the different departments designed lesson plans, decided on the aims and materials and co-taught. The activities varied from painting and drawing, to counseling and interview, to language teaching activities. The students worked very well together. They presented the activities, discussed their importance and answered questions. Afterwards, they were asked to self-reflect on the process. They were taught to not only plan and teach but to additionally reflect on the process (theory versus practice).

"My favorite assignment from this class was when we had to do presentations, as teachers, and teach the class a skill. It was the one assignment that caused us the most stress, but it was the most fun and energizing assignment we have done to date. We presented abstract art, entitled: An introduction to watercolor abstract art". (Student portfolio material, 2024)

Additionally, apart from the co-teaching experience and planning, we were also covering the course materials and topics from the course book. We were examining and discussing the importance of each topic in planning and were comparing the necessity of each one for the different fields i.e. some fields needed complementary chapters and skills. As a result, I decided to put students into the "expert position" namely, I asked them to analyze the chapters of the course book and to decide what they could additionally add as a chapter of their own (relevant to their field of studies). We termed this "course-book modification".

"The last assignment was to add a chapter that we thought would fit in and be on the same level of importance in the book. We all got into groups and started thinking. After some discussion with my partner, out of the ideas we had written down, we decided to

go with project development, which would come after the chapter Material development". (Student Portfolio source, 2024)

The results of the task were surprisingly good; students actually thought about the process and gathered ideas. The topics were listed in order of importance and students conducted a voting strategy process, in which, the most relevant topics would be chosen. During this phase, students distinguished among the topics and with clear argumentative feedback argued for or against. They discussed the issue of relevance, do-ability and effectiveness of the chosen topic and within a very cooperative atmosphere, chose the best among topics.

Table 1.

Brainstorming task

Think of the topics in the course book. Are they equally relevant?	How could students be involved in the process? (their level, interest, cooperation)	How will this be accomplished?
What skill/topic could be added?	The second list should consist of what skills/topics students wish to learn.	Present and discuss them with the group. Vote for or against the proposed chapter ideas. Explain why.
Together with peers, make a list of most important/least important chapters.	Make a draft of argumentative feedback regarding your choice.	IMPLEMENTATION PHASE

Following the thinking, voting and selection of the new chapters, the teams began working on the chapter material. The main aim was to develop course content that would be in-line with their fields of study and would also serve as additional material (which they concluded as needed). Two sample-chapters are provided below.

Table 2.

Student chapter sample A

Our contribution-Project Development

Chapter: Project Development

Introduction

After working out the needs analysis, the goals, aims, and objectives, and defining the materials needed, the educators are in a position to introduce project development into the course schedule. Project development will be defined here as the gathering of information and resources and then using that knowledge to create a project. The key to developing a successful project is to aid the students in similar ventures they will encounter throughout their lives. They need to know how to gather research and resources properly and how to use and present them effectively, whether that be in front of a few people, an amphitheater full of students, a business meeting etc.

1. Research Analysis: Why is research important?

1.1. AI: Friend or Ally?

1.2 Good VS Bad Research

2. Project Presentation: How to use the information you have efficiently?

2.1. Gathering and Presenting Research

2.2. How to communicate your research

2.3. Practice makes perfect

3. Activities

4. Aims and objectives

5. Summary

1 Research Analysis: Why is research important?

Before diving into the project, students need to first learn what and how is research done. Research isn't simply one online search or one forum and to call it a day of hard work.

1.2. AI: Friend or Ally?

AI is often viewed negatively due to concerns about job displacement, lack of transparency in decision-making, and the potential for bias in algorithms. These concerns arise from the rapid development of AI technologies and uncertainty about their long-term societal impact. But that doesn't mean AI can't be used for something good.

AI can significantly enhance and accelerate research across various fields by automating tasks, analyzing large datasets, providing insights, and enabling new approaches to problem-solving.

AI is transforming the research process by making it faster, more efficient, and more accurate. Whether it's through data analysis, simulation, automation, or improving collaboration, AI empowers researchers to make groundbreaking discoveries, solve complex problems, and push the boundaries of knowledge in a variety of fields, including medicine, environmental science, engineering, and beyond.

It all depends on how it is used, we cannot blame AI for students misusing it but with how most of the population is used to having the world at their fingertips, using AI to do their work is not much of a shock.

1.2. Good VS Bad Research

Some don't realize that there are correct and incorrect ways to do research, and you shouldn't only look for information that supports your idea but also research that goes against it, one well-written document does not hold well against ten documents that go against it.

Liza Azemi, Sara Popovska

Table 3.*Student chapter sample B***Chapter: Effective Communication****Introduction**

Effective communication is a cornerstone of teaching. It enables educators to convey information clearly, concisely, and effectively. This chapter will equip students with the skills to transfer knowledge and teach their courses with confidence and precision.

Body**Types of Communication**

Communication can take various forms, each with its strengths and limitations.

- **Verbal Communication**

- *Pros:* Immediate feedback, personal interaction, conveys tone and emotion effectively.
- *Cons:* Can be misinterpreted without supporting visual aids, less effective for complex ideas without repetition or clarity.

- **Non-Verbal Communication**

- *Pros:* Reinforces verbal messages, conveys emotions, and supports understanding through gestures or visuals.
- *Cons:* Can be ambiguous if not aligned with verbal communication, culture-specific interpretations.

- **Written Communication**

- *Pros:* Provides a permanent record, effective for detailed instructions or complex information.
- *Cons:* Lacks tone and immediate feedback, can lead to misunderstandings if poorly written.

- **Visual Communication**

- *Pros:* Engages learners, simplifies complex ideas, supports retention through visuals like charts, graphs, or slides.
- *Cons:* Requires technical skills, can distract if overused or poorly designed.

Assignment:

Prepare a project that includes a classroom presentation using at least two types of communication (e.g., verbal and visual). Evaluate the effectiveness of your approach based on audience feedback.

Self-Management and Time Management

Successful communication also depends on the ability to manage one's time and deliver the right amount of information within a given timeframe.

• How Much Information to Deliver:

- Start with the core message.
- Add supporting details sparingly, ensuring clarity and engagement.
- Use examples and questions to keep learners involved.

• Time Management Tips:

- Break sessions into manageable chunks with clear objectives.
- Allocate time for questions, interaction, and recap.
- Use tools like timers or schedules to stay on track.

Assignment:

Document your progress on a teaching project daily for a week. Reflect on how you managed your time and how it affected your communication effectiveness.

Practice

Effective communication improves with practice. Developing habits like journaling can refine one's ability to organize thoughts, reflect on experiences, and track growth.

Assignment:

Keep a journal until the end of the semester. Document your communication experiences, challenges, and improvements. Analyze your progress and share insights in a final reflection paper.

Objectives

By the end of this chapter, students will be able to:

- Communicate effectively and confidently, minimizing anxiety.
- Foster improved teaching practices through clarity and self-awareness.

(Sandra Kostovska Besarta Musliju, Melisa Sadikovic)

A Brief Summary on the Activities and on Student Feedback

The procedure of events began as an introduction to autonomous learning and as a form of collaboration between the teacher and the students and between student peers. The experience not only promoted collaboration and feedback, but also promoted autonomous learning within the tasks. Students not only had the chance to gather information, but they also had the chance to explain to the others the importance that the chosen chapter had for them and their distinguished fields. The main aim was to make students aware of the following: the importance of good materials, the importance of having definable goals in their teaching, the relevance of the learners needs and the overall importance of autonomous learning. Accordingly, “willingness for autonomous learning refers to the learners’ tendency and inclination to actively set learning goals, select appropriate learning methods and engage in self-monitoring during the process. This concept emphasizes students’ pro-activity an self-regulation in learning, which are crucial for life-long learning and personal development. (Wang, 2024, pg. 4)

Chen and Pan (2015) proposed three dimensions to represent foreign language learning autonomy: learner responsibility, the ability to conduct autonomous learning and different autonomous learning activities. Students were not only introduced to autonomous learning, but they were also active participants in the process. They shared their thoughts and ideas and admitted that the process helped them learn together and develop their individual growth. They noticed their strengths and their weaknesses and they could reflect on the skills and competences that needed improvement. Accordingly, in their portfolios, students provided clear insights on the process and what they considered helpful:

Program development played a key role in enhancing my knowledge and learning by providing structure, clear objectives and new learning opportunities. The quality of the course allowed me to engage with the topics in a structured way and provided a solid foundation before moving on to more advanced topics. Even though there was some scheduling conflict with another class, the program proved highly valuable, and I was able to learn a great deal despite the challenges. These initiatives not only helped me understand the theory but also provided practical applications, allowing me to relate what I learned in class to real situations. An activity in class that focused on teamwork and course learning also improved my communication and collaboration skills, which are important for my personal, educational and professional development. This cycle of continuous learning and development kept me disciplined and motivated. Overall, the development program gave me the tools and confidence to solve problems, develop creativity, and learn effectively while planning for the future. Remarks about myself: I want to improve my time management to be more productive and balance my responsi-

bilities to create more space for tasks and projects. By better organizing and prioritizing my time, I hope to utilize my time and discover new opportunities for growth and learning. (Ana Marija Stefanovksa, Portfolio source, 2024)

Conclusion

The paper not only presents autonomous learning, but also provides the outline of the activities, together with the students' reflections of the process and feedback. Hence, it not only provides insights of teacher beliefs, but also provides the outcomes of the process and how well all was managed. The spontaneous procedure allowed for the learners to not only be themselves, but also taught them to trust the process and to collaborate. The portfolio sources provided evidence of student satisfaction, as they were not used to such teaching/learning in their previous education. The experience serves not only as an introduction to autonomous learning but it also serves as a model of theory and practice, implementation and reward. It serves as a model of implementation for teachers who wish to apply autonomous teaching and learning but are afraid to do so due to the above-mentioned factors and issues.

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