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Developing Learner Autonomy in EFL Writing Classrooms via Peer Feedback

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Introduction

One of the challenges facing foreign language teachers is to make students become self-reliant, autonomous learners who can pursue their own learning and survive outside the sheltered environment of the classroom. The aim of this article is to discuss the concept of learner autonomy, the role of teacher and learner in an autonomous classroom and how to promote learner autonomy in EFL writing classrooms. Special focus is placed on the criticism of the traditional way of teacher feedback provision and the use of peer feedback activity as a means to help language learners to be responsible and assume responsibility for their own learning.

What is learner autonomy?

Learner autonomy in language learning is not new. It has become an on going interest and a significant body of research on autonomy in language learning has been conducted (Tamjid & Birjandi, 2011). One key principle of learner autonomy is the emphasis on the role of the learner rather than the role of the teacher. In an autonomous language classroom, teachers are changing their roles and moving to new ones. Language teachers do not play the role of transmitters of information. Their role is more that of a counselor and a facilitator whose position is to manage the activities in the classroom and maintain learning environment that encourage learners to view learning as a lifelong process (Jacobs & Farrell, 2001; Lowes & Target, 1999). The learner’s role is to take charge of their learning (Holec, 1980). As Dam (1995) emphasizes, learners’ active participation and responsibility for their own learning process are significant in the field of foreign language learning. Hence, the learner’s role in an autonomous learning is not that of a passive receiver of knowledge. Learners become autonomous by being involved in all aspects of the learning process and they need to have some choice and control over their own learning (Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2003). Even though the teacher remains the more knowledgeable and
experienced person in the classroom, learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute.

**Problems with the traditional pedagogic culture**

In line with many Southeast Asian countries, Thai education scene has long been regarded as on where teachers took on the role of knowledgeable authorities and students were dependent, passive recipients. Keyuravong & Maneekhao (2006) confirm that students have become accustomed to the traditional classroom structure and their beliefs are that teachers possess all the knowledge so they will be the people who give the knowledge to the students. Teacher-centered pedagogic practices such as lecturing to the class remain a dominant and popular way of English teaching in both primary and secondary schools in Thailand (Hird, 1995; Chatranonth, 2008). As Jarvis and Atsilarat (2004) report, in spite of the Thai government’s official endorsement regarding a move towards a learner-centered classroom, Thai teachers particularly primary and secondary school teachers still practice the traditional teacher-centred method which is characterized by rote learning and memorization of target language rules.

One reason why Thai teachers hold on to a teacher-centred approach can be attributed to their own experience of learning and training. A good number of studies have found that the teacher’s previous experience of learning has an impact on their choice of instructional practice (e.g. Ashcraft & Courson, 2004; Borg, 1998). Rote learning strategies have been firmly rooted in many foreign language learning classrooms in Thailand for decades. The way teachers were taught when they were young inevitably affected their current teaching practice. Indeed, this model of instruction had been handed down from one generation to the next. Furthermore, since such traditional methods worked well for them, they might see no reason not to utilize rote learning and memorization teaching strategies. This issue is important because the way teachers view themselves is unavoidably connected to how they view students (Lee & VanPatten, 1995). When teachers see themselves as the giver of knowledge, this leaves little space for the student to play anything but a passive recipient of the knowledge (Lee & VanPatten, 1995; Holden & Usuki, 1999).

In English writing classrooms, writing teachers commonly use ‘direct feedback’(Williams, 2003). This means teachers enter all corrections onto students’
essays and then require them to incorporate the corrections into a subsequent draft. Fregeau (1999) calls this type of feedback “repetitive copying of teacher-made corrections” (p.8). It is based on the notion of transmitting knowledge to the learner and is widely used among EFL writing teachers (Chatranonth 2008; Lee 2003). Lee’s (2003) study concerning Chinese writing teachers’ perspectives found that most writing teachers corrected students’ essays because they felt that it was their duty to mark and correct all students’ errors. This approach is based on the principle that the teacher, as owner of knowledge, didactically provides correct answers for students who then play a passive role in receiving the feedback and copying them down in their revision. Thus, the students’ role in the learning process is purely receptive and what gets evaluated is no longer the work of the student but that of the teacher.

There are several faults that lie with the traditional way of correcting students’ errors. As Williams (2003) explains, when direct feedback is given, students for the most part only copy the corrections into their subsequent drafts. The vast majority of students does not record nor study the corrections pointed out in the feedback. Such feedback technique does not teach students how to recognize or correct errors on their own (Williams, 2003). This notion is further supported by Muncie (2000) who comments that direct feedback provides students with a lack of choice when producing their revised draft. This leads to the absence of critical processing and evaluation of the feedback which can be argued to decrease “the impact of the feedback and revision process on the long-term improvement in writing ability” (Muncie, 2000:49). As Sheppard (1992) notes, students who had been given full corrections by the teacher were likely to limit the complexity of their writing due to their fear of making mistakes.

In the study of the effectiveness of teacher feedback techniques among Thai EFL university students, Chatranonth (2008) found that the students who received direct feedback from the teacher made significantly more errors run-on, fragment, and comma splice errors than students who received indirect feedback where teacher only pointed out locations of errors. Erel and Bulut (2007) did a similar study but in Turkish context. They also found that the students who received direct feedback made more grammatical errors in 15 error types than students who received indirect coded feedback. Chatranonth (2008) indicates that deprives the student of the opportunity to engage in self-correction and problem-solving. Therefore, when teacher corrects everything for the students, it is possible for students to copy correct forms without
really understanding the grammatical rules behind them and it explains why similar errors tend to reappear on their subsequent writing assignments. Such notion is supported by Truscott (1996) who argues that the teacher’s provision of correct grammatical forms does not help because grammatical structures are acquired through a complex learning process which does not merely involve the direct transfer of knowledge from teacher to students.

The use of peer feedback to promote learner autonomy

An autonomous classroom places a strong emphasis on pair and group work as means to develop learner autonomy. The fact is that learners become less dependent on the teacher by learning to collaborate with their peers. One pedagogical practice designed to build up students’ academic writing competencies and help student writers become less dependent on the teacher is the use of peer feedback (Kulsirisawad, 2012; Van Der Pol, Van Den Berg, Admiraal, & Simons, 2008).

Peer feedback refers to an activity in which students receive feedback about their writing from their classmates (Hirose, 2008). It encourages students to adopt a more participatory role in their learning process. It can be either feedback on global (audience, content, organization) or local (grammar, spelling, and mechanics) writing issues or both depending on the intention of the teacher. Peer feedback could function as complementary to learner-centered teacher feedback methods such as indirect feedback where teacher provides error location or error codes to the students. The basic structures of peer feedback are as follows: the students write an essay on an assigned topic. Then they choose a partner by their preferences and exchange their work with that person. This process is reciprocal, meaning the students take turn playing a role of a teacher commenting on each other’s written work.

Asking students to provide feedback on the work of their peers offers a number of distinct advantages. First, it helps raise their linguistic awareness and encourage them to become critical readers (Teo, 2006). As emphasized by Scarcella and Oxford (1992), the student’s audience awareness can be developed as they are reading their peers’ writing and responding to it. As Hammerly (1991: 106) claims, students must be given plenty of opportunities to engage in their writing process because they “learn little or nothing” when the writing teacher provides correct forms for the students. Writing is a social process (Zainurrahman, 2010) and students can learn by interacting with others (Little, 2000) and critically reading other’s written
work (Keh, 1990). Other advantages of peer feedback are that it encourages greater sense of ownership in learning (Villamil & De Guerrero, 1998), develops critical thinking, and boosts critical reasoning (Muncie, 2000; Saito & Fujita, 2004). Berg (1999:232) explains that unlike feedback from the teacher, when students receive feedback from their classmates, they “question its validity, weigh it against his or her knowledge and ideas” and then decide whether any changes should be made. Even though it may be argued that the quality of the feedback from peers would be different from that of the teacher, feedback from peers is more likely to be perceived by students to be coming from “people who are genuine collaborators and interested readers of the writers’ work and not an evaluator” (Muncie, 2000: 50).

Miao et al. (2006) conducted a comparative study of peer and teacher feedback in a Chinese EFL writing class. They found that students did not entirely rely on or accept the feedback they received from their partners. They suggested this was a positive finding since “the more the students doubted the feedback, the more likely it was that they would develop their own dependent ideas they had for revision” (p.192). They also found that even though teacher feedback was more likely to be taken up by students, peer feedback was related to a greater level of student autonomy. Kamimura (2006) did a study on the effectiveness of peer feedback in EFL writing classrooms in Japan and found that peer feedback had a positive effect on both high- and low-proficient Japanese university EFL students’ writing performance in terms of overall essay quality. Kamimura also found that peer feedback led the low-proficient students to produce longer revisions compared with their original drafts and it brought significant improvement to the rewrites produced by the students with high as well as low English proficiency levels as compared with their original drafts.

With regard to EFL students’ attitudes toward peer feedback activity, Nagasaka (2000) recorded 45 Japanese EFL college students’ journals entries and found that the students showed a favorable attitude toward peer feedback. In a similar vein, Kulsirisawad (2012) found that even in culture that is said to give great authority to the teacher like in Thailand, there is a role for peer feedback. In her study, 95% of students had positive attitudes toward peer feedback activity. It was perceived by the students as very useful and enjoyable. The students accepted and valued grammatical feedback from their peers and they were willing to improve their work based on their peers’ suggestions. Furthermore, they showed a strong preference for peer feedback activity and they supported the use of peer feedback in future writing classes.
Conclusion

English language learning in Thailand can be more effective and successful by encouraging learner autonomy in a classroom. A teacher correcting everything for the students does not work because it does not help activate students’ linguistic competence (Allwright, 1975) and does not create an opportunity for students to become more agentive and be responsible for their own learning (Chatranonth, 2008). It encourages memorization and copying strategies which make students passive recipients rather than active problem solvers. I suggest that it is time that writing teachers move away from direct feedback and turn to a feedback that is more student-centred. Peer feedback should be seen as a complementary approach to teacher feedback. It is a way of encouraging learner autonomy in Thai classrooms since it facilitates the kinds of pedagogic change being called for by Thai educational policy.

Peer feedback activity gives students ample opportunities to take charge of their own learning process. Students can learn from their peers and they also learn how to accept and respect one another’s opinions. Working together in an autonomous learning environment certainly helps prepare students with the skills of cooperation and creativity as well as the ability to adapt themselves to new environments (Seeman & Tavares, 2000). However, a lot of factors need to come together in order for learner autonomy to thrive. Students do not instinctively know how to successfully work on their own. They need training, and the teacher has to give proper preliminary peer feedback training and be vigilant in the supervision of pair work in the beginning Stanley (1992) and Berg (1999a, 1999b). As Nystrand (1986) indicates, peer feedback could function as an effective writing pedagogical tool if proper preparation and guidelines are provided to students in advance.

In conclusion, since Thai official educational policies encourage the implementation of learner-centered instruction, today’s teachers should make students understand the importance and benefit of being involved in their own learning process. By helping students develop a sense of self-reliance, the students will learn to become more engaged and start to trust their own ability. In turn, they will feel empowered and gradually become more independent learners who take responsibility for their own learning.
Reference


