Chapter 6
Self-Directed Language Learning, Asian Cultural Influences, and the Teacher’s Role

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to identify cultural influences on self-directed language learning. Self-directed language learning may take place in the classroom environment, but mainly goes on outside of the classroom, and how students regulate this aspect of learning is crucial to their language learning and academic success. Autonomy is a key characteristic of western education while some aspects of collectivist culture appear to be impediments to autonomous learning. Culture influences learners’ beliefs about the learner and teacher’s relationship and their perceived roles in language learning. Students accustomed to more teacher-centered classrooms need to be given time and support to make the transition to new forms of learning. Teachers are suggested to provide guidance and assistance for learners, such as scaffolding, strategy teaching and self-assessment to encourage independent and autonomous learning to promote learners’ self-confidence, motivation, abilities and skills for lifelong learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Language learning is “a lifelong endeavor” (Thomson, 1996, p. 78). Mastering a foreign language requires learners to overcome several major difficulties from phonological, syntactic, semantic, and sociocultural aspects. However, some have placed emphasis on the social, psychological, and interpersonal fields in language learning (Nunan, 2001). The language learning process usually takes a considerable period of time, and as Ericsson, Krampe, and Tesch-Romer (1993) pointed out, the development of expertise in a specific domain requires approximately ten years of deliberate effort. Even so, students that had been learning a language for over ten years may still not be able to achieve native-like language proficiency. From observing English as second language students who had exposure to English both in and outside of school, Cummins (1981) argued that it generally takes three to five years for these learners to develop basic communication skills and five to seven years to obtain a proficiency level. Language learning requires students to be actively involved in the teaching and learning process. Autonomy, which involves taking responsibility for the learning objectives, such as self-monitoring, self-assessing, and taking an active role in learning, has been a popular discussion topic in language teaching for many years (Boud, 1988; Brookes & Grundy, 1988; Dam, 1988; Dickinson, 1987; Dickinson & Wenden, 1995; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991, 1999; Littlewood, 1999).

With the introduction and popularity of learner-centered methods in language teaching and assisting learners to become independent, it is important to help students become aware of the value of independent and autonomous learning in and outside the classroom. Autonomous learning improves the habit of learning continuously and helps learners become more independent and autonomous in how they think, learn, and behave even after they completed formal studies (Boud, 1988; Hammond & Collins, 1991). Culture, an important factor in language learning, influences learners’ beliefs about the roles they should take in their own learning. This chapter will identify cultural influences on self-directed language learning and how to improve a learner’s self-directedness to enable them to gain abilities for lifelong learning.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Self-Directed Learning

Self-directed learning is “a process in which individuals take initiative, with or without the help of others, to diagnose their learning needs, formulate learning goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement learning strategies, and evaluate learning outcomes” (Knowles, 1975, p. 18). Self-directed learning requires
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