A Double-Channel Model for Developing Learner Autonomy in an EFL Context

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ABSTRACT

Using Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL) to develop learner autonomy is a challenging task in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL). A new, double channel model for developing learner autonomy is proposed. This provides the basis for an experimental study, which investigates the impact of an autonomous learning platform (ALP). Both self-directed learning and socially-mediated learning are incorporated into the platform. The results of the study indicate that the double channel model supports the facilitating effects of scaffolding through English communication in an EFL context.

Keywords: Autonomous Learning, Computer-Assisted-Language-Learning, Double Channel Model, Self-Directed Learning, Socially-Mediated Learning

INTRODUCTION

Recently, researchers have shown an increased interest in the theory and practice of autonomy in learning (e.g., Benson, 2005, 2007; Benson & Chik, 2011; Blin, 2004, 2005; Tschirhart & Rigler, 2009). However, autonomous learning does not happen in a vacuum. The use of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in the development of learner autonomy is a critical issue in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) (Guo & Yan, 2007; Hu, 2005; Wang, 2007), especially the use of multimedia and web technologies for the provision of individualized and collaborative learning in an EFL context (Shao & Wu, 2007; You, 2004).

The current study is situated in a university setting, and explores learner autonomy via CALL for postgraduate EFL students majoring in science and technology learning English to participate in international academic exchanges. In this paper, a range of models for promoting learner autonomy are reviewed, and a new double channel model is developed.

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REVIEW OF MODELS FOR DEVELOPING EFL LEARNER AUTONOMY

In the past two decades, language learning and teaching researchers and practitioners have proposed a range of models to account for the development of learner autonomy (Benson, 1997; Blin, 2005; Macaro, 1997; Nunan, 1997). Nunan (1997) and Blin (2004, 2005) have concentrated on independent interaction with learning materials and educational technologies, while Benson (1997, 2001) emphasized learner control and Macaro (1997) the developmental process of learner autonomy.

Nunan’s Five-level Model

To foster learner autonomy inside the classroom, Nunan (1997) proposes a five-level model. In his scheme, five levels are outlined for developing learner autonomy: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence. Learners’ awareness is viewed as the first step towards learner autonomy because it helps learners understand the learning goal and context. Learners are expected to become aware of the pedagogical goals and identify their own preferred learning strategies or styles. Learners are encouraged to move from awareness to active involvement in the learning process and then make choices among a range of options. This is an intermediate stage, with the act of choosing being more important than the actual learning task itself, because it involves learner decision making. Next, learners are encouraged to intervene in the learning process by modifying learning goals or choosing learning content, moving on to creation that embraces learners setting their own goals, updating learning content and creating learning tasks.

At the heart of learner autonomy is transcendence, which requires the learner to make connections between the content of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom. At this level, learners take responsibility for their own learning, and learn to be effective language users, gradually becoming truly autonomous language learners.

Macaro’s Three-Stage Model

Macaro (1997) advances a three-stage model for the development of L2 learner autonomy. Autonomy is conceptualized in terms of language competence, language learning competence, and choice and action. Autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept, but an ability to be developed.

In this three-stage model, the development of autonomy is viewed as a gradual process. Autonomy of language competence means the development of communicative competence, including linguistic, strategic, and sociolinguistic competence. With a reasonable mastery of the L2 rule system, the learner is expected to use the target language without the help of others. Autonomy of language learning competence involves the learners’ ability to reproduce or transfer the acquired L2 skills and strategies to other learning contexts. The potential in the learner is tapped in such a way that cognitive and metacognitive strategies are activated. Autonomy of choice and action requires the learner to create opportunities to exercise learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy is a developmental process, and all language learners are, to a lesser or greater degree, autonomous. From this perspective, the key to learner autonomy is the opportunity to further develop these abilities.

Benson’s Three-Level-Control Model

In Benson’s (2001) model, autonomy is viewed as the capacity to take control of one’s learning. Control is at the heart of this model, and is exercised at three levels: learning management, cognitive process, and learning content. The technical version of autonomy encourages learners to take control of their learning management; the psychological version channels them to exercise control of their cognitive processes, and the political version concerns...
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