

Some Autonomy-Related Problems and Possible Solutions

自律学習に関する問題と解決の可能性

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The way I was brought up as a child at home and the way I was treated as a student at school in an obedient culture (one where a person isn't able to decide or behave on their own in most cases) made me eager to become an autonomous individual. In the first year of my PhD studies, I became aware of the concept of learner autonomy and could name this desire concretely. Then, I conducted research on some dependent engineering students with low motivation. They were dependent in that their English instructor was complaining about their not activating their inner mechanisms in terms of shaping and directing their own learning. On my supervisor's advice, I started to deal with learner autonomy. My PhD dissertation is entitled "An analysis of the factors influencing learner autonomy in the Turkish EFL context" (Boyno, 2011). While learning more about autonomy, I decided to encourage my students to become autonomous because my students were, as I observed with the engineering students, not so independent nor self-directed. Accordingly, at the very beginning of the academic term, I administered a questionnaire to students so that I could find out their personal diversities: their learning styles, multiple intelligence areas, emotional intelligences, motivation, attitudes and anxiety towards learning English, parental attitudes and English language learning strategies that they employ. I shared the results with them so that they could experience more personal awareness before getting language awareness and learner awareness. I did not follow the



ready-made curriculum and the commercial coursebooks entirely. Instead, my students decided on the syllabus design, the order of the units and topics to study in accordance with their needs and wants. They also developed their own materials in addition to using the coursebooks. At the end of the semesters, they assessed both their own performance (self-assessment) and that of their peers (peer assessment).

I am interested in parental attitudes and autonomy in early childhood, and the applications of self-access centres. I am also interested in classroom-based advising. I know the difficulties of classroom-based advising (please see my explanation of our presentation for the details); yet, in last year's IATEFL Learner Autonomy Special Interest Group (LA SIG) event entitled 'Advising for Language Learner Autonomy' held at Kanda University of International Studies (KUIS), I expected to learn more about the role of the advisor and that of the advisee and about the advising process including the development of materials.

I have been teaching English in Turkey since 1995. I worked at both private and public primary and secondary schools. Everything was quite traditionally teacher-centred: the foreign language teaching system, teachers' way of teaching, administration, and so on. In 2007 and 2009, I presented and listened to presentations on different aspects of learner autonomy at the Independent Learning Association Conferences (ILACs). The LA SIG event at Kanda was very special for me owing to its on-target topic: advising. As a practitioner researcher, I have been aiming to practice autonomy in my classrooms since 2007 despite facing many problems (the details of which you will find below where I write about our presentation). By joining this LA SIG event, I wanted to learn from other academics' experiences as to classroom-based advising in their presentations and to find possible solutions to my problems.

In 2009, I listened to Marina Mozzon-McPherson's presentation at ILAC in Hong Kong. She talked about advising and how to deal with advising-related problems. I enjoyed it very much. Hence, I decided to join the one-day event at Kanda after flying from Turkey to Japan for nearly 11 hours non-stop, thinking that I would be able to listen to Marina again. Unfortunately, she could not make it to this event on advising because of some health problems. (I hope you made a speedy recovery, Marina!) Yes, I missed her but

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enjoyed and learned a lot from other presentations.

One of my main points of interest is the self-access centres (SACs) incorporating materials available for the students, advisors and assessment. I satisfied this academic hunger of mine during the pre-conference visits to the self-access centres. This was not my first time at self-access centres. In 2009, I also visited some centres in Hong Kong as a pre-conference event before ILAC and in Mexico when I visited Marina Chavez Sanchez and her colleagues at Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), and Virna Velázquez and her colleagues at Universidad Autónoma del Estado de México (UAEM). I tried to understand how people design these centres, how many advisors are employed for how many students, what the limitations of the centres are, and what kind of students tend to make use of the facilities in the centres. I enjoyed my interviews with both the advisors and the students there in this sense. I did the same during the SAC visit before the LA SIG event at Kanda. I found out that, if not integrated into the curriculum in any year, mostly final-year students (fourth-year students) visit self-access centres aiming to obtain some materials in their majors to assist them with their career after graduation. In other words, they hoped to find opportunities in English for academic and specific purposes. I observed that there were not often enough advisors in SACs. Another problem was not the diversity of materials but the limited number of the same materials.

My teaching experience through autonomy taught me that learner autonomy is a kind of character education. As one gets older, I believe it gets difficult to change a person's character. Hence, it would be better to start nurturing autonomous learners when they are young. And I insist that, even before beginning school, children should be brought up as autonomous individuals. In other words, parental attitudes are of crucial importance. There is a famous Turkish saying: "A tree gets shaped when young."

In the conference, I visited the poster presentation entitled "Advising using parenting skills" by Yuki Hasegawa and attended the presentations entitled "Advisor versus advisee" by Umida Ashurova, "Developing a deeper understanding of learning processing during complex learning tasks" by Luke Carson, "How a learner changed: Linguistic evidence of metacognitive awareness in advising sessions"

by Hisako Sugawara, and "Encouraging learner autonomy through peer feedback in the writing classroom" by Jennie Roloff-Rothman. My colleagues Eyyup Akil, Ferhat Dolaş and I gave a presentation entitled "Difficulties of classroom-based advising".

The themes of these presentations suited my interests and the questions in my mind. Yuki's poster introduced the concept of STAR Parenting (respond to cooperation, acknowledge feelings, set limits, teach new skills, and avoid problems). These components, which are originally proposed for not perfect parents but growing parents, are used in face-to-face advising sessions and also in written feedback on the students' work by teachers and aim to assist children in becoming autonomous by giving them responsibility to make choices on their own. Although very practical, the steps of this study look very difficult to practice in a crowded classroom in terms of dealing with each student in details. Nonetheless, I believe that these steps can be useful with students who are really eager to learn English at a reasonable level in spite of their harsh conditions. What is more, this study positively confirmed my belief that not only teachers at schools but also parents at home can do something to nurture autonomous individuals.

Umida and her two third-year student advisors talked about the linguistic gains from peer advising to first-year students through positive feedback. They shed light on the importance of the interference of peer advisors' own learning styles, and learner beliefs and attitudes in advising sessions. Some other variables that they emphasized were cooperation between peers, credibility of peer advisors, personality, age, gender, culture, motivation and language. I asked Umida about her thoughts concerning the integration of self-access centres into the curriculum as in their case. She replied that as a limitation of their curriculum they had to separate listening skills from reading, writing and speaking skills and learner training. Students worked on their listening skills in their self-access centre as a compulsory part of the curriculum while practicing the other components in the regular classrooms. One of the participants suggested that integration of the self-access centres into the curriculum raises awareness in students and makes them explore more about their strengths, weaknesses, wants and needs. I have seen that there are different set-ups with regards to SACs: some are completely integrated into the curriculum, some are integrated partially into

the curriculum, and others are separate from the curriculum. I think it might be a burden for teacher-dependent students to visit such a centre and try to make their own way through their learning. However, as they get accustomed to the centre and start to be more successful in their learning, that is, once they get a taste of success, this burden might turn into a habit of them making use of centres.

Luke's presentation was on how cognitive and metacognitive processing interact in complex learning situations. In his study, teacher guidance was replaced with learning advisors' working with advisees – a very dynamic and continuous movement between upper and lower levels of cognitive processing. This process was improved by all learners' metacognitive behaviours to various extents. To him, the upper level of cognitive processing is a must for the completion of a complex independent learning task and must be accompanied by metacognitive learning concepts such as planning, monitoring and control of learning. Most of my students are passive and have low motivation to learn English. They prefer playing the secretary of the teacher while they take notes in the classroom and memorising their notes before exams as much as they can. Putting aside whether they can direct their own learning in terms of planning, monitoring and controlling it (metacognition), they do not even try to discover their own wants and needs. Neither do they try to understand the tasks that they are assigned (cognition). Thus, parallel to the findings of this study, cognition and metacognition should go hand in hand.

Hisako's presentation described one way to assist learners to reach their learning goals: by autonomous dialogues through multiple advising sessions instead of assigning them with a long to-do list. Hisako's case study with one female student put forward some linguistic evidence as to how her learner's metacognitive awareness developed to take responsibility of her own learning process. At the end of this informative presentation, one of the participants commented that teachers should focus on not only "what is the student doing" but also "what does she think she is doing" In addition, he added that even parents should personalise the learning process for their kids and support them metacognitively at their own reasonable pace instead of asking them to do everything that teachers require, including staying up late all night studying. Yes, this was one of my viewpoints concerning autonomy. I felt elated to see that there are academics

thinking in the same way as me.

In Jennie's workshop, participants discussed the significance of peer advising and peer feedback for dynamic and effective autonomous writing lessons. During the workshop, through sample essays and peer reflection worksheets, we played the adviser and learner. At the end of the workshop, we found opportunities to speculate on the applicability of the presented writing materials to our own contexts and encourage the promotion of peer feedback in the writing classroom. I believe that peer advising and peer feedback should be aimed for when autonomy is in practice. However, when writing (a productive skill) is in question, teachers should be attentive and keep monitoring the learners' work.

My colleagues and I aimed to draw attention to some other elements apart from the learning advisor which is still a crucial component of autonomous learning: the education system, fellow teachers, learners, administrators and parents in the Turkish EFL context at the secondary school level. The foreign language teaching system has imposed ready-made curriculums and materials. Fellow teachers have been uninterested in professional development and have showed resistance to change and shifts in their roles. Students have been unwilling to take on more responsibility in their own learning and are disturbed and reluctant to leave their comfort-zones. Administrators have been strictly loyal to the ready-made issues and concerned about the students' disturbance just like parents. At the end of our presentation, one of the participants told us that we were not alone in experiencing these issues. He meant they experienced the same problems in Japan. Another academic complained about the restrictions made by policy makers. In addition, Andy Barfield asked whether there was an autonomy association in Turkey. It was an honour for me to say that we have already started a new association with my colleagues. We aim to conduct autonomy-related research at school – starting from universities down to primary school. In order to be able to practice learner autonomy in any circumstance as effectively as possible – at secondary schools in my case – I believe that everyone involved (teachers, students, administrators, parents) needs training. Additionally, a radical change is needed in the foreign language teaching system. Fortunately, the system in Turkey has changed since the beginning of this academic term. We would like to start with the three universities in our city

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(Gaziantep). At the same time, we are in close touch with the Provincial Administration of National Education to train the English teachers to help them gain positive beliefs towards learner autonomy as an initial issue. Thus, they will be able to encourage their students, administrators and student-parents to practice learner autonomy as well. The students may be encouraged to gain more responsibility related to their own learning processes. The administrators and the student parents may be more patient with the process and provide the teacher and the students with some support both financially and pedagogically.

All of these points reminded me of two realities of the Islamic Turkish educational system: medreses (a kind of religious and scientific higher education institution) and Holy Qur'an courses. At medreses (although rare in number nowadays, they have been functioning for centuries), the scholars have their own classrooms, just like individualised rooms for different skills at self-access centres. They educate groups of two students at the same time by means of assessing their individual learning out of class. This is to not only personalise the learning but also provide opportunities to negotiate in groups. Students follow their own paths of learning and try to accomplish the requirements at their own pace. That is to say, even though some students start the programme on the very same day, they may soon find themselves following different paths according to their levels, background and pace. As for the Holy Qur'an courses, there is a hodja (a teacher) helping a group of successful learners to go ahead and work at their own pace. After finishing their daily requirements, these leading successful learners are assigned with teaching and helping some other groups of learners learn at their own pace. In other words, they play the role of peer advisors. In both cases (medreses and Holy Qur'an courses), learning is not limited to school or course hours. Rather, students do research and study out of school and are scaffolded in their learning when necessary.

All in all, many questions come to my mind regarding nurturing autonomous learners and individuals: How can the teacher be encouraged to let go of some of their control and to let their students gain more responsibility? When should we start giving responsibility to the students? What criteria should be taken into consideration while deciding on the tasks? Should students

choose from ready-made materials or develop their own materials? When should students start to develop their own materials? What kinds of training programmes should be organised for students, teachers, administrators and parents? Where should the advisor start and stop? Is peer advising practical in all levels? What are the typical characteristics of an advisor? What are the roles of teacher-, peer- and self-assessment? I am planning to pursue my post-doc studies to find answers to these questions.

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