Development of the Autonomous Learner Through Blended Learning

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Abstract

Current literature implies that the continuous onset of technology can be beneficial to students no matter the subject matter. However, there is a gap in the research involving the use and positive effects that technology can have in the foreign language classroom. Integrating elements of technology into any foreign language based syllabus can enhance the learning experience by making learning more autonomous and perhaps more importantly, enjoyable for all involved. This paper will summarize current literature in the field of technology and education, blended learning and how these two elements can be combined to make students more autonomous and independent learners. Finally the paper will end with a theoretical framework of the proposed research of the author.

This paper will introduce the theoretical framework behind the proposed research for a PhD thesis at the department of Education at Saga University, under the jurisdiction of Dr. Tetsuo Kuramoto.

Key words: learner autonomy, blended learning, technology in education

Introduction

Technology has shaped the students that we teach in recent times. Learners of today seem to be surrounded by and constantly immersed in technology. Tapscott refers to the young of today as the 'Net Generation' (1999). Prensky claims that today’s students are no longer the people our educational system was designed to teach, (2001). Instant access to information, in the form of high speed internet, Wi-Fi and more recently the introduction of smart-phone technology means that information and learning through such sources is more viable now than ever before. Such developments in technology can be seen to have considerable implications for education, in relation to the growing need to prepare young people for a life saturated by technology and rapid change. Technology transforms knowledge, and makes new things possible in new ways.
This paper has been subdivided into four parts. Part one will introduce the theory and concept of ‘learner autonomy’, how it is often misinterpreted and give a brief explanation of how it can be used in the context of foreign language learning. Part two will analyse the benefits that technology can give the language learner in today’s society. The third section of this paper will be based around ‘blended learning’ and how technology is used to enhance and develop the autonomous learner. These three subdivisions will make up the theoretical framework of the intended research of the author. Specific research questions in the field of learner autonomy, blended learning and technology in education will be addressed in the final section of this paper in the form of a theoretical framework diagram.

PART 1
Learner Autonomy

For many years the teacher, particularly in the Asian context (Littlewood, 1999, Kumaravadivelu, 2008, Kobayashi, 2011) has been the centre of the class and the director of knowledge who educates students with facts he or she, and the curriculum planners, deem fit. No matter how disguised, traditional teaching, is based essentially on the mug and jug theory (Rogers, 1983 in Benson, 2001) where the flow of knowledge is one-way, from the teacher as the jug to the student as the mug. Autonomy does not adopt this strategy and instead suggests that the teacher should act as a facilitator of learning. Knowledge should not flow from one source to another for authentic learning to take place and knowledge cannot be taught, but must be constructed by the learner (Candy, 1991). The facilitator must create a psychological climate by making the learner curious, creating enthusiasm, encouraging where possible, and producing the correct environment in which to learn (Benson, 2001).

1.1 Autonomy

Autonomous learning is increasingly becoming a modern approach to English language education, which many teachers, usually of European or North American origin, strive to develop in their learners. Learner autonomy gives more responsibility to the students in their own learning, and if successful, has the potential to aid learners in their future learning careers.

Defining autonomy can be a difficult task as meanings may be interpreted in different ways by different people. Autonomy in learning involves learners taking more control of their learning, in and out of their classrooms. Autonomy in language learning conversely is the notion of people taking more control over the purposes for which they learn languages and the ways in which they learn them (Benson, 2006). One important component behind ‘learner autonomy’ is that “language learning is a lifelong endeavour” (Lee, 1998:p.282) and that students learn more outside of class than they do in class. The process however, of making students ‘autonomous’ is a lengthy and complicated one. In order to promote the idea that more learning is done outside the classroom in student’s own time than during classes, students must
be directed in how to learn by themselves. This concept of autonomous learning may in fact be a cultural trait more attuned to the Western teacher (Littlewood, 1999) and unknown to his or her students in Japan.

The control that each student has over their learning differs, and the methods each person uses to learn are unique. Benson (2001) explains that autonomy is a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals. The autonomous learner is recognised by specific behaviour, but this behaviour can take many different forms depending on the student’s age, their progress so far and what they perceive learning to be (Little, 1991). One thing is clear, that the autonomous learner must be interested and motivated in what they are doing enabling them to become responsible for their own learning. It is the teacher’s job to initiate the step to learning independence.

1.2 Misconceptions

There are several misconceptions involved with the term autonomy. The first of which is that autonomy may be viewed as the process and teaching style. Another is that teachers “teach” autonomy. Autonomy is a product not a process. Autonomy is not something that teachers do to learners (Little, 1990). Teachers should first understand the meaning of the word, and the product involved in being autonomous. Autonomous language learning does not simply mean learning by oneself (Iida, 2009). Autonomy is not teacher independence, but teacher-learner interdependence (Little 1995, Iida 2009). As teachers we have to facilitate and motivate our students in a way so that our students become autonomous someday, not just say, “starting today you are autonomous”. With time, and guidance from teachers, students should gradually learn the benefits of autonomy and the potential for future endeavours which it can offer.

1.3 Methods used to introduce Autonomy

Introducing innovative methods of teaching to educational institutions in countries where they may not be the norm can be challenging. Jones (1995), a language instructor of Western origin, spent a year in Cambodia trying to introduce the concept of learner autonomy to a group of Cambodian students completely new to the idea. He did this by establishing a self-access centre (a facility that provides an ample supply of resources learners can use to improve their language ability at their will and more importantly, a place that they have complete free access to). He found that in order for students to make full use of the access centre and to become autonomous, students would have to be taught how to use it. Jones (1995) claimed that ‘most successful learning takes place outside the classroom’ (1995:p.228), in order to accomplish this task students must be taught the positive attributes of ‘how to learn’ by themselves. Jones (1995) also discovered that for students to become autonomous it is necessary for the teacher who is initiating the process to have an understanding of learner beliefs before progress can be made.

Jones discovered that rather than passing all responsibility to individual students it was more efficient to get students to work together, to collaborate with each other,
and pass responsibility onto groups of individuals. Through other similar studies, Iida (2009) tried to promote learner autonomy in learners of Japanese in the United States by introducing weblogs. Iida’s idea was to introduce collaborative learning through the use of the Internet where students would collaboratively learn together by communicating through weblogs. This entailed learning from each other through a weblog on the Internet where all students were involved, including the teacher. Collaborative learning through an impersonal body, such as the Internet, takes the focus off student face-to-face interaction. This may prove beneficial to the less talkative students who are more comfortable learning in this way (Iida 2009). Studies like this one show that engaging in dialogue about the learning process between learners and the teacher are essential to foster learner autonomy, or simply that collaboration is a crucial factor to promote learner autonomy (Iida 2008, Little 1995). Autonomy is not complete learning independence, but more learner and teacher interdependence.

PART 2
2.0 Technology in Education

Current trends of society in the developed world show huge potential for autonomous learning with the help of technology. If current pedagogical methods are to keep up with these trends and the younger generation in general, then the use of digital technologies in classrooms is imperative. Today’s students, according to Prensky, have spent their entire lives surrounded by and using computers, videogames, digital music players, video cams, cell phones, and all the other toys and tools of the digital age (2001). Prensky (2001) states that today’s college graduates prefer digital text to analogue text and obtain the majority of their wisdom digitally. Prensky terms this as ‘digital wisdom’ and refers to current day students, as ‘digital natives’ whereas their teachers, who are perhaps less technologically, savvy are ‘digital immigrants’.

The teachers of today’s net generation, referred to as ‘digital immigrants’ by Prensky (2001) appear to speak the language of digital technologies, but with ‘a thicker accent’. According to Prensky (2001), Tapscott (2009) and Williams (2006), teachers of today must learn to implement technology into their classrooms or contemplate loosing their students. The ‘one size fits all’ mentality (Tapscott, 2009) in which knowledge can be disseminated to all learners regardless of individual differences or learning styles is out-dated.

The transmission model of pedagogy refers to the belief that education is a specific body of knowledge that is transmitted from the teacher to the student. This understanding emphasizes teacher-centred learning where students are passive absorbers of information and that the purpose of learning is the memorization of facts. This model does not affirm learning and merely indicates memorization of facts and bypasses actual comprehension of what is being learned.

2.1 Digital Wisdom
Tapscott (1998, 2008) suggests that the ‘net generation’ have the ability to change learning as we may know it. Students of today bring with them a truly transformative power to supplant the conventional pedagogy of the “digital immigrant” to one based on more interactivity and collaboration. Tapscott claims that learning will become more interactive with the use of technologies. Also referred to in Thomas and Reinders, (2012:p.229) the interactive type of pedagogy is identified with a movement from:

1. Linear to hypermedia learning
2. Instruction to construction and discovery
3. Teacher-centred to learner-centred education
4. Absorbing material to learning how to navigate and how to learn
5. School to lifelong learning
6. One-size fits all to customized or personalized learning
7. Learning as torture to learning as fun
8. The teacher as transmitter to the teacher as facilitator.

As Haddad and Daxler, (in Allford and Pachler, 2007) declare that a focus on how to learn, problem-solve and synthesize the old with the new can lead to education for everyone, education anytime and education anywhere.

2.2 Criticism of technology and learning

Thomas and Reinders (2012) claim that there has been a history of introducing learning technologies in education. They indicate that the frequent emergence of new methodologies and technologies are tagged with the label, ‘revolutionary’ or ‘transformative’. They assert that these innovations may stem from origins outside of the learning context and often with commercial rather than pedagogical interests from large institutions passing from interest, to excitement and then disappointment and perhaps eventually abandonment as the ‘new’ learning technology emerges. Kenning (2007) argues in this respect in relation to language learning, ‘while technological progress has affected the way in which subjects are learnt and taught, it has not initiated paradigm shifts’ (p.165). It has also been realized in the literature that even though digital technologies may provide the opportunity to transform teaching now more than ever before, decisions made at tertiary institutions may resist the types of changes that are necessary. It is important to note that criticism towards introducing new technologies into the classroom will be met and may be more problematic for some depending on the institution at which they are employed.

The main point in this argument is that technology alone does not revolutionize pedagogy. Without a sufficient understanding and interest in how the new technology works by the teachers who intend to use it to educate and benefit their students, there may be little point in introducing it at all in the first place. Understanding of new techniques and technologies takes time, for some people more time than others. However, if teachers are willing to take the initiative to learn how to use new technologies individually or if institutions can provide the support for this to be possible then the possibilities for autonomous learning of students beyond the boundaries of their classrooms will inevitably increase.
Similarly Prensky (2012) in his most recent publication aptly named “Brain Gain: Technology and the Quest for Digital Wisdom” states that there may be further criticism as we continually rely on digital devices to acquire information. In the age of digital machines, when more and more information is at our fingertips there may be no need to use the human brain. As technology develops we may constantly depend on our devices to answer our questions and entrust the instant response that they provide. This constant use of artificial intelligence may be diminishing our own ability to think.

2.3 How Technology has changed the way we learn

There will continue to be constant criticism of technology in education with some common arguments being that what it has provided us with is not brain gain, but brain loss. Prensky states that the dispute is that technology is making us less able people, making our lives less “human” and less worthwhile. Prensky continues that this is happening because technology makes ‘many things easier’. However, according to Prensky technology can suppress the critiques by declaring that:

“those of us who choose to fully engage with technology are becoming freer, more productive, more creative, and more capable people, and, I believe, wiser people.” (Prensky, 2012:p.10)

2.4 Mind Evolution

Prensky (2012) offers the idea that rather than stunting the mind, by combining the complex reasoning abilities with technology’s strengths in storing and processing large amounts of data, conversely technology can make us wiser. Prensky claims that the symbiotic combination of the human brain and technology has great benefits for our own cognitive functioning. The cognitive impetus, which he believes has, and will continue to evolve human cognition, through digital wisdom he refers to as ‘mind evolution’ (2012:p.11). The altercation here is that the symbiosis of human and machine is better, and wiser, than the human or the machine alone. Put concisely, technological enhancement is extremely positive for all of humankind.

PART 3
3.0 Blended Learning

Blended learning refers to a language course, which combines a face-to-face (F2F) classroom component with an appropriate use of technology (Sharma and Barrett, 2007:p.7). A blended learning approach combines face-to-face classroom methods with computer-mediated activities to form an integrated instructional approach. In the past, digital materials have served in a supplementary role, helping to support face-to-face instruction. However, with the blended learning concept, technology plays a major role in the actual learning material. In a blended learning environment, class time would be reserved for ‘traditional’ style face-to-face teaching of the technology, how it works, and later to present findings of course work learnt, see Figure 1. Below. Meanwhile, the online portion of the course can provide students
with multimedia-rich content at any time of day, anywhere the student has Internet access.

Figure 1. Blended Learning Methodology (from www.eduriser.com)
Blended Learning provides a proportion of online e-learning, mobile learning and the more ‘traditional’ classroom based learning all within the framework of one course.
For further information go to: www.eduriser.com/blended-learning.php

Blended learning enhances collaborative style learning, whereby learners are encouraged to learn autonomously online through the use of software introduced during class time. According to its proponents, the strategy of blending the use of technologies into the more traditional style classroom learning creates a more integrated approach for both instructors and students.

3.1 Criticism of a the Blended Learning Approach

One criticism of the concept of autonomous learning through blended technologies is the role of the teacher. One commonly asked question is: Will the teacher be needed if students become completely autonomous? Selwyn (2011) argues that several critiques suggest that the further improvement of digital technologies in the classroom and the promotion of autonomous learning may lead to the disappearance of the teacher altogether. It is unlikely this will happen. Selwyn declares that instead it is perhaps more likely that teachers will continue to play an integral role in education and learning, whether technology-based or not.

The value of the teacher in encouraging autonomous learning, through a blended learning concept, cannot be underestimated. Without a teacher present in a blended learning curriculum, the course would not be blended. The authoritative role that teachers can continue to play in educating, informing, managing, facilitating and directing the technological activities of learners is paramount to success. It is the teacher’s job to encourage learners to become autonomous and to change their approach to learning. Without the impetus of the teacher’s input to initiate the goals
or even as a helpful resource when things go wrong, learners may divert from their intended goals and lose track altogether.

There have also been many critiques of the general theory of blended learning. Oliver and Trigwell in Hinkleman (2012) critiqued the overall concept. They argued that the terms of blending technologies into a more traditional style teaching approach were ‘ill-defined and inconsistently used’ and that the theory surrounding the approach was incoherent or redundant (p.2).

3.2 Blended Learning Course Design

Integrating face-to-face teaching with new technologies in the classroom, may not be a new concept however, Neumeier (2005) argues that an ever-increasing hybridity requires that course design receives greater attention. Neumeier states that it is important that sufficient thought is given to course design when trying to implement elements of blended learning into a foreign language programme. Jones (2007) writes, that “it is useful for a course designer to think of an educational programme as a three-part structure that operates on a micro, meso and macro level” (Jones 2007, in Hinkleman 2012:p.30). At the micro level the designer must contemplate the specific ability of the students in each particular classroom with consideration given to lesson plans and suitable class activities within the realms of learner’s capabilities. Meso level course structure contemplates local or institutional guidelines that may alter the boundaries or learner goals. Learning outcomes and degree requirements might heavily influence course design at the meso level. While at the macro level, course designers must consider the effects that can be shown at the international, national or state level after the successful fulfilment of a blended learning course.

3.3 The Micro Level

The micro level of course design refers to the decisions made related to task design in the classroom. Tasks are the building blocks for lessons, especially in the context of language learning. Tasks in this context refer to the physical content of each lesson that a teacher sets, or tasks assigned to the student. Task design in the blended learning context, will promote the use of technologies in order to develop and enrich the learning experience of the learner and promote autonomous learning.

A task in this context according to Samuda and Bygate, (2008) is:

A holistic activity which engages language use in order to achieve some non-linguistic outcome while meeting a linguistic challenge, with the overall aim of promoting language learning through process or product or both (2008:p.69).

Tasks can be carried out at the micro level with the help of educational online resources such as Blogs, podcasts, wikis or any other form of online teaching tool. It is the teacher’s job in such an environment to provide the ICT (Information Communication Technologies) knowhow to their students and show how each individual tool can aid their learning experience. Teachers require some skill and
expertise with ICT in order to devise these kinds of tasks. The objective therein, is to initiate their use in class to promote autonomous learning by the student.

3.4 Meso level

The main objective at the meso level of course design is the consideration of institutional goals. Every educational institution inevitably has a list of `can-do` goals that each class group is expected to reach within the confines of term time. It is these goals that must be considered and fulfilled at the meso level of course design. What must be kept in consideration is the overall institutional policies and graduate attributes, faculty or departmental guidelines that an institution may expect from each course structure. Other considerations may include the time allowance of actual teacher time per week scheduled and the learner expectation that the institution may have for each individual student.

3.5 Macro level

The main purpose of course design at the macro level is to observe the effects that a blended learning approach can have on the community or society in general. Such effects may include a different way of learning that can initiate a chain reaction of events in turn altering the way people learn. See Figure 2 below for a simple explanation of a blended learning course design.

PART 4 Theoretical Framework

The following diagram describes the theory behind the intended research of the author in relation to the following research questions:

- Can a Blended Learning course design effectively make learners of English autonomous in their approach to learning?
- Can technologies introduced in a blended learning approach develop autonomous learning?

For a simplified model of the theoretical framework refer to figure 2 below:
Figure 2. Theoretical Framework model

Framework involves three main concepts:

- **Input**
  - Teacher’s educational goals
  - Independent learning
  - Blended Learning course design
  - Online resources
  - Wikis
  - Online flashcards
  - 350 students
  - Low level learners
  - TOEIC scores 250-400
  - Extrinsic motivation

- **Face-to-Face Learning**

- **Learner Autonomy**

- **Blended Learning Technologies**

- **Output**
  - Improved learning
  - Reduced anxiety
  - Increase in test scores
  - Improved motivation
  - Improved word retention
  - Better comprehension
  - Improved confidence
  - Autonomous learning
  - Intrinsic motivation
  - Collaborative learning

Blended Learning Course Design:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Micro level</th>
<th>Meso level</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Course design at the class level.</td>
<td>Course design at the institution level.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction of new modes of learning:</td>
<td>Institution’s curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Online learning resources</td>
<td>- Course goals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Online dictionaries</td>
<td>- Class syllabus</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Online flashcards - Wikis</td>
<td>- Fulfillment of “can-do” objectives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Online text to speech websites</td>
<td>- Completion of class requirements</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Collaborative learning tasks</td>
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The above framework involves the three main concepts of:

(A) **Face-to-Face class room instruction**: students will be instructed in a classroom setting. Students will be informed of how to complete the class goals in an alternative manner to what they may be used to.

(C) **Blended Learning technologies will be introduced to students to aid them in reaching their goals**. Each technology introduced will aid students to achieving their class goals both individually and collaboratively.

(B) **Learner Autonomy**: students will independently work towards a similar goal out with the constructs of the class. Students will be informed of how to use new technologies introduced in C and use them to reach their goals autonomously.
Conclusions

The effect that technology has on learning a foreign language has been insinuated, but not actually proven from the literature covered within the boundaries of this paper. It is the author’s intention to prove that the use of a blended learning curriculum can positively influence students in becoming more autonomous and improving their English language abilities. Over the course of a two semester long academic year at a medium sized private university in Japan, a blended language course will be designed and administered to a group of around 100 students in 4 class groups. A further group of around 200 students in 10 class groups will act as the control group where a more traditional face-to-face teaching style will be administered. Data will be collected from all 300 students through the use of post and pre questionnaires and an ability test administered before and after the completion of the course. It is hoped that the data will provide positive results to suggest, through introducing a blended learning approach, that students will learn more and indicate signs of autonomous learning indicating an overall improvement in language ability.

References


http://ec.hku.hk/autonomy/


