Enhancing Learner Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning: How and Why?

Dr. Wisam Khalid Al Shawwa / Al Quds Open University

Abstract

English language learners in high education institutions believe that vocabulary learning is difficult and complicated. At the university level, learners are forced to become autonomous and make conscious effort to learn vocabulary outside of the classroom simply because exposure to the target language is limited in university classes. Consequently, the autonomy of the learners play an important role in developing and enhancing their vocabulary. This paper aims at exploring the application of learner autonomy in the context of vocabulary learning for English language students. It also proposes to clarify the importance of learner autonomy in vocabulary learning and learning strategies. Furthermore, it clarifies why teachers should enhance learner autonomy in vocabulary learning by exploring the role of both the teachers and learner, how teachers can enhance learner autonomy in vocabulary learning and the expected effects of learner autonomy in vocabulary learning.

Introduction

Learner autonomy in vocabulary learning is becoming a necessity for English language learners in higher education institutions that adopt either traditional or open education nowadays. It plays a prominent role in developing the learners' language acquisition and achievement. The new trends in education that emphasize the learner's needs and motivations deserve more attention from teachers of English language because they constitute the foundations of the learner's language learning acquisition. Generally learner autonomy in Vocabulary learning is desired in our universities. Students enter the university with different experiential backgrounds and learning achievements, but unfortunately they have few autonomous dispositions which higher education requires in learning. They lack the knowledge of how to achieve by themselves, which requires some guidance and assistance from their teachers and tutors. So enhancing learner autonomy in vocabulary learning is a must for the great impact that it causes on learning process. Some educators as Holec (1981), Dickinson (1992), Little (1991), Dam (1995) and Benson (2003) attached great importance to the necessity of autonomy in education. They stated that students who think and work strategically are more motivated to learn and have a higher sense of self-efficacy or confidence in their own learning ability. Then students who depend on themselves in learning vocabulary are more able to succeed academically and more motivated than those who do not have effective strategies in learning by themselves. Therefore learning how to learn vocabulary autonomously by the learner is a very crucial component that English language teachers have to take into account when teaching English language.

Purpose of the Paper

In this paper "Enhancing Learner Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning: How and Why?", I'd like to emphasize that learner autonomy is pivotal in learning vocabulary in order to master English standards, also I'd like to clarify why we should enhance learner autonomy in vocabulary learning and how and what are the expected effects of learner autonomy in vocabulary learning.

1. Vocabulary Weakness
If one is to be considered a fluent speaker of English language, he has to know chunks of vocabulary. Teachers of English language in the universities are conscious that the majority of their students are weak in vocabulary. I think that vocabulary weakness among our students has several reasons; among these reasons that the learner

- lives in an environment where higher level vocabulary are not used.
- has a lower education level.
- attended special education classes in which lower level vocabulary was used in class and in textbooks
- does not read much or has a reading problem
- does not pay attention to words
- has an auditory perception problem which makes it difficult to hear the subtle differences in words
- does not have a good understanding of the structure of language including parts of speech and word parts, prefixes, suffixes and word roots.

Students who are weak in vocabulary are forced to develop themselves but also good students need to build on their vocabulary at university. Students cannot develop their autonomy alone, they should coordinate with their teachers in order to achieve the desired results.

2. Learner autonomy and vocabulary learning

2.1. Learner autonomy: Definition

There are many educators and thinkers who tried their best in defining learner autonomy and writing down its principles. For example David Little defines it by saying that "autonomy is a capacity- for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning." (Little, 1991). Holec (1981) defines learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", which he then specifies as "to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning,". According to Holec (1981) there are varying degrees of self-direction in learning which may be connected to varying degrees of autonomy. He outlines the following components as an entirely self-directed process of learning:

- fixing the objectives
- defining the content and progressions
- selecting the methods and techniques to be used
- monitoring the acquisition procedure
- evaluating what has been acquired.

I think that the previous components that Holec stated are comprehensive and give learners good strategies in the process of learning. A learner who wants to learn autonomously must follow specific steps when learning a subject as deciding what are his objectives in learning, selecting the most suitable techniques, monitoring his acquisition and evaluating his experience.

2.2. Why autonomy in vocabulary learning?

One may wonder why particularly autonomy in vocabulary learning? Vocabulary learning is very significant to English language acquisition. It is impossible for a learner to communicate without the needed vocabulary. No doubt that a learner cannot learn all language vocabulary in university classes so he is forced to find other ways to learn vocabulary. Learner autonomy is a great relief for students in vocabulary learning because it provides the learner with many privileges as:
• Learner autonomy enhances the learner’s motivation and leads to more effective vocabulary learning.
• Learner autonomy provides learners with more free opportunities for English communication in a non-native environment.
• Learner autonomy caters to the individual needs of learners at all levels.
• Learner autonomy has a lasting influence.
• Learner autonomy enhances the learner's willingness towards active learning.
• Learner autonomy enables the learner to master the basic skills that are required to lasting learning.

Once learners become autonomous in vocabulary learning, they have acquired a life-long learning skill and a habit of independent thinking and learning which will benefit them long after leaving university.

2.3. How to be a good autonomous learner in vocabulary learning?

According to Boud (1995), an autonomous learner is the one who is prepared to take some significant responsibility for his own learning. And in order to be a good autonomous one, the learner should make decisions about his/her own learning, he/she should be able to set realistic goals, plan program of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, evaluate and assess his/her own work and, generally, to learn how to learn from his/her own successes and failures in ways which will help him/her to be more efficient learners in the future. Autonomous learners willingly partner with faculty and peers in learning, and are reflective about their own learning. Omaggio (1978), thinks that there seem to be seven main attributes characterizing autonomous learners, they

• have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
• take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
• are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;
• are good guessers;
• attend to form as well as to content;
• develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
• have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

According to Omaggio's characteristics the autonomous learners can be considered as good language learners and I think that these characteristics can be applicable on the vocabulary autonomous learner.

3. Vocabulary learning strategies

It is important here to mention that if the autonomous learner is willing to be a good learner in learning vocabulary, he/she finds that there are many factors that affect their autonomy development as previous learning experience, independent study methods, workload, role of the tutor, feedback and assessment and peer group. So a learner should decide what kind of learning strategies he/she should adopt for the great benefit he/she could gain from it. No doubt that Learners are in need to be taught how to learn vocabulary, rather than simply the vocabulary themselves. Here Language learning strategies are good indicators of how learners approach tasks or problems encountered during the process of vocabulary learning.

3.1. Learning strategies characteristics
Lessard-Clouston (1997) says that there are a number of basic characteristics in the generally accepted view of language learning strategies. She thinks that language learning strategies:

- are learner generated; they are steps taken by language learners.
- enhance language learning and help develop language competence, as reflected in the learner's skills in listening, speaking, reading, or writing English.
- may be visible (behaviors, steps, techniques, etc.) or unseen (thoughts, mental processes).
- involve information and memory (vocabulary knowledge, grammar rules, etc.).

In addition to the characteristics noted above, Takas (2008) says that Oxford (1990) states that language learning strategies:

- allow learners to become more self-directed
- expand the role of language teachers
- are problem-oriented
- involve many aspects, not just the cognitive
- can be taught
- are flexible
- are influenced by a variety of factors.

3.2. Learning strategies classifications

Rubin (1987) classified learner strategies into three types that are used by learners. These are: learning strategies, communication strategies and social strategies. Learning strategies include cognitive and meta cognitive learning strategies. Cognitive strategies refer to the steps or operations used in learning or problem-solving that require direct analysis, transformation, or synthesis of learning materials. Meta cognitive strategies improve organization of learning time, self-monitoring, and self-evaluation. Rubin sees that communication strategies are less directly related to language learning since their focus is on the process of participating in a conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended. Rubin and Wenden (1987) see that communication strategies are used by speakers when faced with some difficulty due to the fact that their communication ends outrun their communication means or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker. Although these strategies provide exposure to the target language, they contribute indirectly to learning since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language. Research into the good language learning strategies revealed a number of positive strategies so that such strategies could also be used by bad language learners trying to become more successful in language learning. However, there is always the possibility that bad language learners can also use the same good language learning strategies while becoming unsuccessful owing to some other reasons. At this point, it should be strongly stressed that using the same good language learning strategies does not guarantee that bad learners will also become successful in language learning since other factors may also play role in success.

As it is stated previously, learning English vocabulary in university classes is not enough; learners should depend on themselves in learning vocabulary in order to fill the gap. From my own experience as an academic supervisor of English language at Al Q.O.U., a Palestinian university that adopts open education and e-learning, I can strongly recommend that academic supervisors should try their best to enhance learner autonomy in vocabulary learning among their students; they should offer a fairly wide range of possibilities in order to improve and reinforce learners' lexical competence. Open university learners are autonomous by nature because they have inner stimulations and motives as they need to prove themselves, to attain valuable
achievements, the desire to improve and develop, and finally their interest in learning process. There are also external stimulations as Learners’ desire to have positive enhancement, avoiding failure and obtaining a certificate. It is important to mention that Al Q.O.U. educational syllabus in all academic programs and in English department in particular gives the learners the chance to be self-dependent and autonomous in learning. In English language courses, for example, there is a specific course that guides the students how to learn and be both independent and impressive. This specific course aims at helping the learner to develop independently-motivated study habits which will help him/her to sustain a continuing desire to persevere with the language learning process. Notwithstanding, this course is not sufficient for the student in order to be self-dependent; there should be coordination between teachers themselves and students to achieve the goal.

4. How can learner autonomy in vocabulary learning be enhanced?

A majority of learners at the university level are lucky enough to have many different opportunities to improve their vocabulary. In English Language program at Al Quds Open University the textbooks offer a great variety of activities that enhance the learner's motivation and independence in learning vocabulary, also there are several significant resources available in the internet that enhance vocabulary learning, they’re absolutely free. It has been argued that new technologies, in particular computer networks, have the potential to increase learner autonomy when they are used appropriately. Warschauer (1996) claims that the mechanics alone of computer-mediated communication provide students with much better opportunity for control and initiative in language learning. They give a number of examples including the following:

- the "synchronicity" of e-mail frees students from time and distance limitations, enabling them to initiate discussions with their teachers or with other students at any time of day and at a number of places rather than only during class or office hours

- when long distance communication is available, students have the independent opportunity to use the foreign or second language vocabulary for authentic communication with native speakers

- many teachers suggest thinking cross-cultural communication through the mail with task-based learning provides the most fruitful combination for fostering learner autonomy.

There is a good number of learners who sometimes seem to be overwhelmed by the large number of new words that they inevitably meet in their study books. As a result, in order to enhance vocabulary learning they tend to keep lists of single translations. Learners need to know different words before they can form a single sentence and different sentences are full of different words. The more words that learners know how to use correctly, the more different sentences they’ll be able to make in order to convey different ideas. Sometimes it is very difficult for the learner to judge his performance in using vocabulary in good sentences, he needs the guidance of his tutor. Learning by translation is useful and rewarding. Some educators say that if a learner tries to learn an increasing number of translations, this will tend to lead to both success rate and motivation going down over time. It seems to be more of a short-term memory test rather than an effective long-term vocabulary development exercise. As the length of such translation lists increases it becomes more and more difficult to identify which words are really known. It’s also easy to become frustrated by a slowly increasing level of passive understanding, accompanied by an inability to actively use your new words - and the realization that many of the learned new words
are later being forgotten. As a result, learners may soon start to devote less and less time to such a method – but often fail to replace it with anything really useful. Learning single words by translation can also lead to the habit of “word for word” translations when trying to form sentences - both orally and in written form. This encourages second language grammar interference and fossilization of errors. Word Surfing is also another method that aims to make improvements to the vocabulary learning process. It offers a long-term opportunity to develop individually chosen new words in a central resource through repeated exposure and practice. It can help learners to learn by doing, to focus on prioritizing the importance of individually chosen words, to develop good grammatical habits and save time and effort in the long run due to more learning efficiency. This method will also show that if the learner really wants to know a new word, he/she needs to be aware of the possible different meanings connected to the word. He/she needs to be exposed to it in grammatically correct sentences, and to start to use it himself/herself as soon as possible and practice using it several times.

English language teachers have to ensure that their students know the basics of the target language, its grammar, phonetics, spelling and vocabulary. Once this threshold is reached, learners are sufficiently autonomous to expand their vocabulary by extensive reading in particular, which has become possible given the acquisition of a basic vocabulary, and pleasurable, as the learner can take a new text and find it comprehensible and interesting. In extensive reading, learners select and read large amounts of materials that interest them and that are within their level of comprehension. Extensive reading, as Carrell and Carson (1997) defined, has two characteristics: reading a large number of reading materials, and focusing on the meaning rather on the language. According to Renandya and Jacobs (2001), extensive reading helps develop sight vocabulary, general vocabulary and the knowledge of the target language. Krashen (2004) called extensive reading free voluntary reading, and considered it superior to direct instruction in terms of acquisition of reading, vocabulary as well as grammar and writing. Krashen's idea about extensive reading has been successfully implemented by educators. Herrell and Jordan (2004) reported that free voluntary reading supported not only vocabulary development but also spelling, grammar and writing development. For extensive reading to be effective, learners must be regularly exposed to large amounts of comprehensible text. Because the knowledge gained from a single encounter with a lexical item is likely to be forgotten unless soon followed by another encounter, repeated contextualized exposures are necessary to consolidate and elaborate word meaning.

4.1. Teacher's role in learner's autonomous world

In learner autonomous world of vocabulary learning the teachers' role is reduced and they become facilitators. But this does not mean that teachers become passive in learning process; teachers still have various roles: they can teach vocabulary relevant to tasks in hand, judge and give instruction in strategies which help retention. Teachers should enhance autonomous learning because it is of great significance for their students in universities. Also they should teach strategies to learn vocabulary autonomously. Deep vocabulary learning strategies take more time but ensure greater retention and ease of retrieval from memory. They include learning lists, reading a variety of texts on the same theme so as to ensure multiple exposure to relevant items, making extensive use of dictionaries, building up deep knowledge through word associations and revising to ensure retention. Teachers may have little role to play where a learner is using shallow strategies appropriately. But they have a clear and ongoing role both in using deep strategies in class work and in training learners in their use. This is especially true for weaker learners, who tend to use even shallow
strategies ineffectively: they guess inaccurately from context and do not later modify wrong guesses, and they do not read widely enough. But it is the teacher responsibility to foster the students’ ability of autonomous learning by designing class activities and create positive atmosphere, a language context and make students want to learn and know how to learn.

Teachers should develop autonomy because vocabulary learning is unique to each student. In addition, the class time for vocabulary is extremely limited compared with the immense number of vocabulary items that learners need to acquire. All these points demonstrate that studying vocabulary on their own is a must for all learners, the best preparation the teacher can provide is to “help them become more autonomous” (Scharle and Szabo, 2000).

4.2. How can we prepare teachers to enhance learner autonomy in vocabulary learning?

When trying to find an answer to this question the following ideas can be considered:

1. It is not a straightforward process.

2. Teachers need stimulus and encouragement to attempt a pedagogy for autonomy.

3. Teachers must realize by themselves that they can do what at first seemed impossible.

4. Teachers should be able to work on a collaborative basis.

5. Teachers must be autonomous themselves to be able to develop their learners' autonomy.

So if teachers themselves are autonomous and motivated, how does the teacher promote greater autonomy in his students? Brajcich (2000) suggests twelve ways to promote learner autonomy which I think can be of great value in vocabulary learning. He says that teachers should:

1. Encourage students to be interdependent and to work collectively. The less students depend on their teacher, the more autonomy is being developed.

2. Ask students to keep a diary of their learning experiences. Through practice, students may become more aware of their learning preferences and start to think of new ways of becoming more independent learners.

3. Explain teacher/student roles from the outset. Asking students to give their opinions on the issue of roles could be beneficial.

4. Progress gradually from interdependence to independence. Give the students time to adjust to new learning strategies and do not expect too much too soon.

5. Give the students projects to do outside the classroom. Such projects may increase motivation.

6. Give the students non-lesson classroom duties to perform (taking roll, writing instructions, notices, etc. on the board for the teacher)

7. Have the students design lessons or materials to be used in class.

8. Instruct students on how to use the university's resource centers
9. Emphasize the importance of peer-editing, corrections, and follow-up questioning in the classroom.

10. Encourage the students to use only English in class. 11. Stress fluency rather than accuracy.

12. However, do allow the students to use reference books, including dictionaries in class.

But sometimes teachers find that there are students who know all the language. Here teachers can use brainstorming extra vocabulary or example sentences, covering some topics that aren’t in the textbook, concentrating on production of the language rather than explanation or grammar practice, and using authentic texts. This means that teachers have extra work to do with students to be more autonomous such as trying to find suitable online practice for them; finding, photocopying and giving out extra worksheets; giving out and taking back in graded readers and other books; keeping abreast of recent self-study books and where they are available so that teachers can recommend the right one; marking any extra writing they do; and answering any questions they have that came up in the extra work they did.

Little (1995) and Smith (2000) stressed that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent, and that teachers wishing to promote greater learner autonomy need to "start with themselves", reflecting on their own beliefs, practices, experiences and expectations of the teaching/learning situation.

4.3. Learners' role

Learner has a pivotal role in enhancing his autonomy in vocabulary learning, he should:

- Decide which words are worth learning.
- Learn to use the context, that is, the surrounding words, phrases, and sentences. Hints provided by the context sometime give us clues to what an unknown word means. Such hints include:
  - punctuation marks
  - helping words and phrases such as "for example," "that is," "which means"
  - a sentence that tells the opposite of the unfamiliar word
  - a following or preceding sentence that explains the new word
  - a sentence written expressly to define the strange word
  - a list of examples and known words used to define unknown words
- A word’s meaning is made up of both denotation and connotation. Denotation is the literal (dictionary) meaning of the word. Connotation is the emotional impact of the word, the reaction to the word that a reader or hearer has. Skillful writers choose words for their connotations.
- Organize vocabulary learning: if learners are not happy with their present method of noting down vocabulary and find that there just become too much to cope with, with longer and longer lists of vocabulary to learn as each week goes, organizing vocabulary learning would be useful for them.
• Remember vocabulary: if a learner forgets vocabulary that he/she 'learned' earlier, he/she will face one of the biggest problems in vocabulary learning. Remembering vocabulary gives some suggestions to help learned vocabulary stay learned. According to Center for Teaching and Learning in the University of Alabama the following guidelines will help learners remember new words:

- Practice writing the word and its definition often.
- Practice saying the word. Use the pronunciation key in learner's dictionary to learn the correct pronunciation.
- Try to learn the word and its meaning the first time learner's see it.
- Make vocabulary flip cards from index cards. Write the word on one side and the meaning on the other.
- Make up a sentence a learner can understand using the word correctly.
- Vary the word: try to make it plural, to change the tense, to add -ly.
- Practice the word in conversation, being sure to pronounce it correctly.
- Use the word in writing assignments as often as possible.
- Repeat the word many times in his/her mind.
- Study a few words each day for several days to firmly learn them.
- Notice the words used by teachers, public speakers, people on TV, etc.

• Evaluate vocabulary learning: It's very important for most learners to have an idea of whether they're making progress or not. Finding that they are actually making progress can be a big help to their confidence. This advice sheet gives advice on evaluating learners' learning progress and checking their vocabulary size.

5. Summary remarks

To conclude, it is not the teachers responsibility to teach all vocabulary to the learners. Learners should depend on themselves by adopting strategies that suit their abilities in learning vocabulary. Vocabulary learning is not always easy. But with practice and time, learners should find that they are making progress. Learners should study items that appear in many contexts. Learning in rich contexts is valuable for vocabulary learning. Vocabulary words should be those that the learner will find useful in many contexts. When vocabulary items are derived from content learning materials, the learner will be better equipped to deal with specific reading matter in content areas. Learners will feel that vocabulary learning is effective when it entails active engagement in learning tasks. Computer technology can be used effectively in learning vocabulary autonomously. Autonomous learners in learning vocabulary should have a continuous desire of learning vocabulary and they should develop their strategic ways of learning. Learners should choose a private way that stimulates their enthusiasm and motivation. As mentioned earlier in this context the learner who learns vocabulary autonomously should choose the objectives of his/her learning then he/she should choose the materials that will be used to reach the objectives chosen. He/she has to decide upon the methods and techniques he/she wants to use. All the previous decisions are usually taken concurrently with decisions about materials since means and ways are closely interdependent. The outcome is assessed and more
decisions are made as to the degree of appropriateness of the chosen objectives, materials, methods and techniques.

References


- Takas, Visnja Pavicic (2008), Vocabulary learning strategies and foreign language acquisition, Cromwell press LTD. Accessed 22-7-2010 at (http://books.google.ps/books?id=PHqqd785IzYC&pg=PA55&lpg=PA55&dq=oxford+(1990)+LLS&source=bl&ots=sNyO109GHd&sig=KXNQEUHnQm3g3BfqCR6fBH6tMc&hl=ar&ei=sS5YTJK0Do3T4gbWh4meBw&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=3&ved=0CBcQ6AEwAg#v=onepage&q=oxford%20(1990)%20LLS&f=false)