The Need For Autonomous Vocabulary Learners In The Malaysian ESL Classroom

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ABSTRACT

One of the many predicaments faced by language learners at all levels is lack of lexical competence, resulting in lagging proficiency levels and inability to relate to the four language skills. There are many factors which explain this state, one of which is the learner variable. The learner is deemed to be of utmost importance because it is ultimately the learner who has to learn for himself and by himself. In view of this, fostering learner autonomy is becoming one of the most important goals in language teaching as the ultimate goal of education is to produce lifelong learners who are able to learn autonomously. This paper proposes that in the Malaysian context, as is elsewhere, it is imperative that we train our learners to become autonomous in realising the National Education Philosophy which espouses lifelong learning. By learning vocabulary autonomously, several benefits are derived, namely, learners can improve both receptive and productive language skills, consequently see improvement in language proficiency. Good language proficiency also ensures the ability to respond appropriately to the pervading era of knowledge economy and globalisation, which will in turn, enable Malaysian learners to be assured of employability. Hence, the initial seed of autonomous learning of vocabulary must be planted by the learner to ensure a fruitful harvest at all stages of learning and post-learning.

Keywords: autonomy; vocabulary; lifelong learning; Malaysian ESL learners; Malaysian National Education Philosophy

INTRODUCTION

Despite receiving ESL (English as a Second Language) instruction for over a decade, that is, six years at primary and five years at secondary school, alas, many Malaysian learners lack mastery of English language. English is accorded the status of a second language after *Bahasa Malaysia*, but many learners are inclined to regard it as a foreign language instead. Thus, the aim of English language learning in the Malaysian context, which is, to be able to carry out various functions beyond formal learning such as in business transactions, economics, finance and marketing are often not achieved.

The weak grasp of English language ability among Malaysian learners has been a matter of concern to linguists, educationists and policy makers alike. We often hear discussions of the declining ESL proficiency, but where the standards specifically fall and how they exactly do is rarely detailed out. Reverberations of lagging language ability are clearly evidenced by peeking into the performance in the English language at major public examinations. From the very limited published data available on learners' performance in the Malaysian University English Test (MUET), the writer sourced statistics from June 2000 to December 2002 and found that less than 1% of the candidates who sat for the MUET qualified for Band 6 (Very Good User) (see Wan Norliza Wan Mustapha, 2002). The situation has not improved since, and for the November 2006 sitting, it was even worse because one third (29.2%) out of the 120,000 candidates scored Bands 1 and 2, which identified them as "Very Limited User" and "Limited User" respectively (Chapman, 2007).

As the problem does not end at secondary school and is carried right through tertiary education, this means that one third of learners who graduated from public universities in 2006 had very low English language proficiency (Chapman, 2007).

The discussion below aims to delve into one of the main reasons which have been postulated for learners' low achievement at various stages of ESL learning in Malaysia, that is, lack of vocabulary. Limited vocabulary has been a cause for concern and is a plaguing problem as indicated by a number of local studies (see Naginder Kaur, 2012; Norzanita Othman, 2009; Rosemala Ismail, 2008; Tengku Intan Suzila Tengku Sharif, Mohd Yusri Mohamad Noor & Harlina Yunus, 2008; Zaira Abu Hassan Shaari, 2008). The paper offers a tangible suggestion as to how low language achievement can be overcome, that is, by becoming autonomous vocabulary learners and provides further benefits that can be derived from autonomous vocabulary learning behavior.

ROLE OF VOCABULARY

Of the various challenges faced by learners at the various stages of ESL experience, one of the primary concerns is lack of lexical competence. Being conceived as a learner's nightmare and sometimes even their greatest language problem, learners themselves regard lexical incompetence as one of the major hindrances in L2 or foreign language learning (Nation, 2001). This is beyond doubt as lexical errors are the most common type among second language learners (Segler, 2001). Low (2004, cited in Zulfa Zakaria, 2005, p. 2) likewise illustrates that ESL learners in Malaysia face learning challenges mainly because they lack vocabulary, that is, they fail to acquire and comprehend lexical items.

Despite its key position in developing language proficiency, unfortunately, vocabulary instruction somewhat tends to take a backseat in ESL teaching priorities. In many teachers' instructional approaches, focus on structural signals and grammatical patterns of the language seem to override vocabulary and learners are expected to pick-up vocabulary on their own, with little or no guidance. Vocabulary has often been perceived to be the "distant cousin" of language teaching" and "the Cinderella of the field of second language acquisition (SLA) research" (Segler, 2001, p. 1). Clearly, there seems to be a lack of emphasis on vocabulary as teachers downplay its role in formal classroom instruction.

This perception echoes in the Malaysian ELT context as Fauziah Hassan and Nita Fauzee Selamat (2002) found vocabulary exercises to rank fourth out of the nine language activities investigated on the frequency of use in ESL lessons. Likewise, when asked to rate their preferred learning activities, vocabulary learning is one of the lowest ranked in the students' list (Teh Chee Seng, 2004). Thus, students are left with "serious deficit for any kind of real use of the language they are learning" (Twaddell, 1972, cited in Zulfa Zakaria, 2005, p. 4). This predicament is also the result of students' initial perception of English being a difficult language, limited exposure to the language and teachers' failure to use interesting teaching and learning processes in class (Low, 2004, cited in Zulfa Zakaria, 2005, p. 2).

AUTONOMY IN VOCABULARY LEARNING

The concept of learner autonomy is becoming "a buzz-word within the context of language learning" (Little, 1991, p. 2), hence, fostering learner autonomy, including self-regulation, self-efficacy, self-awareness, self-care, self-charge, self-command and self-confidence is becoming one of the most important goals in language teaching. Given the varied and evolving definitions of autonomy that prevail, Holec's (1981, p. 3) apt definition as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" holds relevance and seems to be the most frequently cited definition as it is the cornerstone and forms the crux in understanding this variable,

which essentially means that the learner must take responsibility for his / her learning experiences. Holec (1981) also outlines a number of aspects of learning for which a learner should be able to take responsibility for making decisions, including "determining objectives, selecting and grading content, selecting methods and techniques, monitoring the procedure of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired" (p. 3). According to Scharle and Szabo (2000), the process of autonomy essentially involves three phases. These are raising awareness, changing attitudes and transferring roles to learners.

As vocabulary is one of the main problems encountered in developing language proficiency, it is therefore imperative that learners develop a sense of autonomy in learning lexical items. It is the learner factor that seems to underpin the problem of low lexicon because it is ultimately the goals set by the language learner that would determine the extent of success of his or her learning process. As stressed by Nation (2001), "no matter what the teacher does or what the course book presents, ultimately it is the learner who does the learning" (p. 394). This is because language is not learnt by groups, but by individuals, who in order to become successful learners, are in effect learning theorists (Brown, Bransford, Ferrara & Campione, 1983, cited in Peter Yongqi Gu, 2003, p. 73).

In vocabulary learning, the qualities aspired of a good language learner when learning lexical items would involve being able to take advantage of potentially useful learning situations, and if necessary create them. In this regard, there is a need to draw a line between "learning the meanings of specific words" and "learning strategies to become independent word learners" (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2000, p. 505), that is, learners should not only learn how to acquire new words for themselves per se, but also learn to be responsible for their own vocabulary development. In stressing the importance of autonomous learning, Nation (2001) points out three major attributes of learner autonomy in determining success of vocabulary learning, which are, having a positive attitude, possessing adequate awareness and having sufficient capability of word knowledge and word forms.

In a similar vein, Blachowicz and Fisher (2000) suggest four activities through which learners can assume autonomy and become active vocabulary learners. Firstly, learners ought to develop and utilise strategies in selecting words which are important for their learning. They must also receptively and expressively learn words in their own field of study. Next, it is necessary to retain and use vocabulary to facilitate and enhance subsequent learning. Finally, learners must evaluate their own vocabulary development and reflect upon it. In this respect, pedagogical approaches to vocabulary instruction must incorporate means to accelerate learner autonomy.

In classifying the types of vocabulary learning strategies learners use, several taxonomies have been developed. For example, Peter Yongqi Gu and Johnson (1996) proposed seven major categories, namely, metacognitive regulation, guessing strategies, dictionary strategies, note-taking strategies, rehearsal strategies, encoding strategies, and activation strategies (cited in Peter Yongqi Gu, 2003). Further, Hunt and Beglar (1998, cited in Torres & Ramos, 2003) also proposed two main strategies related to vocabulary, which are: (a) to experiment with guessing from context and (b) to examine different types of dictionaries and teach students how to use them. Among the various forms of strategies experimented, dictionary use is found to be the leading choice of strategy for many students in Malaysia (see Ahmad Azman Mokhtar et al., 2009). Other modes of preferred strategies in Malaysia are social strategies (Naginder Kaur, 2012) since Malaysian learners have preference for group learning (Naginder Kaur, 2004). Learning with and from peers is a profitable strategy to facilitate autonomous learning, as it fits the Malaysian culture which emphasises group learning and collegiality. Thus, whatever the preference may be, learners need to learn lexical items autonomously and make choices relating to word meanings that they need to know, subject to their own purposes and idiosyncratic environments. What

every learner must do is to learn words so that he / she can behave appropriately in a given context and contribute to the language community he / she belongs to, which consequently hinges on each learner's autonomous learning of vocabulary.

An integral aspect of autonomy is that autonomous learning is not the same as teacherless learning. Autonomy in lexical learning can develop and flourish in a teacher-led class (Nation, 2001) because the aim of others directing us is often to allow us to direct ourselves. Learner autonomy does not render the teacher redundant nor does the teacher lose control over what transpires in the language learning process. Nation (2001) further stresses that autonomy is experienced as long as the learner wields empowerment and explores what should be given the greatest amount of attention and effort, what should be looked at again and reviewed outside class, how the material presented should be mentally processed, and how interaction with the teacher and others in the class should be carried out. Only with all these efforts can learners ensure that they are able to direct their learning to become lifelong learners who are able to learn autonomously, which is the crux of our National Education Philosophy.

RESISTANCE TO AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

In trying to raise language proficiency via explicit and implicit vocabulary enrichment programme and the curriculum as a whole, the learner factor, as the moderating variable, must be adequately weighed and stressed because "there seems to be a natural resistance on the part of many learners to become autonomous" (Victori, 2004, p. 1). Victori (2004) points out that this is largely attributed to learners' educational backgrounds which are usually grounded on very traditional teaching methodologies, in which the whole curriculum is entirely determined by the teacher or the school. Thus, when learners are encouraged to be autonomous in their learning, they are faced with two types of problems: (a) lack of methodological preparation to organise own learning, leading to undertaking activities without any sound learning plan behind them, and (b) perception of lack of skills and non-confidence in adopting such a responsibility, which results in negative attitude towards adopting an autonomous learning approach.

In the Malaysian context, the situation is by no means dissimilar. It is contended that Malaysian learners, as the protagonists in the learning process, shun responsibility in learning. Studies conducted by Thang Siew Ming (2009), Thang Siew Ming and Azarina Alias (2007), Thang Siew Ming (2001, 2003, 2005, cited in Thang Siew Ming & Azarina Alias, 2007), on tertiary students' autonomous learning initiatives at various (public and private) institutions of higher learning in Malaysia indicate that majority of the learners are teacher-centred, if not fully teacher-dependent, that is, they favour the traditional role of the teacher as a knowledge transmitter, guide and motivator. Suchitra Nair and Parvathy Ratnam's (2003) study on readiness for empowerment at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia also found that students are just not willing to empower themselves, even if the teacher desires them to shoulder responsibility for their own learning. They lack the drive to be self-directed - within and beyond formal learning. Majority of the learners favour the traditional role of the teacher as a knowledge transmitter. Similarly, Rohayah Nordin and Naginder Kaur (2004, p. 11) also found that the students "… refrained attending to their language problems independently and were unwilling to take full-charge of their learning process."

Yet, another frustration learners face is the inability to relate words to ideas by thinking deeply about a word and seeing how it functions in the language. These attributes collectively underpin the extent learners take control and responsibility for their own learning.

WHY AUTONOMY IN VOCABULARY LEARNING?

Students need to be encouraged to know the why, how and what about the learning of vocabulary items. A more concerted and conscious effort must be made to transcend the looming barriers. Although relatively aware of the importance of being autonomous in the learning process, many shun being in charge of their own learning, as pointed out by Courtright and Wesolek (2001):

> Students realise the important role vocabulary acquisition plays in all aspects
> of their language learning, but few have really thought about what it means to
> learn a vocabulary item.   (p. 3)

In a rapidly changing and evolving world, there is an urgent need to respond to these changes by inculcating autonomous learning amongst our learners in general, and autonomous learning of vocabulary items in particular. The reasons to cite are palpable and discussed below.

IMPROVEMENT IN RECEPTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE LANGUAGE SKILLS

Various studies conducted at the secondary school as well as at institutions of higher learning in Malaysia show that lexical paralysis is a major contributor to learners' incapacity to develop the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing. Since words are the basic building blocks of language, lexical knowledge forms the foundation of language and vocabulary acquisition and enrichment are requisites as well as determinants of success in the four language skills (Nation, 2001). For example, if a learner possesses sufficient lexis, it facilitates his / her daily oral communication and various types of reading as well as ensures input for conversation and written work (Nation, 2001). It is claimed that a good knowledge of how the system of a language works may not necessarily enable one to communicate whereas it is usually possible to communicate if one has the vocabulary.

In essence, autonomous learners are such learners who are able to develop techniques and strategies appropriate to their individual and idiosyncratic needs. Stern (1983) sums up four strategies tapped by good language learners who possess autonomy sense, namely, active planning strategy, academic learning strategy, social learning strategy and affective learning strategy. Hence, if learners are able to hold a grasp on autonomous learning behavior, they will propel themselves in the language learning process and consequently, improve language proficiency in receptive skills of listening and reading and productive skills of speaking and writing.

Some recent studies in Malaysia on autonomous learning (Gurnam Kaur Sidhu, Sarjit, Kaur & Chan Yuen Fook, 2011) as well as autonomous vocabulary learning in traditional classroom setting (Naginder Kaur, 2012) or online distant learning classroom (Puvaneswary Murugaiah & Thang Siew Ming, 2010) show how teachers and learners can play a complementary role in enhancing learner autonomy in the Malaysian educational context for improvement in receptive and productive language skills. This indicates that autonomous learning is proven to work in Malaysia and should be further mooted among all learners to encourage autonomous learning behaviours at all levels and in all modes of learning.

THE EMERGENCE OF KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY AND GLOBALISATION

Malaysians are currently experiencing strong winds of change with the emergence of knowledge based economy (k-economy) and globalisation which have pervaded our lives all around. Hence, higher English language competency is required of Malaysians in the process

of nation building. This calls for a need to equip ourselves with firm English language skills so as to be able to contribute to the betterment of the nation because English is a global language and will remain important for the foreseeable future.

Further access to knowledge and information in the field of science and technology is crucial in the development of knowledge workers in Malaysia through the use of English, as implored by the former Premier of Malaysia, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad who upheld and stressed the need for Malaysians to integrate successfully into the global village via mastery of English because "simple acquaintance with the language alone is not enough for new technologies to be learnt" (New Straits Times, 2005). This is also supported by Lee King Siong (2004) who asserts that "our country will be seriously disadvantaged if we lack knowledge workers" (p. 128). And Manveet Kaur (2002) comments:

> Although Malaysia has a literacy rate of 93%, which is one of the highest in the world, there remain many young Malaysians whose futures are periled because they do not read well enough to meet the demands of our competitive technology-driven society.   (p. 11)

In view of the knowledge economy and globalisation, the situation calls for urgent attention because the role of English as a global language is undisputable and it "has become the de facto language for science and commerce" (Tschirner, 2004, p. 27). In addition, there is no reason to believe that any one other language will appear within the next 50 years to replace English as a global language. Thus, the mastery and usage of the English language is seen to pave the way for Malaysia's progress and development. This aspiration is currently carried out through English language learning from Year One (primary school) right up to Form Six (secondary school), over a span of 13 years, where learners need to use these years of formal learning effectively so as to equip themselves to become autonomous language learners.

EMPLOYABILITY

There have been grievances among employers about our graduates' lack of creative and critical thinking skills. In a survey conducted by Bank Negara involving 321 companies, 77.6% of respondents held the view that Malaysian graduates lacked the required skills to function effectively at the workplace (New Straits Times, 2004). Similarly, Norizan Abdul Razak, et al. (2006) found Malaysian graduates to be inadequate in six major areas namely communication skills, personal qualities that include a balanced individual, job knowledge and initiative to learn, confidence, proficiency in information, communication technology (ICT) skills as well as required performance standard. Their quantitative analysis found that the qualities ranked highest and sought by employers are communication skills (92.3%), a positive attitude and English language proficiency. As the third highly ranked skill, English language is an important indicator of the ability to express oneself effectively as well as to elaborate further one's expertise at interviews (Norizan Abdul Razak, 2006, cited in Norizan Abdul Razak et al., 2006, p. 294).

Hence, it is paramount that learners be able to embrace autonomous learning means to improve language proficiency. More specifically, by increasing lexical competence, they are in firm control of the language, consequently position themselves strategically for the employment market with an edge. In discussing the role of higher education in Malaysia in preparing employable graduates, Lee King Siong, Hazita Azman and Koo Yew Lie (2010) stress that undergraduates, as market products, need to be repackaged to fulfill the needs of the industry and further state, "it is clear that the holistic development of the main stakeholder in the process … is being sidelined." Ultimately, the main stakeholder (the learner) has to take the central role in learning in order to develop holistically, including learning

autonomously, so as to situate himself strategically for the competitive employment market needs.

LIFELONG LEARNING

The National Education Philosophy of Malaysia espouses that education in Malaysia "is an on-going effort towards further developing the potential of individuals in a holistic and integrated manner, so as to produce individuals who are intellectually, spiritually, emotionally and physically balanced and harmonious, based on a firm belief in and devotion to God …" (Ministry of Education, 1989, p. 5). It has at its core the concept of lifelong learning and envisages the learners to possess the ability to function autonomously in and beyond the years of formal education. In realising the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy, The Integrated Secondary School Curriculum (KBSM) too espouses the philosophy of educating learners in the larger context of life so that they grow up to be forward thinking citizens, able to contribute to the betterment of the society and nation.

In being contributing citizens, they need to have the ability to face life's challenges: handling and managing change and making wise decisions. The holistic development of the individual is the focal point in the implementation of the curriculum. Thus, in line with the education philosophy and the curriculum, Malaysian learners need to adopt autonomous learning because "if one goal of education is to produce people who are capable of educating themselves, then students must learn to manage their own lives, set their own goals, and provide their own reinforcement" (Woolfolk, 2001, p. 225) as life is full of tasks that call for learners to possess the skills of self-management.

LEARNER-CENTRED CURRICULUM

Since the last decade, there has been a strong emphasis to explore the learners' learning instead of the teacher's teaching, catapulted by the learner-centred curriculum movement. The traditional notion that teachers teach and learners learn is a limited one and has compelled researchers to place more emphasis on the process of learning. Thus, researchers need to enquire more about what is learned from what is actually taught and how it is learned. This is because the methods (how) and the reasons (why) learners learn are as important as what they learn. This is emphasised by Teh Chee Seng (2004), reminding educators and researchers that "students, as individuals with their own wants, needs, likes, dislikes, peculiarities and nuances, tend to have fixated perceptions as to what constitutes as profitable activities in the language class" (p. 255). For example, when teaching reading, it ought to be a means of empowering the learner (Lee, 2004), such as training students in the use of reading strategies so that they can read effectively unaided, and critically. Thus, texts can be independently interpreted and lexical items be adequately comprehended. In self-directed learning, students would assume more responsibility instead of merely responding to instruction and are encouraged to develop their own interests and learn freely without fear of taking control of their own learning processes, in line with the current paradigm of learner-centred teaching.

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, autonomous learning or the learner factor seems to underpin the problem of low lexicon in dealing with the learning of vocabulary because it is ultimately the goals set by the language learner that would determine the extent of success of his or her learning process. As the protagonist of the learning process, it is the learner who has to be autonomous and configure informed choices masterfully as to what he / she wants to learn and how he / she

can best learn it, besides understanding the rationale of learning the specific input. This is because "no one can learn for someone else" (Vilches, 2002; Manning & Payne, 1996; Winnie, 1995; Zimmerman, 1990; Zimmerman & Schunk, 1989, cited in Woolfolk, 2001, p. 225).

Thus, it is hereby imperative that Malaysian learners take a more central role in assuming autonomy. To become autonomous learners, our students need to be responsible for their own learning in fulfilling the aspirations of the National Education Philosophy, as a whole. In realising these aspirations, the instrumental role of the instructor as well as intrinsic awakening and awareness on the part of the learners is crucial. As the saying goes, "you can bring a horse to water but you cannot force it to drink." If we wish to produce lifelong learners and create a holistic and knowledgeable workforce, the option before us is obvious - we must provide the backdrop of platform in the classroom for our learners to take the centre stage in the learning process.

Among some of the plausible measures that can be taken in providing the backdrop is the development of an explicit vocabulary learning programme, which is starkly missing in the present curriculum, training and exposing learners to the different vocabulary learning strategies, encouraging the reading habit, including tapping on online reading resources and creating a conducive learning environment which supports autonomous learning of vocabulary items. Since lexical learning is the crux that enables one to relate to the different language skills, it is thus time for the first leap in becoming autonomous learners.

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