

# Self-regulated strategy development as a means to foster learner autonomy in a writing course

Nguyen Minh Hue\*

*Department of English - American Language and Culture, College of Foreign Languages,  
Vietnam National University, Hanoi, Pham Van Dong Street, Cau Giay, Hanoi, Vietnam*

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**Abstract.** This paper aims to propose a possible solution to a real-world curriculum problem of how to foster learner autonomy in an English academic writing class at College of Foreign Languages-Vietnam National University where a generally low level of learner autonomy is perceived. It begins by defining relevant terms and representing the problem. Thence, the rationale for the proposed solution and a plan for implementing it are discussed. The final section suggests a plan for evaluating the effectiveness of the problem-solving task.

## 1. Introduction

The importance of learner autonomy in language learning has been well established in the literature. The purpose of this paper is to propose a possible solution to a real-world curriculum problem of how to foster learner autonomy in an English academic writing class at College of Foreign Languages-Vietnam National University where a generally low level of learner autonomy is perceived. It will begin with definitions of relevant terms. Then the problem will be represented. Next, the rationale for the proposed solution and a plan for implementing it will be discussed. The final section will suggest a plan for evaluating the effectiveness of the problem-solving task.

## 2. Definitions of terms

It would be helpful to define a theoretical framework for each of the major terms that are going to be used in this paper. Definitions of learner autonomy have been varied (Littlewood [1]). However, the basis of autonomy has always been the ability to take responsibility for (or take control/charge of) one's own learning (Cotterall [2]; Dickinson [3]; Little [4]; Littlewood [1]; Benson [5]; Little [6]). According to Perry, Nordby, and VandeKamp [7]), the term *self-regulated* is used to describe metacognitive, intrinsically motivated, and strategic learners. Zimmerman [8] defines *self-regulation* as "self-generated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are oriented to attaining goals".

A strong link has been found between learner autonomy and self-regulation. According to Wenden [9] "in the cognitive literature on learning and instruction, autonomous learning is referred to as self-

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\* Tel.: 84-4-7523872

E-mail: bcngamta@yahoo.com

regulation". The *ability to take responsibility for learning* often refers to learners' ownership of many learning processes traditionally owned by teachers such as setting goals; choosing learning methods, materials and tasks; monitoring and evaluating progress (Ho and Crookall [10]; Cotterall [2]; Littlewood [1]; Benson [5]). These strategies have been used in the literature to describe both autonomous and self-regulated learners (e.g. Wenden [9]; Lee [11]; Graham, Harris and Troia [12]).

### 3. The curriculum problem

The present author is asked to teach EFL academic writing to a group of Vietnamese second year students majoring in TESOL at a university in Hanoi. In response to the university's demand for teaching innovations, the teacher has been required to develop a writing curriculum that can foster learner autonomy, a weak area in the university's traditional writing curriculum. In order to define the problem, the teacher needs to gather further information about various aspects of the curriculum. The information will help the teacher in the problem-solving process.

#### 3.1. The learners

A student questionnaire will be carried out during the orientation week. A part of it will collect information about learners' age, language learning experience, educational background, beliefs about language learning, beliefs about learner autonomy in general and self-regulation strategies in particular.

#### 3.2. Learners' needs

A need analysis is conducted to find out the students' target needs, expectations, and

lacks (Crabbe [13]). According to the teacher's observation and analysis of the undergraduate program, their most immediate needs are to take up writing opportunities available in this course and its assessment. In year 3 and 4, they are going to take other academic courses e.g. teaching methodology, research methods, etc for which they need to write essays, assignments, and reports. After graduation, the students will have various needs to write academically and professionally. Some will start graduate studies which have high demands for academic writing. Others will get jobs such as teaching, translating, creative writing and so on of which writing is an important part. Generally, greater autonomy is required as they progress through different levels of needs.

Besides, another section of the student questionnaire is aimed to find out what the students expect from the course. A diagnostic test is also administered to collect information about the students' proficiency levels and writing ability.

#### 3.3. Current teacher and learner roles

According to the author's general observation, some classrooms of the English Department are still teacher-centered. Goals have been set by the teachers and/or curriculum designers and students' personal goals have not been encouraged and considered. The teaching-learning environment has not been encouraging enough for them to actively find their own means to achieve learning goals. Therefore, passive students rely on the teachers in deciding what and how they should learn. When they leave the classroom, many find it difficult to self-regulate their own learning. Additionally,

some teachers hold complete authority in evaluating learning progress and outcome. Self-assessment has not been openly discussed and encouraged in the classroom and not used in formal assessment. In general, the teachers have been holding authoritative roles in deciding both the means and the ends of learning.

However, the discussion of teacher and learner roles above is only the author's subjective view based on personal observation. Although it is true in many classrooms, it cannot be confirmed as true in all classrooms and the class concerned. Therefore, a part of the student questionnaire gathers more valid information about the roles of the previous teachers and the students so that informed decisions are made. This information is also collected from a teacher questionnaire.

### 3.4. Social context

Given that developing greater learner autonomy is the desirable change, Checkland and Scholes' (1990); cited in Crabbe [13]) CATWOE model is adopted to collect information for defining the social context of the problem.

- **Customers:** The beneficiaries of the change are primarily the learners. Other beneficiaries are the university and prospective employers.

- **Actors:** The teacher and students play principal roles in bringing about the change.

- **Transformation:** The students become more autonomous learners.

- **Weltanschauung:** The teacher strongly believes that autonomy helps learning and that learner training can contribute to promoting learner autonomy. Information about learner beliefs about language learning, learner autonomy and self-regulation will be collected through the questionnaire.

- **Owners:** Both the teacher and learners are owners of the problem. The problem-solving will draw on the resources provided by both parties.

- **Environmental constraints:** the biggest constraint is the existing traditional environment where some other teachers still exercise control over students' learning.

### 3.5. The materials

The material for this course is a textbook of academic writing compiled by a group of teachers at the Department. The material is used as a resource rather than a script. The teacher is going to examine it to see what learning opportunities it provides and design a curriculum that can add value to the tasks provided in the material (Crabbe [14]). Opportunities for learning awareness will be paid special attention to.

## 4. A proposed solution: Self-regulated strategy development (SRSD)

### 4.1. Rationale

SRSD has been proposed as a possible solution to the problem of how to foster learner autonomy in the context for two main reasons. First, many autonomy experts suggest it as an option to approach the problem. According to Little [15], students are not automatically autonomous in the formal classroom. The teacher's job is to equip them with "appropriate tools and opportunities to practice using them" (p.176). One of the most suggested ways in the literature has been learner training (e.g. Graham and Harris [16]; Rees-Miller [17]; Little [15]; Harris, Graham, Mason, and Saddler [18]), of which SRSD is one type.

Second, according to Graham and Harris [16], SRSD can foster learners' autonomy because it provides them with scaffolding in using strategies that they could not previously do without assistance and self-regulation skills necessary to use the strategies tactically. More importantly, this is one of the most suitable solutions for the current context because the students' lack of self-regulation strategies appears to be the major cause of their low autonomy. This solution is also feasible in the social context of the problem.

#### 4.2. Goals of SRSD

The major goals of SRSD are helping the students to (1) master cognitive and metacognitive strategies in writing academic essays and (2) develop autonomous, self-regulated use of the strategies.

#### 4.3. Procedure of SRSD

To achieve the goals, a 6-stage procedure for SRSD is adapted from the literature on SRSD (e.g. Graham and Harris [19]; Mason, Harris and Graham [18]; Harris, Graham and Mason [20]; Chalk, Hagan-Burke and Burke [21]). Information collected at the earlier stage will be analyzed and taken into account when the instruction is implemented. As detailed instruction plan is hardly possible before the information becomes available, the stages are briefly explained as follows:

*Stage 1: Develop and activate background knowledge:*

This stage activates and develops the pre-skills and the students' background knowledge about the topic and task type needed for the writing task. Attention is paid to task knowledge which includes knowledge about task purpose, the nature of

the task and the knowledge and strategies they need to accomplish the task. At this stage, two self-regulation procedures, goal-setting and self-monitoring, are also introduced and initiated.

*Stage 2: Discuss it:*

Depending on the strategies identified by the students at stage 1 and information about the students' current performance level, the teacher may introduce additional strategies to be learnt. The teacher and students establish the significance of the writing and self-regulation strategies. How and when these strategies can be used for the present task and future ones and opportunities to use them in new tasks are discussed. The goals of learning the strategies are explained and students' commitment to learn them is obtained.

*Stage 3: Model it:*

The teacher or a peer models the task-specific strategies and accompanying self-regulation strategies naturally. Types of self-instructions e.g. problem-definition, planning, self-statements, self-evaluation, self-correction can be introduced. It is important that self-instructions be selectively introduced and modeled.

*Stage 4: Memorize it:*

This stage is to make sure that the students memorize the strategies involved in composing and self-regulating, any accompanying mnemonics and self-statements. Some students may need this stage, some may not.

*Stage 5: Support it:*

As students actually compose, the teacher scaffolds their use of the instructed strategies and can introduce more self-regulation strategies. The teacher attends to individual goals, needs, and paces through prompts, interaction, and guidance. She may write

collaboratively with some students if needed. Throughout this stage, the teacher and students continue the plan for and initiation of generalization and maintenance of the strategies. Covert self-instructions or self-statements are encouraged.

*Stage 6: Independence performance:*

Students are highly encouraged to use covert self-instructions because they are moving on to using strategies independently. The teacher monitors their independent use of the strategies already taught. Strategy generalization and maintenance continue to be planned. The teacher and students evaluate the effectiveness of strategy use and performance collaboratively. Revisions can be made where necessary.

These are the six recommended stages for SRSD. It should be noted that the stages do not need to be instructed in the presented order. Some stages can be skipped if the students are ready, some can be combined. According to Graham and Harris [16], SRSD should be integrated into the regular writing curriculum instead of replacing it. This way, the students will learn and apply the strategies in the real writing task and the chance that they are going to memorize, generalize, and maintain them is increased.

## **5. A plan for evaluating the effectiveness of the proposed solution**

This part proposes a plan for evaluating the effectiveness of the problem solution. Considering solving the current curriculum problem as a "task" (although it is bigger than the communicative tasks discussed by Ellis [22], it shares more common features with micro-tasks than with macro programs or projects), the author adapts the second step in Ellis's [22] procedure to plan for the evaluation. The plan is specified as follow.

- Approach: The objectives model approach is followed to evaluate to what extent the pre-set goals of the task have been achieved. Attempts are also made to understand how effectively the task generally works for students and teacher.

- Purposes: The evaluation is carried out for accountability purpose (did the task fulfill the goals?) and development purpose (how might the task be improved?)

- Focus: The evaluation focuses on the effectiveness of the task.

- Scope: The evaluation is internal, i.e. evaluating the task against the stated objectives/goals.

- Evaluators: The teacher and the students directly involve in evaluating the task.

- Timing: The evaluation will take place both during and after the task.

- Type of information: Information about students' use and self-regulation of cognitive and metacognitive strategies in writing will be collected through the teacher's classroom observation and students' writing portfolios. The detailed action plan will be discussed below.

### *5.1. Classroom observation*

According to Harris et al [20], the teacher needs to look for evidence in students' process and product of writing to see if they are actually using the strategies in writing and regulating their strategy use. The teacher also needs to observe changes in the students' behaviors, attitudes and beliefs about writing (Mason et al [23]) which can be indication of their autonomy development.

While observing students' performance, the teacher engages them in the evaluation (Harris et al [18]; Harris et al [20]). They are encouraged to discuss with peers and teacher

which part of the instruction is most helpful and which needs improving. Students are also invited to self-reflect in pair or groups during or after each writing task on their strategy use. Their reflections can give the teacher information about changes in their level of self-regulation or autonomy as a result of SRSD.

### 5.2. Writing portfolios

Writing portfolios have been strongly recommended for collecting information to evaluate the effectiveness of SRSD (Mason et al [23]; Harris et al [20]). Portfolios create a good context for students to generalize, maintain, and expand the instructed strategies. They also offer opportunities for students to enter interaction and collaboration with the teacher and peers and receive feedback and scaffolding for their strategy use. Meanwhile, the teacher can collect information about their writing and self-regulation strategy use on an on-going basis and provide support promptly. Particularly, the students' self-reflections and self-assessment, which are important components of the portfolios, not only help track their use of the instructed strategies over time inside and outside of classroom; but interestingly they are also means to acquire autonomy (Grabe and Kaplan [24]; Muller-Verweyen [25]; Hirvela and Pierson [26]; Weigle [27]).

For the above reasons, the progress portfolio (Weigle [27]), which contains both drafts and final products, is implemented. Each portfolio includes 4 entries written in 4 different genres of academic essays. For each entry, the students are asked to include at least 3 drafts and the final product that best show their development over time. The entries can be revised in-class essays or independent works outside the class.

Most importantly, for each entry the students write a paragraph reflecting on the process that they have gone through in making that entry and assessing their own work. They are instructed to write about their strengths and weaknesses, their problems and how they solved them. They are also guided to comment on the helpfulness of the strategies. These are helpful information for evaluating the effectiveness of SRSD. However, as self-assessment and reflection might be difficult for some students to write, especially in L2, the teacher need to provide careful training in this area (Coombe and Barlow [28]; Nunes [29]). According to Nunes, at an early stage, self-reflection can take the form of questionnaires.

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## Nâng cao tính độc lập tự chủ cho người học kỹ năng viết thông qua việc phát triển các chiến lược làm chủ quá trình học

Nguyễn Minh Huệ

*Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hoá Anh - Mỹ, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ,  
Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội, Đường Phạm Văn Đồng, Cầu Giấy, Hà Nội, Việt Nam*

Tính độc lập tự chủ của người học có một vai trò hết sức quan trọng trong học tập nói chung và học ngoại ngữ nói riêng. Tuy nhiên, theo quan sát của tác giả thì khả năng này còn yếu đối với rất nhiều sinh viên năm thứ hai học môn viết tiếng Anh tại Khoa Ngôn ngữ và Văn hóa Anh - Mỹ, Trường Đại học Ngoại ngữ, Đại học Quốc gia Hà Nội. Vì vậy, bài viết này nhằm gợi ý một giải pháp nâng cao tính độc lập tự chủ của nhóm sinh viên này: phát triển các chiến lược làm chủ quá trình học cho sinh viên. Bài viết bắt đầu với việc định nghĩa các thuật ngữ được dùng trong bài. Tiếp đó, bài viết miêu tả thực trạng của vấn đề thiếu tính độc lập tự chủ của sinh viên và đưa ra một kế hoạch thu thập thêm thông tin có liên quan đến vấn đề này. Lý do và quy trình áp dụng giải pháp nâng cao tính độc lập tự chủ của sinh viên được đưa ra ở phần tiếp theo của bài viết. Cuối cùng, bài viết gợi ý một kế hoạch đánh giá hiệu quả của việc áp dụng giải pháp này.