

The Enhancement of Learner Autonomy Through DDL in L2 Writing Class

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Abstract:

To afford learner autonomy to EFL learners is a desired aim of teaching instruction and of significant importance to aid them in becoming better learners with higher language proficiency levels. Numerous research has been undertaken to investigate whether DDL could foster learner autonomy in SLA since the advent of it, largely due to its discovery and inductive exploration of corpus, while there is a paucity of research focused on the impact of DDL on learner autonomy in terms of L2 writing study. An in-depth semi-structured interview is implemented after the pedagogical practice of DDL in assisting students' L2 writing. It is found that with the adoption of DDL, students' learner autonomy has been fostered as well as their critical thinking ability. Future research could work on the strategies to enhance the durability of DDL and cultivate EFL learners' habit in adopting DDL to continually improve learner autonomy.

Keywords:

Learner Autonomy, Data-driven Learning, L2 Writing

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy refers to the multidimensional capacity to take control of one's own learning [1], a slight adapted version from the definition given by Holec [2], which he defines as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Little [3] added "interdependence" to the connotation of learner autonomy suggesting collaboration rather than working in isolation involved in the process of managing and directing one's own learning.

Data-driven learning (DDL) is coined and pioneered by Johns [4], who worked at the English for Overseas Student Unit of Birmingham University from 1971 till the end of his career. He asserted the notion that the task of the learner DDL is a lexicogrammatical approach to foreign language learning by treating language as data and learners as researchers to undertake teacher-guided discovering learning tasks. Even though there is a growing body of well-established area of empirical research covering many aspects of language teaching and learning in DDL in recent decades [5,

6], researchers and practitioners have adapted Tim Johns's DDL procedures and invented their own practice leading to a difficult situation of precise definition of DDL[7]. Nonetheless, researchers have reached a consensus on the common characteristics among the various academic interpretations of DDL research, authentic corpus and student-centred exploratory learning activities[8]. In general, the use of language corpora for language teaching and learning is recognized as DDL [6]. Since its inception, DDL has captured numerous researchers' attention and increased in prominence over the years. The effectiveness of assisting students in exploring the authentic language uses and acquisition of fixed language structures has been attested by numerous researchers in their research[5, 9-11] [8, 12, 13], thereby adopting this corpus-based learner-centred explorative learning method herein the research.

The research objective is to explore the students' perception on whether DDL fosters their learner autonomy in English writing in a tertiary level under Chinese context.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy, on the one hand, offers more choices on personalizing the learning content and objectives, learning time and pace, and even learning style and strategies for learners; on the other hand, it also challenges their competency and compacity of reflecting and self-evaluating of the whole learning process. Learners make decisions about their learning and learn knowledge and skills on the basis of their own needs and preferences to achieve better outcomes [14]. However, learner autonomy or self-directed learning capacity is not innate in individuals [14], as Little [15] has stated that learners become autonomous in their learning when they overtly accepts responsibility of their learning and start to develop and exercise "reflective skills of planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning" and learner autonomy essentially depends on reflection and self-assessment.

2.2. Data-driven Learning

Notably, technology has played an important role in motivating learners' capacity for independent learning [16,17] and SLA research has long been paid attention to the learners' autonomous learning [18,20]. Since its inception, the proponents of DDL has been advocating its effectiveness in promoting learner autonomy in the field of SLA [5,21,22]. The spirit of cooperation and collaboration running through the LA especially in the process of awareness raising of lexical chunks, the self-exploration and consultation process of DDL, both play a pivotal role in fostering learner autonomy.

DDL emphasizes learners' autonomous exploration of authentic language data with sufficient guidance, thus incorporating the notion of learner autonomy "in the sense of letting learners discover linguistic patterns for themselves" [10]. Some researchers have claimed that the enhancement of learner autonomy is one of the key features of DDL [10,23]. Because in applying DDL and during the whole learning process, desired learning pace and path are the respondents' own choices rather than the strict commands from the instructor due to the learning nature of DDL, as there is more explorative work in the DDL process and students act as researcher, which constitute a more active, learner-directed, and motivation-driven learning process.

The researchers who adopt DDL consultation (also consisting of learners thereof) are obliged to encourage and engender the cultivation of cooperation and collaboration during the whole learning process in the research and meanwhile the application of DDL has enabled learners to take more responsibility of their own learning. The teacher's role in DDL is no longer an authoritative dominator but a facilitator, a guide, and even a cooperator in the exploration of prefabricated language use. The teacher guides rather than direct the discovery and inductive process of language acquisition.

By asking simple questions like 1) "What are we learning? 2) Why are we learning it? 3) How are we learning? 4) How successful is our learning? and 5) What are we going to learn next?" [24], teachers can raise the awareness of the students' autonomous mindset of planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning process and cultivate the ownership of learning process. The answers to the foregoing questions recommended by [24] and used to raise the awareness of both teaching and learning will be: 1) we are learning the formulaic language patterns which are authentic and idiomatic and 2) we are learning it because it takes a larger portion of language usages than we have normally assumed and due to this, the target language input and output processing have been accelerated and the fluency and accuracy of target language will be improved as well, 3) in DDL, we learn as researchers, both teacher and student, by treating authentic language in corpus as data, we identify, classify, and generalize the possible nativelike collocations.

"Researchers" initially transform data into information, and then internalize the information into knowledge through the identification, classification, and generalization of DDL consultation [25]. The whole discovery and inductive DDL exploration

In DDL, especially direct DDL, teachers act as facilitators, assisting the students in the exploratory process of searching formulaic and idiomatic usages through the concordance lines and explaining the variation of formulaic and idiomatic usages to the learners if necessary. For the learners' interesting discovery of a certain language pattern which the teacher has not noticed beforehand, the learners and their teacher could also work collaboratively to classify its usages and attest its generalisation within the corpus tools. Learner autonomy in SLA is never only about independent learning; on the other hand, it is more associated with cooperation and collaboration to become a better language learner who can autonomously take control of their own learning pace and learning outcome.

Researchers have attested the enhancement of learner autonomy in DDL [26,27,21,22,28,29]. By conducting the in-depth semi-structured interview inquiring about the students' perception of the role of DDL form-focused tasks in the task engagement, Zare et al. [28] have contended that learners' autonomy along with their motivation, interest, and concentration etc. of language learning through the adoption of DDL practice has been fostered and students become more autonomous in SLA with the aid of DDL. In the similar vein, Looi et al. [22] have undertaken a focus group interview to delve into the promotion of students' learner autonomy when adopting DDL as a likely complement to the insufficient coursebook in learning French and they have discovered that DDL improves "long-term retention, critical thinking, and learner autonomy" [22].

Besides, carried out their research in a Chinese context, He and Xie [21] have underscored the strong potential of DDL in fostering students' autonomous learning

and promoting a more sustainable way of learning in terms of formulaic expressions, such as collocation, acquisition due to the explorative and engaging nature of DDL. They also suggest that the excellent mastery and frequent use of DDL might serve as a powerful complement to the formal school instruction[21].

The aforementioned research all implements mixed research design of including both quasi-experimental research with the pretest, post-test, and delayed post-test, and the qualitative research mainly either by conducting in-depth semi-structured interview or focus group interview or by administering questionnaire survey.

2.3. L2 Writing

English writing ability is deemed to be the most difficult English ability worldwide particularly for EFL learners [26, 30, 31] [32-34], writing difficulties including lexical insufficiency and mis-collocations [8, 35]. Many English-teaching practitioners as well as the author of this dissertation have also found that China EFL learners also experience more difficulty in comprehending reading and listening discourse of authentic and native usage in real-world contexts compared with doing reading and listening comprehension in text books and examinations [36]. There is an enormous gap between Chinese EFL learners especially university students' growing demand of commanding English and their high-investment- low-return insufficient English learning and ability. Effective and creative teaching and learning are of urgent necessity [37].

3. Methodology

The qualitative research carries out an in-depth semi-structured interview to delve into the perception of respondents on DDL and its effect on learner autonomy in English writing.

3.1. Participants

The participants in the research are 8 first-year English majors in a university located in northern China. They are from the same intact class which the researcher implements DDL training to aid students' writing ability in their English writing course. Convenience sampling is chosen to recruit the respondents in the research. the research encourages the students to voluntarily participate in the research. With regard to research ethics, the purpose of the research will be informed to the participants, and a formal written consent will be signed. All the interviewees are referred to as Interviewee 1 to Interviewee 8 in the research without revealing their names.

3.2. Research Design and Data Collection

The research runs for an entire 16-week semester. At the beginning of the semester, there is a DDL training session which takes about 6 weeks to instruct the students to conduct both indirect DDL (i.e., materials provided and edited by the researcher from corpus) and direct DDL practice (direct use of corpus by the students themselves). During the writing instruction section, the students will be guided how to use concordance lines and KWIC (key word in context) to correct their misuse of collocations and idiomatic expressions. The students are also helped in accumulating collocations and fixed formulaic languages through the paradigm of identification, classification, and generalization of DDL consultation instead of mastering them in a passive and deductive way from a word list. At the end of the semester, the semi-

structured interview will be conducted in English to investigate students' perception on the improvement of learner autonomy. Questions like "Do you think DDL improves your independent learning or learner autonomy, if the answer is positive and how?" and "what do you think of DDL consultation" will be asked to inquire about the respondents' perception on DDL and its relationship with learner autonomy. The interview for each respondent will take about 30 minutes.

3.3. Data Analysis

The qualitative data collected will be analysed by thematic analysis [38]. The interviews are recorded, then transcribe the interviews verbatim. The researcher manually codes the transcript to obtain the possible themes. The themes will be presented with analytical analysis with excerpts from the interview to add credence to the research.

4. Results and Discussion

The students engage themselves in a more self-directed learning paradigm with the influence of the application of DDL. Even though they reveal that they have encountered great challenges when using the corpus-based DDL, they also convey that they are inclined to conduct a more exploratory learning approach compared to just being a receptacle of knowledge in the traditional language classroom. A learning approach featuring exploration and discovery may require more time and effort from learners; it is likely to lead to longer and improved retention of the cognitive knowledge and more efficient learning outcomes.

Many participants have admitted that after being introduced to the corpus tools, their ability of tackling cognitive difficulties in language learning has enhanced. When they are confused about idiomatic language use, instead of asking their peers or teachers they could always start an explorative journey of classifying the confusion independently. The use of corpus tools enables them to conduct a self-directed exploration of authentic language use, permitting a much deeper comprehension of language usages.

Extract 1

Researcher: Do you think with the use of the corpus tools, have you improved your learner autonomy or your skill of learning English independently, your independent learning of English writing in particular?

Interviewee 3: In my opinion, I think it improve my independent learning efficacy because I before I come into the university, I don't know the corpora. But after I know the corpora, I, when I in the class or maybe after the class, I will, I may use it to learn more words and use and learn more net[trying to pronounce native] native speakers, how to make the words more (authentic) in my composition. And in addition, I think it helped me to analyze different a language styles, which very vary from region to region and change with the development of the time. Maybe when I use it, I will distinguish between different usage patterns and draw a conclusion about language use. And I so I think it is the key to component of critical thinking.

Extract 2

Researcher: Do you think with the use of the English corpora, have you improved your independent learning skill and or learner autonomy in English writing?

Interviewee 2: By using English-corpora.org I can be more independent, I can explore language patterns, collocations and frequency of usage. And [this,] these are [benefit] beneficial to my English study.

Extract 3

Researcher: So, do you think you have improved your independent learning or have you enhanced your learner autonomy in writing by using the English-corpora.org?

Interviewee 6: Yes, absolutely. Using corporate tools has significantly enhanced my independent learning skills with the English corpus tools, I can search some useful information by myself, which I could use in my writing. And I think [the er.] the corpus tools can broaden my ability to obtain some learning skills, such as the problem-solving ability and [and] [self] and self-improvement.

The interviewees have also discovered that besides the fostered learner autonomy, they have also improved their other non-language skills such as critical thinking. The finding of the enhancement of critical thinking ability is in line with the findings of Looi et al. [22] and He and Xie [21], who have attested the positive correlation of learner autonomy and critical thinking. The improvement of the critical thinking ability is, as a matter of fact, a byproduct of the practice of DDL. The explorative nature of DDL requires the learners to identify, classify, and generalize the nativelike language usages through the extensive amount of authentic language use as the same way researchers do their empirical research, questions of how target language is authentically used being raised, tentatively answered, and repeatedly tested of correctness and appropriateness through the discovery process of data analysis. As a result, to think critically is an essential element in the whole identification, classification, and generalization process of DDL [4].

Extract 4

Researcher: Do you find you have improved your independent learning or you have improved your learning autonomy in writing by using the English-corpora.org?

Interviewee 8: I think the corpus tools have enhancement (enhanced) independent learning ability and learner independence. With these tools, I can explore language on my own and dig deeper to these words and qualifications which I could use in my composition. As for non-language skills like critical thinking, we have (has) also being improve (been improved) because I need to analyze the data and examples for this. For example, when I try to find the best way to use this or use a phrase, I must think critically about the different results between (the) some results, some data with the corpus (i.e., to think critically to acquire the most appropriate word usages with the aid of corpus tools).

4. Conclusions

The findings of fostered learner autonomy through the employment of DDL is consistent with the previous research on whether DDL practice could improve learner autonomy. Further research could work on the teaching and learning strategies to assist the learners to develop the habit of using DDL consultation consistently and regularly in the long run to guarantee the durability of DDL.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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