
Research Article

Fostering Learner's Autonomy through Response Journals

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ABSTRACT:

Autonomy is a phenomenon that speculated many scholars and readers. It is a broad term found in many disciplines because it has a number of potential benefits. It is defined by Henric Holec (1981, p.3) as a capacity or a fundamentally critical process to reflect on one's own experience and "to take charge in one's own learning". This paper investigated the promotion of autonomy through the use of response journals. The aspects of autonomy were examined generally in this study. Language teaching was approached through the task-based instruction. Students were asked to write a response journal as the task to language learning. The response journal was written before explaining the lesson in class to ensure students' responses to the lesson were original and not blurred by the teacher's explanation. The subjects were senior female English students in King Saud University. The subjects were given explicit instructions regarding the format and content of the journal. Then, an analysis of the first journals and fifteenth journals took place in terms of self-reflection, self-recognition, and other aspects of autonomy. The choices of the journals were taken randomly, just to track the progress in the subjects. Therefore, the effectiveness of the use of response journal to foster autonomy in language learners was the main concern of this paper. The analysis showed that learners throughout the process of writing journals used more of the mental verbs, personal pronouns, and attitudinal lexis. These three features can denote students' self-awareness, self-recognition, and self-reflection. As such, this study has found that the use of response journal is an effective method in fostering their autonomy. It provides students with a context to learn, reflect, and evaluate, hence, promoting learners' autonomy.

Introduction:

Autonomy is a phenomenon that fascinated many scholars and readers. It is a broad term found in many disciplines. It is defined by Henric Holec (1981) as a capacity or a fundamentally critical process to reflect on one's own experience and "to take charge in one's own learning" (p.3). Therefore, the learner takes responsibility in the learning process. This definition has been adopted in many papers, including the present one. In addition, this definition links autonomy to language learning. In fact, one of the main objectives in language material design is to promote autonomous language learners. This objective comes as a reaction to some outdated teaching methods, which concentrated on teaching rather than learning. In other words, the experience was centered on the teachers and not the learners, which is what current methods criticized. Learners have been influenced by the perspective that "there are traditional beliefs of traditional hierarchy in classrooms, where the roles of teachers and learners are rooted deeply in people's thinking" (Ho & Crookall, 1995, p. 237). As a result of this hierarchal relation, students' individuality was rarely present in the classroom, and if present was unfavorable. However, the current methods shifted the focus from teachers to learners. Teachers are no longer seen as masters of the language and students are no longer passive receivers (Hsu & Malkin, 2011, p.43). Advocates of current approaches such as, *task-based instruction*, the method adopted in this paper, asked to consider both teachers and learners as partners in the

educational experience. Task-based instruction aims at providing students with novel tasks as a means to learn the language while developing interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Nonetheless, providing a task for learners has to be aligned with their needs. For instance, learners need to trust themselves and be autonomous. As such, this paper investigates the use of response journals in an English literature course for non-native learners to foster their autonomy. Response journals are defined by Les Parsons (2001) as "a form of writing in which students record their personal reactions to, questions about, and reflections on what they read, view, write, represent, observe, listen to, discuss, do, and think and how they go about it" (P.9). They provide learners with an opportunity to think about and reflect upon the learning material. According to Brownlie, "What we as educators want is ... to help [students] reflect, and to help them see the world in a different way" (2005, p.1). The learning material of this study is an advanced course in *English Modern Poetry* taught at King Saud University' Department of English Language and Literature. It includes reading a collection of modern poems and an understanding of the modern period.

Literature Review:

While reviewing the literature on autonomy and response journals, it is evident that both present unresolved issues. They

are still open to interpretation regarding their application language learning. For example, response journals are not extensively used in language classes. According to Chireman (2007), response journals are subjective to individual differences, although they are considered a good tool for fostering critical thinking (p.200). Accordingly, using them might be a challenge for both teachers and students. As for the issue of autonomy, scholars like Benson and Voller were at odds with the significance of autonomy in language learning. The question is whether autonomy should be an end in itself or a method to promote successful language learning (1997, P.2). Frankly, both types of autonomy are crucial. The first one develops the person socially and the second one assures successful language acquisition.

Most of the studies on autonomy agreed on the common aspects of it. Hall and Ogawa (2011) claimed that these aspects are interrelated, are simultaneous, and coexist. The aspects examined, in this paper, are responsibility, reflection, self-confidence, and self-recognition. According to Sinclair (2000), reflection is learners' ability to take more responsibility for the learning. Therefore, "learners will not be able to reflect, without conscious and explicit" descriptions to the tasks involved in the learning (para.9). In addition, Scharle and Szabo (2000) regarded self-confidence as a necessary tool for taking responsibility for learning. In order for students to do so, they have to recognize their potential, and be confident about themselves.

Hall and Ogawa (2011) also studied the use of reflective journals to foster autonomy. They asked the learners to write reflective journals after each lesson and gave them a questionnaire to which they can evaluate the role of these journals in their learning. The findings of this study are lacking as they did not present the use of this technique as a sufficient solution for increasing autonomy. Nonetheless, it explained the significance of letting learners voice their ideas freely and think critically.

The present study does not aim to distinguish between the different aspects and issues involved when promoting autonomy in the classroom. As can be seen from previous studies, the lines between these issues and aspects are blurred. Furthermore, the abstract nature of these issues makes it even more difficult to present possible solutions for them. Accordingly, this study examined the use of response journals to generally promote autonomy without focusing on a certain aspect of it. The present study examined the use of response journal in an English literature course, whereas Hall and Ogawa's study examined the use of open reflective journals in a language class. This is because journals help in generating a personal understanding of ideas, reflection upon ideas, and improvement of the writings of these ideas, which can be beneficial for literature courses aimed at enhancing students' self-assessment (Roessing, 2009, p.5).

Methodology:

Subjects:

The subjects are five senior English female students in the Department of English Language and Literature, King Saud University. They are studying modern poetry as a mandatory course.

Instrument:

The instrument used in this study is response journal. Response journals have proven effective in teaching literary courses because it allows the students to generate their own meanings (Roessing, 2009). The course includes almost ten poems; therefore, ten journals were expected.

Procedure:

First, teaching of modern poetry was approached through the *task-based instruction*. Second, students were asked to write a response journal as the task to language learning. Third, the subjects were given explicit instructions regarding the form and content of the journal. The response journal was written before explaining the poem in class to ensure students' responses to the lesson were original and not blurred by the teacher's explanation to that poem. Finally, an analysis of the first and fifth journals took place to see if the autonomy level was raised.

Results and Discussion:

Results:

Table.1 Comparison between the First and Fifth journals

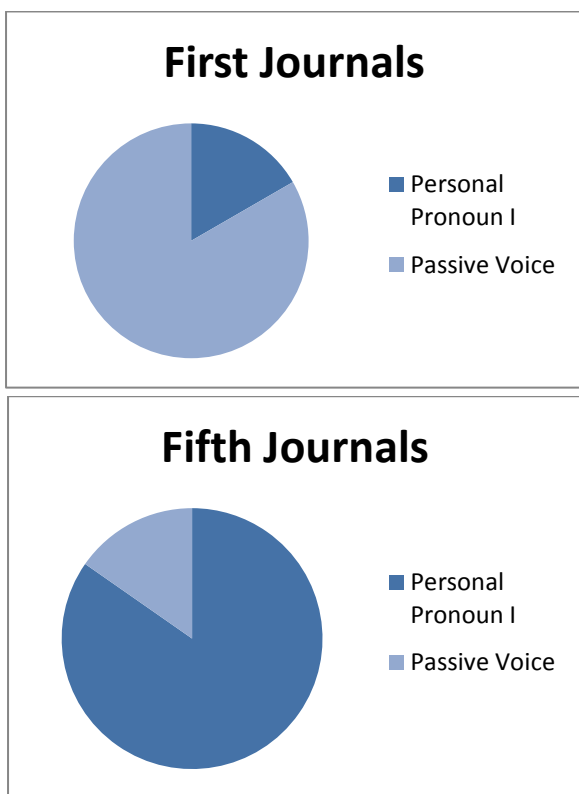
Linguistic Features	First Journals "The Coming"	Second	Fifth Journals "Sea Rose"
Personal pronoun "I"	5	17%	24 83%
Mental verbs	7	19%	29 81%
Attitudinal lexis	4	8%	42 92%
Plagiarism	4	80%	0 0
Passive	6	85%	1 15%
Integration of opinions	7	20%	28 80%

As shown in the table, the use of the personal pronoun "I", mental verbs, attitudinal lexes, and the integration of personal opinions were kept to a minimum in the first journals contributing to 17%, 19%, 8%, and 20% respectively. However, plagiarism and the passive voice were used greatly in the first journals, contributing to almost 80% and 85% in comparison to the fifth journals.

Discussion:

According to Table.1, there is an incredible rise in the use of the personal pronoun “I” in the process of journal writing. 83% instances of the use of “I” are marked in the fifth journal, whereas only 17% instances are highlighted in the first journals. The use of “I” clearly illustrates an increase in self-awareness of the internal state of students as well as their own self-reflection (Lewis & Ramsay, 2004, p.1821), hence reflecting an increase in autonomy. Interestingly enough, in the first journal, the passive voice is used more extensively than the personal pronoun. The passive is used when there is vagueness or objectivity in the part of the agent of the verb. It is also used when the writer wants to divert attention from the agent and shift it to the verb itself, which is the case here. The students were reluctant to subjectively name the agent in the first journals, however in the fifth journal, the students learnt how to substitute the passive voice with the active voice by using the personal pronoun “I” as the agent. For the fifth journal none of the students used the passive voice.

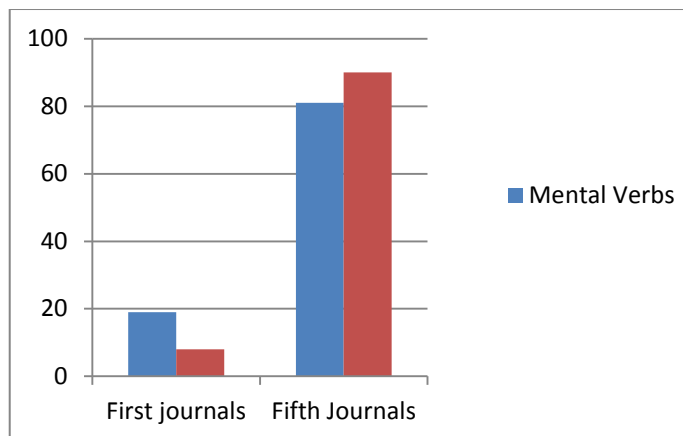
Chart.1 The use of “I” versus the use of the passive voice



As shown in Chart.2, the use of mental verbs and attitudinal lexis witnessed an incredible increase in the fifth journal, contributing to 79% and 92% respectively of the total use. Mental verbs convey the opinion and attitude of the writer and denote cognitive engagement and reflection (Thompson & Droga, 2012, p.41). In addition, attitudinal lexis indicate speakers' assessment of the content, and also suggest an opinion or a reaction from the speaker (Stillar, 1998, p.39). Since mental verbs denote cognitive, reflective engagement and attitudinal lexis indicate speakers' assessment, the use of them can lead to the promotion of autonomy in these students. The students are starting to judge the material individually and to assess its relevance to their lives. For instance, one student

classified the poem “Sea Rose” as a poem which is relevant to women's suffering, another perceived it as "a mysterious poem" that might be devoid of meaning.

Chart.2 Mental Verbs and Attitudinal Lexis



In addition, almost all the students plagiarized in their first journals. Clearly, they were not confident about their understanding of the poem and their writing abilities. However, no one plagiarized in the fifth journal. When one of the subjects did not understand the poem, she chose to take responsibility in her learning by reading the poem several times to understand it. She was also able to write in the journal her response to the poem; that the poem was difficult to understand. The students also freely wrote their personal opinions and responses to the poem. They provided a clear stance as the thesis and supported that stance with their opinions. In fact, 80% of the students were able to implement their opinions in the journals. For example, one student clearly stated that the poem reflects the life of a woman. Then, she supported that claim by providing her opinions to the issue.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the fostering of autonomy through the use of response journals by students. It provided a brief review of the literature on student autonomy. It also examined the general increase of students' autonomy, and did not limit the study to a single aspect. Five students were asked to write a response journal for each poem they studied. They were asked to prepare the journals before class. Then, these journals, the first and the fifth, were analyzed for specific linguistic features. The linguistics features are the use of personal pronoun, mental verbs, and attitudinal lexis. The use of the passive voice and plagiarism were also examined in their journals. They used more of the personal pronoun “I”, mental verbs, and attributive lexis. Accordingly, the use of the passive and plagiarism were reduced. These three features can denote students' self-awareness, self- recognition, and self- reflection. They learned to voice their judgments and evaluation of the processes clearly. These results have shown that learners' autonomy increased with the use of response journals. As such, this study has found that the use of response journal is an effective method in fostering their autonomy. It provides students with a context to learn, reflect, and evaluate, hence, promoting learners' autonomy.

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