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Research Article

PROMOTING AUTONOMOUS LEARNING IN ONLINE CLASSES: A DESCRIPTION OF TEACHERS' BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

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ABSTRACT

Learner autonomy (LA) or the capacity of learners to take charge of her/his own learning has been a well-established research area in the field of teacher education. Using classroom observations and interviews, the researchers followed through the mental lives of the tertiary teachers in a teacher education institution. In particular the inquiry highlighted the relevance of learner autonomy in the virtual classrooms through the lens of the teachers' beliefs and practices. The Filipino teachers' classrooms revealed that LA can be promoted through an effective utilization of the digital platforms of learning. The digital delivery of instructions for lectures and assessment purposes showed that the Filipino learners are capable of working on their own, as well as collaborate with their classmates as a team. Teachers equipped with digital capacities showed advantages as they displayed ease in delivering lessons and establishing interaction with their students. However, the tendency to be teacher-centered was noticeably prevalent as teachers maximized the online class as the opportune time to give inputs, instruct and give asynchronous activities for independent learning. Despite the prospect of online classes as a platform for independent learning, the researchers assume that it cannot be considered as a stand-alone modality for most of the undergraduate students in the rural universities in the country.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, teacher education, mixed method, online classes.

INTRODUCTION

The world was taken aback by the magnitude of effects that COVID 19 pandemic has brought in our lifetime. In particular, it has changed how millions around the globe are educated. Risk-control decisions adapted by the academic sector led our students into what appeared to be a temporary home-schooling. However, the current signs suggest that it could have a lasting impact on the trajectory of learning innovation and digitalization. Education has indeed changed drastically with the distinctive rise of E-learning where teaching is undertaken remotely and on digital platforms.

The present study is an attempt to assess and take one step backward to determine the teachers' effective way to make students learn in the digital education. On hindsight, the rapid spread of COVID 19 has demonstrated the importance of building resilience to face various threats from pandemic disease as well as the rapid technological change. The pandemic has opened an opportunity to remind our teachers of the skills the students need in this unpredictable world such as informed-decision making, creative problem solving and perhaps above all – adaptability. In this connection, one of the interesting developments in the field of teacher education research is the concept of learner autonomy. From the term itself, it suggests the capacity of the students to be autonomous or independent. The researchers believe that learner autonomy is a 21st Century skill that students must acquire in order to keep up with the challenges of our time.

What is learner autonomy?

Influenced by various theoretical perspectives -political, educational, psychological and language learning (Benson, 2013) – the notion of

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learner autonomy first entered the field of language teaching through the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project established in 1971 (p.58). Their project began with an emphasis on adult education that aims to provide what lifelong learning foresees to achieve – to produce citizenry who are capable of running responsibly the affairs of the society in which s/he lives (Benson, 2013). One of its impetus projects- the creation of self-access language learning centers (SACs) assumed to promote experimentation on self-directed learning through an exposure to a rich collection of second language materials emphasizing authenticity.

The construct of learner autonomy continued to call the attention of educators and scholars in the field. The late 80s paved to pay attention to the social character of the classroom setting. Anchored on the concept of social interaction, Little (1995) espoused the idea of "pedagogical dialogue" (p.178) where the teacher and the learners in an atmosphere of negotiation and shared responsibility learn from each other, likewise, allows the learners to take part in managing their own learning. Similar notion is posited by Breen and Littlejhon (2000) in their concept of "procedural negotiation" (p.8). According to them, procedural negotiation like pedagogical dialogue aims to arrive at an agreement that is acceptable to both parties, likewise, beneficial for effective learning and teaching in the classroom. Engaging learners in a shared decision-making, somehow, manages teaching and learning as a group experience. Similarly, the concept of "experiential learning" (Kohonen, 1992, p.14) enriched the merits of collaborative learning as an essential component among various learning experiences that a student must encounter towards becoming autonomous. Experiential learning which took its roots from views of humanistic psychology regards individual learners' subjective experiences, feelings and attitudes towards their learning as of prime importance. This theory on learning posits that if learners are guided to improve themselves as learners, they gain confidence and motivation to utilize their full potential.

Eventually, the ideas of self-directedness, self-instruction, independent study and distance learning became common terms associated with this new educational goal – all geared towards allowing the learners to be active participants in the meaning-making and knowledge acquisition. Needless to say, the learning and teaching theory strengthened the goals that lifelong learning skills are aiming. This trajectory undoubtedly is supported by digital education that the tertiary education around the globe has adapted these days. The virtual learning experiences that Filipino college students in particular are engaged in require the learners to practice independent learning given the absence of face-to-face interaction with the teacher, and reliance on the self-learning modules as references. E-learning is viewed to be an alternative to the conventional models of a classroom. In view thereof, it is the intention of the paper to examine the technology-based approaches that teachers adapt in order to deliver instruction, eventually determine whether the teachers' practices contribute in the promotion of autonomous learning.

Research Objectives

It is the aim of this paper to examine the teachers' beliefs and practices in promoting learner autonomy in the uniqueness of virtual classroom learning. The researchers focused on the role of teachers in the promotion of such curricular goal. It must be noted that it is through the teachers' behaviors that one may determine whether they encourage learners to be self-directed or self-regulated in various ways anchored on the perspectives that placed learner autonomy as a valuable pedagogical paradigm for independent learning. In this vein, the study sought to accomplish the following objectives:

1. Describe how the promotion of learner autonomy is actualized in the virtual classrooms.
2. Determine the relevance of learner autonomy in the context of Filipino classrooms

METHODOLOGY

The study employed mixed method of classroom observations and interviews with target teacher participants whose beliefs on learner autonomy and practices of technology-based instruction became the basis in examining whether the tertiary teachers who teach via E-learning environment contribute in the promotion of learner autonomy.

Population and Study Locale

It targeted the faculty members from Dinalupihan Campus, a teacher education institution which offers courses on Bachelor in Elementary Education (BEED), Bachelor in Early Childhood Education (BECED) and Bachelor in Secondary Education with areas of specialization in Math and Science. Dinalupihan Campus, a town located adjacent to Pampanga and Zambales caters to students coming from nearby towns as well as those coming from the two aforementioned provinces. With a student population of less than a thousand students, there were at least thirty (30) teachers, all of whom hold a permanent status. The faculty staff is dominated with senior faculty whose years in service range from 22 to 32 years. It is interesting to note that given this dominant number of years in the teaching profession, the BPSU-DC teachers' beliefs and practices had the potential to offer interesting insights in the field of teacher education, thus, allowed the researcher to explore a description particularly in the promotion of independent learning like learner autonomy.

Table 1 Faculty Profile

TOTAL	SEX		Average Years in Service	Highest Educational Attainment		
30	Female	Male	22 years	Bachelor	Masters	Doctorate
	21	9		2	16	12

Sampling and Data Collection

The study utilized a purposive sampling where the target participants were sought for their consent to be observed. Two (2) teachers from each of the various disciplines (Math, Science and Professional Courses) were targeted for classroom observations. In selecting the participants, the researcher considered the teachers' willingness to hand over their video-recorded classes during the adaption of blended learning in the university.

Data collection was conducted through the video recordings of classes extracted from the Google Classroom that the university adapted in their Learning Management System (LMS). A minimum of two regular classes of each of the six teacher participants were solicited. Hence, a total of 12 video recordings of classes were subjected for analysis. They were from different programs: Science, Math and Professional Courses clusters. The video recordings were able to capture the teachers' actual practices of fostering autonomous learning (or the absence of such) particularly in E-learning platform. Moreover, since BPSU adapted a distance learning scheme that includes both synchronous and asynchronous classes, both platforms were considered as part of the teachers' practices in teaching online classes, hence, both were subjected for examination.

The researcher deemed the conceptual categories of Lau (2012) as an appropriate set of rubrics for observation as they feature practical classroom contexts basically intended to examine classroom instructions that promotes self-regulated learning – a concept highly relevant to learner autonomy. The following table shows the specific items under the broader conceptual categories and opposite the classroom contexts are the descriptors of instructional practices that promote learner autonomy.

Table 2 Teachers' Instructional Practices Checklist

Conceptual Categories	Descriptors of Practices Promoting Learner Autonomy	Observation Notes

1. Instructional Tasks
  1.1 Instructional Content
  1.2. Materials
  1.3. Instructional Activities
	• Utilizes textbooks that are suited to the needs and preferences of the learners
	• Considers authenticity and relevance of materials.
	• Allows learners to discover ideas on their own.
	• Establishes enriching ground for teacher-student and student-student interaction
	• Elicits students' social awareness through self-expression	

2. Instrumental Support
  2.1. Teacher Support
  2.2. Peer Support
	• Helps students connect prior knowledge to new ones.
	• Shows competence in delivering knowledge
	• Uses varied strategies that stimulate the learners' interest
	• Establishes collaborative work through peer and group works	

3. Autonomy Structure
  3.1 Student participation
  3.2 Autonomy and choice
	• Provides learners ample room and space to express themselves
	• Provides activities that encourage learner participation.
	• Allows learners to participate in classroom planning like topics, methods, groupings, schedule of submission etc.
	• Includes metacognitive activities and projects that encourage self-reflection.	

4. Evaluation Practices
  4.1 Evaluation tool
  4.2 Aims and nature of evaluation
  4.3 Self or peer evaluation
	• Uses evaluation tool both for formative and summative purposes.
	• Negotiate the rationale, rubrics and procedure of evaluation among the students.
	• Train students to evaluate their own work as well as their classmates' work.
	• Regularly updates students of their progress.	

The last phase of the data gathering was a semi-structured interview which further unveiled the teachers' beliefs and validated the classroom observations conducted. Questions constructed for the six classroom observation participants focused on their significant classroom practice/s that promoted or challenged the idea of autonomous learning.

Data Analysis

In order to examine whether learner autonomy was promoted in the virtual classroom, the researchers examined the classroom practices reflected in the video recordings of the six participating teachers. The video recordings where the participants were seen to be in action inside their virtual classroom were transcribed for content analysis. Moreover, assigned tasks for asynchronous activities were also documented. There were twelve video recordings, hence twelve sets of transcripts as basis for a thematic analysis. The researchers identified the recurrent practices of teachers that revealed their beliefs in the promotion of learner autonomy, either consciously or unconsciously employing them. Each teacher participant was introduced through a narrative presentation of their academic background, current teaching assignment, beliefs and influences on

teaching and the actual classroom situation during which the observations were conducted. This introduction provided the premise of subsequent discussion of the themes extracted from the teachers' classroom behaviors. The themes mulled over from the classroom observation data were supported with personal pronouncements of the teacher participants during the second phase of data gathering, the semi-structured interviews.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

What follows is a thematic analysis of the behavioral patterns of teachers which contribute (or otherwise) to the promotion of learner autonomy. The discussion was informed by the various concepts in which learner autonomy was posited. Likewise, the researcher also utilized Lau's outline of instructional practices which served as a springboard for the thematic framework. The themes revealed the actualization of learner autonomy, whether LA is promoted or not consciously or unconsciously in an online platform.

The Emerging themes

(1) There is a heightened consciousness among teachers to strengthen interactions in online classes.

Noticeably, the teachers observed in the present study manifested a heightened consciousness to connect with the students in the most possible way/s to break the limitations that virtual classes offer. Obviously, those who were well-equipped with digital skills were able to maximize the various applications that can facilitate interactions like the use of in-call message for brainstorming, review of the previous lessons or graded recitations. Everything that transpired during the online class on Google Meet was recorded so the teacher would have the copy after the Google Meet closes, hence, attendance and dialogue in in-call message were accessed. The use of break-out rooms for group tasks proved to be another commendable feature of the Google Classroom and facilitating these platforms require that the teachers must have the skill to manipulate the application and be able to guide the students. In a study by Hsu (2016), the latter posited that there is a need to equip the EFL teachers in the proper application of technology to enhance and supplement language learning.

In the observations conducted, a number of teachers were observed to have the digital skill to guide the students, while others have the gadget to execute discussion like using tablet with stylus pen in illustrating computations. Jaymark, who is a Mathematics teacher had to use mirroring technique so the students would see him in the normal position on the screen. Despite the limiting factors to accommodate more students to participate, the teachers observed in the study provided space for the students to present their outputs. It can be observed that the teachers constantly call the attention of the students to pay attention. In most cases, they ask the students to read the texts in the slide presentation, simply to hear their voices and check if they were still in the online meeting. Students' queries, requests for clarifications and openness for commentaries were found to be always present in the discourse of the teacher and the students during the online classes. Jaymark, in fact, reminded her students that the recitation must not be dominated by a few.

> "Wala nabangiba? Naka ilang recite naatasi Ezekiel e, gusto ko sana yungiba naman eh, ohh. Meron pa? Eto si Jailyn, Jailyn?" (What about the others? Exekiel has recited several times already. Here Jailyn, go ahead Jailyn)
> (Transcript 9, p.12)

However, despite the teachers' efforts to heighten the students' participation, there is limited interactions from the students. Learner autonomy encourages the student-to- student kind of interaction. Although, it happens during group works, it was not evident during class discussions where the content is expected to be a display of the students' preparedness to participate in the generation of knowledge. Individual tasks were usually assigned in asynchronous classes while group works were facilitated online. In both cases, the promotion of learner autonomy was seen to be possible in virtual classes.

(2) Teachers' inputs were emphasized in online classes; hence, teacher-led ways of teaching were dominant.

It can be observed that almost all of the video recordings of classes were dominated with lectures using PowerPoint Presentations with exchange of interactions when the teacher raised pertinent questions about the topic and in most instances, allowing the students to raise queries or request for clarifications. Assigning of advanced readings or watching informative videos before the discussion particularly from Science and Mathematics teachers can be considered as an all-time good practice that can contribute in the promotion of learner autonomy. It allows the students to share in the generation of knowledge in the classroom, however, if it was not processed or emphasized, evidence of independent learning may not be validated. It is possible that in the course of the discussion, inputs from the advanced readings was tackled, however, because most classes were lecture-type, processing of what was read did not become a priority. Apparently, the online classes observed were meant to provide lectures as inputs of concepts for the learners to absorb and later on apply. This kind of learning still perceives the teacher as the sole purveyor of knowledge in the classroom and misses the opportunity of the students to discover knowledge by themselves. Such scenarios are common to Filipino classes; however, it can still be considered as initial steps to develop independence as the teachers in the observations conducted provided individual and group tasks to process concepts or solve mathematical problems on their own.

Various teacher support strategies were demonstrated in the virtual classes observed. The Science teachers made use of word games to build concepts, Professional Education teachers utilized brainstorming while Math teachers connected previous lesson via explanations. Majority of them unlock unfamiliar and key words to facilitate understanding, some were even more conscious of proper pronunciation of borrowed terms in their discipline. The code switching of medium of instruction from English to Filipino and vice versa was perceived to be an instrumental support of the teachers to simplify and facilitate comprehension among the students they handle in the online classes. Love (2010) acknowledged that part of the teachers' Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) is their ability to teach the discourse specific to a specialization. She espoused the role of language awareness in content literacy as an important skill in teaching.

Moreover, the use of informative videos was commendable to enhance the discussion and experience other platforms of learning. The practice of Gab to present only his target concept in the video was effective because, he was able to emphasize his points by cutting short the video presentation, hence, utilizing the video as merely support to his discussion and not as a substitute for it. The most obvious strategy that the online classroom observation participants utilized to foster student participation were by way of employing group works as their major classroom activity: Claire required her class to present an ideal school applying various philosophies in Education while Gab required individual students to

report scientific papers as per research problem, methodology and results. The learners were, in a way, given the space to take charge of generating ideas and knowledge intended for class consumption. In the same manner, the activity also allowed the students to speak their minds.

On the other hand, majority of online classroom activities were dominated with teachers as the source of information and involvement of the students in decision making was not evident.The teachers utilized the meeting with lecture-type of discussions and with only one and a half hours allotted, inputs were observed to be dominated by the classroom teacher.

(3) The teachers' classroom instructional tasks in online classes can strengthen or weaken the students' involvement in classroom activities.

Independent learning can come in various forms and ways. When the learner has the motivation and willingness to learn, it manifests in her/his classroom participation and the quality of output s/he delivers. We can consider a learner autonomous when s/he sets academic goals to achieve and actively participate in the classroom activities. In other words, the learner has the initiative to take control of her/his own capacity to learn. One of the promising tasks that majority of the teachers assigned their students is the idea of advanced reading prior to the topic discussion. It encourages the students to participate in the generation of knowledge, hence, they were not mere recipients of the teacher's inputs. However, processing of the reading experience of the students seemed to be set aside, and instead, the coverage of topics to be tackled seemed to be a priority of most of the online classes observed.

Meanwhile, the activities of Claire and Gab who required the students to present their ideal school and present scientific papers coupled with insights respectively were praiseworthy and are definitely aligned with the promotion of autonomy in learning. The activities were empowering on the part of the students because they were given the space to apply what they learned from various philosophies on education and showcased their ideal school based on their understanding. It highlighted the capacity of the students to analyze and build their own idea of an ideal school. Meanwhile, the activity of Gab on scientific paper presentation challenged the students to read more on the specific topic of the scientific paper assigned to them individually. The students were obviously guided on how to present their assignments and what the teacher expected them to emphasize and explain. More importantly, the activity also required them to discuss their insights which definitely required them to fully understand the content of their assigned paper. Such activities not only trained the students to enhance their understanding of the concepts they need to discuss, the activities also trained them to be good communicators and develop confidence in presenting their well-studied reports. A positive self-efficacy is viewed to be an important factor for the learners to take charge of their own learning. Like motivation, it can also drive the learners who developed confidence to be responsible of their own studies. The aforementioned assigned activities in the virtual classrooms observed and analyzed were evident of what pedagogic dialogue that Little (1995) espoused. It posits that teachers and students with their various roles to foster independent learning must work collaboratively in order to achieve the pedagogic target of the teacher, hence, the teachers' role plays an important factor in achieving LA.

Implications

Learner autonomy as a students' capacity goal and a curriculum goal at the same time is conceived to be a strong version of learner-

centered teaching (Benson, 2012) hence, the promotion of such should seek to empower learners by enabling them to assume an informed and self-directive role in the pursuance of their learning goals and life in general. In view of this, teachers are encouraged to take a progressive shift in the balance of decision-making from teacher to student within a negotiated curriculum. It could be a matter of further orientation that teachers could start focusing on learners and learning instead of merely teaching a subject. The New Normal brought about by COVID 19 in our time provides an interesting background for examining teaching and learning processes in our classes in the context of Filipino students. During this time when the demand for distance learning is highly relevant that teachers must consider training the learners to develop autonomy in their learning. Pedagogical strategies for learner autonomy must be taken into consideration as an arm to support the demands of the New Normal for independent learners. Thus, emphasis on new ways of teaching to motivate and set new goals for learning among our Filipino students would be most viable. There seems to have the need to revive the learning training, particularly, the promotion of learning strategies which has not yet become a key part of mainstream pedagogical recommendations in our curriculum. Such goals in the classroom also cover the call for reflective learning which proved to have contributed to fostering and promoting autonomy in learning.

Meanwhile, in the plethora of scholastic pronouncements about the gains of reflectivity in teaching, the researcher believes that the present paper was able to contribute to the proliferation of this school of thought in the discipline of teaching. Becoming a reflective teacher, however, rigorous, can take effect if we set the culture from among the pre-service teachers so they can carry it on when they become professional teachers themselves. The interrelatedness of teacher and learner autonomy can be conceived as a boomerang effect in such a way that the more teachers adopt a reflective teaching principle in their beliefs and practices, it becomes easier for him/her to relinquish her/his role as the transmitter of knowledge in the classroom, instead, s/he becomes an agent to deliver transformative knowledge on the other hand. This culture could only take effect if we consider a serious step towards the inclusion of this pedagogy in our teacher education curriculum vis-a-vis the promotion of reflective teaching and learning.

CONCLUSION

Given the vignettes of the seemingly successful and unsuccessful classroom interactions that the researchers witnessed, the tradition of teacher-dominated practices in online classes revealed the Filipino teachers' compliance to the cultural norms of obedience and respect for authority and like many classrooms in the Asian context (Barnard and Li, 2016; Liyanage, 2012) Filipino learners, in return seemed to expect their teachers to be in charge of the classes. Despite the dominant agreement that LA is an inclusive capacity goal for learners across nations, studies have shown that its promotion remains to be context-bound (Paltreyman and Smith, 2003). Similar to the pioneering study of Madrunio *et al.,* (2016) on teacher cognition of LA, the present study conducted among Education teachers in the university, also elicited the certain amount of ambivalence towards the strong articulation of learner autonomy in the classroom.

It would be interesting to examine the correlation of learner autonomy with the learners' proficiency in learning. Although few studies undertook the impact of autonomous learning, a study focusing on autonomous practices and their impact on the students' performance could expand the theory on LA.

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