

How computer technology can promote learner autonomy, IATEFL 2007

Jo Mynard, *Koryo International College, Aichi, Japan*

Mynardjo@hotmail.com

1. Computer applications designed for EFL learners

Benefits: Varied activities and focused activities. Engaging and professional. Authourable ones provide focused practice tailored to students' needs

Drawbacks: Language items in commercial software do not always reflect students' needs or fit in with the goals of the course. Students are not involved in diagnosing or addressing weaknesses. Students often do not pay much attention to feedback. Not learner-centred.

2. Learner autonomy – a definition

"...a capacity - for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts" [Little, 1991:4].

3. Computer as a tutor (Levy, 1997:199)

- The programme should contain a tutorial
- The programme should provide context-sensitive help
- The computer guides the learner
- The programme should be responsive to needs of the learner
- The computer provides appropriate, error-free feedback

"If the computer tutor satisfies such criteria, then it can provide real autonomy learning opportunities for the students...Control is delegated to the computer to manage the learning, and in consequence, students will rely on its judgments"

4. Computer as a tool (Levy, 1997:200)

- The computer's role is neutral
- The computer does not evaluate the student
- The learner has responsibility for managing interaction
- The learner decides how to use the tool
- The learner determines whether the use of the tool is appropriate

5. Mindtools / cognitive tools

Mindtools are "computer applications that have been adapted or developed to facilitate critical thinking and higher-order learning" (Jonassen, Peck and Wilson, 1999:152)

"..cognitive tools go beyond amplification and can help learners reorganize their knowledge in a manner that results in deeper understanding" (Lajoie, 2005:87)

Examples of Mindtools:

- Microsoft packages (Word, Excel, PowerPoint)
- Communication tools: e-mail, chat rooms, online forums, MSN, Blogs

6. Chat rooms as Mindtools - Study in the UAE (Mynard, 2004)

Evidence of Autonomy

- Students required little guidance, took initiative and made decisions
- They collaborated naturally with peers

How computer technology can promote learner autonomy, IATEFL 2007

Jo Mynard, *Koryo International College, Aichi, Japan*

Mynardjo@hotmail.com

- Active participation rate was high
- Students applied a range of strategies
- They made connections and observations
- They transfer learning to/from other contexts

7. Blogs as Mindtools - Research in Japan (ongoing – since 2005)

Evidence of Autonomy

- Students make decisions about content
- Students decide how often/how much to write
- Students personalize language learned in class
- Students write reflections of their learning on their blogs

8. Conclusions

Computers as tutors have a role in promoting learner autonomy if the programs are well designed and have been chosen by students. Teachers can encourage learners to think about the choices they are making and reflect on how the program is beneficial.

Computers as tools (or Mindtools) potentially facilitate learner autonomy more efficiently as students make more of the decisions about how to use the tool. Students still need to be helped to understand how a tool might benefit their overall learning.

Learner training

In order to further promote autonomy using Mindtools, the following could be incorporated:

- Awareness-raising activities - use transcripts / printouts for awareness-raising
- Self-evaluation – encourage students to evaluate how well they did after an activity
- Reflection activities - Learners discuss how they could improve their performance
- Goal setting with follow-up - Learners set goals before the activity and review them later

References

- Jonassen, D.H. (1996). *Computers in the classroom: Mindtools for critical thinking*. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Merrill.
- Jonassen, D., Peck, K. and Wilson, B. (1999). *Learning with technology: A constructivist perspective*. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Lajoie, S.P. (2005). Cognitive tools for the mind: The promises of technology - cognitive amplifiers or bionic prosthetics? In R.J. Sternberg and D.D. Priess (Eds) *Intelligence and Technology: the impact of tools on the nature and development of human abilities*. Mahwah, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Levy, M. (1997). *Computer-Assisted Language Learning Context and Conceptualization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Levy, M. and Stockwell, G. (2006) *CALL Dimensions: Options and Issues in Computer Assisted Language Learning*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum & Associates.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy 1: definition, issues and problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Mynard, J. (2004) Investigating evidence of learner autonomy in a virtual EFL classroom: a grounded theory approach. Conference Proceedings. Research In ELT Conference. King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi Bangkok, Thailand