IMPACTS OF ASSESSMENT ON LEARNER AUTONOMY IN LITERATURE STUDY: A CASE STUDY IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: This study was accomplished in May 2005, five months prior to Vietnamese Government's issue of Resolution 14/2005/NQ-CP in November 2005 to launch a long-term strategy for a "fundamental and comprehensive reform" in Vietnam's tertiary education. This case study aimed to identify the impacts of assessment on learner autonomy (LA) in literature study at Vietnamese high schools. A questionnaire was conducted on 241 third-year English majors at the Faculty of English Linguistics and Literature (EF), the University of Social Sciences and Humanities (USSH), Vietnam National University - Ho Chi Minh City (VNU-HCM). The questionnaire centered on the common practices in the literature teaching and learning, and student assessment at the students' high schools. This paper consists of four main sections: (1) Concept of "learner autonomy", (2) Essentials of LA in literature teaching and learning, (3) Findings, and (4) Implications for LA enhancement

Index terms: impacts, assessment, learner autonomy, literature study, Vietnam

I. INTRODUCTION

Learner autonomy can be considered one of the most influential concepts in the world education history. However, it had been widely recognized until the mid-2000's that the majority of Vietnamese tertiary-level students were not readly for learner autonomy.

This study, completed as part researcher's master's thesis entitled "Fostering Learner Autonomy via Literary Works", was implemented from February to June 2005. In the research context, the researcher was teaching American and British literature to third-year English majors at the EF. It was the researcher's and his colleagues' observation that while studying English literature, many students displayed a low level of autonomy in their study habits, literary interpretation and appreciation, and test-taking performance. Meanwhile, theories of literature teaching and learning highlighted the essential of learner autonomy in the study of this subject.

To identify the students' readiness for learner autonomy, a survey was accordingly conducted to learn about the common practices in Vietnamese literature teaching and learning at high schools. Data was collected from 241 students through a questionnaire.

Findings showed that the students' low level of autonomy was mainly resulted from their experience in the traditional content-based assessment during their secondary education, which had shaped their performance in literature learning.

II. CONCEPT OF "LEARNER AUTONOMY"

Holec (1981) described LA as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning" and this "grows out of the individual learner's acceptance of responsibility for his or her own learning." The term has also come to be used in at least five ways (Benson & Voller, 1997: p. 2; cited in Dimitrios, T.):

1) *for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;*
2) *for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;*
3) *for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;*
4) *for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;*
5) *for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.*

Omaggio (1978) lists seven key attributes of autonomous learners as follows (cited in Wenden, 1998, p. 41-42):

1) *Autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;*
2) *take an active approach to the learning task at hand;*
3) *are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;*
4) *are good guessers;*
5) *attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;*
6) *develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and*
7) *have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.*

The following quote presents a similar view of the qualities of autonomous learners:

> *To all intents and purposes, the autonomous learner takes a (pro-) active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1975; cited in Dimitrios).*

This places emphasis on learners' activeness and independence in learning, which is reinforced by Wang and Peverley (1986), who stated that autonomous learners are cognitively and affectively involved in the learning process.

III. ESSENTIALS OF LA IN LITERATURE TEACHING AND LEARNING

The objective of this section is to determine the essentials of LA in literature teaching and learning by discussing aspects of literature teaching and learning, principles of literature teaching and learning, and principles of student assessment in literature teaching.

Aspects of literature teaching and learning

Following are the key aspects of literature teaching and learning synthesized by Doan (1999):

- Two goals of literature teaching and learning: for better understanding and more enjoyment
- Two factors characterizing a literary work: a work of language and a work of art
- Two domains of literature analysis and appreciation: intellectual involvement and emotional involvement

The aspects above address the requirements for literature study. Since a literary work is both a work of language and a work of art, literature study is demanding on the part of the learner: a work of language requires the learner's intellectual involvement, and a work of art requires the learner's emotional involvement.

Principles of literature teaching and learning

Literature teaching and learning should[1]:

1) *encourage active engagement and participation by students;*
2) *encourage the development of critical thinking and analysis in students;*
3) *encourage students to develop and explore their own ideas, and exchange different viewpoints and perspectives;*
4) *encourage students to read widely for enrichment and enjoyment; and*
5) *focus on the study of literary concepts, and enable students to understand, analyse, and apply these concepts.*

In literature teaching, the teacher needs to create an environment that encourages his/her students' independent thinking, which serves as the precursor to their self-reliance. Literature study requires students' active involvement and cooperation in constructing meaning and knowledge.

Principles of student assessment in literature teaching

Regarding student assessment in literature teaching, testing modes and tasks should be based on the following objectives[2], which highlight that students are expected to be able to:

1) *make an informed personal and critical response to texts and account for their responses;*
2) *demonstrate an understanding of how the literary context of a text informs their understanding;*
3) *critically analyse and evaluate ways in which writers' choices of form, structure and language shape meaning; and*
4) *clearly communicate the knowledge, understanding and insights appropriate to literary study.*

Wenden (1991) concluded that successful learners have learnt how to learn. They have been equipped with (1) learning strategies, (2) the knowledge about learning, and (3) attitudes that enable them to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately and independently of a teacher. Thus, developing learner autonomy is indubitably necessary for learners' life-long study and for their retention of knowledge.

In literature study, students are required to be cognitively and affectively engaged in constructing the meaning of literature works (Wang & Peverley, 1986). They are also required to be able to express their own perspectives on literary interpretation and appreciation.

Therefore, LA is integral to the process of literature teaching and learning, both in classroom activities and in test-taking performance. However, when asked about the constant problem facing their teaching of English literature courses at the EF, all of the researcher's colleagues answered that it was their students' display of a low level of LA in their study habits, literary interpretation and appreciation, and test-taking performance. The students' observable behaviours include:

- *their failure to handle a literary work actively and independently,*
- *their heavy reliance on the teacher's interpretation and appreciation of literary works,*
- *their reluctant to give responses or reflections to issues raised in literature classes, and*
- *their failure to establish their own view angles on literary test questions.*

IV. FINDINGS

The survey, conducted during March to May 2005, aimed to identify the students' readiness for learner autonomy at tertiary level by tracing their literature study experience at their high schools. The selected sample population comprised 241 third-year English majors at the EF, who were from different regions in Vietnam. The majority of them were aged 21 and some 22 and only 18% of them were male. In 2005, these students were in their third-year at university, so their responses reflected the typical teaching and learning of literature at Vietnamese high schools during 1999 and 2002.

The questionnaire consists of four questions, falling into two categories: teaching and learning, and student assessment. This was purposefully designed to investigate the influence of how they had been

[1] www.moe.gov.sg/education/.../literature-in-english-pre-university.pdf

[2] [2] www.moe.gov.sg/education/.../literature-in-english-pre-university.pdf

assessed on how they had learnt during their secondary education.

As shown in the Table 1, the first two questions are related to the domain of literature teaching and learning. The objectives of these questions are to identify the typical interaction mode between the teacher and the students during a literature class, and the focus of teaching contents. The last two questions refer to student assessment domain, aiming to recognize the students' habitual test preparation activities, and their habitual test-taking performance.

Table 2 shows how the students' responses were measured by Likert-scale, with 4 options scored from 1 to 4 (1 for the most negative option and 4 for the most positive). The scoring criterion here was based on the condition/activity that fosters LA, and the scale was determined by the frequency of each condition/activity. Accordingly, options (1.1), (2.1), (3.1), and (4.1) are unfavourable to developing learner autonomy. Therefore, the scoring scale for these was from 1 to 4, corresponding to the range from "always" to "never". On the contrary, choices (1.2), (2.2), (3.2), and (4.2) are favourable to enhancing learner autonomy and the scoring for them was opposite to the other category. Following are the statistics of the students' responses to each question.

Table 1: Survey questions

No.	Domains	Objectives of questions	Questions	Options
1	Teaching and learning	To identify the typical interaction mode between the teacher and the students during a literature class.	(1) How do you describe the interaction between the teacher and the students in your literature classes at high schools?	(1.1) The teacher delivered lectures and dictated his/her instructions to the class.
2				(1.2) The teacher and the students discussed the meaning of the literary work.
3		To identify the focus of teaching contents.	(2) What was the focus of the literature classes at your high school?	(2.1) Only the meaning of the literary text
4				(2.2) Critical thinking skills to analyze and appreciate literary works
5	Student assessment	To identify the students' habitual test preparation activities.	(3) What kind of preparation did you use to take for tests in literature at high school?	(3.1) Learning by heart the teacher's instruction taken in your notebooks during the class sessions.
6				(3.2) Exploring the text by yourself for your own findings.
7		To identify the students' habitual test-taking performance.	(4) What was your habitual performance while writing a literary analytical essay during a test?"	(4.1) Writing down only what you had learnt by heart.
8				(4.2) Taking your stand and defend it.

Table 2: Question categories and scoring

Options	Impact on learner autonomy	Scoring			
		Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never
(1.1), (2.1), (3.1), (4.1)	Unfavorable	1	2	3	4
(1.2), (2.2), (3.2), (4.2)	Favorable	4	3	2	1

Teacher-student interaction

The data in Table 3 demonstrates the typical teacher-student interaction in a literature class session at the students' high schools:

Table 3: teacher-student interaction

Questions	Number of responses/Percentage				Total scores	Central tendency
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never		
1.1	82	124	30	5	440	1.8
	34%	52%	12%	2%		
1.2	15	57	134	35	534	2.2
	6%	24%	56%	14%		
AVERAGE SCORE						2

In response to option (1.1), 34 % of the students confirmed that their teachers "always" delivered lectures and dictated their instructions to the class, and 52 % of them responded that their teachers "usually" did the same. As for option (1.2), a low percentage of 6% of the students answered that their teachers "always" had discussions with their students about the meaning of the literary work, and 24% of them responded that their teacher "usually" did so. This results in the average score of 2 for the central tendency.

The frequent application of the teacher-centered approach reveals that literature teaching and learning at Vietnamese high schools then was not effective in fostering learner autonomy. In this teaching and learning mode, knowledge flows from the teacher to the students. Such an education environment deprives the students of opportunities to express their reflection and feedback, and to develop their autonomy.

Focus of contents of teaching and learning

The focus of teaching and learning contents was stated in Table 4, in which 44% of the students disclosed that the consistent focus of the literature class sessions was on the meaning of the literary texts only, and 40% of them confirmed that their teacher "usually" focused on the same teaching contents.

The statistics of choice (2.2) shows that only

3% of the students recognized that their literature teachers "always" focused on equipping their students with critical thinking skills to analyze and appreciate literary works. It was notable that 102 (42%) out of 241 students stated that their teachers "never" focused on providing their students with relevant thinking skills to be able to handle literary texts independently. It is explainable that the central tendency for these responses is only 1.7.

It can be inferred from the statistics of responses to questions 2 that the typical literature teaching and learning at Vietnamese high schools during the period mentioned was heavily content-based, offering students few opportunities to develop their independent thinking.

Table 4: Focus of teaching and learning contents

Questions	Number of responses/Percentage				Total scores	Central tendency
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never		
2.1	107	98	26	10	421	1.7
	44%	40%	11%	4.10%		
2.2	8	21	110	102	417	1.7
	3%	9%	46%	42%		
AVERAGE SC0RE						1.7

Students' habitual test preparation activities

In their preparation for literary tests, 72 (30%) students confessed that they "always" learnt by heart their teachers' instructions taken in your notebooks during class sessions. Another significant number of 87 students (36%) responded that they "usually" did the same before a test in literature. The number of those who "never" prepared for literary test this way was only 29 (12%). The statistical figures in Table 5 discloses the fact that the majority of the students had studied to the test as a result of the traditional content-based student assessment in the teaching and learning of this subject in Vietnam's secondary education in the early 2000s.

Table 5: Students' habitual test preparation activities

Questions	Number of responses/Percentage				Total scores	Central tendency
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never		
3.1	72	87	53	29	521	2.1
	30%	36%	22%	12%		
3.2	45	114	54	28	547	2.2
	19%	47%	22%	12%		
AVERAGE SCORE						**2.15**

Students' habitual test-taking performance

As demonstrated in Table 6, 20% of those questioned answered that during literary tests, they "always" wrote down what they had learnt by heart which included their teachers' explanation and sample literary interpretation in some books. Slightly below 40% of the samples "usually" did that during a

literary test. Nearly 26% of them "sometimes" did the same.

Table 6: Students' habitual test-taking performance

Questions	Number of responses/Percentage				Total scores	Central tendency
	Always	Usually	Sometimes	Never		
4.1	50 20.70%	96 39.80%	62 25.70%	33 13.70%	560	2.3
4.2	5 2.10%	54 22.40%	117 48.50%	65 27%	481	2
AVERAGE SCORE						2.15

The number of those who "never" took their stand and defend it while writing a literary analytical essay was 65 out of 241, which was 27%. Those answering that they "sometimes" presented their own ideas in their essays account for 48.5%.

Very few students are "courageous" enough to express only their own view towards the issue raised in the test: only 5 out of 241 survey participants answered that they "always" did so at high schools. Talking to those five students, the researcher realized that all of these five students were students of gifted classes specializing in literature at their high schools. That is, their performance is not typical of high school students' performance.

Several interviews were also conducted to clarify the students' answers to the questionnaire. Many students confessed it was "safe" to learn by heart their teachers' sample interpretation of literary texts, and that they were not courageous enough to write down only their own perspectives during a test. They expressed their fear that if their reasoning presented in their test papers did not correspond to their teachers', they might run a risk of getting a low or even a failing mark.

The students' responses to questions (4.1) and (4.2) reflect the traditional focus on rote learning in the research context, where students had little opportunities to enhance their critical thinking.

Central tendency

Table 7 provides a synthesis of the students' responses to the four questions, with the average score of 2 for the central tendency.

Table 7: Central tendency of literature teaching and learning at high school

Questions	Aspects of literature teaching and learning	Central tendency
1	Teacher–student interaction	2
2	Focus of teaching and learning content	1.7
3	Students' habitual test preparation activities	2.15
4	Students' habitual test-taking performance	2.15
		2

As discussed earlier, one of the key functions of literature teaching and learning is to foster student critical thinking, beginning with developing their autonomy in their study. That is, the average score here should have been higher.

V. IMPLICATIONS FOR LA ENHANCEMENT IN LITERATURE STUDY

The data, centered on the common practices in literature teaching and learning at high schools, was collected from third-year students, who had graduated from high school three years earlier. This gives rise to the reliability of their responses since during the time the survey was conducted, these students were free from possible constraints that might prevent them from speaking their minds.

In order to get admission into the EF, the students involved in the survey had had to be successful in a highly competitive university entrance exam, comprising of three tests: (1) mathematics, (2) English language, and (3) Vietnamese literature. This means these students were considered good at literature subject, based on the assessment criteria during that period. In spite of this, they displayed a low level of learner autonomy in their performance while studying American and British literature at the EF. This provides inputs for the inference of the level of learner autonomy shown by those recognized as weak at the subject of literature, compared to those in this survey.

The ways students are assessed can actually shape the way they learn (Brown, 2004). Accordingly, the traditional student assessment at secondary level in Vietnam during that period needed changing. First of all, the term "education quality" should be reconceptualized, focusing on "how to see" and "how to be" rather than "what to see". This would lead to an adjustment of student assessment, which in turn would contribute to enhancing learner autonomy. In addition to the reform in student assessment, teaching and learning activities should be conducive to fostering learner autonomy. To make this possible, Bloom's Taxonomy should be employed in instructional planning and implementation, and assessment task design to help students gradually improve their critical thinking skills.

CONCLUSION

The study findings show that the ways the students were assessed determined the way they learnt literature. At their high schools, the focus on student assessment of this subject was heavily on their rote learning, resulting in their lack of self-reliance displayed in their learning activities and test-taking performance. This partly reflects the reality of Vietnam's traditional teaching and learning of this subject at secondary level in the early 2000s, before the implementation of the "fundamental and

comprehensive reform" in education. Despite the small sample population of 241, the survey respondents were from different regions in Vietnam, which is significant to the generalization of the issue under study. The findings here were discussed from the researcher's view as an instructor of American and British literature at the tertiary level in Vietnam, which may inspire further discussion from different perspectives.

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