Stimulating learner autonomy in English language education : a curriculum innovation study in a Vietnamese context

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CHAPTER 5

THE INTENDED CURRICULUM

In chapters 3 and 4, I investigated the teaching methods and the parameters of a curriculum aiming at stimulating learner autonomy and communicative competence. The investigation revealed that the task-based language learning probably fits that aim the best. To achieve the aim, a curriculum should be constructed around tasks. The tasks must create the opportunities for students to make *choices* and create interaction in the target language when they work on the tasks. *Choice* is manifested by the students' decisions on the task features (e.g., themes, outcomes and the overall plan of doing the task) and decisions on learner development (e.g., social, affective, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies). With choice as a parameter, the tasks designed aim to (1) create opportunities for students to choose the theme, (2) to negotiate the outcomes of the tasks, and (3) to make an overall plan of doing the tasks by experimenting with social, affective, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. According to the Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983), *interaction* in the target language is hypothesized to generate the negotiations of meanings which facilitate the acquisition of the language. In this chapter, I will first elaborate *choice* and *interaction* as the two key design parameters of the intended curriculum. I will then describe how these parameters were operationalized when I designed that curriculum.

1. THE TWO KEY DESIGN PARAMETERS

1.1 Choices

"It is a truism that learning has to be done by the learner. This means that teaching cannot cause or force learning; at best it can encourage and guide learning. The impetus for learning must come from the learner, who must *want* to learn, either because of a natural human propensity to do so, or because of an interest in the material" (van Lier, 1996: 12).

It should be recalled that the central claim of the researchers (e.g., Swain & Lapkin, 1998; Littlewood, 1992) from the socio-cultural approach to task-based language learning (TBLL) was that learners construct the activity they engage in according to their socio-historical background. To promote learners' personal involvement and active participation, the curriculum should be built around the tasks which are relevant to the learners' interests. Learners' interests are best promoted by learner choice (Lee, 1998; Cotterall, 2000). Making choices would result in a higher level of intrinsic motivation because then learners can experience ownership of their learning. Choice would also stimulate the development of self-regulation because learners have opportunities to take control of their learning (via their planning, monitoring and self-evaluating their learning). When learners take over the control of their learning, their attitudes to autonomous learning would be enhanced. In other words,

choices might enhance learner autonomy. It is assumed that autonomous learners make better language learners (Little, 2000a). For this reason, I make *choice* one of the key parameters for a curriculum stimulating learner autonomy and communicative competence. Choices are manifested by the students' decisions on the task features and learning strategies operationalized in the intended curriculum (i.e., choices of learning content and learning strategies). In the following section, I will elaborate *choice of learning content* and *choice of learning strategies*, beginning with the manifestations and the benefits of making these choices.

1.1.1 Choice of learning content

Research findings (Foster & Skehan, 1996; 1999 and Skehan & Foster, 1997; 2001) indicated that task features such as *topics, negotiated outcomes* and *overall planning* contribute to a balanced development of the outcome of language learning: Fluency, complexity and accuracy. To arrive at this learning outcome, learners go through the process of *selecting the content to learn, performing authentic communications when planning the task,* and *setting the learning goals via negotiating the task outcomes.* This process of learning manifests the means needed to stimulate the development of learner autonomy and communicative competence. Drawing on these research findings, tasks in language curricula aiming at stimulating learner autonomy and communicative competence should provide learners with the choice of learning content.

Choice of learning content allows learners to select the materials (used as subtasks) to complete the tasks (i.e., the main tasks). This choice generates opportunities for them to expose to the language input and to the way of doing the similar tasks (e.g., reading the student guide of a certain university to learn the way to complete the task of writing a student guide) so that it will help them to complete the main task. The provision of opportunities for learners to select the learning content embodied in selecting the topic and the outcome of the task performance relevant to their interests will enhance their *motivation* to learn.

1.1.2 Choice of learning strategies

Regarding *learning strategies,* the curriculum attempts to create opportunities for learners to experiment with affective, social, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies. This is to say choice of learning strategies is manifested by the learners' selection of cognitive, meta-cognitive, social and affective strategies to use when they work on the tasks. Experimenting with these types of strategies, students will learn which ones will work best for their learning.

Learners may use meta-cognitive strategies in self-managing their learning. They are manifested in learners' *planning for their learning, monitoring the learning task* and *evaluating how well one has learned.* They aim at strengthening learners' *thinking about their learning process.*

Social and affective strategies include the manners in which learners interact with others and control themselves to enhance their learning. Social strategies are

aimed at strengthening the cooperation among learners. They are manifested how the learners ask questions for clarifications and corrections and how they cooperate with their peers and the target language users. Affective strategies help learners to enhance self-confidence and motivation by lowering one's anxiety.

Cognitive approaches to language acquisition assume a key role of *attention* (Tomlin & Villa, 1994) in second language acquisition. Reflection strengthens the learners' attention. The curriculum should provide students with stimuli and opportunities *to reflect on* the strategies they tried out. Then they may learn from their successes and failures in their attempts to use the language to learn it.

Providing students with the opportunities to experiment with these learning strategies (i.e., learner development) is aimed at observing the production of behavioral and psychological changes in order to enable students to take great control over their learning. Grounded in the traditions of self-directed language learning (SDLL) and learner strategies in language learning (LSLL), learner autonomy aims at stimulating learner autonomy and communicative competence respectively. Section 2.2.3 in chapter 4 of this book reviewed the various approaches to learner development. To achieve the aim of developing learner autonomy and communicative competence, learner development should be promoted in the light of the *integrated* and *self-directed approaches*. The integrated approach treats learner development as a by-product of language learning. The self-directed approaches encourage learners to train themselves through reflecting on self-directed learning activities. These two approaches create opportunities for students to interact in the target language and may enhance the learners' interaction in the target language while they may also help them to learn and think about their learning.

Choice of learning strategies may enhance the students' self-regulation. Students may plan their learning in the way they think fits their learning needs and their objectives the best. Based on what they have planned, students will have opportunities to acquire the skills of monitoring and evaluating the plan they choose. As a result, they train their self-regulation. The more self-regulated they become, the more confidently and independently they are able to solve learning problems and do learning tasks.

Choice as a key design parameter was elaborated in the previous section. Choice of learning content will enhance the learner's motivation to learn. Choice of learning strategies will enhance the learner's self-regulation, which stimulates learners to take control over their learning. In other words, choice will stimulate learner autonomy. The more autonomous, the better the language learners are. Therefore, stimulating learner autonomy is also aimed at enhancing communicative competence. As indicated by the research finding in the field of second language acquisition (e.g., Long, 1983), the curriculum should create the opportunities for learners to use the target language because interactions in the target language will create opportunities for them to negotiate the meanings. These negotiations will help learners to acquire the language. In other words, interactions in the target language stimulate the development of communicative competence. Interacting with the teacher or peers about learning problems that a learner faces and seeks assistance for (i.e., scaffolding), will help the learners to learn to solve their problems. The experiences of solving problems first with or later without scaffolding will help the learner develop their level of

independent problem solving. In this way, interactions stimulate learner autonomy. The following sections will discuss *interaction* as the other parameter of the curriculum stimulating communicative competence and learner autonomy.

1.2 Interaction

The aim of creating interaction in the target language is to stimulate learners' communicative competence and learner autonomy.

The Interaction Hypothesis (Long, 1983) proposes that the tasks which generate *negotiations of meaning* (e.g., requesting clarifications, comprehension checks, confirmation checks, recasts) would help learners acquire the second language. Modifications in *interaction* lead to comprehensible input (e.g., through decomposing or segmenting input) and facilitate language acquisition. Through interactions in the target language, learners' communicative competence is developed. Adding to the role of interaction in language learning, Rijlaarsdam (2002) proposed that interactions function as a means and as a target of language education. As *a means*, the target language should be the main medium of communication. Interactions in the target language will create opportunities for students to experiment with the language and learn what works and what does not work for them in terms of communicative effectiveness. Through their successes and failures in using the target language, learners will acquire the target language. As a *target*, learning and teaching a foreign language means learning and teaching communication. Therefore, the aim of learning and teaching the target language is achieved when learners learn how to interact with one another in the target language.

Vygotsky (1978) elaborated the function of *interactions* by his *zone of proximal development* (ZPD) theory. He assumed that, at a given point of time, there are things in the so-called area of self-regulated action where learners can do them confidently on their own. Beyond this area of self-regulated action, there is a range of knowledge and skills that learners only can access with someone's assistance. For learners to develop their learning by *developing their level of independent problem solving,* an effective language curriculum should create interaction via tutorials, pair work and group work to offer learners the scaffolding they need. This scaffold will enable learners to *reach* as far as they can into their *zone of proximal development.* In other words, these interactions would develop the learners' ability to be independent of the teacher in learning. Sharing Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD theory, Little (2000a) supported the promotion of *interactions* in a language curriculum. In group-work, learner autonomy is a matter of developing and exercising capacity for independent learning behavior in *interactions* with other learners.

Language education is enhanced by engagement, intrinsic motivation and self-determination, which are promoted by interactions (Clark, 1987). Drawing on Clark's (1987) argument, a language curriculum should create opportunities for interactions between student(s)-students and teacher-student(s). From these interactions, students' intrinsic motivation and self-determination develop. In section 2.2.2, chapter 4 of this book, I proposed a working definition of tasks. I define a task as

> an activity that creates opportunities for learners (motivates learners) to use the target
> language authentically (e.g., negotiating the meaning, exchanging information on plan-

ning work, problem solving, evaluating language input and the effects of their perform-
ance) to execute real-life work (for oneself or for the other).

From this working definition, I assume that the use of the target language assists the
learners to activate and construct the knowledge of the language (e.g., pragmalin-
guistic, textual, socio-cultural, and linguistic) and of other fields (e.g., education,
environment ...). A language task should generate an environment for learners to
use the language authentically (e.g., interacting with peers when working together to
complete the task, to self-evaluate their task execution and to reflect on their lan-
guage learning).

To conclude, the curriculum bound by *choice* and *interaction* is aimed at stimulating
the enhancement of students' autonomy and communicative competence. In section
1 of this chapter, *choice* and *interaction* as the two key design parameters of focus in
a curriculum focusing on stimulating learner autonomy and communicative compe-
tence were elaborated. In section 2, I will describe how these two parameters were
operationalized in developing the intended curriculum.

2.   THE INTENDED CURRICULUM

2.1 Aims

The primary aim of the intended curriculum is to create opportunities for learners *to*
enhance their *learner autonomy* and *communicative competence*. To corroborate
these two variables, I designed the tasks consisting of activities for learners to use
the target language to acquire it. The tasks also provide learners with opportunities
to choose and experiment with the type of learning strategies (i.e., learner develop-
ment) they think fit their learning styles the best.

2.2 Constructing the intended curriculum

2.2.1   Tasks

The construction of the intended curriculum was the design of tasks. The design of
tasks included the design of the *main tasks, sub-tasks* and *learning activities.*

Main tasks. In chapters 3 and 4 of this book, I argued that Willis' (1996) *creative
task* is the type of task which seems to create more *interactions* between the learners
and teacher-learners while learners work on the tasks than other types of tasks.
Willis' (ibid.) creative work also generates room for personal involvement by pro-
viding more *choices* for learners to make while they perform these tasks than other
types of task. The manifestation of creative work is *project work.* As a result, project
work takes the role of the main tasks within the intended curriculum.

In the intended curriculum, for each unit, the main tasks are "open" tasks. In
these open tasks, no "predetermined solutions" to the completion of the tasks are
offered: Students may choose the topic to focus on, and may choose the learning
strategies to complete the task. These "open" tasks also create opportunities for stu-

dents to negotiate with their group members and the teacher on the outcomes of the tasks they set themselves.

Unit projects *A Guide to First-Year Students of English in Can Tho University* (Unit 1), *A Travel Brochure* (Unit 2), *A Profile on Critical Issues of Your Community* (Unit 3), *A Journal on "Housing and the Family"* (Unit 4), and *A Vietnamese Traditional or Foreign Recipe* (Unit 5) were developed as the main task in the intended curriculum. These projects were based on themes indicated to be most relevant to the students' interest and life experience: School Life, Nature, The Community, Housing and the Family, and Food respectively.

Sub-tasks. To support students to complete the main task, a series of sub-tasks were designed to guide the students when choosing between the alternative sub-tasks or different ways of doing the same task. As the course moves on, more global tasks have been developed (e.g., with less support in terms of materials used as sub-tasks recommended) so that students can gradually learn to become independent of the teacher.

Learning activities. Learning activities in all units are conducted in pair and group work most of the time. These activities included students' choice of the content of focus and of the strategies to complete the tasks. In pairs and in groups, students are provided with an environment to use the target language authentically. Doing the task includes planning, executing, and evaluating the task performance.

Planning is manifested by students' decisions on the content to focus on in the main task and the way to complete this task. For example in unit 1, the main task requires the students to complete "a student guide" to students at CTU. In a group, students may plan which contents (e.g., academics, entertainment, accommodation, …) will be included in their student guide and they may plan how they are going to complete their student guide (e.g., reading the websites, interviewing senior students for information about the university, …).

Executing refers to doing the sub-tasks such as reading a paper or listening to a piece of news or watching a topical television program, which leads to insights into completing the main task.

Upon doing a sub-task or completing the main task, students will have the opportunity to reflect on the contribution of doing that sub-task to the completion of the main task (e.g., how the reading of a student guide of a certain university helped students to complete the student guide of their own university). Reflection also includes the students' self-evaluating whether they are satisfied with the results of their task execution. If they are dissatisfied with them, they would think of possible measures to improve their performance for the next task execution. In addition to the design of the main tasks and sub-tasks, activities for reflection on action and reflection in action were developed at the end of the completion of each main task. For example, in unit 2, after students watch the video about New York City, they got involved in reflecting on the organization, content and English language used in this video, so that they could use these insights in completing their main task "designing the travel brochure". At the end of the unit, students will self-evaluate their work on the travel brochure and their language learning via their completion of the travel

brochure. These reflection activities are aimed at helping students develop strategic competence, the core quality of learner autonomy and communicative competence.

2.2.2 Two design parameters

The construction of the intended curriculum took into consideration the two parameters: *Choice* and *interactions in the target language.*

Choice. For each project, students might choose *what* to focus on in the task (i.e., the content to focus on, the outcome of their task execution) and *how* to do the task (i.e., making the overall plan of doing the task and using strategies to complete the task). The last section of each unit aims to strengthen the reflection activities by retrospective self-report or checklists about the choices the students made. This may help students to increase their awareness of their learning process and learning strategies which lead to the development of self-regulation and intrinsic motivation towards success in learning the target language. When students reflect on the plan and the choices they made, they are more likely to engage in new choice-making processes, in planning how to proceed with a learning task, monitoring their own performance on a concurrent basis, finding solutions to problems encountered, and evaluating their performance upon task completion. To Chamot (1999), students will become motivated, confident and independent learners as they begin to understand the relationship between their use of strategies and their success in learning.

Interactions in the target language. To encourage authentic interactions in the target language, students will work in self-selected groups, using the target language to discuss and decide on what content they will focus and on how they want to complete the task. These authentic interactions might also occur when learners reflect on materials (i.e., evaluating input) they have used as the sub-task to complete the main task.

2.3 Learning units

I designed five units in the intended curriculum, drawing on the two design parameters. The following sections will describe each unit, starting with what task (i.e., unit project) is, which choices are included and how genuine interactions in the target language are stimulated.

Unit 1: School Life. At the end of this unit, students will be able to complete and orally present a written project "A guide to first-year students of English at CTU University". To complete the main task "the student guide", students may choose to read authentic materials (i.e., the websites of the university and the student guides to foreign students in the Netherlands and in the US) and to listen to a cassette-tape as a student-guide to university students. Providing students with the choice of what to read, we aim at exposing them to the authentic language use so that students might learn the *content* and *organisation* of a student guide, which would help them to complete their own student guide. In a group, they will discuss how to complete

their student guide and how to present it most effectively. In addition, when completing the unit project, students might also make the choice of how much support they expect from the teacher. Working in a group of three or four students to complete the student guide, the unit creates the opportunities for students to participate in genuine conversations and discussions: interviewing guest speakers about living and studying at CTU and using the target language with their peers in doing the task and reflecting on and evaluating their task execution and language learning.

Unit 2: Nature. At the end of Unit 2, students will be able to complete and orally present a mainstream travel brochure about their province in an in-class travel tour fair. To assist the students to complete the travel brochure, students might choose to read travel books or brochures such as *Vietnam: My Homeland, Amsterdam: A Travel Guide, Brussels: A Travel Book, Boston: A Travel Book* and *Sydney: A Travel Tour Guide.* After reading the source, they might choose to write about what they found interesting or good (e.g., its information, organisation, illustrations and presentation) so that they can envisage what a good travel brochure looks like. In addition to choose the source to read (i.e., a sub-task), the design of this unit considered creating the opportunity to interact authentically with their classmates and informants (e.g., sharing with their friends their ideas about the resources they choose to read, negotiating with their group-mates about the working plan, the plan of the travel brochure, communicating with the informants to get information about the province). Students' choices of learning content and learning strategies are strengthened by their reflecting on and self-evaluating the content and the methodology they have chosen, which will help them to do the future projects better.

Unit 3: Housing and the Family. At the end of this unit, students will be able to complete and orally present *a group's profile on housing and family life in a Vietnamese context.* In this unit, students are encouraged to look for articles or resources about the topic "housing and the family" to use as sub-tasks to serve the completion of the project work. Otherwise, the unit offered students some articles (e.g., *The role of women in family life and society: Past and Present, The responsibility of husband and wife, I want a wife*) for them to choose to read. With the articles and the topic to focus on, in a group, students might decide on the content, the organization and the presentation of the profile. Working in student groups aims at authentic communication in the target language. Interaction in the target language includes their negotiating with their group members about the profile of the group but also the content presented in the profile.

Unit 4: The Community. At the end of unit 4, students will complete and make an oral presentation on a journal with the theme "Critical issues in your community" after having selected the topics and having edited the papers written by peer students. At the same time, students will be able to work as contributors to their peers' journal on a theme chosen by their peers. In this unit, as the editors of a journal, students might choose the topic for their group's journal relating to "critical issues in your community", and have decision-making responsibilities for the quality of pa-

pers contributed and how to run the journal. As the contributors to a journal, students might choose to use whatever references they think could help them to finish the article to contribute to their peers' journal. Authentic interactions are stimulated when students working in a group decide on the theme of their journal, the criteria for the quality of the papers.

Unit 5: Foods. In an in-class food court, at the end of the unit, students will complete and orally present a traditional Vietnamese or a foreign recipe. Each group might choose to cook a Vietnamese dish and complete the recipe for that dish. In a group, students will discuss their choice of food and the preparation of the dish. Upon finishing this last unit in the intended curriculum, students will be able to take greater control of their own learning process by managing time, by supervising their learning activities and resources, and by self-assessing strategies the students have employed. These activities will stimulate the development of their learner autonomy and communicative competence.

3.   VALIDATING THE INTENDED CURRICULUM

A pilot version was presented to two language educators and a methodologist from the Graduate School of Teaching and Learning, University of Amsterdam, the Netherlands and to three language educators, one methodologist, and one language educator as an administrator from the Department of English, School of Education, Can Tho University. Following is the feedback and ideas from these reviewers.

3.1   Strengths

Provision of choice and interaction. Almost all external readers approved that the design of tasks within the curriculum match the aim of stimulating learner autonomy and communicative competence. The following are the perceptions of the external readers on the provision of choices and interactions provided in the intended curriculum. In terms of *choice,* the so-called "open" tasks in the intended curriculum will create opportunities for students to make the choice of the topics (e.g., learning content), the outcome of their task performance to focus on and the strategies to use to complete the task. In terms of *interaction*, learning activities included in each task will encourage students to use the target language authentically when planning on what aspect of the task theme they want to focus and on how they want to complete the task. Target language use will also be encouraged while students execute the task, evaluate their task execution, and discuss their experiences in language learning.

The gradually increasing level of autonomy. All external readers agreed that the level of autonomy increased in each unit.

Predicted contribution. More than half of the Vietnamese external readers perceived that it was an interesting curriculum because it brought different ideas into teaching English in a Vietnamese context. These teachers predicted that with a new way of

learning English, the quality of foreign language education in this Vietnamese context would be enhanced.

3.2 Questions

Learner autonomy in a Vietnamese context. One teacher educator raised the question if developing learner autonomy is feasible in the Vietnamese context. When talking about learner autonomy, people tend to think about it as a Western-biased concept. Empirical findings from the research on learner autonomy (see section 1.2, chapter 3 of this thesis) conducted in Asian contexts showed that it is not the case that Asian learners are not autonomous, but that the educational systems in these Asian contexts do not create learning environments for students to be autonomous. Human beings are biologically endowed with genetic qualities but influenced by the social setting where they live. Just imagine that a child from an Asian country was brought up in a Western society, who would guarantee that he would not be learning autonomously because he is Asian? This is to say learner autonomy could be developed in a Vietnamese educational context and even more so in any Asian one.

Explicit instruction on learning strategies. One question concerning learning strategies was raised. One teacher stipulated that it was necessary to include explicit instruction of learning strategies. The researcher rejected this advice. The aims of the intended curriculum is to create opportunities for students to experiment with learning strategies, so it is a good idea to help students to try different learning strategies in order to discover what kind of learners they are and what kind of strategies fit them best. Therefore, there would be no explicit instruction on learning strategies in the intended curriculum.

Explicit instruction on pronunciation and grammar. Two teachers assumed that pronunciation and grammar should take considerable roles in a foreign language education curriculum in Vietnam. To these teachers, it seemed that explicit instruction of pronunciation and of grammar was not taken into consideration. The research explained that in the intended curriculum pronunciation and grammar were included as self-study activities. When students conduct their interaction in the target language, they will discover what areas of grammar and of pronunciation they need for authentic expressions in the target language. They are encouraged to look up the pronunciation of the words in dictionaries and to check for correct grammatical usage in grammar books. For these reasons, the intended curriculum did not include explicit instruction on pronunciation and grammar. However, it is a good idea to offer the students a list of references on pronunciation and grammar textbooks so that they may use these resources.

Pre-, while-, and post-activities for reading and listening tasks as sub-tasks. A methodology teacher raised a question of designing pre-, while-, and post- activities (e.g., the manifestations of the PPP paradigm) for sub-tasks in units 1, 2 and 3 in the intended curriculum module. The philosophy underlying the development of the intended curriculum is that students use the target language to acquire it, so there would be no need to design the pre-, while- and post- activities for reading or listen-

ing tasks which are used as sub-tasks to serve the means to completion of the project work. However, it is a good idea to design the questions that help the students to raise their awareness of the *content, organization* or *language use* of the texts used as the sub-tasks. Their awareness of these areas will shed insight into their completion of the main task.

As observed, the majority of the ideas on the first version of the intended curriculum were positively received. Taking the proposal on the role of pronunciation and grammar in learning the target language into consideration, I added a list of references of pronunciation and grammar textbooks so that students may use these resources. Though no comments on the organisation of the curriculum were made, after reviewing the intended curriculum, I arranged all learning activities in a clearer organization, following the simplified TABASCO procedure of a task-based lesson: *Planning, monitoring* and *evaluating*. Each unit started with the class-meetings introducing the main task (i.e., unit project). Then followed the session where student groups planned what content of the main task to do and how to complete the task (e.g., the sources used as the sub-tasks, the strategies used to complete the main task). In the following class-meetings, the opportunities for the students to share their work plan and the plan of unit project and to monitor their task execution are provided. At the final class-meetings of each unit, students were scheduled to report on and evaluate the outcomes of their task performance and their learning the target language.

4. THE RESULT

It turned out to be possible to create a curriculum matching the two design parameters: *Choice* and *interaction*. In other words, the curriculum focuses on stimulating the development of learners' autonomy and communicative competence – the two qualities which were indicated to be far from satisfactory in Vietnamese secondary school English language education and in ELTT programs. As a result, the intended curriculum consisting of five units was available for implementation. For the benefit of the teachers, a manual on teaching the intended curriculum, containing hints as how to prepare, execute, and evaluate the lesson was developed. In addition, a list of guidelines to design the module was available to teachers and curriculum developers.