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

Quoc Lap, T.

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CHAPTER 10

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

The curriculum innovation study reported in this book is aimed at optimizing the development and implementation of an experimental curriculum module (referred to as the intended curriculum) and, from empirical evidence on its quality, generating the methodological direction for the development, implementation and evaluation of adapted curricula (van den Akker & Plomp, 1993). Following the three-phase model of curriculum innovation: *Initiation, implementation and adaptation* (Fullan, 1991), the study consists of two chronological experiments.

Experiment 1 was initiated from the idea of improving the quality of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) curriculum in teacher education programme at Can Tho University (CTU), Vietnam. An intended curriculum aiming at stimulating learner autonomy and communicative competence was developed based on the theory of task-based language learning (TBLL). Two design parameters were operationalized in developing this intended curriculum: *choice and interaction in the target language*. The implementation of the intended curriculum was monitored and its effects were measured. The implementation of the intended curriculum generated the opportunity for curriculum developers at my department to adapt its design parameters according to their educational philosophy. At the curriculum innovation level, the implementation of the intended curriculum resulted in the adapted curriculum consisting of TBLL and presentation- practice- pronunciation (PPP) as the two components.

Experiment 2 included implementing and measuring the effects of the adapted curriculum on participants' self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning

In this chapter, the theoretical framework and the main results of the two experiments are summarized and discussed. Then at the end of the chapter an evaluation of the study and future research directions are presented.

1. THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In the scope of this study, central to the theoretical framework of curricula aiming at stimulating learner autonomy and communicative competence is strategic competence (i.e., self-regulated meta-cognitive activities: Planning, monitoring, and evaluating learning experiences and performances). Stimulating learners' autonomy in language learning aims to enhance their communicative competence because the more autonomous language learners and users are, the better language learners and users they become (Little, 2000a). A teaching method showing to create the opportunities for learners to develop their self-regulated skills is task-based language learning (TBLL). Projects as main tasks generate opportunities for learners (1) to make *choices* of what content to focus on when doing the task and of how to complete the task and (2) to carry out authentic interactions in the target language when they work on the tasks. Promoting learners' self-regulated skills aims to stimulate learner autonomy. Underlying the provision of choices of learning content and of learning methodology is the aim of promoting students' intrinsic motivation to learn

via performing language tasks. Figure 10.1 summarizes the theoretical framework used in this study.

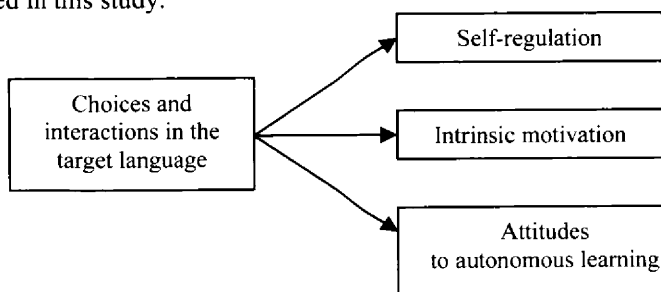


Figure 10.1. Theoretical framework.

As can be seen from figure 10.1, *choices* and *interactions in the target language*, the two design parameters, were assumed to enhance students' self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning. In other words, choices and interactions in the target language were hypothesized to be prerequisites for stimulating learner autonomy.

1.1 Variables to be measured

Figure 10.2 illustrates the independent variables monitored and the dependent variables measured in the study. The operationalization of the curriculum was monitored to find out whether it (1) provided the students with *choices* of learning content and of learning methodology and (2) created *interaction* in the target language when they worked on the tasks. Teachers and students involved in operationalizing the curriculum experienced its effects. In addition to observing the provision of choices and the creation of interaction in the target language, the participants' perception of other characteristics of the curriculum shed insight into the quality of the curriculum for future improvements when necessary. *Self-regulation*, *intrinsic motivation* and *attitudes to autonomous learning* as dependent variables were measured to test the effects of the curriculum developed with *choice* and *interaction in the target language* as the two design parameters. Figure 6.1 in chapter 6 of this book introduced the curriculum variables measured in the study. Figure 10.2 summarizes what was measured in this study again.

From figure 10.2, it was seen that the operationalization of the curriculum at classroom level was monitored to ascertain whether the provision of choices and the creation of interaction in the target language were guaranteed. Teachers' and students' perception of the operationalized curriculum was documented to confirm the operationalization of choices and the creation of interactions in the target language and to find out the degree to which the operationalized curriculum fits the intended curriculum. The outcomes (self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning) of the implemented curriculum were also measured.

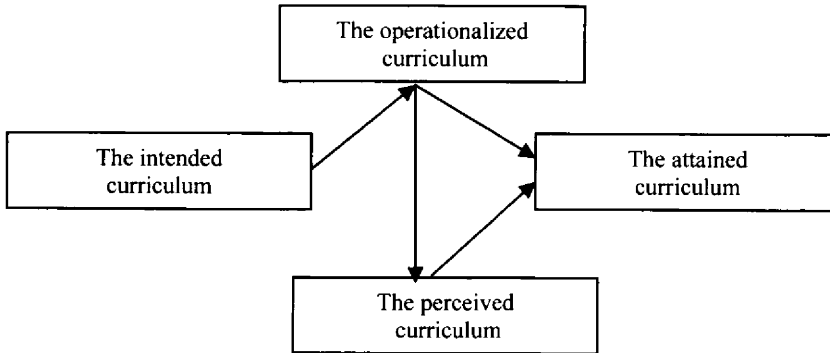


Figure 10.2. Variables to be measured.

1.2 Research questions, design and procedure

Experiment 1. To test the effect of the theoretical framework underlying the intended curriculum aiming at stimulating learner autonomy and communicative competence, the researcher (1) documented the implementation of the curriculum: The operationalization of choices and creation of interactions in the target language, teachers' and students' perception of the operationalized curriculum, and (2) measured its outcomes.

The operationalization of the intended curriculum was monitored to find out whether it provided the students with choices of learning content and learning strategies and whether it created opportunities for students to interact in the target language authentically when they worked on the tasks. In terms of the effects of the intended curriculum, whether students demonstrated awareness of choices of learning content and learning methodology towards the creation of learning tasks was described. The curriculum was operationalized for 60 students (referred to as cohort 1) divided into four groups by the four teachers. Monitoring of the provision of choices and the creation of interaction in the target language as the main medium of communication was conducted as part of this experiment. The teachers' and students' perception of the curriculum was documented to bring the curriculum developer insights into the operationalization of the design parameters in order to make future improvements to the curriculum when necessary.

The outcomes were measured to answer the question whether the intended curriculum enhanced the learners' self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning.

Experiment 2. After the end of experiment 1, two lines of perspectives on curriculum development influenced the design of the new curriculum for the new intakes of the academic year 2003-2004. *First*, some time after the end of experiment 1, the management team at my department changed. This change could have had consequences for the perspective on foreign language education by the managers as

change agents. The managers responsible for curriculum development at my department assumed that students should be taught to use the target language and that the implementation of the PPP paradigm could fit "learning to use" the target language the best. For this reason, the PPP paradigm was used as one of the components in the curriculum. *Second*, the teachers' summative evaluation of the operationalization of the intended curriculum revealed an important issue "education for today and/or tomorrow". The teachers involved in teaching the students of cohort 1 in semester 2 (academic year 2002-2003) agreed that the curriculum also had to aim at preparing students to live in an ever-changing society. In other words, the curriculum should focus on stimulating learner autonomy. As a result, the task-based component was included in the curriculum. The two design parameters operationalized in the intended curriculum (i.e., choices and interaction in the target language) were adapted to develop the TBLL as another component of the adapted curriculum. This adapted curriculum, consisting of two components: The PPP and the TBLL, was implemented for 40 students (referred to as cohort 2) divided into three groups. The implementation of the task-based component in the adapted curriculum was monitored to find out (1) whether choices of learning content and learning methodology were operationalized to support students to do their tasks, (2) whether the curriculum was operationalized to the same degree in the three groups of students, and (3) which features of the curriculum the teachers and students perceived positively and which features of the curriculum according to the teachers and students need improving.

The outcomes of the implementation of the adapted curriculum, self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and attitudes to autonomous learning were measured.

To summarize, the design of the two experiments in the study was the one-group pre- and post-test in which self-regulation, intrinsic motivation and attitudes to autonomous learning were dependent variables and choices and interactions in the target language, dependent variables with the monitored implementation of the curricula

Exploratory investigations into the effects of learner characteristics. The aim of the curricula grounded in the theory of TBLL is to stimulate learners' autonomy (i.e., self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and attitudes to autonomous learning) and communicative competence. In addition, learners' characteristics (e.g., their initial levels of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, attitudes to autonomous learning, and English) could play a role in achieving these outcomes. The study explored the contribution of each of the two curricula to the development of learner autonomy and communicative competence for different learner characteristics to aim to find out to what extent the effects of the two curricula interact with learner characteristics and whether these interactions differ between the two curricula.

2. RESULTS

2.1 *The implementation of the two curricula*

In experiment 1, the description and analysis of classroom observations in the four groups showed that *choices* were provided and *interactions in the target language* were created when students worked on the tasks. The curriculum was operationalized as intended although the degree of operationalization of the curriculum differed in the four groups.

The case study confirmed the operationalization of the curriculum. It was implemented as intended. The participants with relatively high or low initial level of self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, and attitudes to autonomous learning benefited from the curriculum in the way they demonstrated awareness of the choices they had; they adapted choices and they created the learning tasks for themselves. They showed use of self-regulated skills in their learning.

The teachers and students for the most part perceived the intended curriculum positively. The teachers' perception revealed that (1) choice was properly operationalized in the curriculum and that (2) the curriculum achieved the goals of learning the target language to use it and learning how to learn the target language. Opportunities were generated for the students to use the target language as much as they could in planning and choosing what to include in the output of their task performance and how to achieve that output. Unit 3 was chosen to report the implementation of the curriculum. The excerpts of classroom observations in this unit revealed that being provided with choices, the students planned, monitored, and evaluated their task execution and their experiences in using target language for authentic communicative purposes to learn it. From the snapshots of classroom observations, it was observed that during the operationalization of Unit 3 in the intended curriculum, about 95% (a rough estimate) of communication between the teacher and students and between/among the student(s) in the classroom was conducted in English.

In experiment 2, the results from the observations of the teachers' tutorials revealed that the task-based component in the adapted curriculum was operationalized as intended: Choices were provided and interaction in the target language was created for students to do their projects. However, the degree to which the curriculum was operationalized in the three groups was different: A varying degree of challenge and support and the use of English or Vietnamese as the main medium of communication in tutorials in the three groups was observed. Four out of five teachers assumed that the first project would bring the students moments of confusions, worry and challenge; therefore, they conducted their tutorials in Vietnamese to make sure that students would not be cognitively overloaded. They explicitly expressed their recognition of the importance of using the target language as the main medium in instruction. The teachers' and students' perception of the amount of choices operationalized in the task-based component positively confirmed the operationalization of the task-based component in the three groups. Both teachers and students perceived that the students had opportunities to use the target language to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning tasks.

2.2 The outcomes

The outcomes of the implementation of the intended curriculum and the adapted curriculum are reported in table 10.1.

Table 10.1. Pre-test and post-test comparison

<i>Variables</i>	<i>Study 1</i>	<i>Study 2</i>
Self-regulation	no change	no change
Intrinsic Motivation	decrease	no change
Attitudes to autonomous language learning	increase	decrease

From table 10.1, it was observed that the mean of the participants' self-regulation in the pre-test and post-test in the two experiments did not differ. A decrease in the mean score on intrinsic motivation was observed (experiment 1); the mean score on intrinsic motivation did not change in the adapted curriculum. The mean scores on attitudes to autonomous learning were found to increase in the intended curriculum and decrease in the adapted curriculum.

In experiment 1, the statistical results revealed that no group effects on the participants' gains in *self-regulation* and *intrinsic motivation* were observed. A group effect on the participants' gains in *attitudes to autonomous learning* was observed. Group 4 showed the most gain. Teacher 4 did the best job in terms of helping students raise their level of attitudes to autonomous learning.

In experiment 2, no group effects on the participants' gains in *self-regulation* and *attitudes to autonomous learning* were observed. A group effect on the participants' gains in *intrinsic motivation* was observed. While group 1 and group 3 gained; group 2 lost. The difference between group 2 and group 3 was significant.

2.3 Differential interactions with learner characteristics

Exploring learners' characteristics revealed that when participants score relatively highly on *self-regulation* and *attitudes to autonomous learning*, the intended curriculum results in a better effect on self-regulation, intrinsic motivation, attitudes to autonomous learning (i.e., learner autonomy) and language achievement than the adapted curriculum does. When the participants initially score relatively low, the adapted curriculum is a better choice.

3. DISCUSSION

3.1 *Self-regulation*

The results showed that participants' overall mean in self-regulation remained the same during the implementation of the intended curriculum and the adapted curriculum. The outcome of self-regulation was different from what the researcher expected. The failure to observe the effects of the curriculum on the participants' overall means of self-regulation could be explained in terms of their initial level of self-regulation. For both cohorts, the participants' mean scores in the pre-test were relatively high ($M = 5.68$, $SD = .62$ and $M = 5.46$, $SD = .75$ for cohort 1 and cohort 2 respectively) on the scale of 7.0 as the maximum score. It is not an easy task to raise these means with the implementation of the curricula as interventions. The following two paragraphs will offer more explanations to the failure to gain the expected effect of the curriculum on participants' self-regulation.

The correlations of participants' scores between the two points of measurements in the two experiments were rather weak ($r = .54$ and $.30$ respectively), which indicates participants' placement in the rank order changed. This change of order among participants was most probably the result of participation in the curricula. The curricula succeeded in improving self-regulation of some participants and failed to do so for other participants.

The case study reported in section 1.5.2 in chapter 7 of this book showed that whether from condition low or condition high, students demonstrated that they used self-regulating skills in working on the tasks and on learning the target language. Miller and Brickman (2004) believe that *future goals* and *sub-goals* and their impact on students' self-regulation cannot be overlooked. They argued, "Future goals guide the development of a system of sub-goals for future goal attainment" (Miller & Brickman, 2004: 29). The background of the participants in the study was presented in section 3.2. in chapter 6 of this book. The participants went through a sharply competitive national exam before acceptance onto the program to be trained to be teachers of English in secondary schools. This implies that their future goal (i.e., acquiring the target language to work as secondary school teachers) has been clearly set. To accomplish this future goal, they accordingly work toward the sub-goals (i.e., completing learning tasks). Thus, future goals and sub-goals which were argued to influence self-regulation were guaranteed in the study. Therefore, why the expected effect on self-regulation was not observed could be more likely to relate to the fact that it is not easy to raise the relatively high initial mean in self-regulation of the whole group higher.

3.2 *Intrinsic motivation*

The mean of participants' intrinsic motivation decreased at the end of the implementation of the intended curriculum and was the same at the end of the implementation of the adapted curriculum. An explanation for the decrease in the intrinsic motivation of the cohort 1 could be as follows. Before entering the program in semester 1, it might be the case that based on their experiences of learning and teaching English

at high school, together with information from senior students already following the program, participants had already built up an idea of how learning and teaching in the University was going to be. This picture of learning and teaching had prepared them well psychologically for their coming learning, so the intrinsic motivation mean at the start is rather high on the scale of maximum 7.0 ($M = 5.79$, $SD = .50$). As they followed the intended curriculum, their image of learning and teaching changed and though the control of learning was passed gradually from teachers to students over 14 weeks, students were still in the process of finding a way to familiarize themselves with learning independently, so their intrinsic motivation decreased ($M = 5.51$, $SD = .60$).

The correlations between the pre-test and post-test scores in intrinsic motivation in the two experiments were not strong ($r = .39$ and $.38$ respectively). This implies that the curricula might have succeeded in enhancing intrinsic motivation of some participants and failed to do so to other participants. Though it could be so, one may raise the question whether it could be the case that the intended curriculum as an intervention failed to raise the participants' intrinsic motivation. The following paragraphs offer alternative explanations for the failure to observe any effects of the curricula on intrinsic motivation.

According to Errey & Schollaert (2003), motivation theories that examine what may lead to learners' intrinsic motivation agree on three areas. First, learning appears to happen best when it is carried out in relation to a *particular goal, plan, project or purpose* which the learner strongly identifies with. Second, learners' *self-image or self-esteem* and the *place* they occupy in the group or class will influence the way they perceive their learning and the way they perform learning tasks. Third, learners need to have a positive *internal representation* of the task and a positive *self-determination* of what the task means to them.

The first agreement on what contributes to the learners' intrinsic motivation depends on the learner and on the context of learning. Entering this ELTT programme, learners are expected to be competent in using the target language to work in secondary schools as teachers of the target language and are able to use their learning experiences of how to learn for life-long learning. The goals of the programme are compatible with what the majority of participants reported in their learning plans for the semester. The participants reported that they would try to improve their language skills by practicing using the language authentically and using their self-learning skills to continue their language learning after graduation. Analyzing the implementation of the intended curriculum and of the task-based component of the adapted curriculum confirmed that *doing project work concerned with real-life goals that aim at using the target language authentically* (to learn it) and *to get more information about the issue under investigation* (i.e., learning more about studying and learning in a new environment in which learners are in). At the end of each project, the participants were required to self-evaluate in the form of *reflection* on their target language learning experiences and on the learning process, which guarantees the *learning-to-learn component*.

The second agreement on what contributes to learners' intrinsic motivation formulates the link between learners' self-esteem or self-image and the place a learner occupies in her group or her class and her level of motivation. It should be recalled

that the participants in the study are somewhat homogenous because almost all of them have been short-listed based on the entrance exam into the program. It would not necessarily deny some variation in the ability to use the target language among participants; however, it would not be the case that participants in the study might feel inferior to their peers and become demotivated. The type of work arrangements (i.e., group work, pair-work, individual work) for the participants to execute project work in the experimental and the two-component curriculum is group work. With group work, participants are encouraged to negotiate (in using the target language) in performing the tasks and sharing work equally so that each group member feels that they have contributed to the outcome of their task execution.

The third agreement relates to the way learners perceive *what* the task is about and *how* to execute the task. The way learners understand the task is both external and internal. Externally, they respond that way to the teachers' instruction (requirement). Internally, they must have a personal reason to be interested in the task. Learners' motivation is related to human need for *choice* and *positive association*. Regarding choice in this context, this is choice of *what* and *how* to learn. What learners think about learning is associated with what they have experienced in their past learning (e.g., feelings, images, beliefs, values, strategies) or past task executing even though their beliefs, values or strategies could be misconceptions. The degree to which the intended curriculum and the task-based component in the adapted curriculum have been implemented has revealed that *choice* was offered to the participants. Participants working in groups could choose which aspect of the task topic to focus on (*the what*) and the way to perform the task (*the how*).

The picture of learning English in which the teacher is the presenter of new language materials, the lesson planner and the model of the target language could fit the image of learning to use the target language more than the image of a language classroom in which learners themselves are the designers and managers of their own learning, which could influence the decrease of participants' overall mean of intrinsic motivation. An examination of overall mean of intrinsic motivation in experiment 1 showed that the mean was rather high ($M = 5.79$, with 7.0 as maximum score), so it is not an easy task to raise this high mean of intrinsic motivation further.

To summarize, the research question showed to be theoretically sound, based on the theory of second language acquisition. The measurement instruments were shown to be moderately reliable to collect data. The intended and the adapted curriculum were operationalized as intended. However, the development of the participants' self-regulation was not observed and intrinsic motivation on the post-test was found to be even lower than that on the pre-test. The correlations between the pre-test and post-test scores on self-regulation and intrinsic motivation were not strong, implying that the curricula as interventions might have succeeded in enhancing self-regulation and intrinsic motivation of some participants and failed to do so for other participants.

3.3 *Attitudes to autonomous learning*

An increase and a decrease in *attitudes to autonomous learning* in the overall mean of participants in experiment 1 and experiment 2 were observed.

The increase of attitudes to autonomous learning of participants in cohort 1 could be the results of the implementation of the intended curriculum as an intervention. In the oral exam at the end of the semester, the majority of the participants of cohort 1 explicitly expressed that the curriculum created the opportunities for them to take control over cognitive, meta-cognitive skills (e.g., taking initiative in learning, ...), affective factors (e.g., becoming more self-confident, ...) and social factors (e.g., working in cooperation with others, ...). In other words, the curriculum created opportunities for them to enhance their attitudes to autonomous learning.

It should also be recalled that at the end of the implementation of the intended curriculum with all project work (experiment 1, semester 1), students' attitudes to autonomous learning were found to increase. This increase could be explained as follows. Before entering the program, participants had experienced the teacher-centered approach to teaching and learning English in lower and upper secondary schools in which the role of the teacher was more important than students' role in their success in learning. Participants' attitudes to autonomous language learning had not developed or they had had no idea of autonomous language learning. Therefore, their mean score on attitudes to autonomous language learning is just over average ($M = 3.91$, $SD = 0.30$) on the maximum of 7.0. However, during the semester the adapted curriculum was operationalized, at least for a part, the task-based component created opportunities for students to gradually develop their responsibility for their own learning. From this component, students had an idea of what an autonomous language learner is like. However, for the most part, the adapted curriculum did not create sufficient opportunities for students to develop a certain degree of attitudes compatible with what they had perceived about autonomous learning, so it could be the reason that their attitudes to autonomous language learning decreased ($M = 3.78$, $SD = 0.31$).

4. FURTHER RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

4.1 *Limitations of the study and future research directions*

In both experiments, the expected effects of the two curricula on the group means of self-regulation and intrinsic motivation were not observed. It should be noted that the participants in the two experiments of the study have long been accustomed to the teacher-centered classrooms. To these participants, learning to use the language, learning to handle one's own learning, and growing familiar with *the new way of learning* (as termed by participants in cohort 1) might take more time than one full semester (in experiment 1) and than half semester (in experiment 2). Therefore, future research studies concerning self-regulation and intrinsic motivation as the outcomes of a language curriculum and choices and interaction in the target language as the curriculum parameters should be at least in two successive semesters in which the two intended curricula modules would be operationalized and at least three

points of measurement (at the beginning of semester 1, the end of semester 1 and at the end of semester 2) would be administered. It might be that with time and increasing familiarity with autonomous learning, students will become more motivated.

Relating to the failure of observing the expected effects of self-regulation and intrinsic motivation on the group means, it should also be recalled that the correlations between the pre-test and post-test scores in self-regulation and intrinsic motivation in both experiments were relatively weak ($r = .54$ and $.30$ for self-regulation and $r = .39$ and $.38$ for intrinsic motivation respectively). As discussed in section 4.2 (chapter 9), these weak correlations could indicate a weak instrumentation which was possibly caused by a random way of responding to the items in the inventories related to assumed cultural bias. However, for this study, the researcher did not receive any sign of such a bias; the internal consistency of instruments used to measure was reasonable ($\alpha = .66$ and $\alpha = .72$ for self-regulation on the pre-test and post-test respectively, and $\alpha = .68$ and $\alpha = .73$ for intrinsic motivation on the pre-test and post-test respectively). In the two experiments, the low correlation between the pre-test and post-test scores on self-regulation and intrinsic motivation indicate that the participants' initial rank order most probably changed as the result of participation in the curriculum. This result needs investigation that is more thorough. First, the types of participants for whom the curricula showed to work for the enhancement of self-regulation and intrinsic motivation should be more thoroughly investigated in further research. Second, future research should test the profitability of different interventions on different participants in terms of raising their levels of self-regulation and intrinsic motivation.

4.2 Contributions of the study

Theoretically, the study has proposed working frameworks for the concepts of *communicative competence*, *language tasks* and *learner autonomy in language learning*. The common feature in working definitions of learner autonomy in language learning and communicative competence is strategic competence. To develop strategic competence, language tasks must provide learners with the opportunities to choose, plan, execute, monitor and self-evaluate their language learning and learning process by using the target language as the main medium.

Empirically, the study has contributed the values to the *universality* of learner autonomy (Crabbe, 1999) in Asian contexts and to the body of literature on learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is not a Western-biased concept. The study reconfirmed that it is the educational system that does not create the opportunities for learners to exercise their autonomy; it is not the case that learners themselves are not autonomous by nature. The result from the empirical study is also encouraging in terms of developing curricula in light of a task-based approach in which choices and interactions are the parameters for the development of attitudes to autonomous learning. Chapters 7 and 8 of this thesis reported students' perceptions of the paradigm "using to learn the target language". They perceived that they used the target language to plan, monitor and evaluate their task execution and their language learn-

ing. These instances of the target language use are authentically communicative. Communication is the means but also the end of learning a target language.

At the curriculum innovation level, the study proposed the paradigm of *using to learn* and *to learn how to learn the language* in the curricula stimulating the development of learner autonomy and communicative competence. The empirical results from the study indicated that for the ultimate development of learner autonomy and communicative competence, the paradigm *using to learn and to learn how to learn the language* showed to benefit learners whose initial level of self-regulation and attitudes to autonomous learning are relatively high.

In the light of the proposals and empirical evidence in the field of SLA and the empirical evidence from this study, the curricula aiming at stimulating learner autonomy and communicative competence should be built around tasks which (1) provide learners with the opportunities to use the target language authentically (i.e., authentic interactions in the target language), making the target language as the medium of instruction as much as possible, (2) allow choices of *what* and *how* to do the task, and offer students proper scaffoldings when necessary, and (3) self-evaluate their task execution and language learning via *reflections*.

From the analysis of the students' ideas from the interviews with students about their learning experiences with the intended curriculum at the end of the semester (e.g., the oral exam), the effective language learning model would most probably be strategic language learning in which learning the target language is through using it authentically and through learning how to learn the language, using social, affective, cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies to acquire the communicative skills and the target language.