Promoting learner autonomy in the EFL classroom: the Exploratory Practice way

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Introduction

Exploratory Practice was initially developed to empower teachers by bringing a research perspective into their classrooms, where ordinary classroom activities are adapted for their investigative potential. Little research has been done to explore how Exploratory Practice can be integrated into regular classroom life to help learners develop a sense of autonomy in language learning. This paper details one study conducted in an EFL classroom in Hong Kong where the use of regular classroom activities, designed to encourage *conscious reflection* on learning, achieved a greater understanding of classroom experiences for both the teacher and the learners.

Evidence from this study shows that the students developed their metacognitive awareness, with learner awareness, language awareness, learning process awareness and social awareness (Ellis 1999, Sinclair 1999) being developed to varying degrees in different students. Both the learners and the teacher became more autonomous and the quality of life in the classroom improved, showing that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy can be promoted through Exploratory Practice. As learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent, it is proposed that future teacher education program should provide trainee teachers with the skills to develop autonomy in learners.

Background to the study

I was introduced to the idea of Exploratory Practice when I undertook Dick Allwright's module *Background to Applied Linguistics in TESOL* when I started my second year of teaching at the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts in September 2001. As described by Allwright and Lenzuen (1997: 73): *Exploratory Practice is a sustainable way of carrying out classroom investigations that provides language teachers (and potentially the learners also) with a systematic framework within which to define the areas of language teaching and learning that they wish to explore, to refine their thinking about them, and to investigate them further using familiar classroom activities, rather than 'academic' research techniques, as the investigative tools.*

Exploratory Practice is unique in that it emphasises a natural integration of research and pedagogy. It relies on existing pedagogical practice as a research tool, and it uses teacher and learner *puzzles* about classroom events as its starting point for pursuing an understanding about what happens in classrooms. Allwright (1999a) proposes that by discussing and making decisions about language learning in class, Exploratory Practice becomes a practical means of teacher development, while simultaneously working for learner development.

Formulating my classroom puzzle

I decided to explore a longstanding puzzlement that I experienced in my classroom life ie: *Why is my students' sense of learner autonomy so low while English is deemed an important language in Hong Kong?* There were three particular episodes in class that prompted me to formulate my classroom puzzle this way.

Episode 1
At the beginning of the first term, I introduced the course outline to both the drama and music groups. According to the Language Department, students were required to keep personal vocabulary notebooks as records of learning. These notebooks would be included as part of the continuous assessment grade. Ten new words collected from their English and other classes needed to be recorded in their notebooks each week. Soon after this was announced, one student in my drama group raised her hand and asked how much the work of keeping a vocabulary notebook would count towards the final course grade. Interestingly enough, the same question was asked by my music students. After the class, I couldn't help but wonder: *Why is it that grades seem to be the most important thing that matters to them? Can't they see the value of keeping a vocabulary notebook in helping them with their English?'*

Episode 2
Two-thirds of the way through the term, after assigning a group discussion task, I was circulating to oversee my students' work. I noticed one girl was looking at her notebook attentively when she was

supposed to be having a discussion with her classmates. As I went over to see what she was doing, I found that she was revising a list of Italian vocabulary. I looked at her in amazement and asked why she was doing this. She justified this by saying: *Well, I'm having an Italian quiz in the next class*. I sighed with a bitter smile, saying: *I appreciate your effort in preparing for the quiz, but could you please join your classmates in their discussion? They need your help*. The girl did so, but my mind was filled with a string of questions: *Why does it take a quiz or a test to get students do some independent work? Why don't students treasure the learning opportunities available in class and make good use of them?*

Episode 3
Throughout the first term, I had a good time teaching the drama students because they seemed to enjoy their lessons as much as I did. However, their responses to the end-of-term feedback questionnaire puzzled me. The 18 students unanimously agreed that the class sessions were well organized and that the course was delivered in an enthusiastic manner. The overall feedback was very positive. However, when it came to the question whether they had improved their language ability over the semester, the responses were much less positive. Two students strongly agreed, seven agreed and nine disagreed which meant that half of them did not perceive that there had been any improvement in their English by the end of the term. I wondered why this was so: *Couldn't they tell that all the activities in class were aimed at helping them with their English? Had they ever reflected on what really goes on in class?*

With these episodes and questions in mind, I came to the conclusion that my students were unwilling to take charge of their own learning. They seemed to be focused on the products of learning ie: quizzes, tests and grades rather than on the processes of learning offered through learning opportunities in class. I really wanted to understand how my students came to this approach and wondered whether I could play a part in helping them to become more autonomous language learners.

Design and procedures of the study
I selected Exploratory Practice as the most suitable means of understanding my classroom puzzles and helping my students develop a better sense of learner autonomy. I then formulated the following research questions:

▪   Why is my students' sense of learner autonomy so low while English is deemed an important language in Hong Kong?
▪   What are the effects of promoting learner autonomy in the EFL classroom through Exploratory Practice?

Key concepts in the research questions
Before the research questions could be addressed, the key concepts had to be operationalised.

Learner autonomy
As Benson (2001) rightly argues, autonomy is a *multidimensional* construct of capacity that will take different forms for different individuals. It will also take different forms for the same individual in different contexts and at different times. However, a more specific description of learner autonomy was needed for the purpose of this study and *learner autonomy* was defined as a construct of capacity for making informed decisions about one's own learning. Autonomous learners were seen as those who are able to reflect on their own learning through knowledge about learning and who are willing to learn in collaboration with others (Holec 1981, Allwright 1990).

In order for learners to make informed decisions about their learning, they need to have developed an awareness of at least four important areas of metacognition (Ellis 1999, Sinclair 1999):

1   Learner awareness
2   Subject matter awareness of the target language
3   Learning process awareness
4   Social awareness

Exploratory Practice
Allwright and Lenzuen (1997:75) explain the principles of Exploratory Practice in this way:

> *There are two fundamental principles for Exploratory Practice: (1) promoting everyone's understanding, while (2) promoting language teaching and learning. In other words, it is all intended to foster professional development – helping all participants to achieve productive progress through their developing understanding of language teaching and learning.*

Allwright (2000) outlines seven practical stages to help teachers get started with the implementation of Exploratory Practice. These are:

1   Identifying a puzzle
2   Reflecting on the puzzle
3   Monitoring to gather data
4   Taking action to generate data
5   Considering the outcomes and deciding what to do next
6   Moving on to protest or to change via action research
7   Going public as a recruitment exercise

Through its principles and associated practices, Exploratory Practice claims to offer an appropriate approach and method for both language teacher development and language learner development.

Data collection
The students in this study were a group of Diploma One drama students. As the teacher-researcher I taught the group for the two terms of the 2001/2002 academic year. There were 18 students: 16 were Secondary 7 graduates and 2 were Secondary 5 graduates.

Ordinary and familiar classroom activities were adapted to raise metacognitive awareness in the students. Data was gathered through group discussions, oral presentations in class, learner diary records and the teacher-researcher's diary. Data was gathered on an ongoing basis and it was explicitly discussed in class.

The seven stages of Exploratory Practice suggested by Allwright (2000) were followed and the process of data collection reflected Allwright's (1999b) three processes of teacher development as depicted in Diagram 1 below.

THREE PROCESSES OF TEACHER DEVELOPMENT.
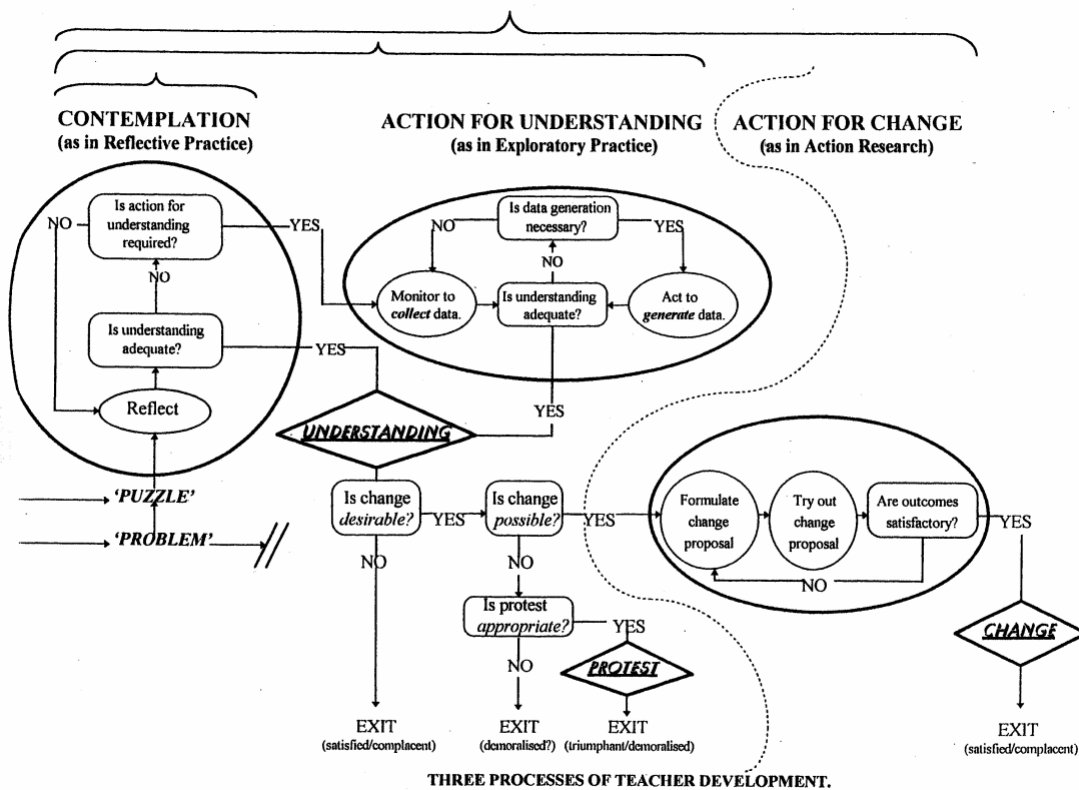
Diagram 1: Three processes of teacher development (Allwright 1999b)

The process started with the identification of a classroom puzzle and I moved back and forth between the processes of reflecting, monitoring, taking direct action to generate data and considering the outcomes and deciding what to do next. If understanding was not achieved through interpreting the data, as the teacher-researcher I would go back to the reflection stage and start the process again.

The theme of learner autonomy is in tune with the course I wrote for the Academy for the second term. As a course developer, I intentionally incorporated a learner diary writing session into normal class time because I thought it was high time some training on learner autonomy was undertaken. The Language Department at the Academy had attempted to foster learner development by installing language software packages in the computer laboratory for students to use during their own time. However, the feedback from the questionnaire at the end of first term revealed that students did not find the packages helpful in improving their English and they spent very little time using them. Consequently it was decided to help students reflect on their language learning in class. A semi-structured Learner Diary Record form was devised for this purpose. Students were asked to reflect on their learning by summarising what they had learnt from the class, commenting on the effectiveness of the class, identifying particular areas for self-improvement and planning follow-up actions. The teachers who taught the same course agreed that the learner diary writing would count as 10% of the continuous assessment grade. Apart from keeping a learner diary in class, other class activities, especially aimed at fostering learner autonomy, were undertaken. The major activities are summarised in Table 1.

Understanding the context of the research
Striving to understand my classroom puzzle
I identified the nature of my classroom puzzle to be essentially a social one. Holliday (1994: 11) states that *the social context is the social interaction within and around classroom language teaching and learning which affects and therefore helps explain what really goes on*. He argues that it is not sufficient to look only within the classroom to understand this interaction because much of what goes on within the classroom is influenced by factors within the wider educational institute, the wider educational environment and the wider society.

To have an in-depth understanding of my classroom puzzle, I first critically explored the sociolinguistic context of post-1997 Hong Kong and the institutional context of the Academy. I then reported how I came to understand the group culture of my drama students through Exploratory Practice.

Macro-contextual factors: sociolinguistic context of post-1997 Hong Kong and the institutional context of the Academy
Having been a British colony for more than one and a half centuries, Hong Kong was returned to China in 1997. Despite Hong Kong's long colonial history, it was only in 1974 that both English and Chinese were recognised as the official languages. Prior to this, English was the only official language. Over 98% of the seven million Hong Kong people use Cantonese and standard written Chinese for daily communication and Chinese is considered to be their mother tongue. English is seldom used for daily communication among the majority of local people and is largely restricted to education, government and the workplace.

Week	Date	Class Activities	Targeted areas of metacognitive awareness
1	31/1	Ice-breaking activity (introduce your partner)	Social awareness
		Introduce the course schedule and explain the purposes of writing a learner diary in class	Learning process awareness
		Complete a self-assessment form of personal language learning needs and objectives	Learning process awareness
2	7/2	Group discussion on the use of strategies for learning English	Learning process awareness
3	28/2	Group discussion on the nature of group work and the difficulty of holding on to English in group work	Learning process awareness Social awareness Subject matter awareness
		Introduce the use of a semi-structured learner diary record form	Learning process awareness
5	14/3	Complete a questionnaire on 'What sort of language learner are you?'	Learner awareness
6	21/3	Give feedback on Assignment 1 and identify problems with plot summary writing and summary skills	Subject matter awareness
		Share examples of learner diary and discuss the functions of keeping a learner diary	Learning process awareness
8	11/4	Give feedback on Assignment 2 and identify the major writing problems in Assignment 2	Subject matter awareness
10	25/4	Storytelling presentation (Assignment 3)	Subject matter awareness Social awareness
11	2/5	Give feedback on Assignment 3 Complete an evaluation sheet for speaking skills	Subject matter awareness
13	16/5	The teacher-researcher shared her story of growing as a teacher	Learning process awareness Subject matter awareness
		Oral presentation (Assignment 4): Sharing "life at the Academy"	Subject matter awareness Social awareness
		Comment on each other's presentation	Subject matter awareness Social awareness Learning process awareness
14	23/5	Sharing "life at the Academy" (continued)	Subject matter awareness Social awareness
		Comment on each other's presentation	Subject matter awareness Social awareness Learning process awareness
15	30/5	Give feedback on Assignment 4 Put checks against items in a self-evaluation form	Subject matter awareness Learning process awareness Subject matter awareness
		Complete a final reflection form	Learning process awareness Subject matter awareness

Table 1:Class activities and their targeted areas of metacognitive awareness

Luke and Richards (1982) argue that English is somewhere between a second and a foreign language in Hong Kong and call it *an auxiliary language*. Lin (1996: 24) refers to English as *a socio-economically dominant language* in Hong Kong and points out that *it is closer to a second language for bilingual, middle class people and closer to a foreign language for monolingual, working class people*. Lee (1993) explains the growing dominance of the English medium secondary schools before 1997 in the light of socio-economic factors. For practical reasons, English is seen to offer better opportunities for jobs and tertiary studies and greater access to information. Economically speaking, knowledge of English has undoubted commercial value in Hong Kong. In terms of social mobility, the acquisition of English is perceived as a means of climbing the social ladder. Therefore, it is not surprising that the high regard placed on English as an international lingua franca, as well as the fact that English is important for Hong Kong people for social mobility and for practical and economic reasons, make it so

tempting for Hong Kong parents to choose English as the medium of instruction (MOI) for their children in schools.

The issue of which MOI should be used for secondary education has long been a part of the language malaise of Hong Kong. On purely educational grounds, using the mother tongue as the MOI in schools can be regarded as conventional wisdom. Although the Education Commission, educationists and academics have repeatedly affirmed the merits of mother-tongue teaching and encouraged its adoption, fewer than 20% of public secondary schools in Hong Kong had entirely adopted Chinese as the MOI by 1997.

What happened in the majority of the English-medium secondary schools was the prevalent mixed-code teaching. In primary schools, English was taught as a foreign language. When students moved on to English Medium secondary school, English was used across the curriculum. This was late immersion but unlike the immersion programs in Canada. For example, although the number of students involved in English-medium education in Hong Kong was greater than 80% of the Primary Six student population, there was not an *equally* large number of well-trained teachers with native-like English proficiency to teach the content subjects through English (Tsui 1992). The teachers in Hong Kong usually resorted to the mixed-code approach as a response to the conflicting demands on them to ensure thorough understanding of the teaching points by students with limited English ability while trying to fulfil the official requirement of teaching in English.

However, the situation has radically changed since the Education Depart ment issued its finalised policy paper - *Medium of Instruction: Guidance for Secondary Schools* in September 1997. The majority of secondary schools were mandated to use Chinese as the MOI from 1998/99. Less than 25% of schools were permitted to continue using English as the MOI and to do this they needed to fulfilled certain criteria. To justify such a radical linguistic streaming policy, the Government mainly appealed to the educational benefits and claimed that the aims were to maximise effective teaching and learning by using Chinese as the MOI and to minimise mixed-code teaching in schools. However, this policy is self-contradictory in the sense that it confirms the status of the Chinese language on the one hand but on the other hand, it allows students of high calibre to be educated through English. The Government could not satisfactorily defend itself when challenged, for instance, about its lack of determination to adopt Chinese as the MOI in all secondary schools.

The measures taken by the Education Department to emphasise Chinese as the MOI around the time of Hong Kong's reunification with the People's Republic of China and the tight schedule of implementation gave rise to suspicions about its adoption as a political necessity. Fasold (1984: 34 cited in Lo 1997) has noted that when deciding on a medium of instruction *educational benefits ... are never the only consideration and may not even be the most important*. In the case of Hong Kong, the policy on mandating Chinese as the MOI in secondary schools s eems more political than educational in nature.

Institutional context at the Academy
The Department of Languages has a pan-Academy role in the provision of language courses. It provides courses in English, Putonghua, Cantonese, French, German and Italian. As English is the principal official MOI at the Academy, it is compulsory for the two -year post-secondary Diploma program and for the first two years of the Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) program. The majority of the students enter the Academy after graduating from Secondary 5 or Secondary 7. The minimum language requirement for admission to the Academy for students from Hong Kong is a pass in English in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination.

Micro-contextual factors: the group culture of my drama students
Having a deeper understanding of the society and the secondary schools my students come from, I realized that their passion for performing arts would not necessarily carry them through when it came to their language learning. Although the content I chose for the class was closely related to the performing arts, it did not mean that their enthusiasm and interest in this area of expertise would necessarily transfer to the language classroom. To have a better understanding of the group culture of my drama students, I employed regular class activities as my investigative tools.

Students' past experience of studying English
To investigate my drama students' attitudes towards English and their awareness of the differences between studying English in their secondary schools and studying English at the Academy, I asked them to discuss the following questions in groups:

- How would you describe your past experiences of studying English in your secondary schools?
- Were there more positive learning experiences or negative ones?
- Can you share one example of your positive and/or negative learning experience(s)?
- Do you think there are any differences between studying English at your secondary schools and studying it here at the Academy? If so, what are they?

The results of the group discussions showed that about half of my drama students had more negative experiences in learning English at their secondary schools. One common area of dislike was that the English classes in secondary schools were all about examination practice. This revealed one ironic fact of educational life in Hong Kong ie: most students focus their learning on what they think will be tested while the teachers second-guess the examination and give students notes and model answers to rote learn.

Although a number of my drama students could name some positive learning experiences, most of them seemed to have bitter memories of the heavily examination-oriented teaching and learning of English at the secondary level. The bitterness varied in degrees and I realised that the differences in their positive experiences of learning English could affect their receptivity to me as an English teacher, as well as their receptivity to my way of teaching and the course content.

The students did have a very vague idea of the role of English at the Academy. Some noted the smaller class sizes at the Academy while others could not see any differences. I could understand why they did not notice the differences as they had only been at the Academy for three weeks when this question was asked. To help them establish a positive attitude towards learning English, I made good use of the opportunity to share my understanding of the importance of English at the Academy and the significance of using it as a tool for their future learning and career development. I explained that English is a compulsory subject at the Academy because this language is deemed important to help students study the other English-medium subjects in the BFA programs and that the overall purpose of English courses at the Academy is to cultivate students as international artists. Although not all students were convinced enough to smile at me, I could tell this sort of *explicit* explanation of the different approaches to teaching and learning English was helpful in understanding the classroom reality at the Academy.

Student strategies for learning English
Although my drama students were generally cooperative, they did not seem to be willing to do more than the minimum. The vocabulary notebooks they handed in at the end of the first term showed that most of them did not record new words on a regular basis. Rather, they did it all at once at the end of the term and noted an odd collection of words from sources on the Internet, which had nothing to do with what they learnt in classes.

During the second week of the second term, I expressed my concern regarding the lack of interest in keeping a vocabulary notebook during the previous term and asked them to discuss the following questions:

- Why did keeping a vocabulary notebook last term seem to be an ineffective strategy for you?
- What strategies did you employ in your secondary school to keep up your English? How did you keep vocabularies? How did you improve your listening, reading, speaking and writing skills?

The results of the discussion were interesting. The major reason many of them gave for their lack of entries in the notebook was their limited use of English outside the class. Seldom did they need to use the words they learnt in their English class. Apart from their English and Voice classes, their major classes were conducted in Cantonese. The scene work they needed to perform for their major studies was also done in Cantonese. Therefore, they found copying meanings and examples of words they seldom used a tedious practice.

For the second question, many examples were given. In fact, some had kept vocabulary notebooks at school. The words kept were specified by their teachers and were tested in class. This explained why it was more rewarding to keep a vocabulary notebook at secondary school because they could immediately see the results of their hard work, even though they need not use those words in their daily lives. For skills improvement, they gave examples such as reading newspapers, listening to the exam practice materials, writing compositions and attending extra tutorial schools. They practised on such a frequent basis that they could see some immediate signs of improvement in terms of examination scores. With one specific goal in mind ie: passing English in the public examination, they perceived their effort to be well worth it. They knew that if they failed English, they would not be accepted by any tertiary institute.

After this discussion with my students, I had a much better understanding of why they seemed to be led by the products of learning instead of the processes of learning. Their concepts of what counted as gains in learning English were largely constrained by their past experience of learning English within a heavily exam-oriented school system and a pragmatically oriented society where English is looked upon as an important asset. Their motivation for studying English was mostly *instrumental* in nature (Gardner and Lambert 1972). I could now understand why my students came to be this way since I myself had been through the same school system. However I might be more fortunate than my students in that I had more positive experiences of learning English than negative ones. After being a language teacher for eight years, I found it a bit hard to put myself into my students' shoes. I tended to forget how difficult it could be to study English as a second or foreign language in Hong Kong.

In the meantime, I realised that throughout the first term, there were no quizzes in the English classes to remind students what they had achieved in *quantitative* terms. Moreover, the lessons were only two hours a week and there were not many opportunities to consolidate what they had learnt. I figured that these may be the reasons why they did not perceive any improvement in their English during the first term.

As a language teacher, it is my passion to instil a love and appreciation of the English language in my students. To do so, I believe it is worthwhile to promote autonomy in the learner because it is only when the students are actively involved in the process of learning that they can realise the fun and value of learning a language.

Effects of promoting learner autonomy through exploratory practice
Student reflection on their classroom experiences
Throughout the second term, regular learning activities were designed to develop metacognitive awareness in the learners. The activities and their targeted areas of metacognitive awareness are summarised in Table 1.

Data quoted in this section are taken from student learner diary records completed before each English class ended. Two hundred and forty nine learner diary records were collected from January 31st 2002 to May 30th 2002. Student development of autonomy was evaluated in terms of their metacognitive awareness by using Sinclair's (1999: 104) framework as shown in Table 2.

Level of awareness	Characteristics
Level 1 Largely unaware	▪ description with little or no rationale ▪ formulaic or shallow rationale ▪ broad statements with little or no support ▪ few or naïve questions ▪ little or incorrect use of metalanguage
Level 2 Becoming aware Transition stage	Greater use of: ▪ anecdotal evidence ▪ introspection (expression of thoughts/feelings) ▪ metaphor ▪ metalanguage
Level 3 Largely aware	Confident and competent use of the items in Level 2 *plus* descriptions of alternative strategies

Table 2: Framework of metacognitive awareness in language learners

Activities aimed at promoting metacognitive awareness
Throughout the course I conducted various activities in class to raise student awareness of various aspects of metacognition.

Learner awareness
Learner awareness refers to learners being aware of themselves as learners mainly in terms of attitudes, beliefs, motivation, needs and learning styles. This study showed that learners need help to consciously think about themselves as individual learners.

In Week 5 I asked the students to complete a questionnaire to raise their awareness of the sort of learners they were. According to Ellis and Sinclair's (1989: 6) categories, five of the students were analytic learners, while 13 were a mixture of analytic and relaxed learners. Interestingly, none of them were relaxed learners.

In Week 15 the students were given a final reflection form to identify their personal learning styles. Greater use of introspection showed that they were becoming more aware of their preferred learning styles as these unedited sample responses show:

▪ *I know that I must learn English in active way. I'm not saying that I don't like read books, but I'm an active person, so movies and discussion can help me learn faster. I like the way we learn in this year. It happy.* (William)

▪ *My own preferred learning style? I still can't find it. However, I know a lot of paper works and textbooks will not help me learn better. I prefer to learn from presentation, listening and television.* (Simon)

▪ *Actually I'm a lazy student. Just learning with books or reference notes are not suitable for me. Watching videos, listening to songs and playing games are my preferred learning styles – and demonstration, it helps remind me how much I've learnt and how much I've got.* (Larry)

These comments show that the bitter shadow of how English was learnt in secondary schools was still in the students' minds. They did not prefer reading textbooks and doing paper work. They preferred learning English through activities because it suited their styles of learning.

Apart from becoming aware of their preferred learning styles, some students were becoming aware of a change in their motivation in class as this student response shows:

- *Yes, I am now start to learn more about English. At the first term, I am very lazy. I just like to read Chinese book, to watch Chinese film. But now, I start to read books in English version, to see English program. I think Joanne use a new and good method to make me like to learn English.* (Derek)

Subject matter awareness
Subject matter awareness refers to learner awareness of English as a system. The most successful activity to arouse student language awareness was the oral presentations done in Weeks 13 and 14 (see Table 1). This was the last assignment of the second term. Students were required to present a self-reflective account of their experience as a student at the Academy for the year. Some guidance questions were given to help them with their reflection. A feedback form was given to students to help them evaluate the presentations of their classmates:

1   Content: attention grabber, organisation, supporting examples
2   Language: accuracy of grammar, pronunciation
3   Delivery skills: vocal variety, eye contact, gesture, facial expression etc.

As a similar feedback form had been explained to students when they did their storytelling presentation in Week 10, they were already familiar with the terms used.

The students sat in two facing semi-circles, forming Teams A and B. In each team, students decided which aspects they would like to focus on when commenting on the presentations. Before they started their presentations, I sat between the semi-circles and did a presentation sharing my own story of growing as a teacher. This was meant to serve as an example for students to observe and comment on using the criteria on the form. When a student on Team A was presenting, students on Team B observed and prepared comments on the presentation, and vice versa.

This activity proved to have a very positive impact on all the students in class as the following comments show:

- *I think it is so amazing to speak by using another language. And I can use it to express my feeling make me feel successful! I enjoy learning English more than before. Because I can take part in the class all minutes, even seconds!* (Derek)

- *I discover that I afraid English because we usually have to use English to response immediately. And I found my English can't make me do that. But today I am happy because when I give comments to the presenter, I can directly communicate with them. And I don't afraid speak English with them.* (Rita)

- *This lesson makes me comfort. We can know each other's story. And I have learnt how to really listen. You should pay full attention to that person. To connect with him/her. Also, Sandy said that we just used present tense when we were saying our past experience.* (Jonathan)

- *The presentation can improve my grammar, my pronunciation. It made me be more brave to speak in front of people. And I also need to write out the presentation beforehand, it can help me remember what I think.* (Rose)

These student responses show that they employed introspection and metalanguage, showing an awareness of the language as system. Some students also reflected on their learning experiences outside class because of the stimulation gained in class, as this comment shows:

- *We've listened to '20 Bad Ads' and presented some advertisements through games. I think the games are interesting. It reminds me the importance of pause during speaking English. As we've done something on listening and speaking, actually I've thought of a problem – I'm not sure if it's about listening or speaking. When I talked to some native speaker, especially their jokes, I don't know what it means at all. When it happened, I don't know how to react and I was nervous to communicate. I don't know it's about speaking or listening.* (Larry)

Through anecdotal evidence this student managed to relate what happened in class and his experience outside class and to raise questions about his own language learning. This reveals some qualitative

gains in the depth of his reflection. It also confirms Lor's (1998) finding that challenging experience in class helps provoke deeper reflection in the learner.

Learning process awareness
Learning process awareness refers to self-assessment, goal setting, monitoring progress, evaluating activities and organising time and resources. As the learner diary records were kept throughout the term, students were given opportunities to monitor and evaluate their learning progress in a very systematic way. In Week 1, the students were given a self-assessment form to identify their language learning needs and to set their personal learning objectives for the term. In Week 6, half way through the term, the self-assessment forms and previous learner diary records were returned to the students to aid reflection on their progress. Examples of learner diary entries were shared and a discussion was held on how they could best make use of writing their learner diaries in class. In Week 15, one final reflection session was held on whether keeping a learner diary in class helped them reflect on their language learning.

An important aspect of the process was that ongoing relevant discussions were conducted in response to the student queries recorded in their learner diaries. For example, in Week 2 Sandy said: *I found that once we play games or discuss in small groups, we would talk to group mates in Chinese and lose concentration. So, playing games with whole class would be better!* Therefore, in Week 3, the students discussed why it was difficult to hold on to English when working in small groups. Apart from saying that they lacked the necessary vocabulary to express themselves in English, they also claimed that using Cantonese was quicker and more efficient when they wanted to express the vividness of their creative ideas. I then realised that expressing their creative ideas in vivid Cantonese may be more important to my drama students than practising English in class.

When reflecting on their learning processes, some students revealed insights into learning and demonstrated greater metacognitive awareness by suggesting alternative approaches to the learning tasks as these comments show:

- *Every time, we form groups by count 1, 2, 3, 4, I think maybe we can group by ourselves. It would be more interesting and we can be more involved in the discussion.* (Nancy)

- *I think the topic about critical thinking isn't suitable for us because we can't think like our parents. And parents and teenagers isn't an interesting topic. Maybe you can choose some topics about love, friendship and fashion that could make us interested.* (Catherine)

In fact, student suggestions helped me make the classroom more autonomous for them. Reading their comments enabled me to better plan class activities and to choose more appropriate instructional materials for them.

When evaluating whether or not they had achieved the goals they set at the beginning of the term, fifteen students agreed that they had achieved their goals to a certain extent while three said they did not achieve their goals. Below are some of the student responses:

- *I think I can't achieve my goals because I always forgot the things that I learnt. I don't have the opportunity to use it. For example, I learnt a lot of words in every lesson, but I won't use them again. So, it is a pity. It is like I haven't learnt them before.* (Lisa)

- *No, maybe I don't speak English after the lesson. I seldom use English I learnt in the lesson. So, my English is not improved.* (Felix)

- *Although I'm not really achieve the goals I set at the beginning of the term, but I already improved a lot. My English become more alive, not just only on the book. I know I can directly use English, not like before, I prepare one Chinese sentence and translate it. I always don't have enough vocabulary for express myself, so I must listen and study more.* (Rita)

- *I can't say I can completely achieved the goals, but I really improved in speaking, becoming more natural. And I found that one way is listen more and speak more. I want to speak like a native speaker.* (Nancy)

- *Yes, a bit. I've thought of reading more English script and I did it! I read some even without Chinese version – a good way for me to think of the characters in the script in another way cause I read in another language.* (Larry)

These responses reveal different views of language learning which correspond to the following six conceptions of learning (Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty 1993):

1	Increasing one's knowledge	
2	Memorising and reproducing	Quantitative conceptions
3	Applying	
4	Understanding	
5	Seeing something in a different way	Qualitative conceptions
6	Changing as a person	

When we look at the student responses quoted above we see that Lisa and Felix gave quantitative views of language learning whereas Rita, Nancy and Larry gave qualitative views. Qualitative conceptions of language learning appear to be most indicative of readiness for autonomy (Benson and Lor 1998) and this study showed that different conceptions of language learning do influence how learners exercise their potential capacity for making informed decisions about their own learning.

Social awareness
Social awareness refers to learner awareness of the presence of others in the classroom and their willingness to cooperate with others through interaction and collaboration. To build a better team spirit in the class, I had already conducted a group training activity during the first term. In this activity I displayed a transparency of the following question: *How often did you need to work in groups in your secondary English lessons?* I also showed a response scale of: *Very often, Often, Occasionally, Seldom, Never*. I asked the class to respond through a show of hands. The results revealed that 8 out of the 18 students (44%) had occasionally worked in groups while 35% of them indicated they had seldom or never done so. Only 27% of them showed that they had had frequent opportunities to work in groups.

I explained to them that the behaviour called for in a cooperative small group can be radically different from the behaviour called for in a conventional classroom setting. I also explained that we needed to learn to work collaboratively. I then asked them to play a game called *Mission Impossible* in groups of five. After presenting a big bag of cookies to the winning group, I asked them to discuss what skills were needed for successful group work. They identified skills such as good use of body language, a good range of English vocabulary, cooperation and leadership. I then explained that no one person is good at all these skills, that everyone can master at least one and that language skills are but one skill needed to get group work done. Consequently we should appreciate the presence of our classmates and try to learn from one another.

Although I do not know how much this explicit group training activity helped promote positive attitudes towards group work, I believe that some guidelines for successful interactions need to be provided to raise their awareness of what they could do in order to benefit from group work. In second term students were well aware of the presence of others in the classroom and it seems that it took a good team spirit to help promote social autonomy. Below are some comments which reveal student social awareness:

- *All the presentations by classmates are touching. Maybe we are all experiencing the same thing. We all want to know more about each other. I can feel them when they speak. It helps me to understand each other more. The atmosphere is warm indeed.* (Kitty)

- *I've learnt how to analyse a story. I can understand more about the author's view. I think role play is a good game for us because we all like acting! Also, we can have a chance to create some wild ideas through it. The game can break the dead air of our class!* (Sandy)

The use of learner diaries

Students were asked to reflect on the use of the learner diary in Weeks 6 and 15. Their comments show that writing a learner diary can help raise metacognitive awareness. In Week 6 most students could only identify its function as keeping track of their learning process but by Week 15 quite a few could recognise its function in helping them be aware of their learning styles and language problems. Table 3 shows the development of metacognitive awareness in three students over the term.

Language ability	Student comments	Areas of metacognitive awareness demonstrated
Week 6		
High	▪ *Yes, I think it is a communication between you and us. When I see back the learner diary, it helps to remind me the goal I've set before. But maybe it's not necessary to all the classmates. It need not be a compulsory work.* (Larry)	Learning process Social
Medium	▪ *Yes, it reminds me many common problems I've never resolved. It reminds me I have to face them. And I've never reflected my English learning before I enter APA. It much help me to know my weakness in English.* (Ernest)	Learner awareness Subject awareness
Low	▪ *A little bit. When I do the learner diary every week, I really think it is no use. But when you pass the diary back to me, I find that I interest to learn English in some way, such as watch movie, comics etc.* (Derek)	Learner awareness
Week 15		
High	▪ *Yes, I totally agree the use of learner diary. It's a self-reflection and you can see how much we have learnt and we can tell you our problem and suggestion on studying English.* (Larry)	Learning process Social Subject matter
Medium	▪ *To evaluate the learning process and know more about the lesson and the program were taught. Yes, because through the diary, I can know many common problem and what is my barrier in English: but the solution is not clear, so it is hard for me to improve.* (Ernest)	Learning process Learner Subject matter
Low	▪ *When I am writing the diary, I think it is so boring. But now, I watch it. The feeling is good. Because I know what I've learnt and I can see that I improve in English.* (Derek)	Learning process Learner

Table 3: Development of metacognitive awareness

Further metacognitive awareness was demonstrated when some students suggested alternative approaches to writing the learner diary and pointed out problems with the format of diary writing:

▪ *I think keeping a learner diary in class helps me reflect on my language learning partly. I don't want to write under the same title in every week. That is boring. I think maybe can write different title of what I want. It's more interesting and helpful to reflect on my learning.* (Kay)

▪ *It's good to help me remember the lesson, things I learnt. However, not every columns in the learner diary is suitable for every week such as 'future plan' and it is hard to let all the students think deeply since there is no enough time for us to fill in the form.* (Simon)

The teacher-researcher's reflection on her classroom experiences

Undertaking this study has been one of the most rewarding experiences in my professional life. As a language teacher, I have grown professionally as well as personally through experimenting with Exploratory Practice. Before conducting this study, I was worried whether or not I had adequate knowledge to properly promote learner autonomy. As Little (1995: 180) states, *a capacity to argue the importance of learner autonomy is not the same thing as a capacity to promote learner autonomy in the classroom.* However, employing regular learning activities in the classroom as potential investigative

tools did not sound alienating to me and the very nature of Exploratory Practice gave me the confidence to keep trying and learning.

A number of factors in this particular investigation did help me to be more autonomous. Firstly, as the course developer, I understood the rationale for the course and I was very familiar with the course materials and class activities. This gave me a great sense of ownership when implementing the course.

Secondly, the curriculum objectives for the course were relatively broad and my role was to tailor the activities to suit the needs of my class. This meant that I could incorporate regular learning activities into the course to help my students reflect on their learning experiences. As Allwright (1999a) states, language teachers are almost uniquely placed to take advantage of the opportunity to promote learner development. They can do this by putting language learning itself forward as a process worth discussing and making decisions about.

Thirdly, the learner diary records I collected after each lesson provided me with immediate feedback on my teaching and my students' critical comments helped me to be a more reflective teacher. I was often amazed at how observant my students could be when judging the learning value of class activities and the way I conducted my lessons. The first time I read a negative comment about an activity in a learner diary record I paused to reflect on it. I did realise that the particular activity had not gone well in class, but when it was confirmed by my student's written comment, I had a second chance to analyse the situation and see it from my student's perspective. This was an invaluable form of reflection ie: putting myself in my students' shoes when evaluating whether something worked well or not. My students were my best teachers. As Little (1995: 180) points out, to promote learner autonomy in the language classroom, aims, course content, the ways in which course content is mediated, learning tasks and the assessment of learner achievement must all be negotiated and the basis of this negotiation must be a recognition that in the pedagogical process, teachers as well as students, can learn, and students, as well as teachers, can teach.

Fourthly, keeping a teaching diary throughout the research period helped bring my reflection to a conscious level. I had been a language teacher for eight years, but had never before *systematically* recorded my thoughts on my classroom experience. I realised that writing a teaching diary helped me to practise Exploratory Practice with more effectiveness. At the heart of Exploratory Practice is the issue of understanding, but understanding does not arrive without the conscious effort of reflection. I was able to reframe the familiar while confirming my current practice as the following excerpts from my diary show:

- *I realise today that variety of seating arrangement in class helps bring the class alive. It's not just the variety of input in different media; in fact, all kinds of varieties help. Indeed, variety is the spice of life!* (7/2/2002)

- *Putting down the scheduled activities on the board right from the beginning of the class is important. It helps to keep track of things when running the class. It also helps the students to recall their experience when reflecting on what they did today.* (28/2/2002)

Articulating that something worked and understanding why helped me achieve a fuller understanding of my own practice. I was then able to decide on future class activities with more informed planning. This confirms Ellis's (1999) suggestion that there is a close link between good classroom management and lesson planning and the development of learner autonomy.

My final reflection is that I felt empowered to be able to explore my classroom puzzle and promote learner autonomy through Exploratory Practice. During my exploratory journey, I struggled at times when deciding how much control I should give my students. I noticed the different pace of autonomy development in different individual students and wondered whether I should give more freedom to those who were more advanced by letting them write their learner diaries in their own way and at their own pace at home. But I decided not to, because this might have shaken the morale of those who were less advanced. Writing the learner diary in class should be a built-in classroom practice that all students undertake to keep track of their learning and to reflect on their learning in a systematic manner. This proved to be a wise decision considering the fluctuating developmental nature of autonomy in the learners and the time limit for this study.

Conclusion

This study showed that the students in my class developed metacognitive awareness. Learner awareness, subject matter awareness, learning process awareness and social awareness were raised to varying degrees in different students. Both the students and the teacher became more autonomous and the quality of life in the classroom improved. I concluded that both learner autonomy and teacher autonomy can be promoted through Exploratory Practice.

However having drawn this conclusion, the following limitations should be acknowledged:

1   Time constraints always operate in the classroom.
2   Being able to critically reflect on one's learning experience is a skill that takes time and practice to learn. It might be demanding for the students to learn to reflect on their learning experiences immediately after each session. Some students may need more time to digest what they have learnt and it may take them longer to think and write about their feelings and thoughts. Language proficiency may also be a constraint. The students' writing ability may hinder them from expressing or articulating their reflective process, especially when this is done in the target language. First language may be accepted when students have difficulty in exp ressing themselves.
3   There is a concern about the effect of *pleasing the teacher*. If the writing of the learner diary is towards the course grade, the students may tend to put positive comments in their diary records.

In the study I conducted I believe that the *please the teacher* effect was minimized by the constant open discussions in class. Although there were a number of limitations with writing the learner diary in class, it was only one of the classroom activities that aimed to promote learner autonomy. Many other class activities were also employed to heighten learner metacognitive awareness and promote shared responsibility. I believe that the learners' improved positive attitude towards language learning and their willingness to take more responsibility for learning were preliminary signs of learner autonomy. As Little (1995) argues, if learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent, then the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the promotion of teacher autonomy.

I believe future teacher education programs should provide trainee teachers with the skills to develop autonomy in the learners. More studies in different contexts need to be conducted so that the results can be shared to inspire ingenious ways of implementing Exploratory Practice. This paper is an attempt to share the results of how Exploratory Practice works in an EFL classroom. I hope that the findings of the study may provide some insights for language teachers who are interested in experimenting with similar ideas in their classrooms.

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