Autonomy and Strategizing in Self-directed Language Learning

Don SNOW
Nanjing University, PRC

Autonomous language learning requires not only initial planning of self-directed study efforts, but also modification and improvement of strategies after such efforts begin. As language teachers consider how best to support students in their early experiences with autonomous modes of language learning, and also how to help learners become more effective strategy users, a deeper understanding of the early phases of self-directed study efforts is valuable because it helps teachers know how best to offer support. This paper reports on a journal study that examines the experience of a group of language learners in China as they design and carry out self-directed language learning projects. The study concludes that, for a significant number of learners, the process of adapting and modifying their plans is not completed during the first few weeks, which suggests that support over longer periods may be valuable. The study also concludes that combining strategy instruction with a language learning task results in more serious attention to strategizing on the part of students.

Introduction

Within the language teaching community there is widespread agreement that it is desirable for learners to be autonomous, in other words, to be able to design, direct, and carry out their own language learning efforts. Of course, as Nunan (1997) points out, autonomy is a relative concept rather than an absolute one, with the different levels of autonomy distinguished in large part by how many of the choices involved in language learning are made by students themselves; the more of the choices students are able and willing to make, the more autonomous they are. We can thus view the building of autonomy as a process of increasing learner involvement in organizing the learning process, and also