Book Review[3]: Phil Benson, 'Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning'. (Harlow, UK, Longman/Pearson Education, 2011, 283 pages, 123 USD (Hardcover) ISBN-13: 978-1408205013

KEUK Chan Narith* & LIM Chantha
Institute of Foreign Languages of the Royal University of Phnom Penh, Russian Federation Boulevard, Toul Kork, Phnom Penh, Cambodia
*Corresponding Author: KEUK Chan Narith (keukrith@gmail.com)

Phill Benson's thought-provoking book, *Teaching and researching autonomy*, provides important views about teaching and researching regarding learner autonomy in (language) classrooms. This book has illuminated educational policy makers, curriculum developers, managers, teachers and various other professionals who are concerned about developing learner autonomy with core principles about learner autonomy, practices of (language) learner autonomy, and research areas about (language) learner autonomy. The book comprises four sections, each of which consists of several chapters. Additional information such as quotes and explanations, short synopses of relevant concepts, and bibliographies of the relevant scholars have also been portrayed in each chapter to enhance readers' comprehension of the chapter.

---

[3]This book review is based on original contribution of author.

Learner autonomy is a fundamental component of lifelong learning (Gavrilyuk, 2015). It is a learning skill which has recently drawn serious attention from the Royal Government of Cambodia, especially the Ministry of Education Youth and Sport (MoEYS) in its deep reform of the education sector in Cambodia (MoEYS, 2004, 2015, 2018). In Cambodia, lifelong learning is a newly developing concept, and it has become known after the adaption of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015. One of the 17 goals of SDG, Goal 4 aims to "ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all" by 2030. Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as learners' ability to account for their learning, and this notion of learner autonomy has been enhanced upon by various scholars, applied linguists, researchers, teachers, and other professionals who advocate promoting autonomous learning to empower learners with lifelong learning skills.

Section 1 of the book consists of six chapters. This section provides an overview of "learner autonomy" in various contexts, and how it is established in language classrooms. Chapter 1 describes an origin of learner autonomy; autonomy and self-access; autonomy and learning training; autonomy and individualization; and autonomy and independence. This chapter also focuses on why learner autonomy should or should not be adopted for teaching and learning. Benson also explains the two faces of learner autonomy, i.e., a rise of learner autonomy and the relation between education and employability.

In Chapter 2, Benson further explains learner autonomy beyond the scope of language education. First, the education reform, which has occurred almost everywhere around the globe, has brought about a change in the way

teaching is conducted; that is, a move toward classroom-based approaches which foster autonomy. Second, Benson points out the emergence as well as the development of learner autonomy in different fields, such as adult education, the psychology of learning, and the philosophy of personal autonomy. This overview has assisted readers in conceptualizing learner autonomy appropriately before they further read subsequent chapters.

Chapter 3 reveals a clear conceptualization of learner autonomy, including dimensions of autonomy; versions of autonomy; measuring autonomy; and autonomy and culture. This chapter helps readers broaden their understanding about learner autonomy – students taking responsibility for their learning; that is, students determine objectives; define what they will learn and how they learn it; select methods and techniques for learning and monitoring the progress of learning; and evaluate what has been learned.

Chapters 4 and 5 discuss a concept of control which is "a natural attribute of learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 73) and its dimensions with references to substantial evidence of various research to create strong sustenance of learner autonomy. Benson argues that (adult) learners exercise control over learning of their desire and even without any particular training in self-directed learning. Chapter 4 explains the kind of control in terms of autonomy, encompassing self-management in learning; learner agendas in the classroom; control of psychological factors influencing learning; and seeds of autonomy. Chapter 5, moreover, discusses the dimensions of control in terms of control over learning management; control over cognitive processing; and control over learning content. Chapter 6 provides a brief conclusion of this first section, stating that the concept of learner autonomy has long been discussed

and researched in the fields of education, psychology and philosophy. The evidence from the research related to autonomy could yield a learner autonomy framework that can be adopted for practices in classrooms.

Section 2 of the book focuses on the practices of learner autonomy. It comprises eight chapters (i.e., Chapters 7 to 14). This section aims to "explain how practitioners and researchers can better demonstrate the effectiveness of their work in the field of autonomy; describe the main areas of practice associated with autonomy in language learning; and discuss evidence for effectiveness within these areas of practice in terms of autonomy and better language learning" (Benson, 2011, p. 121).

In Chapter 7, Benson first distinguishes three essential terms such as 'autonomy' – a learner attribute; 'autonomous learning' – a mode of learning; and 'autonomous learning programmes' – educational practices designed to foster autonomy. Second, Benson introduces six different types of approaches which are used to develop learner autonomy. These approaches are resource-based approaches, technology-based approaches, learner-based approaches, classroom-based approaches, curriculum-based approaches, and teacher-based approaches. Each of these approaches is detailed in subsequent chapters.

Chapter 8 unfolds how learner autonomy is created and fostered through resource-based learning. This chapter provides learners with opportunities to self-organize and self-direct their learning. To help practitioners of learner autonomy achieve high potential practice of autonomy, Benson demonstrates various kinds of approaches that promote autonomous learning opportunities; that is, creating self-access centers,

tandem learning, distance learning, self-instruction, and out-of-class learning. In this chapter, Benson also discusses factors that contribute to the effectiveness of the resource-based approaches to autonomous learning regarding collaboration in resource-based learning, structure and support in resource-based learning, and skills in resource-based learning.

Chapter 9 reveals the essential roles of technology in assisting learners in self-organizing and self-directing their learning. Benson discusses the roles of technology in promoting autonomous learning in terms of computer-assisted language learning (CALL) and the internet, which allow learners to manage time and learning more efficiently and effectively; access to available resources when needed for learning; manage reading and writing effectively; and a combination of learning and entertainment. Benson argues that using technology-based approaches to teaching and learning empowers learners with their control over learning regarding managing the learning process and allowing more extensive access to authentic target language sources.

Chapter 10 is about using learner-based approaches to promote autonomous learning. The learner-based approaches rely on "learners' development, or behavioural and psychological change within the learners themselves" (Benson, 2011, p. 154). In contrast to the resource-based and technology-based approaches, which seek to provide opportunities for learners' self-directed learning, the learner-based approaches promote learners' control over learning. Benson discusses some factors which have impacts on learners regarding autonomous learning. These factors include learning strategies that learners adopt to fulfill learning goals; the kinds of activities, especially task-based activities, which promote autonomous

learning; learners' language proficiency; types of texts; language modality; contexts of learning; background knowledge; target language and learner characteristics.

Chapter 11 expands the opportunities for promoting autonomous learning through classroom-based approaches, i.e., involving learners in making decision on learning processes. Benson argues that creating a collaborative and supportive learning environment in a classroom is essential for learners to develop autonomy. Factors such as creating a classroom learning environment that is appropriate to learners' learning styles, fostering collaborative and motivational tasks, and providing opportunities to learners to freely respond to tasks are conducive to enhancing learners' autonomous learning. Benson points out a practical approach for properly assessing learners' learning outcomes using a formative assessment that evaluates learners' learning performances rather than following a traditional assessment approach – a summative assessment.

Chapter 12 further expands the opportunities for autonomous learning through promoting learners' participation in creating curriculum by making decisions on the course content and procedures of learning through working with their teachers. This chapter provides five principles based on Cotteral (2000) for a course design that promotes autonomous learning. This chapter also demonstrates evidence of the effectiveness of involving learners in developing curriculum because learners have opportunities to exercise their control over learning at a certain number of levels.

In Chapter 13, Benson discusses the significant roles of teachers in promoting autonomous learning. These roles include facilitators, helpers,

coordinators, councilors, consultants, advisers, knowers and resource. Besides these essential roles of teachers in enhancing learner autonomy in the classroom, developing teacher autonomy through teacher professional development, teacher research, reflective practice, and action research, is necessary. Benson argues that changing and training teachers to become autonomous teachers is a fundamental step toward preparing and training learners to be autonomous learners.

Chapter 14 summarizes these six approaches, i.e., resource-based; technology-based; learner-based; teacher-based; classroom-based; and curriculum-based approaches, the combination of which contributes to promoting autonomous learning. However, as Benson argues in this chapter, for learner autonomy to be successfully and effectively developed, implemented, and fostered, it requires learners' will or desire to adopt a learner autonomy approach and teachers' willingness to modify ways of teaching and learning, which were teacher-dominated learning methods, to be one that promotes learners' self-organized and directed learning.

Following Section 2, which has demonstrated six approaches to developing, implementing and fostering learner autonomy as stated earlier, Section 3 of the book, comprising two sub-sections, first provides key areas for research or action research in the field of autonomy. Second, it demonstrates and showcases six important case studies undertaken to examine teachers' research activities on learner autonomy. Case study 1 examined how pre-service teachers and novice teachers in Hong Kong promoted autonomous learning among their students using out-of-class learning activities. Case study 2 examined how a self-organized language learning community developed

autonomous learning. Case study 3 investigated learners' and teachers' satisfaction and attitude towards language advising or counselling within a self-directed skill. Case study 4 explored the practices of self-directed learning in the classroom. Case study 5 focused on the effectiveness of learner autonomy in enhancing learners' language proficiency. Case study 6 explored the experiences of high achieving self-directed learners and the effects that these high achieving independent learners' learning behaviour might have on their learning progress. These case studies are exempla for scholars, teachers, and other professionals to construct a research design appropriately to study the practices of autonomous learning.

Section 4 of the book provides useful resources for research and practices of learner autonomy. These resources include books, journals and newspapers, conferences and workshops, professional organizations, and various research journals which publish research related to autonomous learning.

This book, being three-in-one, i.e., focusing on relevant concepts about autonomous learning, fundamental approaches for developing autonomous learning, and potential areas for teachers' research or action research to promote learner autonomy as well as case studies of learner autonomy, is significant, yet practical, for educational policy makers, curriculum developers, managers, scholars, applied linguists, teachers and other professionals who seek to develop, implement and foster autonomous learning. Not only does this reader-friendly and thought-provoking book assist these concerned people in conceptualizing learner autonomy, but it also helps them create a learning environment, which follows resource-based; technology-based;

learner-based; teacher-based; classroom-based; and curriculum-based approaches, that allows autonomous learning activities to be adopted by the learners. Upon reading this book, they will be able to construct teaching models for practising learner autonomy as well as research designs for exploring the practices of learner autonomy in the classrooms to get better views of learner autonomy and practices of learner autonomy and enhance the quality of teaching.

References

Benson, P. (2011). *Teaching and researching autonomy*. Harlow: Pearson Education Limited.

Cotteral, S. (2000). Promoting learner autonomy through the curriculum: Principles for designing language courses. *ELT Journal, 54*(2). doi:10.1093/elt/54.2.109

Gavrilyuk, O. A. (2015). Autonomy is a core value of lifelong learning. *Journal of Siberian Federal University. Humanities & Social Sciences, 8*(11), 2283-2290. doi:10.17516/1997-1370-2015-8-11-2283-2290

Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and foreign language learning*: Council of Europe.

MoEYS. (2004). *Policy and strategies on information and communication technology in education in Cambodia*. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education Youth and Sport.

MoEYS. (2015). *Curriculum framework for general education and technical education*. Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education Youth and Sport.

MoEYS. (2018). *Detailed syllabus for English subject for upper secondary school* Phnom Penh: Ministry of Education Youth and Sport.