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Basikin, et al.



Selected Papers
The 15th Asia TEFL &
64th TEFLIN International Conference

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Multiple Intelligences based Diaries and Learners' Autonomy in Learning Vocabulary

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Abstract:

This study examined the impact of multiple intelligences (MI)-related diaries and EFL university learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary as well as their English proficiency. The research involved 36 EFL university students in an English reading class at Vinh University in Vietnam. The study used mixed methods of data collection including autonomy questionnaires, students' diaries, and interviews. Results indicated that there was a significant improvement of learner's autonomy in learning new words in terms of learning process management, learning strategies and motivation. There was a significant correlation between EFL learner's autonomy and their English proficiency test scores. The study recommends the use of MI-related diaries in English teaching and learning with some suggested considerations.

Key words: Multiple Intelligences Theory, Learner's autonomy, diaries, vocabulary learning.

1. INTRODUCTION

Most learners and teachers understand the importance of vocabulary acquisition. It is generally believed that if language structures make up the skeleton of language, then it is vocabulary that provides the vital organ and flesh (Harmer, 1997). One of the aspects of vocabulary acquisition that has attracted researchers' attention was incidental and intentional learning. Paribakht & Wesche (1993, 1997) found that intentional vocabulary learning yields a better result than incidental vocabulary learning. However, vocabulary learning has not been specified as a training program in the Vietnamese tertiary training framework. Vocabulary teaching is usually integrated into other skills, especially in reading, for a limited time. Moreover, learner autonomy seems to be a concept used in the Western context, many EFL students entering a university may have already formed some personal habits of being heavily dependent. Quynh (2013) found that Vietnamese

students still need their teachers to play the roles of a guide or learning facilitator who provide them with guidance and directions about the process of learning, including vocabulary learning. Therefore, it is necessary to have a change in teaching method that can promote autonomous vocabulary learning among tertiary students in Vietnam, because language learning proficiency could be improved when learners were encouraged to become more autonomous by developing effective strategies (Benson, 2006). Inspired from Multiple Intelligences (henceforth MI) Theory, this study was an attempt to implement MI based diary strategies into vocabulary teaching in order to assist students to be more autonomous in their vocabulary learning.

For all the above reasons, this study attempts to investigate the relationship between MI based diaries as homework and EFL university learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary and to see if there is any correlation between learners' autonomy and their English proficiency.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 MI theory

MI theory was proposed in 1983 by Howard Gardner, a psychologist at Harvard University. With a broader approach to human intellectual functioning, Gardner never expected his theory become so popular among educators. Using an elaborate set of criteria, including evidence from studies of brain damage, prodigies, developmental patterns, cross-cultural comparisons, and various types of tests, he identifies eight central intelligences: (1) linguistic: capacity to use words effectively, orally or in writing; (2) logical-mathematical: capacity to use numbers effectively and to reason well; (3) visual-spatial: ability of using mental imagery for discerning orientation in space; (4) bodily-kinesthetic: capacity of using physical body movements to express emotion and ideas; (5) musical: capacity to perceive, transform, and express musical forms; (6) interpersonal: ability to perceive and make distinction in the moods, intentions, motivations and feelings of other people; (7) intrapersonal: self-knowledge and ability to act adaptively on the basis of that knowledge; (8) naturalist: expertise in the recognition and classification of the numerous species - the flora and the fauna - of an individual environment. Gardner explains about the possible intelligence: "existential intelligence", which he suggests as the ninth one (Gardner, 1999).

In language teaching, Multiple Intelligence theory also opens a new window to teaching and learning process. Since the birth of MI theory, many books, professional papers, and journal articles have been published to fill the perceived gap in field research related to classroom lesson planning language learning. There has been much research about the application of the MI theory in language acquisition, especially in foreign and second language settings (Richards & Rogers, 2001). Armstrong (2009) suggests that MI possesses potential to be used in the teaching and learning of languages, as it provides multiple routes to learning. Gahala and Lange (1997, p.34) explained that "teaching [foreign language] with MIs is a way of taking differences among students seriously, sharing that knowledge with students and parents, guiding students in taking responsibility for their own learning, and presenting worthwhile materials that maximize learning and understanding". Sharing the same view, Richard & Rogers (2001) affirmed that the enhancement of MI theory into ESL teaching and learning provides teachers with a number of teaching strategies and approaches. MI-based instructions motivate learners by spurring multiple ways of ascribing meaning to vocabulary being acquired. Morgan and Fonesca (2004) also made a similar point and detail how each intelligence proposed by Gardner can be applied to improve ESL teaching. They concluded that MI is very promising in the domain of teaching ESL, if handled appropriately in the classroom.

In Vietnam, this theory is not new. Long (2011) translated the third edition of *Multiple Intelligences in the classroom* into Vietnamese, and this book has become one of the "interesting books to read" for Vietnamese readers. However, there is a lack of research relating to the applications of MI theory in an EFL context. Attracted by MI theory in 2011, the researcher did some related researches and found that many researchers have indicated a positive correlation between MI strategies and vocabulary learning (Armstrong, 2009; Razmjoo, 2009; Javanmard, 2012; Farahani & Kalkhoran, 2014; Isabella, 2013; Grammarawi, 2014). The findings of those qualitative and quantitative studies have shown that MI theory has a positive influence on vocabulary acquisition. However, different learners from different cultures may possess different results, and this is the first research that tried to implement MI-based diary to promote students' autonomy in learning English vocabulary.

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2.2. Autonomy

Even though learner autonomy has received interest in the field of education as well as in language learning, its definition tends to vary in the literature. Holec (1981, p.3) mentioned it as "the ability to take charge of one's learning". Little (1991) also defines learner autonomy as 'essentially the matter of the learners' psychological relation to the process and content of learning, a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" (p.4). Each point of view looks at autonomy with different aspects. This study was inspired from Benson (2006)'s definition, which is considered more specific towards language learning. According to Benson (2006, p.1), "autonomy is about people taking more control over their lives- individually and collectively. Autonomy in learning is about people taking more control over their learning in classrooms and outside them and autonomy in language learning about people taking more control over the purpose for which they learn languages and the ways in which they learn them."

3. METHOD

3.1. Research questions

- To what extent do MI-based journals affect EFL learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary?
- What is the relationship between learners' autonomy levels and their English proficiency?

3.2. Research context

The research was conducted over twelve week period in an English major reading class of Vinh University in Vietnam. The textbook was Q Skills-reading and writing 2, targeting at the B1 level in the CEFR. Each of the ten units in this course book consists of a vocabulary section, two reading texts, followed by different types of reading comprehension questions. Even though the text book was used as the official one in the foreign languages department, the lesson plan depends on the individual teachers. Therefore, there exists a lot of room for teachers to develop their creativity during teaching time.

3.3. Participants

The participants of the present study were 36 EFL students of Foreign Language Department at Vinh University. They were all second-year students

and studying English during their third semester. The study was carried out in their Reading classes. They are all at the same level in English: B1.

3.4. Instrumentation

A methodological triangulation was used to collect the data in this study, including autonomy questionnaire, students' diaries, interview and English proficiency test.

3.3.1. Autonomy questionnaire:

The autonomy questionnaire was set up to investigate students' three levels of control over their English learning. There were 51 likert questions which were designed based on those three inter-related levels: management of learning process (questions 1-27), learning strategies (28-35), and motivation toward English (36-51). The reliability of the questionnaire was tested before the administration with the internal consistency of 0.84.

3.3.2. Students' diaries

These diaries were written by students after each unit in reading class. Students were asked to describe their vocabulary learning. The work should include all the new words they learnt from the lesson. There were 12 diaries after 12 units for each student. These diaries were instructed by the teacher in the light of MI theory. For the first eight weeks, eight diaries were asked to write in MI styles: linguistic, visual, intrapersonal, interpersonal, mathematical, kinesthetic, musical and naturalist. For the last four weeks, students were allowed to choose their preferred styles to write.

3.3.3. Interview

There are eight main questions in the interview, which aimed to explore students' self-evaluation of their autonomy as well as their perception of MI-based diaries in vocabulary learning.

3.3.4 Proficiency test

The test covered grammar, reading and writing. It was designed based on B1 level. There were ten questions of vocabulary and grammar, three reading tests and a 100-word writing test. The test-takers were required to complete the test for 90 minutes. The maximum score of the test was 10. The test was taken from Preliminary Four Practice test book by Collin (2014).

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3.4. Procedure

To begin with, the researcher explained to her students about the requirements she was going to make in order to help their vocabulary learning better. The MI theory was also introduced to inform students the purpose of differentiating the diary instructions as well as to make them take consciousness about their potentials. Accordingly, each student was required to write a diary every week about their word they learnt after each reading unit had finished. For these first four weeks, students were instructed to complete the diaries, which should include all the new words they learnt during a unit, with four different requirements, which were inspired by MI framework: describing the vocabulary learning in linguistic style, visual style, intrapersonal style and interpersonal style, respectively. The diaries were weekly collected by the teacher to evaluate and suggest for better work. No score was given. The purpose was to make students get familiar with various strategies of learning vocabulary. These four intelligence types were chosen because the data from MI survey showed that these were four most dominant intelligences among EFL university students in the study.

For the next four weeks, students were free to choose their styles among the four left types of intelligences: naturalist, musical, mathematical and kinesthetic. As these types of intellectual ability seem not be easy to implement in their vocabulary learning, a Facebook class group was set up for the teacher to give advice and recommendation to learners if they needed help. The MI-based strategies provided to students were consulted from two books: *A Multiple Intelligences Road to An ELT Classroom* (Berman, 2002) and *Multiple Intelligences and Language Learning* (Christison, 2005). However, regarding kinesthetic style, after the unit, the teacher divided the class into six groups and involved them into the "mimic" game. It means each group had a representative to make gestures to define the word, the other members should guess what the words were and write these words on the board.

For the last four week, students were allowed to choose their preferred styles. No guidance or instruction was given. The diaries were still collected weekly, and no score was given.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 MI-based journals and learner autonomy in learning vocabulary

To answer the first research question about the impact of MI based diaries on EFL university learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary, the researchers collected and analyzed the autonomy questionnaire, students' journals and interviews. As a result, it is proven that writing MI journals positively affected EFL learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary in many ways. Table 1 presents the results collected from the two autonomy questionnaires.

Table 1. Mean and Standard deviation of pre and post autonomy questionnaires.

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation
learning process management	Pre-test	36	2.6	.37
	Post-test	36	2.8	.45
Learning strategies	Pre-test	36	3.3	.58
	Post-test	36	3.6	.59
Motivation	Pre-test	36	3.1	.57
	Post-test	36	3.5	.54

As illustrated in Table 1, when comparing the difference between the pre-test and the post-test, we could see that students' scores increased in three factors. For the learning process management, the score increased from 2.6 to 2.8, while the difference in learning strategies management is 0.3. The highest improvement is put on motivation with the mean of 3.1 in the pre-test to 3.5 in the post-test. These findings are consistent with Campell & Campell's (1999) and Lazer's (1999) findings which indicated that MI instruction fosters students' self-esteem and teachers' self-efficacy. However, quantitative data cannot itself show us a deep understanding of how these participants' autonomy level improved after the treatment, the qualitative data were taken into account.

Regarding learning process, the data from diaries and interviews showed that students managed their time well to write the diaries. For the

first diary, two students did not complete their tasks. One sent this email to the teacher:

"Today I really didn't want to get up, but I had to do. It is raining cats and dogs. I went to school at 8.15 a.m to learn reading subject. I thought about journal and I hate this thing. Rather, my reading teacher gave us much homework. Although I am lazy, I will try to complete it. I hope I study better."

However, when the teacher gave them their friends' diaries to discuss and clarify the instructions, these students felt ashamed and sent another diary the following day. The next week, all of them finished their diaries before going to the next class. They all felt excited to have a check from their partners or teacher. Besides, they confessed that before the treatment, their learning of vocabulary depends much on teacher's instructions and requirement. The diaries really made them think of the need for spaced practice.

In term of vocabulary learning strategies, before the treatment, students reported written repetition and rote memorization as their only strategies to memorize the words. One of these students shared:

"I don't have many strategies, in some way I can say that I am not well at studying new words. I usually meet them accidentally, I used them and after that I remembered them".

Thanks to MI-based diaries, they now know how to enrich their strategies, at least in eight ways, to learn vocabulary. For example, learning new words might be writing a poem, making a story or creating a mind map, using Keyword Method, mimic games, etc. The more ways they can spend time on, the longer they can keep the words in mind.

With regard to students' motivation, findings from fifteen questions in the questionnaire indicate an increase in students' motivation. This result is consistent with the data from the interviews where students highly appreciated the various approaches to vocabulary learning. MI-based diary not only gave them a multi-ways to learn new words, but also it helped them to have different exploitations of a problem. The MI-based methods gave them an insight to their potentials to discover what they really need to have an effective retention of words. This finding is in line with Cash's (2011) finding

which showed that the use of MI in the classroom motivates and energizes both teachers and students.

To sum up, writing journals based on MI theory encouraged learners' autonomy. It helped learners find out their preferred learning ways and depend on that to either create their own way to study or pluralize their vocabulary learning in a more efficient way. The development of students' awareness, involvement is noticeable. Thereby, discovering the most appropriate ways to apply MI diaries is necessary in order to grow learners' autonomy in learning vocabulary.

4.2. Relationship between learners' autonomy levels and English proficiency

To answer the second question, an examination of the correlation between the proficiency test and autonomy level was taken. The proficiency level was divided into two groups. The low group consisted of 15 students whose test scores were between 0 and 5.0, the high group had 21 students whose test scores were above 5.0. Descriptive statistics were run, and then Pearson correlation was used to see if there was any positive relationship between these two variables (see Table 2).

Table 2: Relationship between autonomy level and English proficiency

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	Sig
Low proficiency group	15	2.95	.38	.09	.045
High proficiency group	21	3.23	.41	.08	

As can be seen in Table 2, there was a positive relationship between students' autonomy level and English proficiency. The mean of autonomy level among low proficiency group is 2.95. Meanwhile, the mean of high proficiency group is 3.23. The result of correlation analysis in Table 2 showed that the significance value is .045. Since the p-value is smaller than .05, it is concluded that students who achieve a higher level of autonomy in learning vocabulary have a higher level of English proficiency. This interesting finding is in line with Benson (1996, 2001, 2006) who stressed that language learning proficiency could be improved when learners were encouraged to become more autonomous by developing effective strategies.

4.3 Conclusion

This study purported at the impact of MI diaries and learner's autonomy in learning vocabulary. Before that treatment, autonomy questionnaire was administered to 36 EFL students at Vinh University in Vietnam. During fourteen weeks of treatment, participants were asked to write different types of journal about their vocabulary learning by including new words learnt from the unit.

One of the significant findings emerged from this study was that most of the participants became more autonomous in their vocabulary learning in terms of learning process management, learning strategies and motivation. These findings suggest that MI-based journals play a certain role in assisting EFL learners to improve their autonomy in learning vocabulary. One of the practical implications of this finding may be that English language teachers should differentiate the instructions in at least eight ways to make students aware of their learning and guiding them the ways they would be more autonomous, more enjoyable in learning English. MI theory can be considered as the framework which paves the way for learners to explore their potentials and approach any problem in many points of view.

The results of this study also indicate that there is a positive correlation between students' English proficiency and autonomy level. The group that had the higher test scores had higher autonomy scores. Similarly, the group with lower proficiency test scores had lower scores on autonomy questionnaire. This reinforces the reliability of the main findings and strengthens the view that learner's autonomy has a close relationship with their language competency.

Finally, some suggestions are provided for the researchers who are interested in this field. As it was discussed in this study owing to the findings, it will be effective to apply MI theory in designing the syllabus and developing educational curriculum and classroom activities whereupon EFL learners can satisfy themselves in language learning and they can learn better and more autonomously.

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