

Developing learner independence through collaborative learning:: some practical considerations

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The paper discusses the second phase of an intervention, which examines how collaborative learning may contribute to the development of learner independence. Based on the results of the first phase of the intervention, which provides learner training to a group of international students in a British higher education context, the second phase takes a more collaborative nature. A discussion of this implementation and the learners' attitudes towards it will be provided, indicating how collaborative learning took place and became a contributing factor in developing learner independence.

The proposed paper discusses certain practical considerations in promoting learner independence through collaborative learning. It is based on the second phase of an intervention, namely a Learning Support Group (LSG), which aimed at investigating how enhanced support could be provided to a group of East Asian undergraduate students, as an enrichment to a British higher education institute's support system. The LSG incorporates more group work, such as small group discussions and group presentations, based on the participants' suggestions in the first phase, namely the Learner Training Course (LTC), through which participants' awareness in strategy use was raised and, which aimed at promoting learner independence.

Examining Vygotsky's (1978) ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development), Bruner's (1975) notion of 'scaffolding', the benefits of collaborative learning, as well as taking into consideration the participants' suggestions and preferences, group work was then implemented in the LSG. The present paper provides a description of the design of the LSG, which generates from the overall theory of Supplemental Instruction (SI – Rust and Wallace, 1994). Following, examples and a deeper insight of the participants' comments will be provided with regard to the usefulness of group discussions and the ways in which collaborative learning took place in this second phase of the intervention. Participants, in particular, commented on how useful group discussions were, in motivating them to express their opinion and develop their oral skills, and helping them better understand the content of the texts provided. Their comments also show that collaborative learning enabled them to develop their knowledge of the world and their vocabulary, and to acquire new ways of thinking and analysing when dealing with English texts. Finally, an overall picture of the impact of collaborative learning in the LSG is drawn, illustrating how it may be used as a contributing factor in learner training – and thus, the promotion of learner independence - in providing further support to undergraduate students in a British higher education context, as well as suggesting the possibility of implementing it in wider contexts.