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Review Article

Autonomous learning in Cambodia: A solution for problematic educational conditions?

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Abstract

In 2019, the Cambodian Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) launched an initiative to promote autonomous learning among teachers, school directors, and students. MoEYS' strategy was born out of the need to address persistent educational challenges faced by many Cambodians. After briefly discussing the construct of learner autonomy, this paper first examines the educational conditions that prompted MoEYS' autonomous learning initiative. It then moves to explore the history of autonomous learning through the example context of foreign language education in Cambodia in order to provide insights into the rationale behind the initiative. The paper then closes with a discussion of how, in spite of difficulties, such insights and recent Cambodian research in support of them can collectively serve as a modern solution to the country's educational issues and pave the way to its further progress in learning.

Keywords: Autonomous learning; educational conditions; self-access centers; Cambodia

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Introduction

A number of Cambodian scholars have discussed the importance of autonomy in education (see, e.g., Keo, 2021; Keuk & Heng, 2016; Meng, 2020; Sok, 2021). According to Benson (2011a), learner autonomy is "the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (p. 58). Becoming an effective, autonomous learner thus entails learning how to learn. Benson (2011a) further explains that "autonomy is a multidimensional capacity that will take different forms for different individuals," meaning that autonomy can be realized in a variety of ways by different learners (p. 58). Thus, learner autonomy should not be confused with other, more narrowly defined notions like independent learning or self-instruction. While independent learning suggests learning by oneself, self-instruction often refers to a way of learning that is largely determined by specially designed materials (Benson, 2011b). Similarly, in the Cambodian context, there have been recent studies making connections between the use of online (Meng, 2021) and blended learning (Sim & Em, 2023) with autonomous learning. While this trend is somewhat encouraging, it is important to understand that learner autonomy is a rich construct that implies more than utilizing online tools or learning outside of the classroom. As will be seen below, a failure to fully grasp what learner autonomy means can result in negative consequences for learners and institutions.

Since 2019, the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport (MoEYS) of Cambodia has promoted the notion of autonomous learning as an alternative or informal mode of education aimed at teachers, school directors, and ultimately Cambodian youth. This policy, as Sustainable Development Goal 4 of Cambodia's Education 2030 Road Map, has been enacted as a means to account for the learning of those not in school and to ensure all learners, regardless of age, have increased opportunities to gain new knowledge and skills. As a result, many Cambodian educators now see it as fundamental to life-long learning (Keuk & Heng, 2016; Ly et al., 2011; Sam et al., 2012; Sok, 2021). The main reason for MoEYS' (2019) autonomous learning initiative is rooted in a number of educational conditions that continue to plague common Cambodians. Hence, what follows is first a discussion of these concerns. Thereafter, an example history of autonomous learning as it specifically applies to foreign language education in Cambodia is explored to contextualize and better understand the reasons behind MoEYS' initiative. This paper then concludes by looking at how

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this initiative can be a solution to the educational conditions and a further way forward for the country.

Cambodia's educational conditions

For many Cambodians, access to and the affordability of education are problems (Doeur, 2022; Ilie & Rose, 2018). To be specific, most educational institutions, particularly at the tertiary level, are situated in and around Phnom Penh. Hence, many living in the countryside simply cannot get a quality education because of the distance, the cost to relocate or commute to Phnom Penh, and the tuition fees, driven by a rise in educational privatization (Ban & Heng, 2023; Brehm, 2021, Heng et al., 2023).

But even if one can access and afford to go to school, there remain matters that are endemic to many schools. Dem (2017), Heng et al. (2023), and Sol (2021) have documented that many Cambodian schools suffer from limited on-campus learning resources (e.g., insufficient and outdated library books; a lack of digital infrastructure and reliable and fast internet services to access up-to-date journals and articles; lack of human resource support for learning outside the classroom, etc.). Moreover, there have been reports of insufficient academic and non-academic support services for learners (Ek & Muth, 2023; Im, 2020) and a lack of other alternative and informal learning spaces (Eam, 2022; Em, 2022; Sam et al., 2012). To compound the issue, concerns have been raised about the quality of education in terms of teaching and learning (Doeur, 2022; Ford, 2003; Nhem, 2022; Sam et al., 2012; Tao & Kao, 2023). Indeed, there continues to be much teacher-centered instruction and little autonomous learning to this day (Chet et al., 2014; Eam, 2022; Em, 2022; Khieng et al., 2022; Khoun, 2020; Ngin, 2018; Sam et al., 2012; Sok, 2021). What is more, many teachers are overworked and often unavailable for learners to consult with (Sam et al., 2012). Additionally, they often moonlight at other universities to supplement their income (Ahrens & McNamara, 2013; Brooks & Ly, 2010; Eam, 2015, 2022).

Hence, taken together, the aforesaid issues have resulted in high drop-out rates and high rates of socially and economically disadvantaged learners (Sambath, 2021) who lack foreign language and communication skills, technical skills, and collaboration and problem-solving skills in the work sector (Khoun, 2020; National Employment Agency, 2018).

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Autonomous learning in Cambodia: A historical example from foreign language education

In order to learn from the past, it is instructive to review an autonomous learning initiative in Cambodia. In the field of foreign language education, self-access centers (SACs) have been instituted as a way of fostering autonomous learning. Cotterall and Reinders (2001) explain that a SAC

> consists of a number of resources (in the form of materials, activities and support) usually located in one place, and is designed to accommodate learners of different levels, styles, goals and interests. It aims to develop learner autonomy amongst its users. Self Access Language Learning is the learning which takes place in a Self Access Centre. (p. 24)

Having emerged in Europe in the 1970s, the practice of SACs and self-access learning has been adopted in many other parts of the world, with a particularly strong presence in France, the UK, Australia, New Zealand, Hong Kong, Japan, and Thailand (Benson, 2011a; Gardner & Miller, 1999). While SACs do exist in Cambodia, they are comparatively limited in number. It is not surprising, then, that very little research has been done on them in Cambodia (see, e.g., Nay, 1997).

There is, however, one notable study by Jones (1995), who detailed the development of a SAC at Phnom Penh University (PPU) in the mid-1990s. This paper has been cited and discussed by other researchers as an example of setting up a SAC outside of the so-called expanding circle of English (Kachru, 1992) and the intercultural challenges that come with it.

Jones (1995) discussed various challenges he faced when setting up a SAC at PPU, now known as the Royal University of Phnom Penh (RUPP). Citing the historian Chandler (1983), an Australian historian of Cambodia, Jones, at the time, seemed to view Cambodians as empty vessels who are dependent on the teacher for the transmission of knowledge. Such beliefs led him to the conclusion that Cambodians were "predisposed against autonomy" (p. 230). This created an issue for him, as SACs are meant to promote autonomous learning. Another problem was that Jones (1995) believed autonomy to be a "Western idea, and may come upon the traditions and conventions of Cambodian education with the force of ideological imposition, promoting a

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type of behaviour that conflicts with the national culture at a deep level" (p. 230). For these reasons, Jones (1995) argued for instituting a modified form of self-access in Cambodia in which more group learning takes place and where the "teacher's presence therefore tends to be more potent than in self-access centres where the student is expected to learn to take initiatives" (p. 231). Jones (1995) embraced the decision of "retreating from autonomy" and resigned himself to the fact that "dependence, at least of the spoon-feeding kind, represents little danger to committed, intelligent, and active adult learners" (p. 231).

However, Jones' approach to setting up a SAC at PPU has been criticized by several scholars. For example, one issue raised by Lander (2010) is that Jones had only lived in Cambodia for one academic year. This fact is somewhat ironic, given that Jones himself stated that "each self-access centre should know its users, their culture and educational background, and allow this knowledge to influence the design of facilities and service" (p. 233). Jones' lack of cultural knowledge is also demonstrated by the dearth of references concerning Cambodia in his article. He includes just one quote from Chandler (1983) for evidence of their educational culture. Although Chan et al. (2002) see Jones (1995) as promoting autonomy and are sympathetic to his paper, they appear to mistakenly conflate autonomy with independence in their own paper.

Other researchers have criticized Jone's decision to retreat from autonomous learning in the SAC at PPU. Al-Ghazali (2007) argues that, as autonomy is the foundational principle of self-access, "withdrawal from autonomy is a violation of the educational philosophy underlying self-access" (p. 9). Furthermore, the decision to deemphasize autonomy "underrates the ability of the Cambodian students to accept innovative methods of teaching and learning if these are presented in the right way" (Al-Ghazali, 2007, p. 11).

Holliday (2003, 2005) also takes issue with Jones' approach to self-access in Cambodia, explaining that his decision to retreat from autonomy stems from a cultural relativist stance. That is, Jones sees autonomy as an essentially Western notion and thus believes it should not be forced on to those outside of the West, who are not autonomous and do not value it. Yet, autonomy should not be understood as an exclusively Western capacity, but rather a human one. As Deci and Flaste (1995) argue, autonomy means acting freely and with volition,

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and it is a basic human need. Jones' misunderstanding of autonomy being essentially Western stems, at least in part, from expecting autonomy to look the same in different cultural contexts. On the contrary, autonomy can be expressed in different ways. For example, autonomy can be expressed socially (Holliday, 2003, 2005; Murray, 2014). Unfortunately, though, Jones' failure to better understand Cambodians and their culture, and his cultural relativist position on introducing self-access, resulted in the creation of a watered-down self-access center at PPU.

In fairness, it should be acknowledged that setting up a self-access center is challenging, and so is fostering autonomy. Autonomy in other cultures may not be easily recognized and detected by outside observers given it can exist and manifest differently (Nucamendi et al., 2011; Pennycook, 1997). Jones (1995) made some valid points in his article. One of these is that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing proposition. Nevertheless, compared to Jones' interpretation of autonomy, others have taken a much more nuanced view, understanding that it can take different forms (Benson, 2011a), be present in varying degrees (Dickinson, 1987; Stringer, 2024), and may involve help from others (Holec, 1981; Skupeňová & Herout, 2024). Fortunately, more modern approaches to promoting autonomy stress the importance of the advisor's role in supporting learners to become more effective and more autonomous (Mynard, 2012).

Yet, Jones did mischaracterize autonomous learning by conflating it with independent learning. For example, according to Jones (1995):

> Autonomy, independent or individual learning, self-direction, self instruction—such terms have earned a place in the discourse on learner-centredness, each term indicating that effective language learners have the capacity to take responsibility for their own learning, independent of the teacher. (p. 228)

Not only do modern scholars emphasize the social dimensions of autonomy (Murray, 2014; Mynard et al., 2020), but this perspective has also been present for two or more decades (see, e.g., Holliday, 2003, 2005). While Jones (1995) apparently has no problem with implementing social learning in a SAC, he seems to regard such activities as non-autonomous learning. Moreover, while we agree with Illich's quote (1971, as cited in Jones, 1995) that "most successful

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learning takes place outside the classroom," we also believe autonomous learning can take place in the classroom (p. 228). Indeed, scholars such as Kashiwa and Benson (2017) have promoted a more ecological view of autonomy where both learning inside and outside of the classroom play important roles.

Autonomous learning as a modern solution

Considering the example above, MoEYS' current initiative appears practical and sound, especially given that autonomous learning results in being proactive and attaining other soft skills essential for future employment (Sok, 2021). There is little doubt, however, that it is taking many teachers and learners time to adapt to it, especially as they attempt to negotiate and act upon what it means to be learner autonomous (Keo, 2021; Sun, 2023). Indeed, in cases besides Jones (1995), research has shown that autonomous learning has not been properly understood and practiced in Cambodia (Em, 2022; Khieng et al., 2022; Sam et al., 2012) as a result of the deeply held view of teachers as authority figures and the persistent use of traditional teacher-centred practices (Pellini, 2005; Sok & Bunry, 2023). Moreover, autonomous learning has remained under-researched (Keuk & Heng, 2016; Khoun, 2022; Sam et al., 2012). Nevertheless, taking the initiative to be learner autonomous is seemingly necessary to improve education in Cambodia (Cornwall, 2002; Pellini, 2005).

Research on Cambodia indicates that the ability to independently and/or socially engage in autonomous learning is seen as critical and necessary for skills and knowledge development and learning success (Heng & Sol, 2023; Sim & Em, 2023; Sun, 2023). This appears even more true given the impact the COVID-19 pandemic has had and the rise of internet and mobile technology, which have pushed Cambodians to engage more with the outside world (Khoun, 2020; Ngel, 2022; Xinhua, 2017). Certainly, there appear to be benefits as research has shown. For instance, Sun (2023) found that the more learner autonomous Cambodians are, the more their academic performance improves in English. Similarly, the more teacher and advisor support for autonomy Cambodian learners receive, the more their overall academic performance improves (Meng, 2020; Yat, 2022). To this end, with evidence supporting the merits of autonomous learning and MoEYS' initiative, there is an urgent need for teachers and learners in Cambodia, like those in other Southeast Asian nations, to embrace it as an alternative way of learning (Lian & Sangarun, 2023).

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Moreover, it should be espoused as a modern solution for the educational conditions impeding their development.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the initiative launched by MoEYS (2019) to promote autonomous learning represents a significant step toward addressing the persistent educational challenges in Cambodia. By examining the historical context of foreign language education and the problematic educational conditions that led to this initiative, this paper has highlighted the potential of autonomous learning as a modern solution to improve the knowledge and skills of everyday Cambodians. The insights gained from this underscore the importance of learner autonomy in fostering more adaptive and resilient learners. Despite the challenges faced, such as resource limitations and the need for a cultural shift in learning approaches, the emphasis on autonomy provides a pathway for enhancing educational quality, accessibility, and opportunity. Moving forward, it is crucial for educators, policymakers, stakeholders, and Cambodians in general to collaborate in nurturing an environment that supports and values autonomous learning, ultimately paving the way for further progress in Cambodia's educational and socio-economic landscape.

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Conflict of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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