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Learner autonomy in language learning

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Abstract

Developing learner independence has an important role in the theory and practice of language teaching. Language learning is a lifelong endeavour, not one that begins and ends in a language class room. Most learners and teachers feel that language learning consumes a considerable amount of time. Learners have to work within and beyond the class room to develop their language skills. The notion of learner independence or learner autonomy moves into an area where learners can direct their own learning. It could mean those learning activities which take place without the immediate intervention of the teacher. In this scenario, learners set their own objectives and follow strategies devised by themselves to fulfil them. This in turn facilitates the learner to become more efficient and effective when they study independently. Learners are compelled to assume responsibility for their own learning. Learner independence demands learner involvement and such involvement may lead to a deeper and better learning. Thus it can be said that the fostering of learner independence may start in a class room environment and extend beyond it.

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Key words: learner independence; language learning; learner autonomy; learner involvement; learner reflection; within and beyond the classroom.

1. Introduction

The term ‘autonomy’ which is derived originally from the fields of politics and moral philosophy, is a slippery term because it is widely confused with self-instruction and independent learning. It is also a multifaceted concept whose meaning has been discussed from many perspectives by theoreticians (Benson 2001, 2007).

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The idea of learner autonomy was first developed at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL), University of Nancy, France, in the early 1970s. According to Henri Holec, its former Director, the need for a term to describe people's ability to take charge of their own learning arose for practical, though idealistic reasons. This is how the concept of 'learner autonomy' came into existence. (Holec 1981). He defined learner autonomy as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning". He also noted that this ability "is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way", and pointed out that "to take charge of one's learning is to havethe responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning...." (Holec).

But Trebbi (2006) argues that 'taking charge of one's own learning' is a verbiage since no learning takes place unless the learner is in charge. He is of the view that taking charge of one's own learning is a prerequisite of learning and learning itself is impossible without the learner actually taking charge. Benson and Voller (1997) defined learner autonomy as the ability to take personal or "self regulated" responsibility for learning and it can be an indicator to predict academic performance. Their point of view is that autonomy is a multidimensional construct of capacity that will take different forms for different individuals. It will also take different forms for the same individual in different contexts and at different times. Taking the above theories into consideration, we can purport that learner autonomy is a construct of capacity for making informed decisions about one's own learning.

However, Holec sees autonomous learning as a double process. On the one hand, it entails learning the foreign language; on the other, learning how to learn. Holec's definition entails that autonomous learners can freely apply their knowledge and skills outside the immediate context of learning. Thus autonomous learning extends beyond a school context: it is a life-long process of constantly developing awareness.

Learning a foreign language is an interactive, social process. This aspect of learning is not taken into account in Holec's definition. The social aspect of learning entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in co-operation with others, as a socially responsible person.' (Dam et al.1990). This belief in the value of interdependent learning in classrooms and beyond led leading practitioners to view learner autonomy as 'a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person' (Dam et al. 1990).

The notions of autonomous learning and independent learning are sometimes interlinked and have come to play an increasingly important role in language education. Independent language learning is characterised by optimising or extending learner choice, focusing on the needs of individual learners, not the interests of a teacher or an institution, and the choice of decision-making to learners. It is also learner-centred which views learners as individuals with needs and rights, who can develop and exercise responsibility for their learning. Independent learners are expected to develop the ability to engage with, interact with, and derive benefit from learning environments which are not directly mediated by a teacher. Thus independent language learning can refer to a context or setting for language learning (Benson & Voller, 1997; Wright, 2005) in which learners develop skills in the target language often, though not always, individually .

Within the research literature though, the relationship between independence and autonomy is not so fluid: Little (1991) states that learner autonomy emphasises 'interdependence' over 'independence' in learning, whereas Dickinson (1994), associates independence with active responsibility for one's learning and autonomy with the idea of learning alone. He sees autonomy as involving 'an ability to operate independently with the language and use it to communicate personal meanings in real, unpredictable

situations'. In the twenty first century, Lamb and Reinders (2006) in the introduction to their edited volume on supporting independent language learning use autonomy to suggest that there are 'two strands of independence/ autonomy', one concerned with language learning as essentially an independent process, the other concerned with ways of organising learning to take place independently of teacher control.

While highlighting the 'contextual nature of autonomy, and indeed independence', Lamb & Reinders (2006) argue that given the complexity of the field, it is impossible to arrive at a definitive definition of either independent language learning or autonomy, mirroring Aoki's (2002) argument that there are only multiple views of autonomy rather than a single authoritative characterisation. It is not unusual for learner autonomy and learner independence to be used interchangeably, as synonyms, or near synonyms (Fisher *et al.*, 2006; Mozzon-McPherson, 2000). The expectation that language learners can be independent, underlies much of the writing on learner autonomy.

The three basic pedagogical principles which underlines autonomy in language learning is learner involvement (engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process), learner reflection (helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning) and appropriate use of target language (using the target language as the principal medium of language learning). Holec (1981), Allwright (1990) and Little (1991) theorize that autonomous learners can be seen as those who are able to reflect on their own learning through knowledge about learning and who are willing to learn in collaboration with others. These learners understand the purpose of their learning programme, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and executing learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness. In other words, there is a consensus that the practice of learner autonomy requires insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others.

The learner has to be equipped and empowered to exercise his autonomy as and when it is required. It is at this juncture that the (continuing) teacher's role in promoting the psychological attributes and practical abilities involved in learner autonomy and in engaging students' existing autonomy within classroom practice becomes crucial (Benson 2001, Dam 19950). Supportive engagement of learners' existing autonomy (by the teacher) can be seen as an important basis for its progressive development; indeed, the notion that learners have the power and right to learn for themselves is seen by many proponents as a fundamental tenet (Smith 2003).

Vygotsky(1991) sees learning as a matter of supported performance and emphasises the social-interactive dimensions of the learning process. According to this model, the teacher's role is to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners can be autonomous in order to become more autonomous. The development of their learning skills is never entirely separable from the content of their learning. Thanasoulas(2000) characterises an autonomous learner as one who should have insights into his/her learning styles and strategies, take an active approach to the learning task at hand, be willing to take risks (to communicate in the target language at all costs), complete homework whether or not it is assessed and place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy (edit own work). Unfortunately, many learners seem not to understand the importance of practice when it comes to learning the skills required for study.

If the learning environment is comfortable where the learners feel encouraged, they are more likely to experiment with different learning strategies and not be afraid to ask questions and to ask for assistance when necessary. Learners also need to be given the skills to be able to seek out materials and resources outside the classroom to enable them to improve their recognition of what is relevant and what is not.

They need to be able to recognise that these research skills are important and transferable and can be utilised when they go on to further study.

Strategies for successful autonomisation include the use of the target language as the preferred medium of teaching and learning from the very beginning; the gradual development by the learners of a repertoire of useful learning activities; and ongoing evaluation of the learning process, achieved by a combination of teacher, peer and self-assessment. Posters and learner logbooks play a central role in three ways: they help learners to capture much of the content of learning, support the development of speaking, and provide a focus for assessment.

Independence and autonomy can be encouraged by giving the learners tools for success in their further study. These tools include helping the learners to understand their real goals and to develop skills to enable them to find the answers and information they need in order for them to be successful in reaching these goals. Learners need to be able to be aware of and understand their own learning styles and to use these to their advantage. At the same time, they should be willing to adapt to a more autonomous method of learning. As they gain confidence they will be more able to monitor their own learning which will in turn make them confident and give them a sense of achievement.

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