

A Study on Learner Autonomy in the Language Learning Class

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Abstract

The most difficult question to define learner autonomy and any answer to it is likely to be subjective. On the basis of expounding upon the different definitions concerning the research on autonomy in language learning, the focus of the present paper is on the learner autonomy.

Keywords: learner autonomy, responsibility, foreign language education

Introduction

Over the last two decades, the concepts of learner autonomy and independence have gained momentum, the former becoming a 'buzz-word' within the context of language learning (Little, 1991: 2). It is a truism that one of the most important spin-offs of more communicatively oriented language learning and teaching has been the premium placed on the role of the learner in the language learning process (Wenden, 1998: xi). It goes without saying, of course, that this shift of responsibility from teachers to learners does not exist in a vacuum, but is the result of the changes in the curriculum itself towards a more learner-centred kind of learning. What is more, this reshaping, so to speak, of teacher and learner roles has been conducive to a radical change in the age-old distribution of power and authority that used to plague the traditional classroom. Cast in a new perspective and regarded as having the 'capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991: 4), learners, autonomous learners, that is, are expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning. However, learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant; abdicating his/her control over what is transpiring in the language learning process. In the present study, it will be shown that learner autonomy is a perennial dynamic process amenable to 'educational interventions' (Candy, 1991), rather than a static product, a state, which is reached once and for all.

Learner Autonomy

For a definition of autonomy, we might quote Holec (1981: 3, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 1) who describes it as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning'. On a general note, the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 2):

- for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

It is noteworthy that autonomy can be thought of in terms of a departure from education as a social process, as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending the construction of knowledge and the roles of the participants in the learning process. The relevant literature is riddled with innumerable definitions of autonomy and other synonyms for it, such as 'independence' (Sheerin, 1991), 'language awareness' (Lier, 1996; James & Garrett, 1991), 'self-direction' (Candy, 1991), 'andragogy' (Knowles, 1980; 1983 etc., which testifies to the importance attached to it by scholars. The term "learner autonomy" was first coined in 1981 by Henri Holec, the "father" of learner autonomy. Many definitions have since been given to the term, depending on the writer, the context, and the level of debate educators have come to. It has been considered as a personal human trait, as a political measure, or as an educational move. This is because autonomy is seen either (or both) as a means or as an end in education.

David Little's terms, learner autonomy is 'essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning--a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991: 4). It is not something done to learners; therefore, it is far from being another teaching method (ibid.). In the same vein, Leni Dam (1990, cited in Gathercole, 1990: 16), drawing upon Holec (1983), defines autonomy in terms of the learner's willingness and capacity to control or oversee her own learning. More specifically, she, like Holec, holds that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation.

Characteristics

There seem to be seven main attributes characterising autonomous learners (see Omaggio, 1978, cited in Wenden, 1998: 41-42):

1. Autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
2. take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
3. are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;
4. are good guessers;
5. attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
6. develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
7. have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

Approaches To Knowledge And Learning

There are three dominant approaches to knowledge and learning, with a view to examining how each of them connects up with learner autonomy. **Positivism**, which reigned supreme in the twentieth century, is premised upon the assumption that knowledge reflects objective reality. Therefore, if teachers can be said to hold this "objective reality," learning can only 'consist--in the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another' (Benson & Voller, 1997: 20). Matching with this view, of course, is the maintenance and enhancement of the "traditional classroom," where teachers are the transmitter of knowledge and wielders of power, and learners are seen as 'container[s] to be filled with the knowledge held by teachers' (ibid.). On the other hand, positivism also lends support to the widespread notion that knowledge is attained by dint of the 'hypothesis-testing' model, and that it is more effectively acquired when 'it is *discovered* rather than *taught*' (ibid.) (my italics). It takes little perspicacity to realize that positivism is incongruent with, and even runs counter to, the development of learner autonomy, as the latter refers to a gradual but radical divorce from conventions and restrictions and is inextricably related to self-direction and self-evaluation. **Constructivism** is an elusive concept and, within applied linguistics, is strongly associated with Halliday (1979, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 21). As Candy (1991: 254) observes, '[o]ne of the central tenets of constructivism

is that individuals try to give meaning to, or interpret, the perplexing maelstrom of events and ideas in which they find themselves caught up'. In contrast to positivism, constructivism posits the view that, rather than internalising or discovering objective knowledge (whatever that might mean), individuals reorganise and restructure their experience. As a result, constructivist approaches encourage and promote self-directed learning as a necessary condition for learner autonomy. Finally, **critical theory**, an approach within the humanities and language studies, shares with constructivism the view that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered or learned. Moreover, it argues that knowledge does not reflect reality, but rather comprises 'competing ideological versions of that reality expressing the interests of different social groups' (Benson & Voller, 1997: 22). Within this approach, learning concerns issues of power and ideology and is seen as a process of interaction with social context, which can bring about social change. As learners become aware of the social context in which their learning is embedded and the constraints the latter implies, they gradually become independent, dispel myths, disabuse themselves of preconceived ideas, and can be thought of as 'authors of their own worlds' (ibid.: 53).

Conditions for LA

The concern of this has so far been with outlining the general characteristics of autonomy. At this juncture, it should be reiterate that autonomy is not an article of faith, a product ready made for use or merely a personal quality or trait. Rather, it should be clarified that autonomous learning is achieved when certain conditions obtain: cognitive and metacognitive strategies on the part of the learner, motivation, attitudes, and knowledge about language learning, i.e., a kind of metalanguage. To acknowledge, however, that learners have to follow certain paths to attain autonomy is tantamount to asserting that there has to be a teacher on whom it will be incumbent to show the way. In other words, autonomous learning is by no means "teacherless learning." As Sheerin (1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 63) succinctly puts it, '[t]eachers--have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand to *stay afloat*' (my italics). Probably, giving students a "helping hand" may put paid to learner autonomy, and this is mainly because teachers are ill-prepared or reluctant to 'wean [students]--away from teacher dependence' (Sheerin, 1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 63).

Learning Strategies

A central research project on learning strategies is the one surveyed in O'Malley and Chamot (1990). According to them, learning strategies are 'the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information' (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 1, cited in Cook, 1993: 113)--a definition in keeping with the one provided in Wenden (1998: 18): 'Learning strategies are mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so'. To a greater or lesser degree, the strategies and learning styles that someone adopts 'may partly reflect personal preference rather than innate endowment' (Skehan, 1998: 237). We will only briefly discuss some of the main learning strategies, refraining from mentioning communication or compensatory strategies (see Cook, 1993).

Here are a few strategies that can help to build an autonomous learning environment.

- Cooperative learning in pairs or small groups
- Problem-based learning situations that require students to use their knowledge to create solutions for specific situations
- Writing in journals and reflecting on what, why, and how they learn
- Assembling portfolios that document their learning process over a period of time
- Using rubrics that include the learner's individual expectations and a self-assessment component
- Peer assessment that allows students to evaluate each other using rubrics and clearly stated objectives

Autonomous learning activities

There are also several activities you can use in your classroom as you build learning autonomy. In the next several pages you will see examples of:

- Learner logs
- Think-Pair-Share
- K-W-L chart
- Application cards
- Admit and exit slips

Conclusion

The main point of departure for this study has been the notion that there are degrees of learner autonomy and that it is not an absolute concept. It would be nothing short of ludicrous to assert that learners come into the learning situation with the knowledge and skills to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, or to make decisions on content or objectives. Nevertheless, learner autonomy is an ideal, so to speak, that can, and should, be realised, if we want self-sufficient learners and citizens capable of evaluating every single situation they find themselves in and drawing the line at any inconsistencies or shortcomings in institutions and society at large. Certainly, though, autonomous learning is not akin to "unbridled learning." There has to be a teacher who will adapt resources, materials, and methods to the learners' needs and even abandon all this if need be. Learner autonomy consists in becoming aware of, and identifying, one's strategies, needs, and goals as a learner, and having the opportunity to reconsider and refashion approaches and procedures for optimal learning. But even if learner autonomy is amenable to educational interventions, it should be recognised that it 'takes a long time to develop, and-- simply removing the barriers to a person's ability to think and behave in certain ways may not allow him or her to break away from old habits or old ways of thinking' (Candy, 1991: 124). As Holyoake (1892, vol. 1, p. 4) succinctly put it, '[k]nowledge lies everywhere to hand for those who observe and think'.

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