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Language Learner Autonomy: Is it Really Possible?

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has gained momentum within the context of language learning in the last two decades. In order to qualify as an autonomous learner, one should independently choose his/her aims and purposes and sets goals; decides on the learning materials, methods and tasks; and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses the criteria for evaluation. Does that sound utopic? Definitely "yes" for some, maybe less so for others. After a little reflection, most of the teachers will recognize that they do a great deal of reading and thinking to prepare their lectures, plan effective activities and select appropriate texts for their students, while the students do relatively little. In most cases, the teachers are the most active learners in their classrooms. The reshaping of the traditional spoon-fed students in our culture into learners who take charge of their own learning and the conversion of teachers shifting their responsibility to learners is not an easy process. How ready are our students and teachers for this change? Is resistance inevitable? Even if we manage to change the teachers and the learners, will it be possible to foster learning for both parties in their new roles? This presentation may not be able to answer all these questions, but the researcher will shed light on these important questions by discussing possible interpretations of "autonomy", "student autonomy" and "teacher autonomy".

1. Introduction

Considering the changed needs of English language learners, the concept of language learner autonomy necessitates the reconsideration of the concept in ELT as well. Many scholars and researchers in the field of ELT,

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who take the learner –the student- as the focus of the language learning process, have attempted to define the concept "autonomy" over the past decades, as its importance has grown. The literature on learner autonomy, though wide-reaching, has not delivered a consensus on the meaning and implications of the term. Even though the concept of autonomy has been widely debated from different perspectives, with an almost total consensus that it is crucial in language learning process, this article has a different interpretation of the concept that has filtered from research to language pedagogy and target practitioners and the author's own expertise in the field of language teaching. The aim is to discuss the concept in detail in a way to ensure that the notion is uniformly understood by the practitioners –the teachers- in the field, and investigate whether the term should be studied within the context of the culture in which the language learning process is going on. Basically, the author believes that what a European teacher and/or student understand from the concept may be totally different than what a Turkish teacher and/or student understands.

There is no doubt that different writers have given different interpretations of the concept. Scholars interpret autonomy in different ways, giving particular attention to different aspects at different times, mainly because autonomy is seen as a multidimensional construct that takes different forms for different individuals, and for the same individual in different contexts (Benson, 2001). However, Benson (2007), gives one of the most widely accepted definition of learner autonomy, as learners' ability to take charge of their own learning. According to Cotteral (2000), in more practical terms, this entails students taking responsibility for various aspects and stages of the learning process, including setting goals, determining content, selecting resources and techniques, as well as assessing progress. In that sense, it can be said that according to literature discussed so far, the autonomous learner is an independent decision maker who exercises varying degrees of control, at the levels of learning management, learning content and cognitive processes. Illés (2012) states that more recent definitions of learner autonomy include not only independence, but interdependence:

> Viewed as an educational goal, learner autonomy implies a particular kind of socialization involving the development of attributes and values that will permit individuals to play active, participatory roles in a democratic society (Benson; 2007 cited in Illés; 2012:506).

Benson (1997) distinguishes three broad perspectives of learner autonomy in language education: the technical, psychological and political perspectives. The technical perspective emphasizes skills or strategies for unsupervised learning: specific kinds of activity or process such as the metacognitive, cognitive, social and other strategies. Second, the psychological perspective emphasizes broader attitudes and cognitive abilities which enable the learner to take responsibility for his/her own learning, and lastly, political perspective emphasizes empowerment or emancipation of learners by giving them control over the content and process of their learning. A technical perspective on autonomy may emphasize the development of strategies for effective learning: this approach is often referred to as "learner training". A psychological perspective suggests fostering more general mental dispositions and capacities; while a "political" perspective highlights ways in which the learning context can be made more empowering for the learning.

Zou (2011) states that autonomous learning is not only an individual and gradual process of self-awareness which involves the sharing of control between teachers and learners, on the other hand, it is a gradual increase in relation to awareness of learning contexts. He then continues that, since students have different metacognitive abilities and levels, not all will reach the same level of autonomy, but still, if they manage to do so, this will help them to raise awareness, to reflect on their own learning experiences, to share such reflections with others and to gain understanding of the factors influencing the learning processes. These are important for the development of autonomous learning competence and positive attitudes towards learner autonomy.

1.1. Culture and Autonomy

Returning to the aim of the paper stated above, a sociological definition of the concept of autonomy might be valuable in shedding light on our understanding of the term by different cultures. Autonomy is typically seen as presupposing a sense of agency in sociology (Bandura, 1989), and it is believed that it includes the capacity to make decisions and to exercise control over important areas in one's life (Ryan & Deci, 2001). The development of a

sense of self is believed to be related with autonomy, and also to assist in the construction of a personal identity (Moshman, 2005; Nucci, 2001).

This development of sense in different contexts has been the subject of research (Benson and Voller, 1997) and it is believed that culture lies at the heart of that debate. A common way of interpreting 'culture' is to refer to national/ethnic cultures such as 'Chinese culture' or 'Western culture'. The idea of learner autonomy has been promoted largely by Western teachers and academics, and when attempts to implement it further afield have encountered difficulties, these are often seen as due to cultural differences between 'the West' and other cultures. One important question is therefore whether or not the concept of learner autonomy is ethnocentric. In the literature, a short survey suggests a positive answer. Since, there are some factors which determine the success of the development of autonomy, such as gregariousness, attitudes to authority, and individual initiative, and since all these concepts are culturally related, we can conclude that the concept of autonomy may be ethnocentric, and culturally inappropriate to non-Western cultures. In an attempt to study the relation between culture and autonomy, researchers have looked for the correlation between the students' national/ethnic background and individual variables, such as learning styles, strategies, beliefs, and so on. Most studies support the hypothesis that students with different cultural backgrounds tend towards different learning styles and strategies.

However, other researchers believe that, because learning styles and strategies are only one aspect of autonomy, the other aspects must also be investigated. To this end, learner attitudes and beliefs are the other components to be studied, as these are believed to differ among societies.

1.2. Autonomy training

So far, we have focused on defining the term and discussing the relationship between autonomy and culture. However, it is important to emphasize   that, we as language teachers need to promote learner autonomy by training our students. Since this training comes as an add-on to the language courses that we teach, teachers should be equipped with the necessary background knowledge on how to become more autonomous themselves. According to Little (2007), the acquisition of metacognition and metalanguage necessary for exerting control over learning requires 'a deliberate effort and conscious reflection' (Little 2007: 224) on the part of learners and their teachers. Saying that, Little (2007) assumes that learners who have been properly trained in autonomy will be able to transfer the ability to control the learning process so as to be able to perform successfully in real-life communication outside the classroom. As Little puts it, their greater autonomy in language learning is in proportion to their autonomy in language use, and vice versa. (Little op. cit.: 223)

Literature suggests many different methods to promote learner autonomy. Among these, we can count self-access facilities, providing   learners with opportunities to be involved in decision making procedures, such as choosing materials, activities, topics, etc., and self-assessment and peer-evaluation, group and pair-work activities, and some even cite the European Language Portfolio as an effective tool for promoting autonomy.

In addition to the methods stated above, McDevitt (1997) believes that fostering language awareness is another form of autonomy training. She says that "One of our tasks then must be to make students aware of language as a system." Students need to be made aware that learning a second language is not a burden, but a challenge which requires becoming acquainted with the structure, the nuances and the vagaries of that language. In order to manage that, teachers may create opportunities to hold discussions on the nature of the language and of language acquisition.

Yang, N. (1998) conducted a language learning project in which students shared in class their language learning backgrounds, and experiences in learning. Then, the teacher used questionnaires to examine students' learning strategies, beliefs, attitudes and preferred learning styles, before explaining the concept of learning strategies in detail. Next, the students were asked to prepare their project proposals. The results reveal the importance of the teacher's role in helping language learners understand learning strategies and expanding their own self-direction in learning. The author found that such an approach raised students' awareness of language learning strategies, improved students' use of strategies, taught them how to assess their own language proficiency, set goals, and evaluate progress, and enabled them to experience greater overall autonomy in learning.

According to Illes (2012) another way of promoting learner autonomy is the teaching of literature. She states that since literature presents a new, alternative reality, usual interpretative and problem-solving strategies and methods

do not suffice, and readers are forced into more active participation in interpretative procedures in order to make sense of the concepts. She continues:

> The teaching of literature thus creates conditions for participation in problem-solving communication and can promote the development of autonomy. Literature also requires a more intensive and careful engagement in the meaning-making process, a feature that characterizes the use of English in international settings as well.

However, it should be stated here that the researchers are divided into two and some hold the opposite view. For example; Harmer (2007) argues that "The ideal situation is for the students to take over their own learning- in other words, to do it without having to be shown how by the teacher' (2007: 399). Therefore, perhaps it is more important to focus on whether autonomy exists? rather than how to promote it.

2. Implications for Teaching

What is the most appropriate pedagogical approach to autonomy in the foreign language classroom? Should we teach it? Or should we expect our students to be automatically equipped with the features of autonomy, gained throughout their educational life. I consider that either can be true and valid, depending on the culture, age and qualifications of the students.

This means, as teachers, we need to identify how and to what extent autonomy helps our learners to become better language learners. Among several issues that can be raised regarding the effectiveness of autonomy, one issue is how the notion of autonomy, described in terms of the control of the learning process, makes it possible for learners to become efficient and successful language users; how the ability to take responsibility for their learning enables learners to negotiate meaning and solve problems stemming from the international use of English.

Once we have been able to define this, as teachers and students, then teachers can start to integrate some meaningful instructional activities into students' learning process. Some believe that these activities should come as a part of the curriculum, and implemented throughout the whole course of teaching activities, as well as teaching administration systems, and students' interest in and awareness of the learning process be raised through task-based activities (Vesisenaho et al., 2010). Others suggest that the learners should be given more opportunities for interaction among themselves, and with their teacher as well, since this will create a more cooperative climate, leading to the development of negotiation in learning. Eventually, this will lead learners to extend their learning and decision making strategies, which will give more scope to developing learning skills and more autonomy, will follow as a result.

So far we discussed potential actions by teachers to promote autonomy in their classes, and developed this theme, suggesting that it should be a part of the curriculum. However, if we stop for a while and consider that according to the definition of the concept above, autonomy entails the concept of choice, and encourages learners to take responsibility for the selection of classroom tasks and materials. Then the question to be asked is that, if this, in nature, is a process that should be initiated and continued by the learner, a dilemma arises when we say that teachers should promote autonomy in their classes. We are all well aware of the fact that the selection of tasks and materials and/or the process of evaluation of all these require some expert knowledge, which teachers possess. Therefore, the dilemma takes us back to the point where we state that education is impossible without teacher control.

Here again, one can talk about the importance of context of teaching and learning because, how teachers use this control and how much they find appropriate to apply, based on the knowledge of their teaching context and their students in particular, should be their own decision. It should not be forgotten that any model of learner autonomy should be adopted and/or applied only after the careful appraisal of its relevance to a specific educational setting by the teacher or other stakeholders. Because, we are all aware of the fact that training students on autonomy is not a simple fact since the word "training" can be used for sub-skills like learning to put a comma between two nouns. However, for some tasks which require complex systems, it is not easy to train somebody.

3. Conclusion

As it is stated by Tschirhart & Rigler (2009) 'Learner autonomy' is a term that has been bandied about a great deal in the language learning literature in recent years. In their own words: "It can be a slippery notion: it is not always clear whether the term is meant to refer to a behavior or an attitude; a right or a responsibility" (p, 71). Considering that, some researchers and scholars have some concerns about the concept. Blin (2004: cited in Tschirhart & Rigler, 2009), for instance, states that learner autonomy is a 'multi-dimensional' concept, which means it does not only include technical and psychological aspects, but also social and political dimensions. For Benson (2001), we should not focus on the development of individual autonomy at the expense of social and political autonomy. Even some others, claim that the concept of autonomy because it is created and promoted in Western cultures, is only relevant to the Western cultures but not to others such as Chinese or Indian or Asian. Therefore, all these should be considered when working on autonomy.

When we look at the phenomena from the teachers' aspect, we see that the traditional view of teachers as the principal source of educational content and control is in tension with the objectives of autonomous learning and with the learning opportunities provided by the new technologies. In some cultures, teachers themselves are not very autonomous in the sense that they were not given enough opportunities to develop their skills as autonomous learners when they were students. Therefore, they should not be expected to be able to promote autonomy when they themselves are unable to incorporate these reflective and self-management processes into their own teaching.

Above, it was stated by the author that the aim of this paper is to discuss the concept of autonomy in detail and investigate whether the term has to be studied within the culture of the context that the language learning process is going on. Consequently, it is believed that as Smith (2003) summarizes: "a clear, though potentially discomforting implication is that autonomy is a multifaceted concept, susceptible to a variety of interpretations (p. 255)", and that leads us to the point that if it can mean almost everything, then it might end up meaning nothing at all.

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