

Developing Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has been of great interest to language teaching practice and research for more than two decades now. This paper reviews definitions of and research into learner autonomy and discusses ways in which autonomy has been implemented both in and outside the classroom. It also looks at the role of learner training and the importance of environmental factors such as the provision of resources and opportunities for self-access learning and ongoing support.

การให้อิสระในการเรียนได้รับความสนใจทั้งในทางปฏิบัติและในการทำวิจัยเกี่ยวกับการสอนภาษามาเป็นเวลากว่าสองทศวรรษแล้ว บทความปริทัศน์นี้ได้ครอบคลุมนิยามและวิจัยเกี่ยวกับการให้อิสระในการเรียน โดยกล่าวถึงวิธีการในการให้อิสระในการเรียนที่เกิดขึ้นในห้องเรียนและนอกห้องเรียน นอกจากนี้ยังกล่าวถึงบทบาทของการฝึกผู้เรียนและความสำคัญของปัจจัยแวดล้อม เช่น การจัดหาวัสดุอุปกรณ์ และการให้ความช่วยเหลืออื่นๆ เพื่อให้เกิดการเรียนรู้ด้วยตนเอง

Learner autonomy has been of interest in the field of English language learning circle for more than two decades. The concept of learner autonomy has been defined differently by different authors. Generally, learner autonomy is seen as the capacity to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981). This includes having the right attitude for learners to be responsible for their own learning (Dickinson, 1992). However, there are many educators who look at learner autonomy differently. It can also be regarded as a set of skills and strategies that students use for self-directed

learning. It can also be seen as a capacity that we are born with but that we lose through formal education (Benson and Voller, 1997).

With reference to the skills of autonomous learners; knowing how to set their own objectives, choosing learning strategies to tackle the tasks they are doing, monitoring their own learning and evaluating their learning are the key skills that are often mentioned. Therefore, autonomous learners can be regarded as effective learners because they are able to learn independently and to choose a suitable approach to handle their studies. Since being autonomous learners requires the learners to have metacognitive learning strategies, they are able to make decisions on what to learn, when and with what resources (Dam, 1995; Littlewood, 1996; Breen and Mann, 1997). Autonomous learners are also regarded as self-directed learners who possess life-long learning abilities.

In addition to the above-mentioned skills which the learners possess, being autonomous is seen as linked with intrinsic motivation because encouraging learner autonomy through allowing the learners to take more control in learning means enhancing their self-determination or where the locus of causality for behaviour is internal to the learners and this can in turn enhance their motivation to learn (Dickinson, 1995, Ushioda, 1996). Also, the process of developing learner autonomy which involves learners' setting their learning goals enhances self-efficacy or personal beliefs about one's capabilities to learn or to perform at a designated level (Bandura, 1986; Schunk, 1989). In language learning, clear and valued goals are important to help the learners to move from their current stage of language proficiency to where they want to go (Tharp and Gallimore, 1988).

In language learning, there are many terms to refer to learner autonomy, e.g. learner independence, independent learning, self-direction, autonomous learning. Also learner autonomy is seen as a concept related to learner-centredness because fostering learner autonomy places learners at the centre of the process and it supports communicative pedagogies in that communicative language teaching is responsive to learners' needs and their communicative goals (Tudor, 1997; Breen and Littlejohn, 2000; Benson, 2001).

When discussing the concepts of learner autonomy and how to foster it, learner autonomy has also been regarded as a culturally-oriented concept (Littlewood, 1999; Pennycook, 1997) because autonomy has been central to Western culture. Therefore, when the notion of learner autonomy is adopted in Asian cultures, many educators look at it as being opposed to Asian culture which places more emphasis on the importance of groups and collectivism. Fostering learner autonomy in many Asian countries thus incorporates the use of group work to help learners learn on their own and allows learners to have more involvement in learning such as through making decisions about their learning. Thus, interdependence, and a group-based version of developing learner autonomy, has been discussed in Asian contexts (Littlewood, 1996). The term used to describe this type of autonomy is reactive autonomy as it is more suitable for collectively oriented cultures like those in Asia. Reactive autonomy is a pedagogic state where the students do not have to create their own direction in learning, but they are expected to organise their resources autonomously to reach their goals. So the learners can learn cooperatively in groups without being pushed by the teacher (Littlewood, 1996).

Because autonomous learners are regarded as effective learners in all cultures, educators have discussed how to help learners to develop autonomy. Generally, three approaches can be employed to develop learner autonomy: the individual-centred approach, the group-centred approach and the project-centred approach (Boud, 1988).

The individual-centred approach focuses on individual learners and their needs. Teachers, co-learners and other resources for learning such as learning materials, help to facilitate the attainment of the goals of the individual as defined by the individual. Groups of learners may provide general support but they do not have a specific role or commitment to any project other than their own. A learner contract or a form for learners to state their learning plan is normally used to facilitate this approach. The learners have to prepare individual contracts which specify learning goals, activities in which they will engage, criteria for judging their performance and how the contract can be assessed.

The group-centred approach focuses on the needs of a particular group of learners and is characterised by a strong commitment to group learning and group

processes. In other words, it is a reactive autonomy which has been used in an Asian context. Individuals pursue their own learning needs within the context of the group. Much learning occurs from learning among group members. Curriculum negotiation or the discussion of what, where, when and how to learn between the learners and the teacher is a common practice in the group-centred approach. In this approach, the learners are encouraged to make their own decisions rather than accept decision from others made on their behalf.

The project centred-approach focuses on the outcome of the project. In this approach, the learners in a group work from their own needs and while doing the project, they have the freedom to choose the content and methods for completing it. They have to negotiate with other group members in order to reach conclusions and go through the process of planning, monitoring their difficulties and evaluating their performance.

In addition to these three approaches, developing learner autonomy can be conducted through learner training (Holec, 1981, Dickinson, 1987). Learner training involves helping the learners to change their attitudes towards their own roles in their learning and helping the learners to learn more about how to learn and about how to use effective strategies as these can help students to be more successful at independent learning (Wenden, 1986; Ellis and Sinclair, 1989; Dickinson, 1992). Learner training is able to help the learners develop learner autonomy because to become autonomous learners, the learners are expected to play roles which they are not familiar with, such as setting learning goals, making decisions on their learning and evaluating their learning performance and their strategies. Therefore, it is necessary to train the learners to both accept their new roles and to have the abilities to perform learning tasks independently.

The learner training process involves giving the learner the opportunity to exercise their learner independence and helping them to be more aware of the language system. It should be noted that the term 'learner training' is not completely agreed on by all educators although it is regarded as an umbrella term for the process of helping learners to foster learner autonomy. Some educators think that it is inappropriate as it is too narrow and focuses too much on functions or skills rather

than having a broad concept of education or development (Chamot and Rubin, 1994). As a result, the term 'learner development' has been used by some writers. No matter what term is used, the process is the same in that it helps learners to become more effective and develop learner autonomy.

Learner training involves the change of learners' attitudes towards taking responsibility for their own learning and equipping them with learning strategies so that they can engage in independent learning mode successfully. With reference to the aspect of changing the learners' attitudes, this process is regarded as psychological preparation for the learners because it deals with enhancing the learners' motivation to learn (Dickinson, 1987, 1992). Holec (1981) calls this process 'deconditioning' because it is the process whereby the learners free themselves from many kinds of assumptions and prejudices or wrong beliefs about learning languages that may inhibit them from learning the language successfully such as that learning a language must be done in class with a teacher. Psychological preparation also aims at helping learners to be confident to learn by themselves. Psychological preparation can be conducted as an on-going process and it can be done through having a dialogue with the learners by sharing learning experiences with the learners so that they will develop an awareness of what to expect from the language learning task and how they should react to the occurrence of learning problems. Also it is important for the learners to have the opportunity to exercise their independence so that they are convinced and confident that they are capable of engaging in independent learning (Dickinson, 1992).

Methodological preparation is the process of acquiring the ability and techniques learners need to undertake work in an independent learning mode. It involves training the learners to use both cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies. Learning strategies are defined as 'learning processes which are consciously selected by the learner' (Cohen, 1998: 4). Wenden (1986) suggests that learner training should be explicit in purpose and that it should be offered in context because it enables the learners to perceive the relevance of the task, and enhances comprehension and facilitates retention.

Cognitive strategies are the strategies learners use with the incoming information in order to help with their learning. It involves interacting with the materials and applying some techniques to complete the task or understand the materials to be learned (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Cognitive strategies can be classified differently but in general they centre around learners' trying to understand the language; guessing or making hypotheses about linguistic forms, semantic meaning or speakers' intentions; trying to look for general rules to approach language learning tasks; practising by repetition, rehearsal, application of rules; finding ways to memorise new words, summarizing, note-taking, translating, etc. (Rubin, 1987; Chamot et al, 1988 cited in O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Learners employ cognitive strategies all the time when studying; therefore, it is important that they have a large enough repertoire of cognitive strategies so that they can choose the appropriate one for the task they are working on.

Metacognitive strategies involve *'thinking about the learning process, planning for learning, monitoring the learning task, and how well one has learned'* (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 137). Wenden (1991) uses the term self-management strategies to refer to metacognitive strategies whereas Holec (1981) refers to them as the skills of self-directed learning. Metacognitive strategies or self-management strategies involve planning how to achieve the task so learners have to determine what their objectives are and decide on the means to achieve them, monitoring or being aware of difficulties they encounter in learning, and evaluating or being able to reflect on the outcome of the strategy they choose and judge the outcome based on the criteria they use. O'Malley and Chamot (1990:8) think that metacognitive strategies are important because *'students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions.'* McDonough (1999) agrees with this idea as he states that monitoring and self-evaluation strategies contribute to the ability to be an autonomous learner.

In order to use metacognitive strategies successfully, Wenden thinks that metacognitive knowledge plays an important role (Wenden, 1998). Metacognitive knowledge refers to what an individual knows about how he thinks and how other people think. It refers to the knowledge and beliefs that one has accumulated through

experience in various cognitive activities (Flavell, 1976). Metacognitive knowledge is separated into person knowledge or beliefs concerning what individuals are like as thinkers, task knowledge or the nature of the information to be addressed when facing a cognitive task and the nature of the task demands, and strategic knowledge or the knowledge of the ways that a person can succeed in achieving cognitive goals. Therefore, learners should be trained how to analyse themselves in order to know the cognitive differences and similarities between themselves and others, to know what information is needed to complete the tasks they are doing and how to be successful in achieving cognitive goals.

Wenden (1986) discusses three kinds of cognitive and metacognitive strategies training in the language learning domain: blind training, informed training and self-control training. In blind training, learners are taught to use cognitive strategies without any metacognitive supplement. That means they do not have to think about what they are doing. In informed training, learners are taught specific strategies and they are made aware of the importance of what they are doing; they are aware of nature of their learning. The metacognitive supplement is limited in this approach as it is limited to monitoring only. In self-control learning, learners are trained to use a specific strategy and then to monitor their performance to determine whether the use of the strategy is effective or not. The metacognitive supplement of this approach consists of general skills necessary to regulate learning. However, in order to be able to reflect on their learning, to monitor their progress and to evaluate the outcome of their learning, learners should have a repertoire of cognitive strategies; otherwise, they cannot monitor their performance and know how to improve it. Wenden advocates training/teaching learning strategies in context as this enables the learners to perceive the relevance of the task as well as helping with their comprehension and retention.

The research on learner autonomy in language learning in the last decade has been concerned with the integration of aspects that help learners to develop learner autonomy in a course or in particular language skills such as writing or speaking (Aagård and St.John, 2003; Aagård et al, 2003; Lynch, 2001). There has been an interest in investigating if using tools such as self-assessment, learning journals, and portfolios can help learners to develop autonomy in learning (e.g. Malone, 2003;

Srimavin and Darasawang, 2004; Raya, 2005). Another area which has been investigated is learners' behaviour and attitudes towards learner autonomy (e.g. Chan, 2001; Gieve and Clark, 2005; Loewen, 2006). Because the ability to learn individually is regarded as evidence of having achieved a certain degree of autonomy, the use of on-line materials is another area which has been researched in relation to learner autonomy (e.g. Corder and Waller, 2006; Groß and Wolff, 2001). However, it should be noted that language acquisition and autonomy have seldom been measured in relation to each other when researching students in a class which is going through the process of fostering learner autonomy. One of the very few exceptions was a couple of studies conducted by Dam and Legenhausen, who investigated the acquisition of vocabulary in an autonomous learning environment (Dam and Legenhausen, 1996). This study compared vocabulary acquisition of the students of two classes, one was a class that was taught using autonomous learning, whilst the other class was a traditional book-based class. The class which was taught by an autonomous approach showed that the number of words students acquired in the first few months was higher than that required in the syllabus. The students were more aware of the English language surrounding them and could integrate this knowledge to develop their English language competence.

In addition to developing learner autonomy in the classroom context as previously discussed, learner autonomy can also be fostered through providing an environment and resources for the learners to practise their cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies. Such an environment is usually called a 'self-access centre' or 'independent learning centre'. Self-access centres are generally referred to as facilities provided to encourage learner autonomy (Holec, 1988; Dickinson, 1987; Esch, 1996). It also provides support for independent learning such as a learner contract, a cataloguing system, clear instructions and helpers or counselors. Benson (1994: 8) views the relationship between learner autonomy and the self-access centre as autonomy representing the goal; self-directed learning, a means to achieve it and the self-access centre, an environment within which it can be achieved. Gardner and Miller (1999) state that when working in the self-access centre, the learners have to change their roles because they are expected to be responsible for their own learning, and realize the importance of reflection on their learning as it helps them to see if they achieve their learning goals or have to redefine them.

As the self-access centre is regarded as an environment provided to develop learner autonomy, learner training for learner autonomy can occur in the self-access centre because when using the self-access centre, learners have to 1) decide on what to do 2) find the appropriate materials 3) use the materials. In other words, they have to use both cognitive and metacognitive strategies when working in the self-access centre and working in the self-access centre can also provide an experience of independent learning to help them have more confidence to learn on their own. Also, the self-access centre can be used as supplementary to learner training in class. Some teachers may provide learner training on how to use cognitive and metacognitive strategies in class and then ask the students to use and practise those strategies in the self-access centre.

However, self-access centres can also be seen as related to independent learning. The use of self-access centres in teaching and learning a language has developed into its own area which is not related to learner autonomy. This can be seen from the research conducted in the self-access centre to gain more insight into what learners do while working in the self-access. The research on the self-access centre also involves the support given in the self-access centre through the use of contracts, students' records and language counseling, which is a supporting aspect developed for use in the self-access centre (Kelly, 1996; Voller et al, 1999, Reinders, 2007).

In conclusion, developing learner autonomy is a process to help learners to become more responsible for their own learning which will in turn enable them to be more effective learners. Autonomy can be developed using different methods. A popular method is the provision of learner training either in class or in a self-access centre to teach learning strategies. This will help learners become more confident and motivated to learn on their own, either individually or in groups.

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