

Learner autonomy in language learning: An overview

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Received: 20/5/2024; Accepted: 28/5/2024; Published: 06/6/2024

Abstract: *No matter what teaching method is used or what stage learners of a language are in, the learning process can only happen if the learners themselves want to learn and make their contribution. Learner autonomy therefore can be seen as an essential attribute to a successful language learner. This paper is a brief overview of learner autonomy, attributes that create an autonomous learner and conditions for autonomous learning to take place.*

Keywords: *Learner autonomy, autonomous learner, conditions, life-long learning*

1. Introduction

Most language teachers have somehow experienced the frustration of investing endless amounts of energy in their students and getting very little response. We have all had groups who did not do their homework on a regular basis, who were reluctant to use the target language in pair and group work, who did not learn much from their previous mistakes, who did not listen attentively to each other in discussion, who did not take opportunities to learn outside classroom to improve their language competence and the list still goes on. It would be, therefore, important to take an investigation into the autonomy of learners in language learning. This paper gives a definition of learner autonomy, its related terms such as an autonomous learner and looks at conditions for autonomous language learning.

2. Research Content

2.1 Literature review

2.1.1. What is autonomy?

Autonomy has many synonyms such as ‘independent’, ‘self-direction’. It is normally seen as something belongs to Western education not East Asian. However, some research conducted in Japan and China shows that students in these countries are aware of needs as autonomous learners (Sert, 2006). They, to some extent, may not be as independent as those in Western countries. This is not because of their innate ability but their learning environment or the educational system itself (Usuki, 2001; Ho&Crookall, 2000 as cited in Sert, 2006).

There is little consensus among educationalists and linguists as to what autonomy really is. A familiar and well-known definition is given by Holec (1981, p3) who succinctly describes autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s learning”. This is a general definition of autonomy however, it is noteworthy that if autonomy exactly means kind of totally taking

charge of one’s own learning process then it would be something impossible as there is no case in which learners can completely be responsible for their learning without taking into account factors that may interfere in this process (de Oliveira e Paiva, 2008).

Another definition of autonomy is introduced by Little (1991). According to this author, autonomy is “essential 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”. In other word, it can be seen as capacity for self-direction. Some phases in the learning process that give room for this capacity to exercise are also pointed out. They are planning, monitoring and evaluation of learning activities, which can be seen as centre aspect in an autonomous learning process. It is also indicated in his theory that autonomy is not something done to learners, therefore it is far from being a teaching method (Thonassoulas, 2000).

Dickinson (1987, p27), in the same vein, states that autonomy is “a mode of learning – one in which the individual is responsible for all the decision connected with leaning process, and undertake the implementation of these decisions”. Dam (1990, as cited in Sert, 2006) follows similar line of thought, examines autonomy in relation with willingness and capacity of learners to control or oversee their own learning.

From analysis of definitions, it seems that these definitions can only apply for the highest degree of autonomy which gives the learners the full right to choose what to learn, where to learn and how to learn it without the constraints of any formal educational contexts. The similar ideas can be found in Crabber’s (1993, p443 as cited in de Oliveira e Paiva, 2008) argument: “the individual has the right to be free

to exercise his or her own choices as in other areas, and not become a victim (even an unwitting one) of choices made by social institutions”.

Young (1986) and Pennycook (1997, p35 as cited in de Oliveira e Paiva, 2008) define autonomy as “authoring one’s own word without being subject to the will of others”. Pennycook sees it as “a struggle to become the author of one’s own world, to be able to create one’s own meaning, to pursue cultural alternatives amid the cultural politics of everyday life”.

In general, the term autonomy can be used in at least five ways: (1) for a situation in which learners study entirely for their own, (2) for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning, (3) for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education, (4) for the exercise of learners’ responsibility for their own learning, (5) for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning (Benson and Voller, 1997).

Moreover, autonomy is enhanced through learners’ responsibility for their learning which makes autonomous learning an explicit or conscious intention leading the learner to accept responsibility for their own learning unless they have some idea of what, why and how they try to learn (Cakici 2015 as cited in Rizki, et al 2023)

2.1.2. Classification

According to Littlewood (1999, as cited in de Oliveira e Paiva, 2008) there are three types of autonomy which can be exercised: (1) Autonomy as a communicator: language is used creatively and with appropriate communicative strategies, (2) Autonomy as learner is exhibited through learners’ engagement in independent learning using appropriate learning strategies, (3) Autonomy as a person: expressing personal meanings and creating personal learning context.

It is suggested that autonomy as IT use, ability to use the technology and solve technological problems, should be added to the classification of autonomy given the important role that the internet plays in the most context of foreign language learning de Oliveira e Paiva, 2008).

2.1.3. What makes an autonomous learner?

There have been so many different ideas about what criteria can be used to decide whether a learner is autonomous in his/her learning, as many as number of definitions and ideas of what autonomy is. There is, however, a common agreement that an autonomous learner must be independent in making all decisions

that relate to their learning process such as setting goals, taking initiatives in planning, choosing materials, methods, tasks, building criteria for evaluation and are able to change any of these if needed Thanasoulas (2000). It is also noted that the implementation of those steps toward autonomy do not happen naturally without conditions. Instead, it requires psychological preparation at least from learner side to be proactive in self-management, interactions with others, and to be able to conduct self-reflection as well (Little, 2003).

A list of characteristics which are supposed to define autonomous learners has been built by Benson (2001). They are:

Regularly participating in the defining of the objectives, understanding the purpose of the task and influencing the content and structure of the program

Showing responsibility and initiative in the development of pre-planned actions

Collaborating in the orientation of work and with those who form a collective with learning preferences

Systematically reviewing the agenda, reflects on what has already been learnt, evaluating effect, developing and using self-evaluation criteria.

Self-regulating his/her interaction with other participants and the proper employment of resources

Maintaining a positive attitude and behavior despite possible learning difficulties and managing to generate high levels of motivation

Using a series of strategies through which he/she achieves a more spontaneous and effective degree of communication. Easily handling different roles in discussion and enjoying a high level of social autonomy in his/her learning

Successfully transferring what has been learnt to new contexts

Being conscious of challenges and reflects upon his/her own contributions

Having a positive image of himself/herself, being creative and disciplined

Undertaking and developing investigative processes

Enjoying activities that favor social interaction

Regarding the teacher as a guide, preferring individual tasks, tutorials and distance/ off-campus learning

It is, however, essential to make it clear that there is not much evidence to prove that autonomy is necessarily the combination of those listed (Benson, 2001). Little (1991) echoes this sentiment about the complicated, vague and diversified forms of expression of autonomy when identifying other

factors concerning the learning process like age, stage of learning, learning needs and learning context as contributing one that need to be taken into account.

A list of main attributes describing autonomous learners with seven items is introduced and seems to be more detailed for the context of language learning, which are: (1) having an insight into learning styles and strategies, (2) taking an active approach to the learning task at hand, (3) being willing to take risks which is interpreted as communicating in the target language at all cost, (4) being good guessers, (5) attending to form and to the content as well, or place attention to both accuracy and appropriateness. (6) developing the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply, (7) having a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language (Thanasoulas, 2000)

According to Griffiths and Soruc (2020), the concept of autonomous learner is multifaceted by its nature and researchers have added some attributes such as learner identity and agency (Huang, 2011), metacognition (the ability to think about one's own cognitive process) (Gao&Zhang, 2011), motivation and the vision of future self (Lamb, 2011), ability, desire and freedom (Huang&Benson, 2013) ability to negotiate with others (Benson, 2013) and sociocultural dimension as well (Murray, 2014).

Conditions for autonomy

Difference in what autonomy is and what makes an autonomous learner leads to various ideas about what conditions are needed for autonomy to occur. In this paper, conditions for autonomy are made up based on the viewpoint that autonomous learners are necessarily responsible ones, who are in charge of their learning process and are based on the ones that introduced by the two authors Scharle and Szabo (2000).

Motivation and self-confidence

As the old saying goes: you can bring the horse to the water but you cannot make him drink; the same can be said for language learning. Teachers can bring and expose learners to all necessary input but learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute and want to learn. This is just like the horse in front of the stream: his thirst will remain until he himself lower his head to take some water. Also, the project will fail if the horse himself does not feel thirsty. So the point here is that learners need to have some motivation to make the process of learning occur. Lamb and Ushioda (2011, as cited in Griffiths and Soruc 2020), in the same vein, emphasize the "close interaction" of autonomy and motivation.

Scharle and Szabo (2000) argue that not any kind of motivation will work as a condition for autonomy. They recommend that intrinsic motivation which is some inner drive or interest of the learner should be encouraged since learners with this kind of motivation are more likely to be able to set the goal of learning and, therefore, have stronger sense of responsibility.

Another kind of motivation, extrinsic, which is shown by reward and punishment is said to help stimulate learning but can also increase the dependence of learners on the teachers at the same time.

Besides reinforcing motivation, self-confidence is also an important factor to the development of autonomy. How can learners work toward autonomy if they do not trust themselves and believe that they are able to manage their own learning process. If there is no confidence in the learners, they would forever solely depend on the teachers, there would be no room for autonomy. The effect works the other way as well: a feeling of responsibility and independence brings a sense of well-being and confidence.

3. Conclusion

This paper is a brief overview of learner autonomy in language learning, factors that contribute to an autonomous learner and conditions for autonomous learning to take place. It is undeniable that learner autonomy plays a pivotal role in language learning in specific and in learning in general as it is an essential attribute of a successful learner. Also, no matter how much learners learn through lessons, there is always plenty more they will need to learn by practice, on their own and in this ever changing world they will continue learning through their lives or in other word take part in life-long learning. The best way to prepare them for this is undoubtedly to help them become more autonomous.

Conference:

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