

Learner Autonomy in the Language Learning Classroom

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Abstract: Teaching has been the premium placed on the role of the learner in the language learning process. From the last two decades, the concepts of learner autonomy and independence have gained momentum in communicative oriented language learning. However, learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant or 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 constant dynamic process amenable to 'educational interventions', rather than a static product, a state, which is reached once and for all. This study examines the learner autonomy 'in order to help to assume greater control over their own learning and it is important to help them to become aware of and identify the strategies that they could potentially use'. At any rate, individual learners differ in their learning habits, interests, needs, and motivation, and develop varying degrees of independence throughout their lives.

Key Words: Teaching, learner, Independence, communicative, transpiring, dynamic process, potentially, motivation.

Autonomy and Importance of learner Autonomy

To define autonomy, we might quote Holec 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 following ways:

- 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.

With innumerable definitions of autonomy and other synonyms for it, such as 'independence', 'language awareness', 'self-direction', 'andragogy', which testifies to the importance attached to it by research scholars.

To all intents and purposes, the autonomous learner takes a proactive role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher. As we shall see, this line of reasoning operates within, and is congruent with, the theory of constructivism. For Rathbone, "the autonomous learner is a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process. He is not one to whom things merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as the result of his own self-initiated interaction with the world."

Within the context of education, though, there seem to be seven main attributes characterising autonomous learners:

- i. Autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies
- ii. They take an active approach to the learning task at hand
- iii. They are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs
- iv. They are good guessers
- v. They attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriateness.
- vi. They develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply and
- vii. They have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

For the development of learner autonomy, many more factors are involved such as learner needs, motivation, learning strategies, and language awareness has to be taken into consideration.

Learner Autonomy – Constructivism, Positivism and Critical Theory

There are three dominant approaches to knowledge and learning are briefly explained, with a view to examining how each of them connects up with learner autonomy. They are as follows:

- i) **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'. Similar to this view, of course, is the maintenance and enhancement of the "traditional classroom," where teachers are the sources of knowledge and wielders of power, and learners are seen as 'containers to be filled with the knowledge held by teachers'. 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*'.
- ii) **Constructivism** is a subtle concept and, within applied linguistics, is strongly associated with. As Candy observes, one of the central tenets of constructivism is that individuals try to give meaning to, or construe, 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. In Candy's terms, constructivism 'leads directly to the proposition that knowledge cannot be taught but only learned', because knowledge is something 'built up by the learner. As a result, constructivist approaches encourage and promote self-directed learning as a necessary condition for learner autonomy.
- iii) 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'. 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.

Learning Strategies for learner Autonomy

According to O'Malley and Chamot, learning strategies are 'the special thoughts or behaviours that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information. 'Learning strategies are mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language. To a greater or lesser degree, the strategies and learning styles that someone adopts 'may partly reflect personal preference rather than innate endowment'. I will only briefly discuss some of the main learning strategies.

Cognitive Strategies

According to O'Malley and Chamot, cognitive strategies 'operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning'. Learners may use any or all of the following cognitive strategies:

- Repetition, when imitating others' speech
- Resourcing, i.e., having recourse to dictionaries and other materials
- Translation, that is, using their mother tongue as a basis for understanding and/or producing the target language
- Note-taking
- Deduction, i.e., conscious application of L2 rules
- Contextualisation, when embedding a word or phrase in a meaningful sequence
- Transfer, that is, using knowledge acquired in the L1 to remember and understand facts and sequences in the L2
- Question for clarification, when asking the teacher to explain, etc.

Meta-cognitive Strategies

According to Wenden, 'meta-cognitive knowledge includes all facts, learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations'. The following are the strategies as follows

- Directed attention, when deciding in advance to concentrate on general aspects of a task
- Selective attention, paying attention to specific aspects of a task
- Self-monitoring, i.e., checking one's performance as one speaks
- Self-evaluation, i.e., appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards
- Self-reinforcement, rewarding oneself for success.

Learner Attitudes and Motivation

Language learning is not merely a cognitive task. Learners do not only reflect on their learning in terms of the language input to which they are exposed, or the optimal strategies they need in order to achieve the goals they set. Amongst the social and affective variables at work, self-esteem and desire to learn are deemed to be the most crucial factors 'in the learner's ability to

overcome occasional setbacks in the process of learning a second (or foreign) language'. In this regard, it is necessary to shed some light on learner attitudes and motivation.

Wenden defines attitudes as 'learned motivations, valued beliefs, evaluations, what one believes is acceptable, or responses oriented towards approaching or avoiding'. For her, two kinds of attitudes are crucial: attitudes learners hold about their role in the learning process and their capability as learners. In a sense, attitudes are a form of meta-cognitive knowledge. At any rate, 'learner beliefs about their role and capability as learners will be shaped and maintained by other beliefs they hold about themselves as learners'. And it seems clear that positive attitudes are helpful to increased motivation, while negative attitudes have the opposite effect.

Although the term 'motivation' is frequently used in educational contexts, there is little agreement among experts as to its exact meaning. The motivation is one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second or foreign language (L2) learning. Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2 and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process. According to Gardner and MacIntyre, motivation is comprised of three components: 'desire to achieve a goal, effort extended in this direction, and satisfaction with the task'.

It is obvious that in language learning, learners are motivated in different ways and to different degrees. Some learners like doing grammar and memorising; others want to speak and role-play, others prefer reading and writing, while avoiding speaking. Furthermore, since 'the learning of a foreign language involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviours and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner', an important distinction should be made between instrumental and integrative motivation. Learners with an instrumental orientation view the foreign language as a means of finding a good job or pursuing a lucrative career. On the other hand, learners with an integrative orientation are interested in the culture of the target language, they want to acquaint themselves with the target community and become integral parts of it. The bottom line is that motivation is 'a central mediator in the prediction of language achievement'.

Self-esteem

Closely related to attitudes and motivation is the concept of self-esteem, that is, the evaluation the learner makes of her/himself with regard to the target language or learning in general. Self-esteem is a personal judgement of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that the individual holds towards himself'. Conversely, a lack of self-esteem is likely to lead to negative attitudes towards his capability as a learner, and to deterioration in cognitive performance, thus confirming his view of himself as incapable of learning.

Now that we have examined some of the factors that may enhance, or even militate against, the learner's willingness to take charge of her own learning and her confidence in her ability as a learner, it is of consequence to consider possible ways of promoting learner autonomy. To say, though, that learner autonomy can be fostered is not to reduce it to a set of skills that need to be acquired. Rather, it is taken to mean that the teacher and the learner can work towards autonomy by creating a friendly atmosphere characterised by 'low threat, unconditional positive regard, honest and open feedback, respect for the ideas and opinions of others, approval of self-improvement as a goal, collaboration rather than competition'.

Conclusion

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. In spite of, 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 similar to 'unbridled learning.' There has to be a teacher who will adapt resources, materials, and methods to the learners' needs. 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'. Briefly put it, 'knowledge lies everywhere to hand for those who observe and think'.

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