Autonomy in language learning

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Abstract

This study investigated the practice of autonomy in Arabic language learning among Arabic language learners at the International Islamic University Malaysia. The samples were 179 students ranging from level 4-5 and of all specializations at the university. The data were collected using survey adapted from Jianping XU (2009) consisting 22 items and 5 Likert scales. Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data. The results revealed that learners could be described as autonomous learners as they demonstrated positive responses towards most of the items in the survey. In other words they have the capabilities to take charge of their own learning except in several items especially when it comes to self-productive activities such as: communication, writing and translation.

Keywords: Arabic language, language learning, autonomous learning, learning strategies, foreign language learning.

1.   Introduction

1.1 Overview

Over last thirty years, language teaching and learning settings gained new perspective which changed the role of teacher from knowledge giver to knowledge mentor or consultant on one hand and the role of learner from spoon-feed to knowledge constructor on the other hand. This perspective was a consequence of constructivist view of learning which believed learners must construct knowledge in their own minds. In order to become active learners, they must actively "discover and transform complex information if they are to make it their own" (Anderson, Greeno, Reder and Simon, as cited in Slavin, 2006: 243). Therefore instructors must provide learners with opportunities to learn independently or from one another, and train them in acquiring the language skills they need to acquire so effectively. In response to the above Holec (1981) introduced autonomous learning which emphasized learners taking charge of their own learning. These abilities involve establishing learning objectives, defining content and learning process, selecting methods and techniques to achieve learning objectives, monitoring the procedure of learning , and evaluating what has been acquired. Being autonomous also means that a learner is capable to make decisions concerning the learning with which he is or wishes to be involved. Dickinson (1987) included that the individual learner takes responsibility for all decisions regarding his or her learning as well as takes on the implementation of the decision. Furthermore, autonomy is also defined as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning" (Little, 1991: 4). As for Benson (2001: 49) "the content of learning should be freely determined by learners". It is essential to point out that, Holec's definition of autonomy emphasizes on learner's behavior in learning as the technical aspect of learning, while Little's formulation of autonomy focuses on the psychological factor of learning that learner should develop. Benson (2001) introduces the third dimension in addition to the technical or methodological and psychological aspects which is political aspect and the freedom of choice. In conclusion utonomous language learners not only decide how and when they learn and how they think about and

manage their learning but, essentially, they also decide what and where they learn. Autonomous learning in the present study refers to the learning process in which the learners take major charge and responsibilities on their own learning. The learning responsibilities in this sense, refer to five autonomous learning activities suggested by Holec; a) determining learning objectives, b) defining the contents and learning progress, c)selecting methods and techniques to achieve learning goals, d) monitoring the procedure of language acquisition, e) evaluating what has been acquired.

2. Literature review

Kocak (2003) and Rukthong (2008) reported that learners in their studies had high motivation from their teachers therefore they were able to use some meta-cognitive strategies such as self-monitoring, and self-evaluation but at the same time most of them perceive teachers as more responsible for their learning. Yildirim (2008) and Jianping XU (2009) found that, English language learners seemed to be ready to take responsibilities in many part of language learning. On the other hand, Yaping (2005) found that the level of autonomy of English major students was unsatisfactory. Their sense of self-efficacy, beliefs of intrinsic value and their strategy use need to be improved. As a result, he posited that learners were willing to learn but they did not have sufficient confidence in themselves therefore they were not too sure about their capacity to learn effectively. Self-efficacy has an intimate relationship with autonomous learning without which, setting learning goal, self-monitoring and strategy use will not be accomplished. Therefore, teachers are highly advisable to develop self-regulation and self-efficacy in their students if only they wish to develop autonomy in them.

In Malaysia Junaidah Januin (2007) reported that distance learners in University Malaysia Sabah (UMS), the Open University Malaysia (OUM) and the Mara University of Technology (UITM) relied greatly on teachers in many aspects of learning. In the same vein, Thang Siew and Azarina Alias (2007) found that Malaysian undergraduate students of three public universities namely the National University of Malaysia (UKM), The Putra University of Malaysia (UPM) and The Open University of Malaysia (OUM) were not autonomous as they preferred learner-centered approach of teaching and learning. In another study ThangSiew (2009) compared autonomy of undergraduate students of public and private universities in Malaysia and found that students from public universities still maintained teacher-centered approach however, private universities students seemed to be independent and more autonomous.

Exploring readiness for autonomous language learning is rampant in the literature. Studies have shown that before any intervention to promote autonomy among learners, investigating learners readiness for autonomy is very essential to pinpoint how ready they are and how to deal with their shortcomings (Wenden, 1991; Little, 1991; Cotterall, 1995; Scharle et al., 2000; Chan 2003). So far studies on autonomy in language learning were done on English language and no study was found to investigate the autonomy in Arabic language learning. Therefore the aim of the present study is to explore the readiness for autonomy among Arabic language learners in the International Islamic University Malaysia.

3. Methodology

3.1 Instrument

The present study adopted a survey by Jianping XU (2009) which was developed specifically to measure language learners' abilities to involve in autonomous learning by looking at the degree to which they are able to conduct autonomous language learning in five specific areas. They are: belief of language learning, determining the objectives of autonomous language learning, selecting strategies for autonomous language learning, monitoring the process of autonomous language learning and evaluating the efficacy of their autonomous language learning. Therefore, the questionnaire consisted of five sections; six items for each section making the total items thirty. However, it is essential to inform that the researcher adopted only four sections of the questionnaire and neglected the first section which is learners' belief of language learning. This is because the four sections are the components of learner autonomy as underlined by Holec (1981) as well as Little (1991). After brief modification, the instrument consists of 22 items presented using 5 Likert-scales. The study employed internal consistency reliability procedure to assess the reliability of the instrument. This procedure examines the degree to which individual's score is reliable across the items on the instrument. The instrument managed to obtain Cronbach's alpha value of 0.91 which is highly ok as far as statistical analysis is concern. The data were analyzed using SPSS and the results were discussed descriptively. Prior to analysis, data screening was conducted to check for missing value, data and statistical assumptions. This was done to grant reliability and accuracy of the results. Table 1 shows the items of the questionnaire.

Table 1: Questionnaire Items

Section-Item	The Item Statements
	Determining language learning objectives.
S 1-1	*I am able to have clear schedule of Arabic language autonomous learning after class*
S 1-2	*I am able to plan the study time well for Arabic language learning*
S 1-3	*I have clear idea of the demands for spoken and written abilities for the CELPAD Arabic language students*
S 1-4	*I have a clear idea of demands for reading Arabic language materials by my own.*
S 1-5	*I have a clear idea of demands for writing in Arabic language.*
S 1-6	*I have a clear idea of demands for communicating with Arabic natives or experts orally.*
	Implementing appropriate language learning strategies
S 2-1	*I can use appropriate listening strategies consciously in listening.*
S 2-2	*I can use appropriate reading strategies consciously in reading.*
S 2-3	*I can use appropriate communicating strategies consciously in a conversation*
S 2-4	*I can use appropriate writing strategies consciously in writing.*
S 2-5	*I can use appropriate translating strategies consciously in translating.*
	Monitoring Learning Procedure
S 3-1	*I can monitor the use of communication consciously and critically in a conversation*
S 3-2	*I can monitor the use of listening strategies consciously and critically in listening exercise.*
S 3-3	*I can monitor the use of reading strategies consciously and critically in reading exercise*
S 3-4	*I can monitor the use of writing strategies consciously and critically in writing exercise*

S 3-5	*I can monitor the use of translating strategies consciously and critically in translating exercise.*
S 3-6	*I am able to use other more appropriate strategies after I had identified the strategies were not appropriate.*
	Evaluating the efficacy of Arabic autonomous language learning
S 4-1	*I actively look for opportunities to practice Arabic language with my classmates after class.*
S 4-2	*I actively look for opportunities to practice Arabic language with my teachers or natives after class.*
S 4-3	*I actively look for opportunities to participate in a variety of Arabic language activities after class.*
S 4-4	*I actively finish my assignments in Arabic language.*
S 4-5	*I am able to find out the reasons for Arabic language errors and take measures to correct them.*

3.2 Respondents

The respondents of the study were students taking Arabic language courses at the Centre for languages and pre-academic development (CELPAD) at the IIUM. It comprises all undergraduate students, from level five and six regardless of their educational background or major of study, nationality, genders and ages. The present study managed to sample 179 Arabic language learners through purposive sampling procedure.

4. Results

4.1 Determining language learning objectives

The following table shows that in general respondents expressed positive ability to determine their own Arabic language learning objectives. Learners showed highest ability in having clear idea of demands for reading Arabic language materials by their own (57.6%) followed by having clear idea of the demands for spoken and written abilities (56.9%), planning their study time (53.1%) having a clear idea of demands for writing in Arabic language (49.7%) and having clear idea of demands for communicating with Arabic natives or experts orally (36.3%). Among all items, respondents were less certain in the ability to have clear schedule of Arabic language autonomous learning after class. It was also witnessed that learners showed a high degree of uncertainty in having clear demands for Arabic communications.

Figure 1
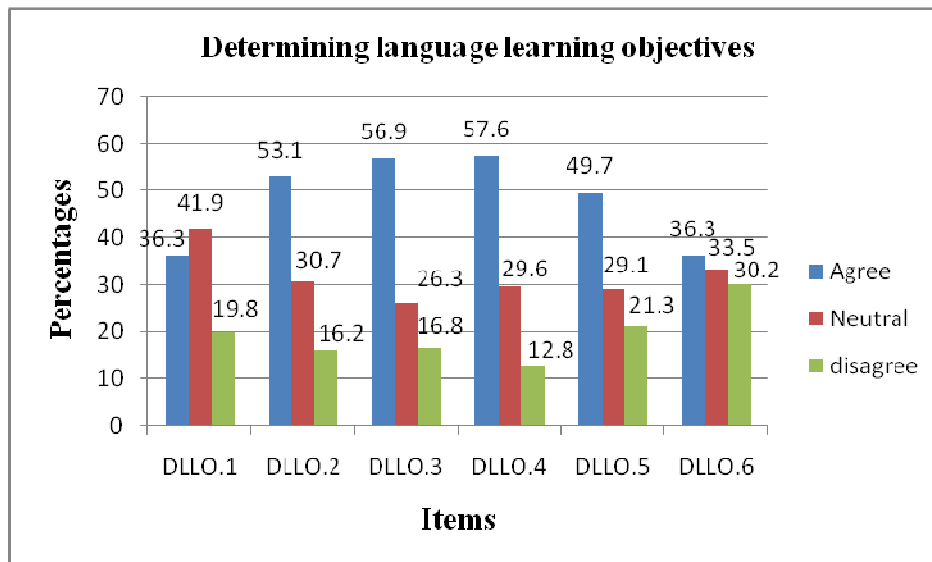
4.2 Implementing appropriate language learning strategies

Learners' ability to implement appropriate language learning strategies involves learners' ability to apply efficient learning strategies suitable for each of the language skills; speaking, listening, reading and writing, as well as communication and translation. The findings showed that in general learners were able to implement appropriate learning strategies in their learning. Learners showed highest ability to implement appropriate reading strategies consciously in reading (69.8%) following adequate listening strategies consciously in listening (59.3%), appropriate writing strategies consciously in writing (51.9%) and appropriate translation strategies consciously in translation (46.9%). Among all learners showed more uncertainty in applying communication strategies in Arabic conversation. It was also noticed that the degree of uncertainty was high in applying the strategies for translation.

Figure 2

Implementing the appropriate language learning strategies
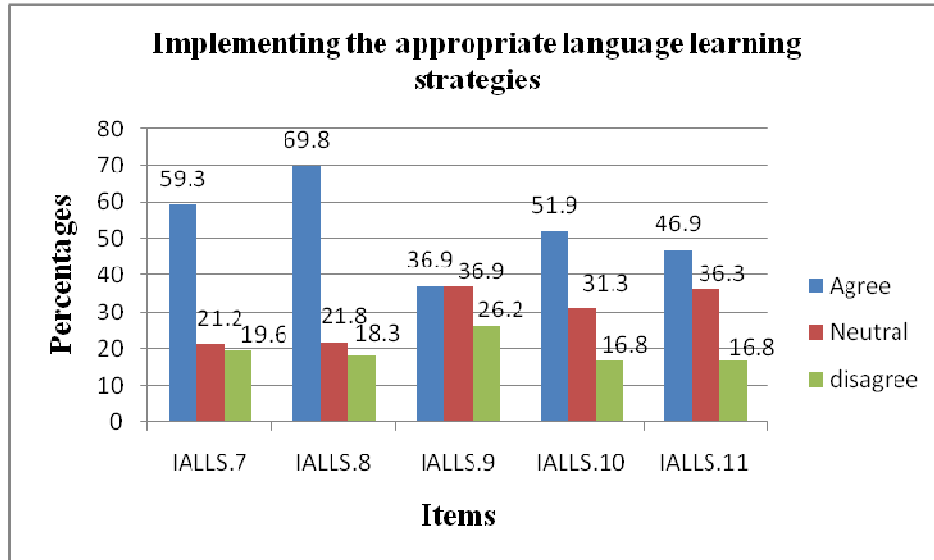
4.3 Monitoring language learning procedure

Learners' capacity to monitor their language learning procedure comprises of their ability to monitor the use of language skills, communication and translation critically and consciously in their respective exercise. Almost majority (62.6%) agreed that they can monitor the use of reading strategies consciously and critically in reading exercise. About 48 % of them showed positive ability to monitor the use of writing strategies consciously and critically in writing exercise followed by ability to use other more appropriate strategies after they had identified the strategies were not appropriate (44.4%) and ability to monitor the use of translating strategies consciously and critically in translation exercise (41.9%). It was noticed that learners showed more uncertainty in monitoring the ability the use of communication consciously and critically in a conversation (43%). In general the findings showed that learners were able to monitor the language learning procedure. However the degree of uncertainty was observed high in 3 items; the ability to monitor the use of listening strategies, translating strategies and using more appropriate strategies after identifying the strategies were not appropriate.

Figure 3
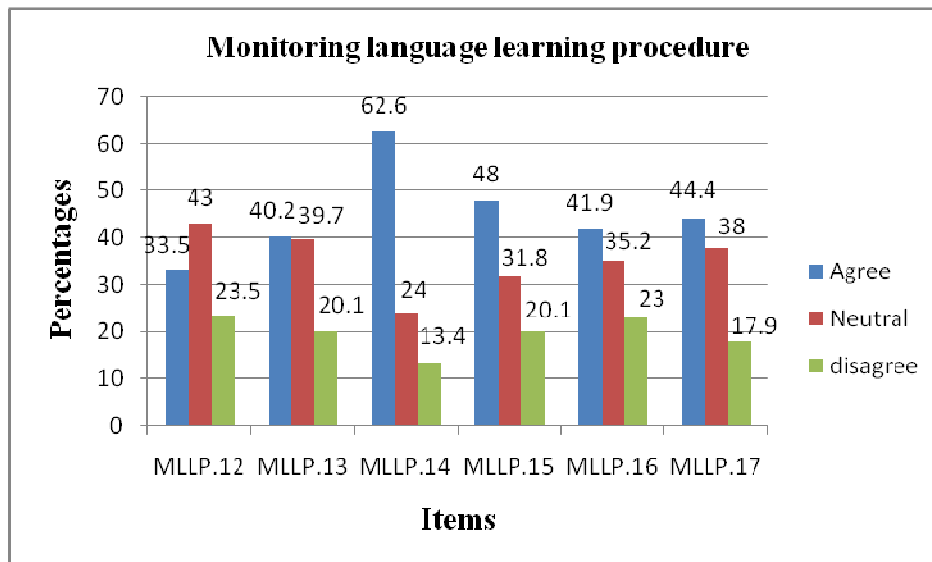
4.4 Evaluating the efficacy of Arabic autonomous learning

The findings showed that majority of learners were capable to evaluate the efficacy of their autonomous Arabic language activities that would enable them practice their Arabic language successfully. 55.9% learners agreed that they can finish their assignment actively in Arabic language. This followed by 47.4% learners were always looking for opportunities to practice Arabic language with their class mates after class, (43.0%) were looking for opportunities to practice Arabic language with their teachers or Arabic natives after class, (41.9%) were able to find out the reasons for Arabic language errors and take measures to correct them and (36.3%) of them were looking for chances to participate in Arabic language activities after class. In this section it was noticed that learners showed high degree of uncertainty in the ability to look for opportunities to participate in a variety of Arabic language activities after class.

Figure 4
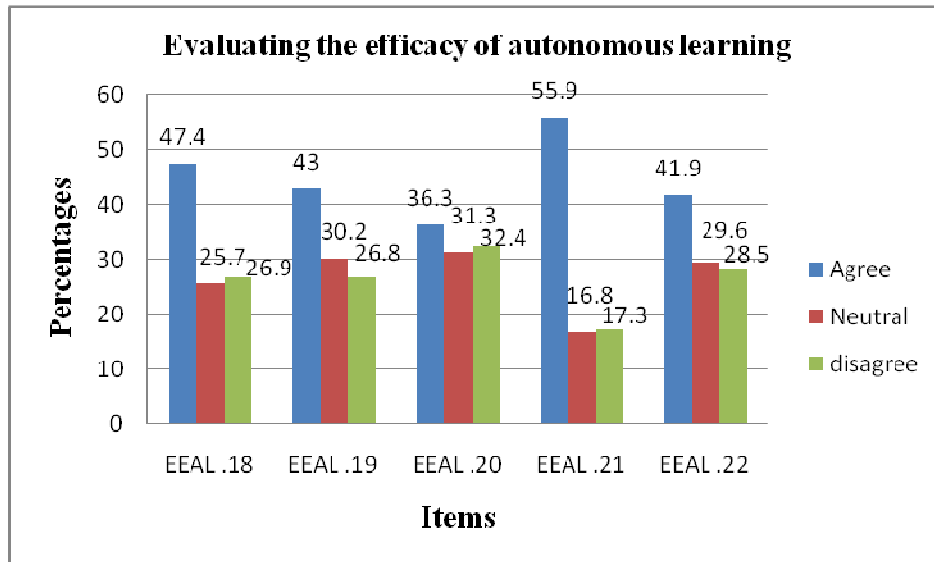
5. Discussions

The finding showed that learners could be described as autonomous learners as they demonstrated positive responses towards most of the items in the survey. In other words they have the capabilities to take charge of their own learning except in several items especially when it comes to self-productive activities such as: communication, writing and translation. One possible answer for this is the learners' background. It was mentioned that the respondents for this study were undergraduate students taking Arabic language at CELPAD regardless of their specialization. Therefore those who showed high degree of uncertainty might be those who are not specializing in Arabic based programmes or programmes that used Arabic language as the main medium of instruction. The argument is that these learners might not have the intention to extend the use of Arabic language further as they were only required to take Arabic as a university requirement. Besides it also can be possibly justified from the stance that autonomous learning is not being seriously emphasized in the IIUM. Learners might not be exposed with autonomy in language learning; what it is all about, how to go about it and the benefits of it. Even though learners could be charged to learn independently in the self-access center however, there is no grade assigned for their individual practice of autonomous learning. As a result, some of the learners were not ready to learn autonomously while the majority endeavored to learn autonomously to obtained good grade that would enable them further their studies in their respective *Kulliyyas* (departments).

6. Conclusion

The findings revealed that CELPAD Arabic language learners were ready to learn autonomously and had positive attitudes and inclination towards autonomy, therefore appropriate and proper trainings are needed to expose and foster autonomy among them.

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