Fostering the Autonomous Learning Experience: Linking Theory and Practice

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the interdependence between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy in teaching, in general, and English language teaching, in particular. It aims at bridging the gap between theory and practice with regards to learner autonomy. It starts with an attempt to define the 'slippery concept' of learner autonomy and consider the factors influencing it. Learners and teachers alike are believed to foster their autonomous learning experience via the framework developed by Reinders (2010). It then argues the feasibility of implementing the framework in classroom pedagogy to promote learner autonomy and discusses the current situation.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, classroom pedagogy, foreign language teaching, learning strategies.

1. Introduction

The word autonomous comes from the Greek words "auto–nomus" referring to someone or something which lives by his/her own rule (Hadi, 2012). The concept of autonomy was first developed in politics. Autonomy as a political concept originated in the Ancient Greek. Philosophers such as Aristotle and Socrates stated that autonomy refers to the right of citizens to govern themselves. These citizens were not governed by an authority as they had the right to free choice (Hadi, 2012). The citizens created their own laws to regulate their cities. On the field of education, it has been on the spotlight of educators for over three decades. Educators perceive autonomy as the legitimate and ultimate goal of education. Many factors account for the change in the direction of research mainly the shift from the teacher-centered approach to the learner-centered approach to language learning. It is well-recognized and agreed upon that learning to learn has become more important than knowledge itself (Finch, 2002). The spread of information via the internet thanks to technological developments has changed the status of knowledge. It is no longer a privilege to the teacher.

2. Learner autonomy

2.1 Defining Learner autonomy

Learner autonomy is broadly defined as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning… to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" (Holec, 1981:3). This still influential definition of learner autonomy listed that the specific decisions were:

- Determining the objectives
- Defining the contents and progressions
- Selecting methods and techniques to be used
- Monitoring the procedure of acquisition
- Evaluating what has been acquired.

However, there is no clear definition of learner autonomy in the literature as various authors views it from different perspectives (Chong & Reinders, 2022; Ly, 2018). There is an ongoing debate on whether learner autonomy is a capacity or a behavior; whether it is illustrated through learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is a psychological phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications (Nga, 2014). It is defined as taking the responsibility for all aspects of learning and without any contribution of either the teacher or pedagogical materials (Dickinson, 1987; Legutke & Thomas, 1991: 270). Others perceive autonomy as having the choice and the means to be a decision-maker (Hunt, Gow et al., 1989). Little (1991) highlights the importance of decision-making; however, he does not reduce it to a mere process of decision-making. He rather defines it as "…a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action." (Little, 1991:4). Wenden (1991b) on the other hand regards learner autonomy as the acquisition of learning strategies i.e. learning how to learn and having a set of attitudes towards its achievement. The concern with these definitions is that each one emphasizes on one facet and disregards the others. Consequently, an overall insight grouping the different views is required.

The autonomous learner is able to detach him/herself from the traditional learning environment, to think critically, and to make decisions with regards to his/her learning (Little, 1991). The autonomous learner is responsible for all aspect of his/her learning from determining the objectives to the evaluation of what has been learnt inside or outside the framework of an educational institution (Ly, 2018). Learning strategies are tools without which autonomous learning cannot be reached for they equip the learner with tools to face challenges (Cummings et al., 2017). It is worth noting that learner autonomy is not an absolute concept. A learner is not either autonomous or not at all. There are degrees of autonomy. As mentioned earlier, the highest degree of autonomy is when the learner is capable of correctly choosing what, how and when to learn independently (Ridley, 1997).

2.2 Misconceptions about learner autonomy

Learner autonomy has become the 'buzzword' within the context of language learning. There is an inflation of terms used synonymously in the literature on autonomy which in fact have different meanings (Chong & Reinders, 2022). Terms such as self-instruction, self-access learning, self-study, self-directed learning, distance learning, and independent learning refer to situations where the learers with various ways and degrees learn by themselves (Finch, 2002; Nga, 2014). The line which separates learner autonomy and the aforementioned terms is that of capability. While the autonomous learner is by definition capable of learning by him/herself, the self-directed learner for instance is not necessarily capable of doing so. These new forms of learning encourage learners to take responsibility over the learning process; therefore, it might foster their autonomy or not. However, it is important to note that participants in these new programs are not automatically autonomous.

2.3 Factors learner autonomy

Numerous factors have been ascribed the role of promoting learner autonomy, namely learning strategies, learner attitude and motivation, the learning environment, the teaching approach, and language policy.

2.3.1 Learning strategies

Learning strategies equip the learner with tools with which s/he becomes better learner (Cummings et al, 2017; Oxford, 1990, 2016). Cognitive strategies and metacognitive strategies are considered the most important strategies with respect to autonomous learning as they help the learner simply to learn (Xiaoyan & Xiaohong, 2007). Examples of cognitive strategies are translation, note taking, deduction, and contextualization. Examples of metacognitive strategies are selective attention, self-monitoring, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement. Briefly, learning strategies gives the learner more control over his/her learning process which in turn foster learner autonomy.

2.3.2 Attitudes and motivation

Learner attitudes and motivation are essential components without which autonomous learning cannot be acquired (Reinders, 2010; Thanasoulas, 2000; Yu, 2006). Attitudes, when positive give rise to motivation. Distinction is made between instrumental motivation and integrative motivation. Instrumental motivation is when learning is triggered by external factors to the learning itself, namely academic success, reward, job promotion, etc. However, integrative motivation is when learning itself is the reward. At last, it is important to note that motivation whether integrative or instrumental is essential for learning to take place and without which learning is not possible.

2.3.3 Learning environment

The role of both teachers and learners may be deeply rooted in the context. It is almost considered as a fixed trait. For example, in the Asian context, the teacher is considered as the main authority. On the other part, learners are passive. The culture is reflected in the educational system. Smith et al. (2018) have stressed the difficulty of implementing learner autonomy in developing countries with difficult circumstances. They asserted that it is possible with the use of the many directed to low resources contexts (2018). Hence, it is crucial to take into consideration the learning environment to adapt the framework accordingly.

2.3.4 The teaching approach

A major factor that hinders the implementation of learner autonomy in classroom in the traditional teaching method i.e. teacher-centered approach where the learner is passive and have no control whatsoever over the learning experience. S/he is merely the recipient of knowledge. The role of the teacher in this approach is the knowledge holder. This teacher-learner relationship is horizontal where the teacher is the only responsible for the learning experience. S/he has control over the learners. It is easier and safer for a teacher to opt for teacher-centered approach even with materials targeted to learner-centered approach. The teacher feels in control of the class and the teaching. Experience determines how comfortable is the teacher in the classroom to cruise and be adventurous with the learners. The more experienced and self-aware the teacher the more likely s/he is to be venturesome and be engaging with learners regardless of their age and level.

2.3.5 Language policy

State-led educational policies and prescribed textbooks and curriculum are other factors that go without the implementation of learner autonomy in classrooms (Reinders, 2010). Therefore, although some teachers are well aware of the importance of learner autonomy and how it can empower their pupils or students, the educational

institutions they work in do not allow for it.

In addition to the teaching approach, language policies, curriculum design, the political environment the learner lives in may have an indirect influence on the classroom environment and may help or hinder the implementation of learner autonomy in classrooms. Keeping these constraints in mind, it illustrates how challenging is the task of implementing learner autonomy in classroom pedagogy. One should not expect to become autonomous by the end of a course. It is a painful and gradual process in which both the teacher and the learner take part. Some may argue that it is not reachable goal as it is an end in itself as it is the ultimate educational goal (Finch, 2002; Lai, 2001). On the other side of the debate, some argue that learners should be equipped with some degree of autonomy as a means to an end i.e. for the sake of language learning. Many have attempted to develop models or frameworks from which Reinders (2010) stands out as a comprehensive framework that require thorough consideration.

3. Toward Implementing Learner Autonomy in Classroom Pedagogy

Despite the popularity and agreement that the construct learner autonomy has among educators, it is still difficult to operationalize it in formal learning context (Vazquez, 2015). Learner autonomy is considered absent to the foreign language classroom (Vazquez, 2015). This is due to the 'double talk' effect that exists between theory and practice (Vazquez, 2015). In fact, theory says that learner autonomy is the ultimate goal of education and it should be promoted by teachers while the reality of the classrooms is quite different.

3.1 The Independent Language Learning Skills Framework

In an attempt to operationalize autonomous learning, Reinders (2010) suggested a framework of independent language learning skills that is composed of eight stages: (1) identifying needs, (2) setting goals, (3) planning learning, (4) selecting resources, (5) selecting learning strategies, (6) practice, (7) monitoring progress, and (8) assessment and revision. Each of these stages can either be directed from the part of the teacher or the learner, that in turn depending on the learning environment and the chosen teaching approach (See Figure 1).

3.1.1 Identifying needs

Identifying needs is the first step and the founding stage. It is very important to be aware of one's needs but most importantly to identify the specific needs in the different stages of learning. The identification of needs does not happen once. It should be reviewed once in a while to make sure that it is what the actual learner needs. The learner may not be a good needs analyzer as s/he is only given global score in exams. Thus, s/he is unable to give a full diagnosis. It is recommended that the teacher stresses this notion at the beginning of the course and keep them reminded of it throughout the course They will realize their strengths and weaknesses as they record their learning needs in diary or portfolio (Reinders, 2010).

3.1.2 Setting goals

Goals can be very specific or very general or can be both. It depends on the learner's needs. It is unfortunately very difficult to tailor the course according to the learner's needs and goals. However, when the teacher is aware of these needs and goals, s/he can put an extra effort to focus more on certain things and disregard others. The learner can commit to the goals by keeping them in focus through extracurricular activities (Reinders, 2010).

3.1.3. Planning learning

Planning is a pivotal element of the learning as it allows the learner to divide the tasks meticulously and allocate the approximate time to them (Reinders, 2010). The more specific and realistic the plan the more likely to be accomplished in due time. Proper planning from the part of the learner may require some assistance from the teacher at the first encounters. However, once the learner is familiar with the mechanism there is no need for support.

3.1.4 Selecting resources

The selection of resources is perceived as the responsibility of the teacher. Nevertheless, involving the learner in the process is possible. Learners can be informed of the theme of the different sessions and accordingly each time bring whatever they think is helpful to share with each other. Projects can also be made and learners share the materials through which they assembled the project. The key element to consider at this stage is how much room learners are offered depending most importantly on their level and age.

3.1.5 Selecting learning strategies

Language learning strategies help the learner determine how to learn in different situations. The learner needs to be aware of the different learning strategies. The teacher may ask the learner what to do to solve the problem and the response are the strategies they already use but may not be aware of. Then, they are exposed to other strategies and they try to practice each one. Learning strategies vary from cognitive strategies, metacognitive strategies, to social-affective strategies (Oxford, 2016).

3.1.6 Practice

Practice can take place inside or outside the classroom. Inside the classroom, the teacher must leave a decent time for practice because it is an important element of learning. Outside the classroom, the teacher can assign homework activities for further practice. Or else, it could be initiated by the learner. Had the learners no room for practice in

the classroom or in their materials, they would have no opportunities to do so. Therefore, it is important for the teacher and the materials to plan their lessons and design the curricula respectively while keeping in mind the importance of the practice section.

3.1.7 Monitoring progress

Monitoring progress is usually perceived as the task of the teacher to evaluate learners progress with regular tests and assignments. Conversely, keeping a learning diary or portfolio are tools that may allow for the learner to have control over her/his own learning. The problems encountered in the learning process have to be written down in details in order to solve them later.

3.1.8 Assessment and revision

Assessment and revision are the last stage of the framework cycle. Being able to assess and revise for one's own learning is challenging chore. Nonetheless, it is not conceivable to assess one's learning without summative assessment. The learner with proper tools and strategies shall be able to assess her/his own learning. Some teachers opt for mixture of summative and formative assessment to promote an autonomous learning environment.

The autonomous learning process has reflection, motivation, and interaction as its executive functioning system which provide the cognitive, affective and social foundations respectively to the eight stages of the cycle. Reflection is a cognitive aspect of learning. It refers to the bridge that connect past learning outcomes to future learning experience (Reinders, 2010). Interaction is a social aspect of learning. It is valued as a major component for developing autonomous learning behavior. Motivation is an affective aspect of learning. A support group is recommended for instance to keep each other's self-motivation upward. Ultimately, reflection, motivation, and interaction should be modulated in each stage.

3.2 Implementing learner autonomy in the classroom

The teacher can play an important role in fostering learner autonomy in classroom setting (Nunan, 1997). At an early stage of learning, learners are incapable of making the right choice with regards to their learning process. Since the process of learning has become the major concern (not the content), the classroom setting is considered the best place to promote autonomous behavior. The learners' quest for learning exhibited in the classroom by means of questions and mistakes should be perceived by the teacher as steps toward autonomy and thus should be encouraged. Therefore, the teacher must prepare the ground in the classroom for learners to step by step acquire some degree of autonomous learning. There are certain specific roles the teacher should fill in to encourage autonomous learning. First, the teacher should introduce his/her students to the concept of learning strategies and then provide them with opportunities for training. Second, the teacher should raise the students' awareness about the nature of language (as a system) and the nature of language learning as well. At later stages of learning, the learner should be introduced to the concept of learner autonomy and given the rationale behind it. And finally, the teacher should gradually rely on the learner for some part of the learning process (Szőcs, 2017). Exercises which require the use of the internet, representations, pair work and take-home exams are very successful tasks in fostering learner autonomy when implemented in the right stage.

The implementation of the framework should be possible gradually. The key element is setting up of reflection. Reflection ought to be over the learning process as whole and in its parts as well inside and outside the classroom. Some institutions have extremely rigid curriculum with little room for introducing such measures. Introducing the framework is not an easy and simple task but worth the trouble for the long-term. As such, the teacher should a find a way through even if that means starting with implementing one of the eight cycles only. The framework needs to be adaptable to the teaching context, including the physical, social, and cultural aspect.

4. Conclusion

There are numerous pedagogical implications in the implementation of the framework of independent language learning skills (Peters & Grove, 2007). Teachers and learners need to be thoroughly introduced to the concept of learner autonomy for a better understanding of learning in general and theirs in particular. Learners by being aware of their own learning process will become more responsible and will consequently recognize their weaknesses to overcome them (Szőcs, 2017). Educators and syllabus designers should take into consideration learner autonomy to help students maximize their learning potential in the long term (Szőcs, 2017).

To promote autonomous behavior, learners should have a say in the identification of learning needs and goals. They also need to get involved in the planification of their learning; choosing the right resources; selecting appropriate strategies; practicing; monitoring their own progress; and finally, assessing and revising their own learning. The framework of independent language learning skills makes the dream of autonomous learning reachable. However, implementing the framework does not automatically lead to learners' autonomy. It instead creates opportunities for it. To conclude, learning autonomy is the development of a certain mindset to perceive learning as never-ending process (Reinders, 2010). It is a gradual process that takes time and necessitate a continuous commitment from both ends.

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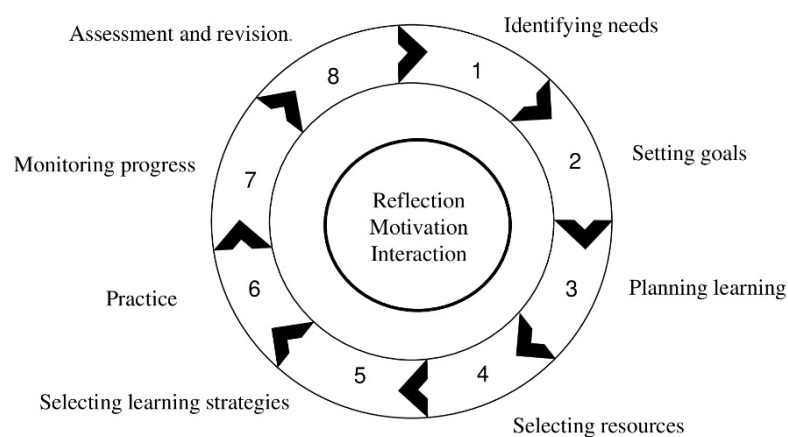
Figure 1. The cyclical nature of the autonomous learning process
Note. Adapted from "Towards a Classroom Pedagogy for Learner Autonomy: A Framework of Independent Language Learning Skills", by Reinders (2010) *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 35 (5), 12.
This figure is a depiction of the eight cycles for an autonomous learning process.