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Learner autonomy in the language classroom: from teacher dependency to learner independency

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Abstract

The field of language education has for the last three decades been witnessing the debate over the issue of learner autonomy. The present study is a literature review of learner autonomy focusing on highlighting the main themes of learner autonomy since it first entered the arena of language teaching. These themes are based on the concepts of learner responsibility and independence, the importance of the classroom context in both the Western and Eastern style and the role of the language classroom teacher. The present study also shows that although learner autonomy means a reshaping of the view that the learner is responsible for learning, teachers do not abdicate their responsibilities of teaching in the language learning process and on the contrary teachers become the primary agents on fostering the development of learner autonomy within the classroom context.

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Introduction

In basic terms autonomy is defined as one's taking the responsibility for learning. However, this is not as simple as it may look. At this point it is necessary to state that Benson [1] claims that it is important to describe autonomy for the following two reasons: firstly, construct validity is an important precondition for research. In order for a construct such as autonomy to be able to be researchable it needs to be describable in terms of observable behaviors. Secondly, it is quite likely that programs or innovations aiming to foster autonomy could be more effective if they are based on clear understandings of the behavioral changes which they aim to foster. However, autonomy is not strictly defined and it may be recognized in a variety of forms. Therefore it is important that we should identify the form in which we choose to recognize it in the contexts of our own research and practice. As language teachers, it is our duty to be aware of the factors which are conducive to learner autonomy because autonomy is the key to life long learning.

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The Birth of Autonomy in Language Learning

The Council of Europe (CoE) established a Modern Languages Project in 1971. As claimed by Benson [1] one of the outcomes of this project was the formation of the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy, France, which became a focal point for research and practice in the field. The founder of CRAPEL is Yves Chalon whom by many is considered to be the father of autonomy in language learning. Chalon died in 1972 and Henry Holec, still a prominent figure within the field of autonomy was given the leadership of CRAPEL. Holec's [2] project report to the CoE is considered a key early document on autonomy in language learning. This project was based on providing adults with opportunities for life-long learning. The approach adopted by this project developed at CRAPEL, according to Benson [1] was especially influenced by the proposals which emerged in the field of self-directed learning which necessitates the development of the abilities of the individual in order to act more responsibly in running the affairs of the society that he lives in. As a result, self-access language learning centers were established by CRAPEL and language learners were provided with a rich collection of second language materials for experimentation with self-directed learning.

As formerly stated, autonomy is not accepted as an absolute concept. For this reason, the literature of autonomy displays studies which have been conducted to discover the processes and factors affecting autonomy. These studies have also attempted to unravel the levels of autonomy embraced by the language learner. A brief account of the major reliable and robust findings emerging from learner autonomy research within the classroom context is presented in this section of the present study.

Learner Autonomy in the Western and Eastern Classroom Context

As previously mentioned, some researchers have claimed that the origins of autonomy are rooted in the European continent. On the contrary there are researchers claiming that the very idea of autonomy has deep historical roots in Eastern philosophies. For example Pierson [3] has shown that ideas of autonomy and self-education have roots in Chinese thought dating back to the Sung Dynasty.

Riley [4] was one of the first researchers to raise the issue of the cultural appropriateness of the idea of autonomy in language learning. Benson [1] states that Riley's concerns were associated with the fate of non-European students in European educational institutions that adopted autonomy among their goals. Studies related to these concerns were conducted, and it was discovered that the national culture was found to be an important factor in the provision of a cultural setting for fostering autonomy. Pennycook [5] describes that the notions of student centered education, individualism, and autonomy derive from a particular context and that these concepts will be structured and valued differently across cultural contexts.

According to the literature it is possible to assume that the Western style of autonomy based on language teaching cannot suit the learning style of each student. For example, Rees-Miller [6] gives evidence relating to this assumption by citing a study of Asian learners taught with Western learning strategies. These learners were found to perform more poorly than the control group because they tried not to use their own well-developed strategies for rote memorization. Along these lines, to sum up, Pennycook [5] warns that the encouragement of learner autonomy universally without an awareness of the social, cultural and political context, may lead to inappropriate pedagogies and cultural impositions.

The Classroom Context and Learner Autonomy

Studies have investigated the meaning and experiences of autonomy in the language classroom. The relevant literature shows that classroom-based approaches aiming to foster autonomy are based on providing the learners the opportunities to make decisions concerning the management of their own learning. As it is expressed by Benson [1], positive results have been gained in accounts of experiments where the learner has been encouraged to take a certain amount of control over the planning and assessment of classroom learning. In addition these experiments have shown that learners are able to exercise control over these aspects of their learning provided that they given the opportunity to do so with the necessary support.

These experiments have reached consensus on addressing the importance of developing learner autonomy within the classroom through the support of the teachers and collaboration of the learners. In addition, their results show that learners are able to develop cognitive skills necessary for their learning by being provided the opportunities to make decisions within the classroom.

Breen and Man [7] are researchers who have attempted to relate the practical implementation of autonomous language learning and the principles that motivate it within the classroom. They have found that the evolution of autonomy in the classroom can be traced with reference to (i) the learner's own shift from one phase to the next, (ii) the classroom group's shift from one phase to the next and (iii) possible relationships between the learner and the group in each phase (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 The Evolution of Autonomy in the Classroom (Breen and Man [7])

The Learner	Classroom Group
<i>Phase 1</i>	<i>Phase 1</i>
Dependent or counter dependent	Autocratic
<i>Phase 2</i>	<i>Phase 2</i>
Independent or individualistic	Anarchic, uncertain and fragmented
<i>Phase 3</i>	<i>Phase 3</i>
Interdependent	Collaborative learning community

According to Breen and Man [7], in a classroom situation if many learners have been socialized into a dependent relationship to the teacher or classroom group, then a shift towards autonomy by the individual will open two strategic pathways for the learner: either counter-dependency through “dropping out” or independence from the group. This phase may be a necessary intervening step towards the fuller realization of autonomy in interdependent relations with the other learners in the classroom. The “autocratic” classroom is the situation where the teacher is in control or the group including the teacher, has jointly conspired to maintain autocracy in its typical ways of working. When autonomous learning is encouraged by the teacher, a phase of relative anarchy typified by uncertainty of purposes and responsibilities arise. Relationships between the learner and the other people in the classroom may be anticipated after these phases of evolution occur.

The Classroom Teacher and Learner Autonomy

Experimental research has shown that teacher style effects learner motivation which in return affects learner autonomy. A study conducted by Deci et al. [8] discovered that students in classrooms with autonomy supportive teachers displayed more intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and self-esteem than did the students in the classrooms with controlling teachers. Deci et al. [8] note that similar results were reported in a study of Ryan and Grolnick (1986) and that in an experiment held by Jelsma (1982) it was discovered that when students were fidgety and inattentive during a teaching session, the teacher became more controlling than when the same students were more attentive. Therefore, Deci et al. [8] claim that students who are highly motivated and autonomous in school may elicit more autonomy support from their teachers, whereas students who are more distracted and less motivated may elicit more controlling behaviors from the teachers.

The teachers' role in the development of autonomy has also been investigated by Voller [9] who found that teachers must have a clear view of the attitudes and beliefs underpinning their views of autonomous language learning. He states that whether the teacher views learner autonomy as a right or as a distant goal, the teacher role-plays the facilitator, counselor and resource. Voller [9] also proposes the following three fundamental assumptions which lead to autonomy. The first is that language learning is an interpretive process therefore; an autonomous approach to learning requires a transfer of control to the learner. The second is to make sure that our teaching practices reflect these assumptions by ensuring that they are based on a process of negotiation with learners. And the third is to self-monitor our teaching so as to observe and reflect upon the teaching strategies we use and the nature of the interactions we set up and participate in.

Another distinctive research is that of Chan [10]. According to this researcher, an attitude towards language learning ranges from dependent (i.e. teacher-directed) to independent (i.e. learner-directed). It is believed that the language learner could be functioning at any point on this learning continuum and that a learner, who is closer to the end of ‘dependent’, is under the support of the teacher while a learner who is closer to the end of ‘independent’ is more autonomous.

Various models presupposing means for fostering learner autonomy in the classroom have been suggested by distinct researchers. One of them, suggested by Nunan [11], claims that most learners do not know what is best for them at the beginning of the learning process. According to this researcher, it is the function of the materials augmentation to develop skills and knowledge in learners, which will ultimately leave the learners in a position in

which they would know best. In a program aiming to increase the degree of learner autonomy Nunan [11] has proposed five levels for encouraging learner autonomy. According to his model the first level is awareness. Here, learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the materials they are using. The second is involvement; the learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer. The third is intervention; learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning program. The fourth is creation; learners create their own goals and objectives. And finally, transcendence; learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond.

As can be seen from this model, some of the levels are more readily incorporated into teaching materials than others. The first step aims to make learners aware of the goals, content and strategies underlying the materials they are using. Then, learners move to active involvement by choosing from a range of content and procedural options. Next, the learners are encouraged to intervene in the learning process through modifying and adapting goals, content and tasks. In the fourth step, learners set their own goals, develop their own content and create their own learning tasks. And finally, the learner is able to create his own learning materials from the resources around him. According to Nunan [11] these levels overlap and the learner is able to move up and down these levels.

Conclusion

The shift in focus of language instruction from teacher-centered to the learner-centered has given learners the responsibility of their own language development. This focus has been adapted by language programs which invite their learners to become autonomous and they expect their learners to be able to diagnose some of their own learning strengths and weaknesses so that they can be able to self-direct their processes of language development.

Due to the consideration of autonomy, Weaver and Cohen [12] state that learners are encouraged to 'learn how to learn' and 'learn how to use' a foreign language. These researchers also stress that language learners should not be left to their own devices because they need to be explicitly trained to become aware of and proficient in the use of a broad range of techniques and strategies that can be utilized during the learning process. The present study has exemplified that although it may be possible for a language learner to work unsupervised, to reach this stage or even at this stage the learner may still be dependent on a teacher for guidance.

This brief survey on the literary review of learner autonomy has also displayed examples that it is possible for teachers to foster the development of learner autonomy within the context of a classroom whether in a Westernized or non-Westernized setting. However, it must not be undervalued that within the context of a traditional classroom, the traditional role of the teacher requires radical changes as he takes into account appropriate pedagogies and cultural concepts. Finally, the discussions in the present study have provided evidence that learner autonomy and the language classroom- with its language teacher, go hand in hand.

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