

## **Learner Autonomy: Origins, Approaches, and Practical Implementation**

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**Abstract** – Learner autonomy is broadly defined as the ability to take charge of one’s own learning. It requires full responsibility for the learning process; a dependence on oneself rather than on other people. Acceptance of this responsibility and any attempt to master the process requires effective metacognition (planning, monitoring, and evaluating), motivation and a proactive approach, self-reflection, and the ability to apply knowledge and skills outside the immediate context of learning. After expanding on this definition (to include some historical background) and what learner autonomy requires, this paper highlights six different approaches (resource, technology, learner, classroom, curriculum, and teacher) that help foster its development. The overall aim is to shed light on this important area of language education and highlight ways for effective practice both in and outside the classroom.

**Keywords:** autonomy, approaches, language teaching, learner training

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

Learner autonomy has been a focal point of research for more than three decades. There have been myriad studies that try to define what it is and involves, provide a rationale for promoting it in and outside the classroom, clarify the role of the teacher, identify institutional and individual constraints, situate it in diverse cultural contexts, and expound on the implications for teaching and learning in general (Holec, 1981; Pemberton, Li, Or, & Pierson, 1996; Benson & Voller, 1997; Sinclair, McGrath, & Lamb, 2000; Little, Ridley, & Ushioda, 2003; Plafreyman & Smith, 2003; Barfield & Brown, 2007; Viera, 2009; Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). As a result, there are many misconceptions about the complex nature of learner autonomy and its practical implementation. As it has the potential to influence a wide range of activities in language education, it is worth exploring the conceptual roots of learner autonomy and its development over the years, to include different approaches, as well as how both teachers and learners can benefit from it.

The origins of autonomy can be traced back to the Council of Europe’s Modern Language Project in 1971. One of the outcomes of the project was the establishment of Centre de Recherches et d’Applications en Langues (CRAPEL) at University of Nancy in France. Yves Chalon, CRAPEL founder, is considered to be the father of autonomy in language learning. After his death, leadership of CRAPEL was passed on to Henri Holec, who remains a prominent figure in the field of autonomy (Holec, 1981).

Initially, autonomy was viewed as a natural product of the practice of self-directed

learning – learning in which the objectives, contents, progress, methods, techniques, procedure of acquisition, and evaluation of learning are, in part or fully, determined by the learners themselves. Holec emphasizes that learners will only make use of their ability or capacity (Benson, 2006) to be autonomous if they wish to and are permitted by existing materials, as well as social and psychological constraints (Holec, 1981).

Although it may have suffered a crisis of identity throughout the 1970s and 1980s by being associated with individualization (a mode of instruction in which learners were expected to work their way through materials prepared by a teacher), autonomy came into its own largely through efforts by teachers who experimented with it in classroom settings. These practitioners were influenced by developing views of the classroom as a social context for learning and communication, and by the idea that autonomy could be developed by a shift in relationships of power and control within the classroom (Benson, 1997). As a result of these pedagogical changes, autonomy now implies interdependence. These days the focus is squarely on the learner as the key agent in the learning process, which has subsequently led to a reexamination of the teacher's role in the curriculum.

In terms of a broad current definition, learner autonomy is the willing capacity to take control of (or take charge of or responsibility for) one's own learning (Holec, 1981; Dam, 1995). More specifically, learner autonomy:

- is an attribute of the learner (a multidimensional ability that learners possess, rather than a mode or method of learning)
- requires conscious awareness of the learning process
- involves degrees (which are unstable and variable)
- is not necessarily innate
- is not just a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent
- is not just a matter of teaching learning strategies
- is not self-instruction or learning without a teacher
- is not something teachers do to learners
- is not an identifiable behavior
- is not a steady state achieved by learners (Esch, 1998; Sinclair 2000)

As for control, there are three interdependent levels at which learners are in the driver's seat:

- Learning management (which involves learners' planning, organizing, and evaluating their own learning)
- Cognitive processes (which focuses on learners' attention, reflection, and metacognitive knowledge)
- Learning content (or learning situations involving the learners' right to determine and implement their own learning goals) (Benson, 1997)

In order to validate the concept of autonomy, it is important to highlight the evidence for learner control as a natural attribute of learning. First, learners who achieve a proficiency in a foreign language employ a variety of modes of learning. Of these, self-initiation and self-

management of learning plays an important role. In other words, at some point in the learning process learners do take some degree of control of the overall direction of their learning. Second, research indicates that learners often follow their own agendas rather than those of their teachers (Nunan, 1995). Learner selection of what is learnt accounts for this mismatch. Third, although weak in terms of empirical data, there is ample anecdotal evidence that learners have some degree of control over their own motivation (Dornyei, 1998). Similarly, learners are capable of employing affective strategies to control their emotions and attitudes about learning (Oxford, 1990). Learners also have the ability to reflect on their learning experiences and, in turn, change their beliefs or preferences in ways that are beneficial to how they go about learning.

## **II. PRACTICES THAT HELP DEVELOP AUTONOMY**

Promoting the growth of autonomy does not imply that teachers simply leave learners to their own devices. Instead, teachers need to actively encourage and assist learners to take control of their learning in ways that will be effective in terms of goals that learners have determined for themselves. Practices that help foster the development of autonomy can be classified under six broad interdependent headings:

- A. Resource-based approaches
- B. Technology-based approaches
- C. Learner-based approaches
- D. Classroom-based approaches
- E. Curriculum-based approaches
- F. Teacher-based approaches (Benson, 2001)

### *A. Resource-based approaches*

Resource-based approaches emphasize independent interaction with learning materials. The ideal types of material involve guided self-discovery tasks based on authentic data, questionnaires designed to help learners clarify or challenge their beliefs about language learning, study guides for language practice activities not based on didactic materials, fluency activities for pairs and groups together with checklists and guidelines for self and peer evaluation, suggestions for different ways of using learning materials, student-generated materials, and standard reading and listening exercises designed for a particular genre rather than a particular text (Sheerin, 1991). These materials depart from the pedagogical model of transmission and testing of language content commonly underlying commercial materials. In fact, the most effective materials may be those that help learners exploit opportunities for learning that are external to the materials themselves.

Another option for fostering learner autonomy is self-access centers, which encourage learners to rely or depend less on teachers for continual direction (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2011). In order for self-access centers to be successful, the profile of the learners, the available resources and materials, the learning environment of the school or institution in which the center operates all need to be considered. Moreover, learners' needs must be discerned, and they need to be trained in order to use the center effectively. Finally, if centers are truly going

to help develop independent learning, there must be a clear understanding of how it functions and is managed.

### *B. Technology-based approaches*

Technology-based approaches emphasize independent interaction with educational technologies. The most effective of these seem to be text manipulation and computer mediated communication applications like email, online discussion boards, and web authoring software. Each of these technologies offers two things very important for learners and learning: the development of control over learning content and opportunities for collaboration. They also allow for interaction among learners, between learners and target language users, and between learners and teachers that could otherwise be difficult to achieve in the classroom.

In one technology-based study, Dang and Robertson (2010) explored the relationship as well as the impact of computer technology on learner autonomy. They viewed learner autonomy in terms of sociocultural perspectives that emphasize the interactions between learners and their environment. The study showed a strong association between computer mediated communication and learner autonomy. Their findings suggest that teachers need to take advantage of students' online social habits for educational purposes. In a similar manner, Ankan and Bakla (2011) studied the use of blogs as a way to promote learner autonomy by making use of four points of reference: decision-making, independent action, critical reflection, and detachment. While the students in the study made independent decisions about content and reacted positively to the experience, they also faced difficulties from the use of unknown technology and language proficiency. This clearly suggests that students need guidance from teachers in order to learn language in an autonomous way. In other words, teachers need to take on the role of facilitators, advisors, and/or supporters, and help students overcome any difficulties that technology may pose.

CALL materials, on the other hand, limit the degree of control offered to learners due to their structure and content, which is something that needs to be addressed as technology plays an increasingly important role in language education.

### *C. Learner-based approaches*

Learner-based approaches emphasize the direct production of behavioral and psychological changes in the learner, which enable them to take greater control over their learning and become better language learners. This necessitates direct advice on language-learning strategies and techniques, training based on good language learner research and insights from cognitive psychology, training in which learners are encouraged to experiment with strategies and discover what works well for them, synthetic approaches drawing on a range of theoretical sources, integrated approaches treating learner training as a by-product of language learning, and self-directed approaches in which learners are encouraged to train themselves through reflection on self-directed learning activities (Cotterall, 1995).

Strategies consist of conscious, deliberate behavior that enhances learning and allows learners to use information more effectively. In terms of autonomy, teachers need to be aware that students don't always transfer L1 learning strategies to L2, and they need to find ways to cope when faced with elements above their current level. For a strategy to be teachable,

students must recognize there is a problem and realize that they need to take strategic action, teachers must be able to exemplify the strategy and show that it is effective, and the strategy needs to be repeatable in an independent manner (Wilson, 2010).

Of the three types of strategies, cognitive (ones learners use in order to complete a task), metacognitive (ones learners use to self-regulate their own learning), and socio-affective (ones concerned with emotions and attitudes while learning), it is metacognitive that will help learners take the strategies we model and turn them into skills that they can use independently. As an example, Vandergrift and Goh (2012) highlight twelve strategies that can be put into a pre [P], during [D], post [P] structure that is particularly useful for receptive skill lessons, activities, and tasks:

1. [P] Planning (develop awareness of what needs to be done to accomplish a task, develop an appropriate action plan and/or appropriate contingency plans to overcome difficulties that may interfere with successful completion of it)
2. [P] Prediction (anticipate contents and the message of a text)
3. [D] Monitoring (check, verify, or correct comprehension or performance in the course of a task)
4. [D] Cooperation (work with others in an effort to get help with improving comprehension, language use, and learning)
5. [D] Using linguistic and learning processes (rely on knowledge of the first language or additional languages to make sense of what is heard or seen, and/or consult language learning resources)
6. [D] Contextualization (place what is heard or seen in a specific context in order to facilitate comprehension)
7. [D] Inferencing (use information within the text or conversational context to guess the meanings of unfamiliar language items associated with a given task, to predict content and outcomes, or to fill in missing information)
8. [D] Focusing attention (avoid distractions and pay attention to input in different ways)
9. [D] Managing emotions (keep track of feelings and not allow negative ones to influence attitudes and behaviors)
10. [P] Evaluation (check outcomes and judge the success of the plan)
11. [P] Reorganizing (transfer what was processed into forms that help understanding, storage and retrieval)
12. [P] Elaboration (use prior knowledge from outside the text and relate it to knowledge from the text to embellish your interpretation)

Just as with the other practices, teachers need to model how to effectively use these strategies with language learning materials, particularly authentic ones that students will regularly encounter in their lives outside the classroom.

#### *D. Classroom-based approaches*

Classroom-based approaches emphasize learner control over the planning and evaluation of classroom learning, and that autonomy can be fostered through cooperative learning within classroom contexts. To achieve these ends, teachers need to negotiate control and responsibility with learners, specifically in the setting of goals, the learning process, and determining evaluation and assessments.

One example of this comes from Miller and Ng (1996) who studied peer assessment as one avenue to get students involved in their own learning and to develop learner autonomy. Their intent was to turn passive recipients into active participants in a language program, which was rooted in the benefits of peer assessment, namely the issue of fairness (classmates vs. teacher), improved understanding of and attitudes towards being evaluated, and self-regulation. Miller and Ng discovered that in order to realize these benefits students needed assistance in properly designing and carrying out assessment techniques, as well as dealing with critical feedback from their peers.

Another classroom-based possibility is the use of portfolios as they provide authentic evidence for evaluating language learning. Benefits of using portfolios include self-directed learning, critical self-awareness, improvement in self-confidence, the development of self-assessment skills, a stress-free class, and a friendly relationship between the teacher and students (Benson, 2001). By being involved in the process of learning and evaluation, learners are better able to set realistic goals and direct their own learning.

In order for classroom-based approaches to work effectively, teachers need to understand and be committed to the concept of autonomy, be prepared to commit to the required training for learner autonomy to develop, to include the implementation of strategies, and integrate self-assessment and peer-assessment into everyday classroom activities, which should be practical in terms of time and resources (Ushioda, 2011).

#### *E. Curriculum-based approaches*

Curriculum-based approaches extend the idea of learner control to the curriculum as a whole. A curriculum is defined as the processes and products of planning, teaching, implementing and evaluating a course of study or related courses. It is the nexus of educational decisions, activities, and outcomes in a particular setting, which is affected by explicit and implicit social expectations, educational and institutional policies and norms, teachers' beliefs and understandings, and learners' needs and goals. Furthermore, it is a dynamic system of three interrelated processes: planning (needs analysis, aims or goals, materials and activities), enacting (teaching and learning in the classroom), and evaluating (assessing learning outcomes) (Snow and Kamhil-Stein, 2006).

The idea of enactment can be traced from Barnes (1976) to Eisner (1985), who described the curriculum as events shaped by the purposes and cross-purposes of teacher, student, subject matter and classroom. Synder (1992) defines curriculum enactment as the educational experiences jointly created by students and teacher in the classroom. In this view, enactment – the teaching and learning processes that happen in the classroom – is at the heart of education. Planning and evaluating are both directed at the classroom and are closely allied with it. The three processes that make up curriculum are embedded in social and educational contexts that determine their purpose and scope (Graves, 2008).

One way to foster learner control within an enacted curriculum is to use a process syllabus as learners are expected to make the major decisions concerning the content and procedures of learning in collaboration with their teachers (Breen, 1987). This requires a negotiation between teacher and students, which can begin with a needs analysis. Key information to gather includes learner expectations of the course (their goals and objectives), reactions to all parts of a prepared syllabus (materials, assessment, and course organization or schedule), and final comments (which provides an opportunity for learners to state needs that may have been overlooked in the teacher planning process). Negotiation necessitates compromise as not everything learners want can or should be implemented. Administrative requirements and the teacher's vision for the course must also be taken into consideration and sufficiently discussed when summarizing and presenting the results of the needs analysis. It's through this negotiation that a teacher and the learners can share differing levels of control, which can result in varying levels of course redevelopment.

#### *F. Teacher-based approaches*

Teacher-based approaches emphasize the role of the teacher and teacher education in the practice of fostering autonomy among learners. Teachers can assist learners to plan and carry out their independent language learning by helping them to assess needs, set goals and objectives, plan work, select materials, evaluate themselves, and acquire the skills and knowledge needed to implement all of these. This assistance is rooted in teacher beliefs about learner autonomy, which have a significant influence on the commitment to learner autonomy in the classroom (Raya & Sircu, 2013). These include beliefs about age, the effectiveness of independent study, the ability to complete tasks alone, making choices about ways to learn, opportunities to learn both in and outside the classroom (without a teacher), giving choice and control in the classroom, language level, learner confidence, culture, collaborative learning, teacher assistance, motivation, and the ability to self-evaluate. Moreover, to what degree learners are involved in decisions about the objectives of a course, materials used, kind of activities and tasks learners do, topics discussed, the means of assessment, teaching methods used, and ways in which the classroom is managed, as well as to what extent learners have the ability to identify their own needs, strengths and weaknesses, monitor their progress, evaluate their own learning, and learn cooperatively and independently, all need to be considered when trying to determine the desirability and feasibility of learner autonomy (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012).

### **III. CONCLUSION**

Although this is just an overview of this complex and developing concept, it does highlight the origins of autonomy, important research done to date, and what teachers can do to help learners. From the six approaches, it is clear that the development of learner autonomy is determined by learner involvement, learner reflection, and appropriate target language use (Little, 1998). Nunan (1988) lays out a nine-step program for learner training and autonomy:

Step 1 – Make instructional goals clear to learners

Step 2 – Allow learners to create their own goals

Step 3 – Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom

Step 4 – Raise awareness of learning processes

Step 5 – Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies

Step 6 – Encourage learner choice

Step 7 – Allow learners to generate their own tasks

Step 8 – Encourage learners to become teachers

Step 9 – Encourage learners to become researchers (Nunan, 1988)

These steps (and overlapping sequence) help move students from total dependence on a teacher to autonomy, which could serve as a blueprint for activating learner autonomy in classrooms around the globe.

Although there are no definitive answers about the ways in which practices associated with autonomy work to foster autonomy, about the contextual factors that influences their effectiveness, or about exactly how the development of autonomy and language acquisition interact, it is still a valid theoretical construct which plays a significant role in language education to this day.

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