

Learner Autonomy

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Abstract – This paper aims to depict the importance of learner autonomy. Learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation: autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning; and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation.

Keywords: learner autonomy; motivation; strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Many people have thought, talked and written about learner autonomy, as it seems to be the essential factor in learning languages because it promotes the learner's freedom. It includes the development of learning skills - the capacity for independent language learning.

Autonomous learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning. However, learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant, abdicating his/her control over what is transpiring in the language learning process (Candy, 1991). Learner autonomy is a continuing dynamic process.

In order to help learners to assume greater control over their own learning it is important to help them to become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use' (Holmes & Ramos, 1991). At any rate, individual learners differ in their learning habits, interests, needs, and motivation, and develop varying degrees of independence throughout their lives (Tumposky, 1982).

The shift of responsibility from teachers to learners does not exist in a vacuum, but is the result of a concatenation of changes to the curriculum itself towards a more learner-centred kind of learning. What is more, rearranging teacher and learner roles leads to radical changes. Say "No" to the traditional classroom, say "Yes" to the new wave of education!

II. WHAT IS LEARNER AUTONOMY?

"Learner autonomy" (*working definition*) is defined as the "ability to take charge of one's own learning", noting that this ability "is not inborn but must be acquired either by 'natural' means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way", and pointing out that "To take charge of one's learning is to have [...] the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning [...]" (Holec, 1981, p.3).

In David Little's terms, learner autonomy is 'essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning--a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991: 4). Leni Dam (1990, cited in Gathercole, 1990: 16), drawing upon Holec (1981,p.3), defines autonomy in terms of the learner's willingness and capacity to control or oversee her own learning. More specifically, she, like Holec, holds that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organising and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation. For Rathbone (1971: 100, 104, cited in Candy, 1991: 271), 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. Rousseau ([1762] 1911, cited in Candy, 1991: 102) regards the autonomous learner as someone who 'is obedient to a law that he prescribes to himself'. Within the context of education, though, there seem to be seven main attributes characterizing autonomous learners (see Omaggio, 1978, cited in Wenden, 1998: 41-42): Autonomous learners

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

On a general note, the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 2):

- 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.

III. STRATEGIES FOR LEARNER AUTONOMY

Language learning does not involve internalizing sets of rules, structures and forms; each learner brings her own experience and world knowledge to bear on the target language or

task at hand. Different factors play great role in a language learning environment such as learner needs, constructivism supports, learners' behavior, motivation, attitudes, language awareness... Herein must be mentioned that autonomous learning is achieved in certain conditions where learners may use different strategies:

1. 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;
- inferencing, when matching an unfamiliar word against available information (a new word etc.);
- question for clarification, when asking the teacher to explain, etc. (see Cook, 1993: 114-115);

2. Metacognitive strategies

- 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.

At the planning stage, also known as pre-planning (see Wenden, 1998: 27), learners identify their objectives and determine how they will achieve them. Planning, however, may also go on while a task is being performed. This is called planning-in-action. Here, learners may change their objectives and reconsider the ways in which they will go about achieving them. At the monitoring stage, language learners act as 'participant observers or overseers of their language learning' (ibid.)

3. Learner attitudes and motivation

According to Gardner and MacIntyre (1993: 3), motivation is comprised of three components: 'desire to achieve a goal, effort extended in this direction, and satisfaction with the task'. Positive attitudes are conducive to increased motivation, while negative attitudes have the opposite effect. But let us examine the role of motivation. According to a large body of empirical research in social psychology, autonomy – “feeling free and volitional in one’s actions” (Deci, (with R. Flaste), 1995, p.2) – is a basic human need. It is nourished by, and in turn nourishes, our intrinsic motivation, our proactive interest in the world around us. This explains how learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation: autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self- management in learning; and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation. Precisely because autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective (conversely, all learning is likely to succeed to the extent that the learner is autonomous). And the efficiency and effectiveness of the autonomous learner means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom (Little, 1991). That’s why learner autonomy is important.

It is evident that students are motivated in different ways and to different degrees. Some learners like doing grammar; some do memorising; others are easily involved in speaking and role-play activities; others prefer reading and writing, while avoiding speaking. Teachers should mind students’ needs, interests (likes and dislikes) and abilities while giving tasks to be done independently and willingly. If you reward your children for doing their homework, they will usually respond by getting it done. But is this the most effective method of motivation? No, says psychologist Edward L. Deci, who challenges traditional thinking and shows that this method actually works against performance. The best way to motivate people—at school, at work, or at home—is to support their sense of autonomy. Explaining the reasons why a task is important and then allowing as much personal freedom as possible in carrying out the task will stimulate interest and commitment, and is a much more effective approach than the standard system of reward and punishment. We are all inherently interested in the world, argues Deci (1995), so why not nurture that interest in each other? Instead of asking, "How can I motivate people?" we should be asking, "How can I create the conditions within which people will motivate themselves?"

4. Learners' behaviour

A central research project on learning strategies is the one surveyed in O'Malley and Chamot (1990). According to them, learning strategies are 'the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information' (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990: 1, cited in Cook, 1993: 113).

IV. HOW TO PROMOTE SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING (LEARNER AUTONOMY)

It is of consequence to note that autonomy is a process, not a product. One does not become autonomous; one only works towards autonomy. One corollary of viewing autonomy in this way is the belief that there are some things to be achieved by the learner, as well as some ways of achieving these things, and that autonomy 'is learned at least partly through educational experiences [and interventions]' (Candy, 1991: 115). Accepting responsibility for our own learning is not only a matter of gradually developing metacognitive mastery of the learning process. It has an equally important affective dimension: in their commitment to self-management and their generally proactive approach, autonomous learners are motivated learners. What is more, Holec's definition entails that autonomous learners can freely apply their knowledge and skills outside the immediate context of learning (Little, 1991). To all intents and purposes, the autonomous learner takes a (pro-) active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1975). According to Wenden (1998: 79-95), a good way of collecting information on how students go about a learning task and helping them become aware of their own strategies is to assign a task and have them report what they are thinking while they are performing it. This self-report is called introspective, as learners are asked to introspect on their learning. In this case, 'the [introspective] self-report is a verbalization of one's stream of consciousness' (Wenden, 1998: 81). Introspective reports are assumed to provide information on the strategies learners are using at the time of the report. However, this method suffers from one limitation: '[t]he concentration put on thinking aloud might detract from [learners'] ability to do the task efficiently' (ibid.: 83), thus rendering the outcome of the report spurious and tentative. Another type of self-report is retrospective self-report, since learners are asked to think back or retrospect on their learning. Retrospective self-reports are quite open ended, in that there is no limit put on what students say in response to a question or statement that points to a topic in a general way. There are two kinds of retrospective self-reports: semi-structured interviews and structured questionnaires. A semi-structured interview may focus on a specific skill with a view to extracting information about learners' feelings towards particular skills (reading, listening, etc.), problems encountered, techniques resorted to in order to tackle these problems, and learners' views on optimal strategies or ways of acquiring specific skills or dealing with learning tasks. A structured questionnaire seeks the same information but in a different way: by dint of explicit questions and statements, and then asking learners to agree or disagree, write true or false, and so forth. It could be argued that self-reports can be a means of raising awareness of learners' strategies and the need for constant evaluation of techniques, goals, and outcomes. As Wenden (1998: 90) observes, 'without awareness [learners] will remain trapped in their old patterns of beliefs and behaviors and never be fully autonomous'. As a result,

constructivist approaches encourage and promote self-directed learning as a necessary condition for learner autonomy (Thanasoulas, 2000).

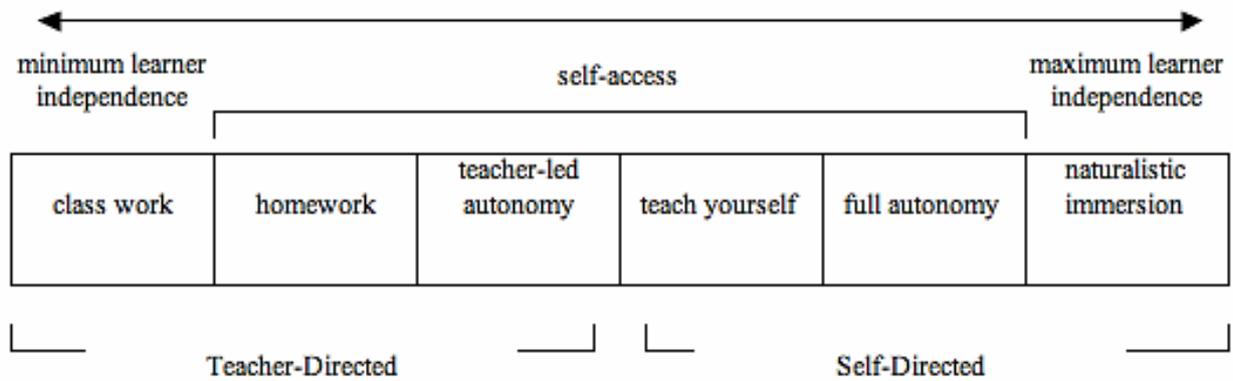
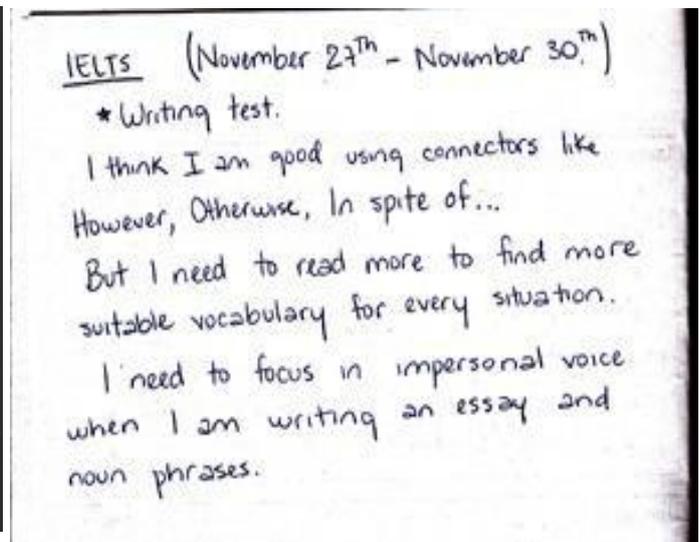
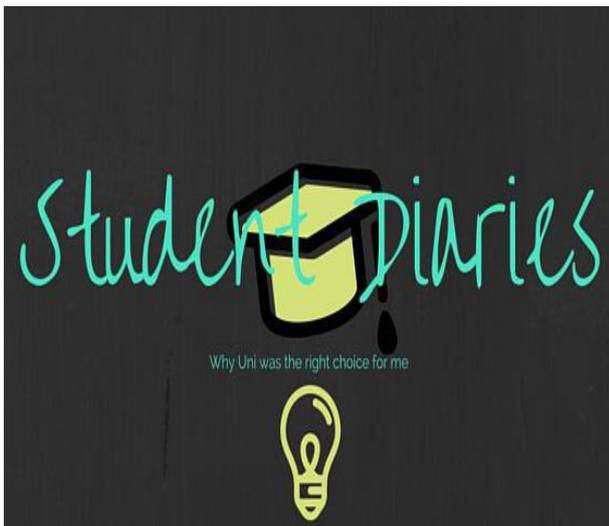


Figure 1. Jones' Diagram representing scope of study with adaptations to show self-access (Jones, 1998, p. 379)

According to Vygotsky (1978), learning is an internalized form of a formerly social activity, and 'a learner can realize [his] potential interactively – through the guidance of supportive other persons such as parents, teachers, and peers' (Wenden, 1998: 107). Herein lies the role of diaries and evaluation sheets, which offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, identifying any problems they run into and suggesting solutions.

Learner diaries with students can be used at different levels and learner needs for various purposes, e.g. as a planner, reminder, or secret keeper. They can also be created to get them focused on something important (events, dates, ideas), to set goals for the coming week, speak about their success, problems, help them remember what they studied; What were the main things they learnt each day?...



Besides the written form there can also be used ediaries (Electronic Diaries) and the effect will be even more powerful, as the pages can be published (if they write essays, it's the great way to do so)...This mainly should be done when doing projects. It seems motivating, useful, fruitful and moreover, it builds different learning skills. And meanwhile, their work is evaluated as well. Autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and Effective. ...

V. WHAT DOES THE TEACHER DO?

The teacher should:

- use the target language as the preferred medium of classroom communication and require the same of her learners;
- involve her learners in a non-stop quest for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analysed and evaluated with the whole class – in the target language, to begin with in very simple terms;
- help her learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities, subjecting them to discussion, analysis and evaluation – again, in the target language;
- require her learners to identify individual goals but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups;
- require her learners to keep a written record of their learning – plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, whatever texts they themselves produce;
- engage her learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class – in the target language. (see Learner autonomy. Little, D., 2007)

The main thing to do all those things is motivation that the teacher can manage by offering at least one computer in a class. Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning the L2. She can show different materials using a projector: plain texts, pictures, diagrams, presentations, showing video, taking a quiz, Correcting sentences; Use the Computer as Learning Center or Station; Students use the Computer as a Tool for Individual Input as Part of a Larger Group or Class Project; as Cooperative Learning Tool; Students also Use the Computer to do Individual Work for Practice or Assessment; teacher can make recording in a grade book... There are many possibilities to use computer for different purposes and do it differently. All the aforementioned things can promote learner autonomy. Even one computer in a class can make wonders. Possibilities are enormous for Both Teachers and Students...

VI. CONCLUSION

As I guess, autonomy is something that could be done independently. Someone decides to do something, sets the goal, generates ideas, chooses material and... Finally it's done. Students should take responsibility for their own learning. Learning is seen as the result of their

own self-initiated interaction with the world. Teacher should provide the learners with the opportunity to experiment, make hypotheses, and improvise, in their attempt to master the target language and, along with it, to learn how to learn in their own, individual, holistic way (see Papaconstantinou, 1997). It may be the case that learner autonomy is best achieved when, among other things, the teacher acts as a facilitator of learning, a counsellor, and as a resource ... Learner autonomy, in other words, belongs together with the idea that one of the functions of (adult) education is to equip learners to play an active role in participatory democracy. That is why it remains central to the Council of Europe's educational concerns (Little, D., 2007)

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