

Culture and Learner Autonomy: An Overview from a Saudi Perspective

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Abstract – The concept of learner autonomy has been promoted by many educators in the core of language education in Europe, and then has become influential as a goal in many contexts world-wide (Pemberton et al., 1996; Sinclair et al., 2000). However, the recent research in cross-cultural social psychology has raised interesting issues about the role of autonomy in the behaviour of people and their freedom of choice in different cultures. In this process, ‘culture’ is regarded as an important variable, but in an abstract way. The aim of this paper is to discuss the role of culture in relation to the concept of the autonomous learner, and address the debate about culture and autonomy from a Saudi perspective since the focus is on the role of Saudi culture and its limitations towards the concept of autonomy. In addition, this paper addresses the following questions: Is the goal of autonomy in language education an appropriate educational goal across cultures? Is learner autonomy an exclusively Western cultural construct and thus it is alien to other cultures? What might ‘learner autonomy’ mean in the context of Saudi Culture? How can we enhance autonomy in a Saudi context? The next sections will try to cast light on the concept of ‘learner autonomy’ (LA) and how it has been interpreted in language education; and then it will draw attention to current conceptions of culture and how they relate to learner autonomy.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, learner-centredness, cross-cultural understanding, behaviourist, cognitive and ideological views.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of LA was originally a reaction against behaviourism, and associated usually with learner-centredness and a consideration of language as a tool for communication (Gremmo & Riley, 1995). In language education, LA is interpreted in various terms as: ‘learner independence’, ‘independent learning’, ‘self-direction’, ‘self-reliance’, ‘autonomous learning’, or ‘learning training’. In fact, to reach a unified definition for autonomy has never been an easy task. There are many descriptions for this term, perhaps the most frequent and quoted one is that of Holec (1981, p. 3), who defines LA as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’. Other linguists share similar arguments in their definitions. For example, Little (1991), Dickinson (1992), and Thanasoulas (2000) all state that autonomy is the capacity for critical reflection, decision making, and independent action with an individual, gradual, never-ending process of self-discovery. On the other hand, autonomy does not only include individualism, but also the role of social context, since personal decisions are made with respect to social and moral norms. Consequently, there are two kinds of autonomy: 1) Individual Autonomy, which focuses on enhancing individual learning styles

and preferences. 2) Social Autonomy, which stresses that learning takes place through interaction and collaboration (Sinclair et al., 2000; Palfreyman, 2003). Therefore, autonomy integrates the notion of interdependence and cultural awareness. Thus, different cultures can place different emphases on LA (Kohonen, 1991; Sinclair, 1997). Furthermore, there has been a shift in focus of LA brought by (Benson, 1997), according to him there are three basic perspectives of autonomy in language education:

1. A 'technical' perspective: which perceives autonomy as the act of learning in one's own, emphasizing strategies or skills for unsupervised learning such as 'metacognitive', 'cognitive', 'social' and other technical ability to do so.
2. A 'Psychological' perspective: which perceives autonomy as the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one's own learning.
3. A 'political' perspective: which emphasizes empowerment of learners by giving them control over the content and processes of their own learning.

In fact, there are different interpretations for these perspectives in terms of its scope. The technical perspective emphasizes the development of strategies for learners to be more self-reliant, this approach is often referred to as 'learner training' (Wenden, 1991). The psychological perspective fosters more cognitive capacities, whereas the political perspective emphasizes ways in which the learning context can be emancipating for the learners (Benson, 1997). Moreover, there are other approaches fostering autonomy focusing on technology, on decision-making in the learning context or even on the learner him/herself. Many concur with Breen and Mann (1997) that this variety of perspectives and interpretations may make the concept of autonomy more flexible and useful for pedagogy.

Furthermore, the research findings and publications together with the current understanding of autonomy in language learning have generated a broader concept and aspects of LA. The most salient aspects of LA are the thirteen aspects reported by Sinclair (1997), which have been broadly accepted by the language teaching profession:

- Autonomy is a construct of capacity.
- Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning.
- The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate.
- Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal.
- There are degrees of autonomy.
- The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable.
- Autonomy is not simply a matter of playing learners in situations where they have to be independent.
- Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, i.e., conscious reflection and decision making.

- Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies.
- Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom.
- Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension.
- The promotion of learner autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension.
- Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures.

Figure 1: The Thirteen Aspects of LA (Adopted from Sinclair, 1997)

It should be noted that although each one of these aspects speaks in its own, they are interdependent and have a significant role in forming the ultimate concept of learner autonomy. It is with respect to these multiple perspectives on autonomy that the place of cultural context should be highly considered. The next section will draw together the current debate between culture and autonomy.

2. CULTURE AND AUTONOMY

Culture plays an important role in language learning and education because the whole education process takes place within a culture or cultures, which influences their form (Palfreyman&Smith, 2003). Culture is inextricable from language, therefore, it constitutes part of the content of language education (Roberts et al., 2001). In fact, ‘Culture’ is a multifaceted concept just like autonomy. Indeed, perspectives on culture are in a way similar to perspectives on autonomy. For instance, Roberts et al. (2001), distinguished between a number of views of culture: ‘behaviourist views’ which focus on patterns of observable behaviours, ‘cognitive views’ which perceive culture as located in the minds of its individuals, ‘ideological views’ which perceive culture as shaped by power, and ‘symbolic views’ which consider culture as a social system of signs. It is clear that these views of the concept of culture are similar to Benson (1997) dimensions of autonomy.

One issue in relation to the study of culture is the extent to which it is going to be examined. In work of LA ‘culture’ has been interpreted as ‘national or ethnic culture’. However, there might be some generalizations since there are many national/ethnic groups within each culture. Thus, Palfreyman (2003) suggests that one way to refine the concept of ‘culture’ is to have the notion of ‘subcultures’. Other linguists differentiate between a number of cultures in a classroom which may be influenced by national/ethnic values, but are not an extension of them; as well as they have their own implications for LA, such as:

- Educational and academic cultures (Coleman, 1987; Benson, 1994).
- Professional cultures of language teaching (Holliday, 1994; Pennycook, 1994).
- Organizational cultures (Wright, 1994).
- Social class or gender-associated cultures (Gilligan, 1986).

In fact, cultures seem more amenable to change. Holliday (1994) notes that it is possible for cultures to cut across each other. For instance, a Saudi and a Chinese teacher of English may

share some aspects of a professional culture, but not a national/ethnic one. Holliday also states that cultural values interact without necessarily conflicting within any learning context.

On the other hand, from a national culture perspective, although many believe that LA is an exclusively Western cultural construct and may seem alien to some learners in other cultures, there is evidence that reports that LA is a psychological phenomenon that can be transmitted regardless of cultural difference (Littlewood, 2001). However, it could be argued that learning behaviour is inevitably culturally conditioned (Aoki&Smith, 1999). In addition, there is an influential claim made by some liberals like Joseph Raz and Will Kymlicka, that cultural membership is a prerequisite of individual autonomy. In fact, it seems that they underestimate the complex and the diverse nature of the human self and the extent to which this self can be shaped by many different memberships and attachments at once. On the other hand, some writers have suggested that the concept of autonomy may be ethnocentric and culturally inappropriate to other non-western cultures. Pennycook (1997) appears to agree with this idea and considers it as a neo-imperialist construct.

Studying attitudes and beliefs is another way to investigate links between culture and autonomy. For instance, according to Cotterall (1995), who analyses individual learners', reported that learners who believe that the role of the teacher is as 'facilitator' and who are self-confident and like risk-taking, they have the readiness to become autonomous. Yet learners who believe that the teacher should be authoritative are considered to be less ready to be autonomous. It has been found that such beliefs differ among societies. Hofstede (1990), classifies countries according to social-psychological dimensions, based on individual beliefs expressed in questionnaires from IBM employees throughout the world, as follows:

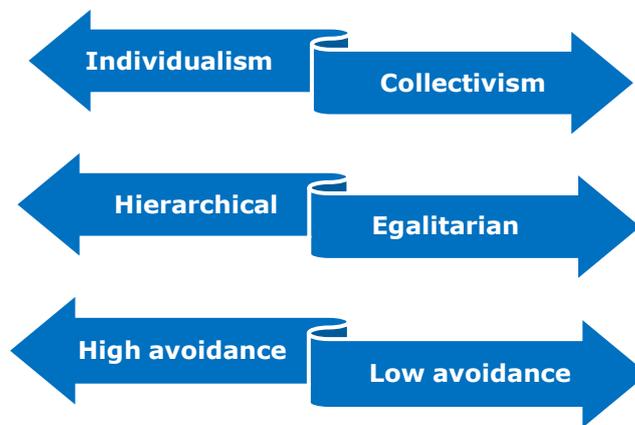


Figure 2: Hofstede's (1990) categorizations of countries according to social-psychological dimensions

According to Hofstede, individualism involves loose ties among individuals with an emphasis on individual self-determination, and is often assumed to be more associated with autonomy (Dickinson, 1996). Contrarily, collectivism characterized by tight and regulating social networks of mutual obligation, as the situation in Saudi Arabia, in which "We" consciousness prevails and "I" is avoided and personal opinion is not expected. These kind of societies are often seen as conducive to interdependent, group-based versions of autonomy (Sinclair et al., 2000). With regard to high/low power distance, distinguishing hierarchical societies from egalitarian ones, Ho and Carookall (1995) consider the teacher as a cultural

obstacle to developing learner independence, such attitude is assumed as leading to 'passivity' (Pierson, 1996). In fact, it can be argued here that teacher is the facilitator for the whole process to be done and not the obstacle.

Furthermore, it should be mentioned here that culture has been entirely rejected by some writers because of its association with national stereotypes (Atkinson, 1999). To summarise, it seems clear that,

A closer look at the ways in which autonomy is described in different educational contexts around the world, however, provides evidence of differing interpretations of it as a concept, both in the field of education and in its wider social and political environment. This means that the study of learner autonomy requires careful interpretation of the particular cultural, social, political and educational context in which it is located. (Sinclair et al, 2000:5)

Hereafter, the next section will try to cast light on some aspects of Saudi culture and autonomy.

3. THE NATIONAL SAUDI CULTURE

From my own experience as an EFL Saudi teacher in both public and private schools, it can be noted that there are considerable challenges in encouraging students to learn and work independently. In fact, Saudi society is a very conservative society and religion is integrated in all aspects of life, but when it comes to the education field, it has an open, flexible and outgoing perspective. In fact, this open insight is originally supported by the Islamic Religion (the official Religion of Saudi Arabia), which encourages people to seek the path of knowledge and enlightenment. In contrast, this open aspect of the Religion was absent from the minds of some Bedouin tribes, who, in the past, had divergent views which led to the overprotection of women, and the prevention of education for girls. Fortunately, although these more traditional views were difficult to overcome, these views are now outdated and education is for all in Saudi Arabia. Thus, the new moves towards more openness and freedom of choice might bring new other changes, such as a greater focus on learner autonomy.

In fact, the concept of learner autonomy is relatively new to most Saudi students and teachers as well, they are not fully aware of its aspects and requirements yet. The interaction between the teacher and students inside classrooms is not encouraging, students are expected to listen rather than participate actively. The prevailing model of teaching and learning in most Saudi schools was "teachers teach and students learn" (Al-Mutawa&Kailani, 1989). This old-fashioned model of teaching and learning created a passive attitude in students leading to a lack of learner autonomy. In my experience, as a teacher of English in a number of Saudi schools, it seems to me that the knowledge learnt is limited and the students became demotivated to learn beyond the exam.

First of all, the first obstacle a teacher, such as I, may face in most Saudi contexts is the belief that learning can best happen only in classrooms under the supervision of the teacher. Therefore, the learning process is usually organised within the classroom and checked strictly by a number of supervisors and educational institutions. The second obstacle, a teacher may

find is students' unwillingness to be self-reliant learners as they are used to being spoon fed the information by their teachers. My own experiences include some of my students who fought actively whilst others remained passive against some attempts to transfer responsibility to them. It can be argued that teachers can resolve this issue by introducing their students to the aims and aspects of learner autonomy before stepping into the curriculum. In addition, I believe it is of paramount importance to recognise that it is the role of the teacher to encourage their students to take responsibility for their own learning and develop an awareness of their learning strategies. Moreover, I think that teachers should be required to incorporate these strategies into their lessons.

Another chief reason that might inhibit learners from becoming autonomous in Saudi Arabia is their low level of the target language proficiency. To address such a problem the teacher is advised to use the target language as a preferred medium of both teaching and learning gradually together with the ongoing evaluation of the learning process achieved by a combination of self/peer and teacher assessment (Dam, 1995; Little, 2000).

However, research (e.g. Pemberton et al., 1996; Little, 2000; Palfreyman, 2003), have shown that communities are more adaptive and innovative than the accounts of my teaching experience may suggest. People can recreate or reshape their views and understanding about certain concepts due to the change in their understanding of globality and to cope with the changing world around them. Accordingly, it is clear nowadays that there is a shift in thinking within the Saudi community. Therefore, learner autonomy has become one of the aims of the Saudi education system (Aljasir, 2009). Therefore, new series of books full of learning training tasks have been introduced to help students to focus their attentions on how they learn in addition to what they learn. Moreover, it should be mentioned that with this new insight, Saudi educators became more aware of the significant role of self-access learning centers. Therefore, it can be noticed that the Ministry of Education made a plan for each educational institutions to have its own research and self-access center (Ibid, 2009). According to Little (2000), a key issue to support the development of learner autonomy is to have a self-access learning scheme. It plays a crucial role in providing students with some kind of advisory service.

Accordingly, it is clear that the previous Saudi model of teaching and learning created a passive attitude in students' behaviours towards autonomy. Therefore, it is required for Saudi educators to make the required changes that can help our students to think and learn independently and turn the learning process into a self-teaching process.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING AND TEACHERS

According to (Smith, 2003), language learners from across the globe do have their own voices, they also have the ability to reflect on what and how they are learning. Some of these voices are often denied or partially accessed in some context, or encouraged in other ones. So, it is required to give our students a wider space to take responsibility in developing their own preferences of learning. In fact, it will be difficult for LA to be fully accepted as a worthy goal in most Saudi classrooms, especially when most teachers still use one textbook

for all levels of students in a class, and stick to some of the traditional teaching methods which can discourage the development of LA (Aljasir, 2009). Therefore, it is important to reach full LA by focusing on two main factors: 1) the learners' awareness of learning strategies, and 2) the teachers' effectiveness in learner training. It should be noted here that the failure of independent learning strategies is attributed to providing our students with the kind of tasks which do not combine metacognitive information with the cognitive approach. In other words, it is essential to teach our students how to tackle the task and evaluating it afterwards (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989). In fact, this demonstrates the continuing essential role of the tutor.

Another essential way to foster LA in our modern world is by the effective use of self-access learning centers and the developments in technology and the web which have made the situation more global and boundless. In addition, it should be noted that effective learning without mentors and peer support is difficult. Therefore, some researchers such as Blin (1999), hold the view that LA also involves interdependence. However, as long as learning takes place in social interactions, it would be ineffective in isolation. Thus, it is of paramount importance for the learners to be positively independent in a cooperative learning environment and to have the willingness to learn independently and in cooperation with others as a responsible learner.

Having discussed autonomy and culture, we are able to highlight the following points:

- Autonomy should be seen as arising not out of any particular membership or group, but out of the interaction between different memberships which hold the power to shape individuals' understanding and the way they perceive the world in which they live.
- To encourage LA universally, it is essential to be aware of the social, cultural and political context in which one is working (Pennycook, 1997).
- Teachers aiming to promote their students' independent learning must remember that the focus of teaching includes instruction in the methods of learning and what to learn.
- The most important element of the learner independence process is to have students set their own targets and then make their own decisions to reach them.
- The type of autonomy adapted in a particular context can be reflected in the expected roles of the teachers and learners, the design and roles of the materials and the availability of learning resources (Sinclair et al., 2000).
- Learning a language inevitably involves the whole person, not just particular aspects of the person (Smith, 2003).

5. CONCLUSION

To sum up, autonomy has been described in a number of ways in relation to language learning. It can be considered as a concept which holds different interpretations that can be appropriated to fit into any context and be universally adopted. Like autonomy, culture is a multiconceptual term and a much-debated one. Although autonomy has become an influential

concept in language education in many contexts worldwide, it needs to be much appreciated in the Saudi educational context. Having this insight of Saudi culture and LA lead us to state that the concept of LA is accepted in general, although it is not yet fully applicable and appreciated in most classes. Also, this leads us to end with a final suggestion that there is a need to educate Saudi teachers on how to promote LA and to investigate whether LA works for all learning environments. In this process, 'culture' is regarded as an important variable in applying this concept. It can be suggested that in the future the emphasis should be placed more on what aspects of language learning or learning in general we can associate autonomy with and why.

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