



From Spoon Feeding to Self-Feeding: Helping Learners Take Control of Their Own Learning

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Abstract

Recent research findings confirm that learning becomes more effective when learners are in control of their own learning and are aware of the learning process and of themselves as learners. Learner autonomy has thus become a prominent area of research in the last three decades. This paper, therefore, argues for an autonomy-based approach to teaching and learning in Oman as an alternative to the existing model which is largely characterized by spoon-feeding and missing voice of the learner. The paper proposes a framework for a gradual handover of some of the roles traditionally held by teachers to the students, emphasizing the role of the teacher in helping students 'feed' themselves and minimize their over-reliance on the teacher.

Key words: Learner autonomy, learner responsibility, metacognitive knowledge, Oman, teacher role.

Introduction

Most teachers have experienced the frustration, and even disappointment, of spending endless effort on their students but getting very little in return. There are groups of students who miss classes, do not do their homework, come to class unprepared, ask about and study only for and just before exams, rarely learn from their mistakes, not bother to practice English outside the class, and miss the English class to revise for another subjects' exams, etc.

Taking charge of their own language learning poses a major challenge to the majority of the students. In 1981, Malcolm Cornwall wrote: "After at least eighteen (18) years of life in general and thirteen (13) years of formal education, students are seemingly unable to take any initiative for deciding what and how they will learn and the task remains the sole responsibility of the teacher." (p.199).

Such behaviour, as seen by Scharle and Szabo (2000), stems from one main cause: the learners' over reliance on the teacher. While this is true, I think there is also another reason: the learners' 'accumulating' and 'consolidating' assumption that the teacher is in charge of and responsible for everything that happens in the classroom, including learning. Even when the students are motivated, they still assume a passive role when the teacher is in charge of everything. In fact, the students' perceptions of their own passive role and of the teacher's "all-or-nothing" role have just been growing profoundly in them over time. The previous schooling has regrettably failed to create responsible and autonomous learners who are willing to take control of their own learning, or, at least, some aspects of their learning. Grow (1991) observes that "the goal of the educational process is to produce self-directed, lifelong learners. Many current educational practices in public schools and universities, however, do more to perpetuate dependency than to create self-direction." (p.127). Notably, this is not only the view of students but also that of some teachers. Some teachers do believe that issue of learner responsibility and learner autonomy belongs to theoretical books and that the reality in the classroom suggests that learners cannot and do not know how to learn on their own, and that it is their job to make them do so. Thus, classroom practices and discourse are very much informed by the beliefs teachers hold about the learning process and their perceived roles as well as by their intuitive assessment of the real potential and ability of their students. Accordingly, they are reluctant to relinquish any of their 'prescribed' roles to the learners. The result is that students continue their over-reliance on their teachers; hence, their autonomy suffers.

The learner autonomy movement in foreign language teaching officially began in the early 1980s after Henry Holec had written his first report on language learner autonomy for the Council of Europe. Autonomy was then defined as the *learners' ability to take charge of their own learning*, (Holec, 1981). This also entails that teachers should possess some degree of autonomy in order to help their learners develop the same capacity. The development of learner autonomy, as stressed by Little (2007), depends on

the development of teacher autonomy. He further explains this interrelated relationship between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy: “It is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner” (p. 27). Raya, Lamb, and Vieira (2007), who are members of a team responsible for the development of pedagogy for learner and teacher autonomy in Europe, also stress that “The rise to prominence of learner autonomy as a goal in formal education contexts has in turn created a need for teachers to develop expertise in pedagogy for autonomy” (p.1).

Most teachers, if not all, agree that students, at least in theory, should be able to take charge of their own learning at some point. Others just feel it is not worth it because students will remain dependent on teachers and textbooks. Students, however, have a variety of responses. Some believe learner autonomy is a good idea, while others feel intimidated by the whole notion of being asked to handle things on their own. But we cannot risk running a system which produces dependent learners who find it difficult to manage their own learning and make meaningful connection with the world outside the classroom. Benson (2010) stresses the increasingly important role of the school which should not only enable pupils to reach a worthwhile level of proficiency in the language being taught, but also to equip learners with the attitudes and skills which will enable them to continue to plan, carry out and monitor their own learning once all the supporting and disciplinary structure of institutionalised learning are withdrawn.

This paper, therefore, argues for an alternative approach to teaching and learning which i) integrates elements of learner autonomy and learner responsibility into the overall design of the learning and teaching activities and assessment methods, and ii) gradually passes on some of the roles traditionally held by teachers to the students so that they are able to ‘feed’ themselves and eliminate their over-reliance on their teachers.

Having set the scene, the paper then defines the autonomous and responsible learner and briefly describes the learning situation in Oman in order to contextualize the discussion and rationalize the argument being made for the adoption of learner autonomy in Oman. It then presents the various arguments in favour of fostering learner autonomy and learner responsibility in learners as one way of meeting the ever-changing demands of today’s world. I shall then explain in practical terms the role of the teacher in adopting learner autonomy and outline a framework for a gradual handover of some of the teacher roles to learners. The paper also describes some of the challenges teachers in Oman are likely to face in adopting learner autonomy and suggests ways to overcome them. The paper finally concludes by pinpointing some of the research gaps in the area and suggesting future directions in applying learner autonomy.

Defining the autonomous and responsible learner

I find it useful to start off by defining learner autonomy and then use the definitions to tease out the specific advantages which autonomy proponents advocate.

Over the last thirty years, learner autonomy has become one of the major research interests for scholars in the field of language education. Learner autonomy, as an approach, has also gained wide popularity among practicing teachers and some learners as well. It was derived from the early work on psychology and strategy training in the early 1980s. As indicated earlier, the first and most commonly cited definition of learner autonomy was proposed by Henry Holec in his report to the Council of Europe. Holec (1981) defined autonomy as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.’

The term "ability" here is understood as the "potential capacity" to carry out a certain task, in this case learning a language. So when we say that someone is autonomous, we mean, according to Holec, the capacity of someone to *exercise control over the learning process* in terms of determining the objectives of his/her own learning, choosing the content, selecting the techniques and methods of learning, monitoring his/her own progress and evaluating what has been acquired. In his ‘must-read’ book, David Little (1991) added cognitive factors to what an autonomous learner could do. These include a *capacity* for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, independent action, psychological relation to the process and content of his or her learning and finally transferring what he or she has learned to wider contexts.

A further cognitive dimension to the definition of autonomy has been suggested by Sinclair (1999). She defines autonomy as the learners’ capacity to make *informed* decisions about their learning. She argues that autonomous learners are not only able to make choices but also are able to provide *rationale* for their choices and describe *alternative* strategies which they could have used.

It is clear then that autonomous learning, as reflected in the above definitions, goes beyond the rote memorization of a series of facts to involve active and conscious metacognitive knowledge (knowledge about learning) which will enable learners to exercise some control over the learning process and gradually achieve self-reliance and cut their dependency on the teacher.

There is general consensus in the literature that autonomous learners are indeed effective learners (Little, 1991; Benson 2001). They have the following features in common. Generally speaking, autonomous learners are responsible, flexible, and curious; they see the need to learn, hold positive attitude towards learning, set their own objectives, plan their own learning, explore available learning opportunities and resources, use a variety of strategies, interact with others, monitor their progress, reflect on and evaluate their learning, rationalize their actions, are aware of alternative learning strategies, are aware of their cognitive abilities and learning style, transfer what they have learned to wider contexts and finally appreciate that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning and behave accordingly.

Mynard and Sorflaten (2002) suggest that learner independence ranges across a continuum, where at one end there are dependent learners who have had little opportunity

to develop independent learning skills, and at the other end of the continuum there are learners who are self-directed, self-motivated and capable of learning without a teacher. Successful learners, they propose, would progress gradually along the continuum with the help of peers, teachers and appropriate learning experiences. They came up with the following list of features of both dependent and independent learners:

Dependent learners	Independent learners
Rely heavily on the teacher	Are self-reliant
Cannot make decisions about their learning	Can make informed decisions about their learning
Do not know their own strengths and weaknesses	Are aware of their strengths and weaknesses
Do not connect classroom learning with the real world	Connect classroom learning with the real world
Think that the teacher is wholly responsible for their learning	Take responsibility for their own learning· Know about different strategies for learning
Do not know the best way to learn something	Plan their learning and set goals
Do not set learning goals· will only work when extrinsic motivators such as grades or rewards are offered	Are intrinsically motivated by making progress in learning
Do not reflect on how well they are learning and the reasons	Often reflect on the learning process and their own progress

Table 1: Dependent & Independent learners based on Mynard and Sorflaten (2002).

Teaching and learning situation in Omani educational institutions

In an attempt to justify the argument for the adoption of learner autonomy in Omani educational system, I find it useful to give a brief background about the teaching and learning situation in Oman.

To meet the demands of the 21st century, considerable changes have been undertaken to reform the educational system in Oman. The Basic Education System was launched by the Ministry of Education in 1998, seeking improvement in the quality rather than

quantity of teaching and learning (Moheidat and Baniabdelrahman, 2011). This system is composed of two phases: 'Basic Education' and 'Post-Basic Education (Secondary)'. Basic education consists of two cycles: Cycle One which includes Grades 1 – 4 and was implemented in 1998, and Cycle Two which includes Grades 5 – 10 and was implemented in 2001. The secondary education phase, whose aim is to prepare students for the tertiary education, extends for 2 years and includes Grades 11 – 12 (ibid).

As far as the English Language Teaching (ELT) is concerned, children now start learning English at the age of six (grade one), compared to age ten (grade four) in the previous system. More importantly, the curriculum aims "to reflect contemporary thinking in ELT by, for example, emphasising meaningful and purposeful language use, promoting self-assessment, and providing a variety of interactive and motivating language learning experiences." Borg (2006:11).

Although the curriculum comprises some of the basic principles of learner autonomy such as the ones mentioned in the above quote, the actual conduct of lessons remains highly teacher-led and test-driven. 'Spoon-feeding' is the prevalent practice and pupils have no say on *what* to study or *how* to study it. In addition, development of metacognitive knowledge (learning how to learn) and reflection seem to be largely missing. As for the place of self-assessment in the pre-university (secondary) curriculum, Moheidat and Baniabdelrahman (2011) observe that:

Although classroom assessment has been given much attention in the evaluation system in general education schools in the Sultanate of Oman, the performance of students is still not at the desired level. The researchers believe that neglecting the students' role in assessment may be one of the main factors behind this low performance. Moreover, students' self-assessment, in particular, has so far been completely disregarded, even though it may have a powerful and positive effect on students' learning (p.56).

The situation in tertiary education is no different. One of the presenters at Annual ELT Conference held at Sultan Qaboos University in 2007 admitted that our students lack the skills (and desire) to initiate tasks and manage their own learning ... they always need a teacher to make selections, decide on what they should learn, design and run tasks in class, etc. They generally hate courses with self-study components.

As stated in the introduction above, the students' perceptions of their own passive role and of the teacher's all-or-nothing role have been growing profoundly over time. The previous schooling has regrettably failed to create curious and autonomous learners who are willing and see the need to take control of their own learning, or at least some aspects of their learning such as self-assessment and reflection. In short, they are not, and have not been trained to become, autonomous and self-directed learners. Consequently, at the initial stages of their tertiary education, most students are challenged by the new academic standards and study requirements of the university courses as they demand

higher levels of cognitive abilities and autonomy. Unfortunately, such inadequacies found in students at the pre-university level are not adequately addressed.

Merits and benefits of learner autonomy

There are many cogent arguments which support the adoption of autonomy-based approach to language learning. To begin with, Crabbe (1993) suggest that autonomous learning is justified by three arguments: ideological, psychological and economic. The ideological argument, according to Crabbe, is that individuals have the right to be free to exercise their own choices in learning. The psychological argument is that we simply learn better when we are in charge of our own learning. Learning, the argument goes, becomes more meaningful, focused and more permanent because learners are more motivated. The economic argument for autonomous learning is that the society does not have enough resources to cater to every individual's specific learning needs. Therefore, individuals have to develop the capacity to acquire the knowledge they need.

Lamb and Reinders (2005) see the development of autonomy and independence in today's learners has become essential as a response to the numerous changes which have taken place in recent times, not only in the field of language teaching but also in the world as a whole. These changes have taken three main dimensions: the learner, teaching institutions, and the society as a whole. Specific examples of changes include:

- the emergence of ICT and its personal, educational and social applications
- the unprecedented availability of information
- impact of globalisation
- political, economic and pedagogical developments world-wide
- expansion in student enrolment
- changing needs of the work place
- responding to new technologies
- responding to the changing learner needs
- the increasing need for communication between people from different parts of the world.

Furthermore, in its 2007 report, the UK Higher Education Funding Council emphasised that

Today's graduates need to be able to apply knowledge when working with people, they need to be able to work independently, become efficient problem solvers, engage in self-evaluation, and be able to develop higher order skills to become 'lifelong learners' in an increasingly globalised, technological world. (Cited in Davison, 2009).

Employability and the changing needs of the workplace are also two important arguments for the promotion of greater learner autonomy in today's learners. A representative of a major recruitment agency in the UK attending a conference at the University of Sheffield

in January 2011 was asked to list some of the criteria used to recruit new graduates. He mentioned about ten. They very much pertain to the characteristics and qualities of the autonomous learners mentioned above. Among the criteria were effective communication skills, curiosity, thirst for development, team skills, courage and integrity, character and character building and practical experience and knowledge.

It was stressed during the session that these qualities and practical skills were regarded essential in a successful applicant and that other credentials were regarded secondary. The aforementioned criteria undoubtedly require higher command of independence, autonomy and metacognitive knowledge on the part of the learner.

Pedagogically, personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning. Dickinson (1995) notes that taking an active, independent attitude to learning and undertaking a learning task independently are beneficial to learning, as personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning. In addition, when learners are trained and given the opportunity to set their learning agenda, learning becomes more focused and purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term. Little (1991:8) stresses that “when responsibility for the learning process lies with the learner, the barriers to learning and living that are often found in traditional teacher-led educational structures should not arise.”

Finally, the fact that learners need to develop the ability to exercise control over learning, i.e., to become autonomous, is also justified by the need to develop the ability to continue learning *after* their formal education (Littlewood, 1999). This view of learner autonomy as an essential aid for lifelong learning is also supported by Cotterall (1995), who stresses that helping learners become autonomous should be regarded as an essential goal of all learning, as no students will have their teachers throughout their life.

Role of the teacher in adopting learner autonomy

For the learners to experience the aforementioned benefits of autonomous learning, practicing teachers and educators would need to realize their new roles. Little (2007) points out that learner autonomy is the product of an interactive process in which the teacher gradually enlarges the scope of his or her learners' autonomy by gradually allowing them more control of the process and content of their learning. Thus, teachers have a key role to play.

To this end, I strongly argue for specialized workshops and hands-on training sessions for teachers in schools and language institutes to, first, critically reflect on and problematize their current practices; secondly, rationalize the intended move; and finally, explain in practical terms how teachers and students could give up their traditional roles and take on new ones.

As a starting point, discussions about the benefits which learner autonomy and learner responsibility bring onboard, should be integrated in the curriculum and constitute a major part of our classroom discourse, as learners, especially at lower levels, are not naturally aware of them. Little (2007) further emphasizes this point and stresses that “teachers must learn how to produce and manage the many varieties of target language discourse required by the autonomous classroom.” (p.26). The systematic and continuous awareness-raising discourses and exercises are seen essential for a smooth transition from a totally teacher-fronted to learner-centred approach and then to the desirable *learning-centred* approach. Dickinson (1987) refers to this first stage as the ‘liberalisation’ of the classroom to allow for the development of learner independence through providing explicit opportunities for the learner to take on responsibility for learning. In addition, Nunan (1992b) recommends incorporating two sets of goals into language programmes: language content goals and learning process goals. Knowledge about the learning processes which David Nunan refers to here has been advocated by the autonomy movement as a prime goal of language education and is referred to as *learning gain*, as opposed to language gain. Being an autonomous learner, therefore, does not only entail learning the target language’s rules and functions and being able to use them but also developing explicit knowledge about the learning processes involved in language learning, known as ‘metacognitive knowledge’ (Wenden, 1998). Such knowledge includes planning, reflection, selection, self-evaluation, thinking about alternatives, etc.

A number of researchers (O’Malley and Chamot, 1990; Nunan, 1997; Ellis, 1999) have reported successful results gained from training learners on metacognitive strategies (learning how to learn). Therefore, one approach to help learners develop greater capacity for autonomous and responsible learning is by developing their metacognitive awareness in specific areas. Ellis (1999), for instance, proposes four interrelated areas which teachers need to develop in their learners. These are language awareness, learning awareness, social awareness and cultural awareness.

She suggests the following measures to incorporate metacognitive awareness in classroom management and lesson planning:

- providing methodical preparation for learners, teaching staff and even parents
- planning lessons that incorporate good staging, timing, pace and signposting
- giving clear instructions and demonstrations
- maintaining class cohesion and attention to maintain learners’ interest and avoid boredom
- using activities that challenge learners and make them think
- involving all learners and providing variety
- equipping learners with strategies and language for coping with situations where they do not have the appropriate language so they can participate and avoid communication breakdowns
- building in opportunities for recapping, revising and reviewing

Another approach to promoting metacognitive awareness in learners has been proposed by Barbara Sinclair (1999). She emphasizes that the link between the development of metacognitive awareness and learner autonomy is clear and that autonomous learners *know* about learning and can make informed decisions based on such knowledge (P.102). Like Ellis (1999), Sinclair (1999) also stresses the need to develop metacognitive awareness in learners through learner training in three areas: learner him or herself, the subject matter, i.e., in our case, the English language and the learning process

She proposes a set of questions to be used by teachers to investigate evidence of metacognitive awareness and, therefore, use the data gained to help learners make the move from being *largely unaware* to a transitional stage which she calls *becoming aware* to the desired state of being *largely aware*, as shown in Figure 1 below:

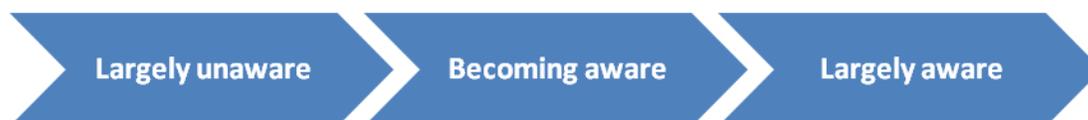


Figure 1: Sinclair's (1999) stages of metacognitive awareness

At the end of each task, teachers can use the questions below to discuss the learners' work in a way that calls upon their metacognitive knowledge. So typically teachers may ask:

- Why did you do this piece of work?
- Why did you choose this particular text/activity?
- Did you like it? Why? Why not?
- How did you go about doing this activity?
- Why did you do it in this way?
- How well do you think you did?
- What difficulties/challenges did you have?
- Why did you have them?
- What did you do about them? Why?
- What could you have done alternatively?
- What is your plan for next week? Why?
- How will you do it? Why?

Similarly, Grow (1991) proposes that teachers should match their teaching style to their learners' stage of self-direction in order to be able to help them progress to higher levels of autonomy and self-direction through the following different stages:



Figure 2: Grow's (1991) stages of self-direction

Another useful framework to encourage learners take control over the learning process was suggested by Scharle and Szabo (2000). They proposed a ‘linear’ framework of three stages. They suggest that a successful transition towards a full learner responsibility involves *awareness raising*, *attitude changing* and finally *transferring of roles*. However, I think that for teachers to successfully raise the learners’ awareness of their capabilities as well as the learning process, they would need to gather important information about their learners such as their beliefs, attitudes, expectations, and learning styles so that they could then use the information to plan the later stages. I also think it is more useful to view these stages as a cyclical process than a linear one, as teachers would normally need to go back to a previous stage with some of the learners who might not be ready to move to the new stage with the rest of the class. Figure 3 below shows the modified stages of the process.

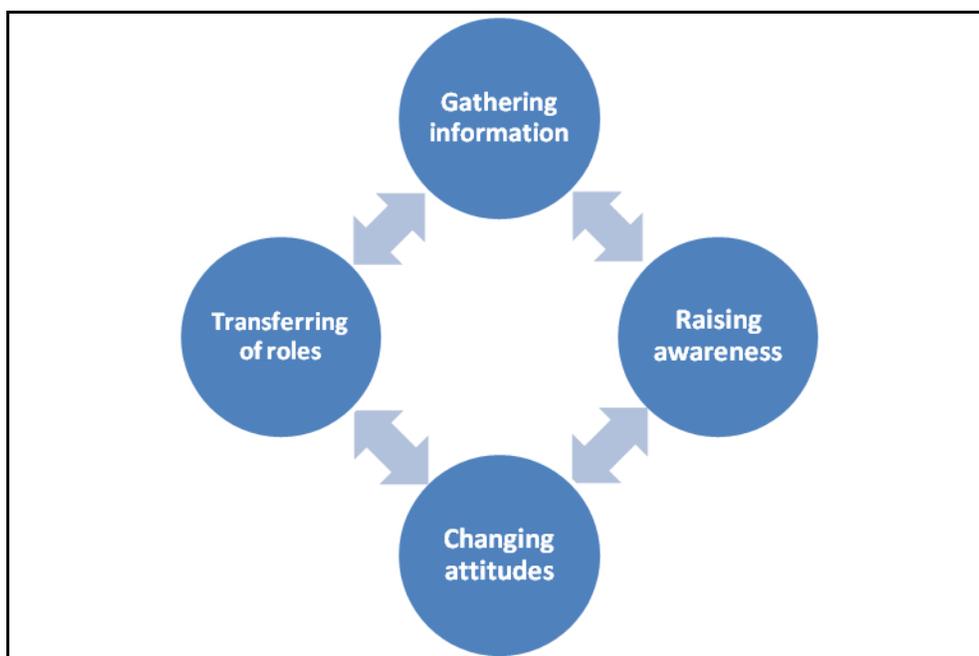


Figure 3: An modified framework of learner autonomy and responsibility based on Scharle and Szabo (2000)

A list of classroom activities was suggested to be used at each stage. The information which may be gathered during the first stage includes learner beliefs, learner attitudes, learner perceptions, learner prior experiences, learner expectations and learning styles.

The activities which may be used at the **awareness-raising** stage aim at helping learners realize new ways of thinking about their learning. These activities would focus on:

- Learners’ old routines and habits and bring them up to the conscious level of their thinking, e.g., how they usually memorise words

- classroom discourse which helps the learners re-consider their old beliefs and attitudes about learning and how they could contribute to their own learning
- new aspects of learning, e.g., new techniques for memorising words
- motivation raising, skill building and working as a community
- strengths & weaknesses
- emphasizing learners' existing knowledge and skills to boost their confidence
- the fact that difficulties are a natural part of learning
- making discoveries about their potential and how the language works
- learning strategies and consciously choose what works for them
- community building to demonstrate the importance of listening and cooperating with others in pairs and groups
- task demands and how to approach each task

The activities which may be used at the **attitude-changing** stage are based on the assumptions that learners have already developed awareness of their potential, language system and the task demands. In the second stage activities should help learners to:

- practise and habituate attitudes and habits introduced in the previous stage
- take the initiative and try out different ways of learning
- develop more learner responsibility
- *consciously* think about and practise cognitive and metacognitive strategies (you may want to investigate their strategy awareness using Barbara Sinclair's questioning techniques mentioned above).
- discover how interacting with others during pair and group work develop responsible attitudes, i.e., task achievement is the responsibility of the group
- stimulate use of personal experience and non-language knowledge
- rely on themselves and their peers and reduce reliance on the teacher
- listen and respond to each other, peer-edit their work and peer-evaluate their performance
- self-monitor their progress and be 'their own teacher' in dealing with mistakes and learning difficulties.
- think about the aims and resources of their learning.

It should be noted here that at this stage, however, learners and teachers would have recognised their new roles as responsible learners and facilitators respectively.

Finally, the activities of the **transferring-roles** stage involve learners:

- handling devices in the classroom
- choosing and preparing learning materials
- deciding on the procedures for learning
- being a source of information to other learners
- peer-monitoring
- peer-teaching
- peer-correcting
- presenting a model of the target language

- making decisions about the learning process
- evaluating or giving feedback on each other's performance
- handing out materials, collecting papers, etc.
- negotiating rules of behaviour in the classroom in the framework of 'a class contract' (keeping discipline)
- keeping time

Generally, the activities in the three stages (raising awareness, changing attitudes and transferring roles) are designed to help students develop responsibility and autonomy in a systematic and gradual manner. They cover a comprehensive range of skills and attitudes and can be easily integrated into regular lessons. These skills and attitudes include developing learner strategies, monitoring learning process, establishing self-evaluation, promoting motivation and developing co-operation.

Challenges in adopting learner autonomy by teachers in Oman

The adoption of autonomy-oriented teaching and learning approach is not all plain sailing. There exist a number of false assumptions among teachers, learners and parents alike of what the concept learner autonomy really is or what it entails; these pose real challenges against the successful adoption of such an approach. Some of these challenges are highlighted here so that we can develop better understanding of these misconceptions and challenges and their potential sources while at the same time devise ways to eliminate their effects. These challenges stem from three basic sources: a) teachers' and learners' false assumptions about learner autonomy and their roles in the autonomy-based pedagogy, b) some practicalities of adopting autonomy-based instruction such as materials development and assessment, and c) community expectations of school and teacher.

As defined earlier, learner autonomy is about learners taking control and responsibility over their own learning. To some teachers, thus, learner autonomy may mean self-instruction, learning without a teacher or at its best, learning with a minimum intervention from the teacher. Such understanding of learner autonomy may well lead some teachers to think of the new approach as marginalizing their controlling role over the whole process. However, as we are going to see in the following lines, learners do not automatically accept responsibility and thus teachers do play an important role in helping their learners perceive their new roles as active and independent learners by designing tasks and activities which gradually assist learners accept responsibility and take control over their learning. (See the previous section for examples of these exercises). In his remarks on what autonomy is *not*, Little (1991) has expelled such misconceptions by explaining that autonomy is not a synonym of self-instruction and does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher. He further argues that "the development of learner autonomy will depend crucially on the initiatives the teacher takes. Learners will not develop their capacity for autonomous behaviours simply because he tells them to." (p. 44).

Additionally, some teachers may not view learner autonomy as an important issue in language didactics (Raya, Lamb & Vieira, 2007), and argue that it does not work in reality or its results are not certain. Others tend to believe that learner autonomy is a good idea in theory but somewhat idealistic as a goal of language teaching in practice (Benson, 2001). However, since its emergence in the field of language education in the early 1980s, learner autonomy has been extensively researched both theoretically and empirically. (See, for example, Little, 1991, 1995; Cotterall, 1995; Dam, 1995; Nunan, 1996; Sinclair, 1996; Ellis, 1999; Sinclair, 1999; Sinclair, McGrath & Lamb, 2000; Benson, 2001; Dam, 2001; Little, Ridley and Ushioda, 2002; and Little, 2007) Research has shown that that autonomous learners are indeed effective learners; they are not only curious. They hold positive attitudes towards learning and achieve good results and they see the need to learn and are able to transfer what they have learned to wider contexts. Several studies have also showed that self-directed students have better academic achievements than their counterparts who possess negative metacognitive beliefs in learning a second language. Benson (2001), for instance, stresses that research within the psychology of learning provides strong grounds for believing that autonomy is essential to effective learning. Studies conducted in areas such as learner training (Nunan, 1997), strategy training (Oxford, 1990; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990) and metacognitive knowledge (Wenden, 1998; Ellis, 1999; Sinclair, 1999) have also provided additional grounds for the adoption of learner autonomy as a goal of language education.

Raya, Lamb & Vieira, (2007) also report on another type of obstacle which may directly disadvantage learners. They observe that “both teachers and student-teachers may show some resistance to innovative pedagogies that assign the teacher a new role as a facilitator of autonomy-oriented processes” (p.1). Handing over some of the tasks which are traditionally held by the teacher to his or her learners may be viewed by some teachers as loss of control over learning and discipline.

One way, therefore, to help teachers develop awareness and positive attitude towards learner autonomy is by integrating aspects of teacher and learner autonomy into teacher education programmes. For teachers already in the field, I argue for well-planned professional development programmes and hands-on training sessions to be regularly conducted for teachers at various levels. These training sessions should aim at helping teachers develop i) awareness of the potential of learner autonomy in creating independent and reflective learners, and ii) activities which promote responsibility and autonomy in their learners. This, however, means that teachers themselves should possess some degree autonomy in order to help their learners develop the same capacity. The development of learner autonomy, as stressed by Little (2007), “is dependent on the development of teacher autonomy.” He further explains this interrelated relationship between learner and teacher autonomy by saying: “It is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner” (27). Raya, Lamb, & Vieira (2007) also stress that “The rise to prominence of learner autonomy as a goal in formal education contexts has in turn created a need for teachers to develop expertise in pedagogy for autonomy.”

Another obstacle which faces full adoption of learner autonomy is the learners' unwillingness and resistance to take responsibility over their own learning. As mentioned earlier, some students feel intimidated by the whole notion of being asked to handle things on their own. Little (1995) points out that "learners do not automatically accept responsibility in formal contexts and do not necessarily find it easy to reflect on the learning process. Teachers must, therefore, first provide them with appropriate tools and with opportunities to practise using them." (p.176). It is certain that in some contexts teachers would need to innovate ways and techniques to deal with learners' reluctance but it is essential that we sustain their motivation and account for their level. One of the successful models for dealing with such situations is the one suggested by Scharle and Szabo (2000) described in the previous section. They devised a series of activities which are designed to gradually help learners develop responsibility and autonomy in learning by first raising their awareness, then changing their attitudes and finally transferring some of the teacher's roles to them.

It is unfortunate to see that not only learners, but also some parents and community agencies still perceive teachers as the only source of information and that they should be in charge of whole process. Teachers have to play their prescribed roles, otherwise they lack qualification and may be accused of being incompetent of teaching. Similarly, in an autonomy-based schooling environment, parents may argue that their children are not yet ready to be in charge of their own learning and may fail their final exams.

Future directions in applying learner autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy has gained considerable support from research and has become a central theme of most conferences and symposia in the ELT profession. Its validity and necessity in effective language learning have been proven. But due to its complex nature, learner autonomy is perceived and applied differently in different contexts. It also manifests itself in different ways and to different degrees (Cotterall, 1995). Therefore, more research and case studies are needed to gain insightful understanding of the concept and its constituents in different contexts. In particular, it is not yet clear how teachers and learners would react towards the introduction of autonomy-oriented teaching in a particular context, i.e., how they would respond to and manage their new roles. In addition, more research is needed to understand the characteristics and roles of materials and assessment in contexts where autonomy-based instruction is adopted. For instance, is it sufficient to assess language proficiency alone or should our approach to assessment also include the assessment of *learning* gains beside language gains?

In Oman, learner and teacher autonomy have not yet been thoroughly researched. Apart from individual papers presented at conferences, not a single empirical study has yet been completed in the area of autonomy. Before any intervention occurs, I believe, teachers' and learners' perceptions of and their attitudes towards learner autonomy should be surveyed and accounted for.

Conclusions

This paper has addressed issues related to learner autonomy and learner responsibility in language classrooms with reference to the Omani context. However, all ideas and suggestions included here are of a generalizable nature, as the sort of challenges which exist in language classrooms tend to be universal.

This paper is intended to help teachers in Oman and elsewhere reflect on their current practices and realize the potential of learner autonomy as a promising goal of teaching and learning in response to the ever changing demands of today's world. To this end, I have described the characteristics of the autonomous and responsible learner and presented the various arguments in favour of fostering autonomy and responsibility in learners. I have also explained in practical terms how teachers could encourage learner autonomy in their learners by offering a framework for a gradual handover of some of the roles traditionally held by teachers to their learners. Because teachers' and learners' behaviours are very much informed by the type of beliefs they hold, I have also tried to clarify some of the false assumptions about learner autonomy which some teachers and learners may hold. I have finally suggested some of the research gaps in the area with special reference to the Omani context.

This paper is meant to provide no more than 'food for thought.' If it only helps teachers develop awareness of the potential of learner autonomy and act upon helping their learners gradually move away from spoon feeding to self-feeding, it will have achieved its goal.

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