Understanding the Concept of Learner Autonomy in the Context of Second and Foreign Language Learning: Definitions, Misconceptions, and Applications

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has been one of the most widely discussed concepts in the field of second and foreign language teaching as the learner-centered approaches to instruction have become more important. However, some scholars warn language teachers about 'learner autonomy' as being the field's new 'buzz' word which has been used frequently without an in-depth apprehension. Two basic challenges for teachers in terms of creating more autonomy-embracing language learning environments for learners are: (a) interpreting what learner autonomy, a very broad and abstract concept, really means in the context of second and foreign language learning; and (b) putting the theory into action by understanding the methods and procedures of promoting learner autonomy in language classrooms. This paper addresses those two challenges by delivering a comprehensive discussion of the definitions, misconceptions, and applications of learner autonomy. It is hoped that such a discussion will provide introductory information and guidance for language teachers who wish to foster learner autonomy in their classrooms. The paper unfolds in three main sections: the first section is devoted to better understanding the concept of learner autonomy by visiting different definitions and misconceptions of this term, the second section aims at helping the reader further concretize the concept of learner autonomy by answering the question 'what makes learner autonomy important and desirable?', and the last section focuses on putting the theory into action by discussing various approaches to fostering learner autonomy in different language learning settings.

Keywords: learner autonomy, autonomous learning, language teachin

Introduction

Learner autonomy has been one of the widely used concepts in the scholarship of second and foreign language teaching as the learner-centered approaches to instruction have acted as catalysts to the popularization of this term. Some scholars warn language teachers about 'learner autonomy' as being the field's new 'buzz' word which has been used frequently in various contexts without an in-depth apprehension (Little, 1991). There seem to be two basic challenges for teachers in terms of creating more autonomous language learning settings for learners: (a) interpreting what learner autonomy, a very broad and abstract concept, really means in the context of second and foreign language learning; and (b) putting the theory into action by understanding the methods and procedures of promoting learner autonomy in language classrooms.

Being an attempt to address the two aforementioned challenges, this paper delivers a comprehensive discussion of the definitions, misconceptions, and applications of learner autonomy in the context of second and foreign language learning. It is hoped that such a discussion will provide introductory information and guidance for language teachers who wish to foster learner autonomy in their classrooms. The rest of the paper will unfold in three main sections: the first section will be devoted to better understanding the concept of learner autonomy by visiting different definitions and misconceptions of this term, the second section will aim at helping the reader further concretize the concept of learner autonomy by answering the question 'what makes learner autonomy important and desirable?', and the last section will focus on putting the theory into action by discussing various approaches to fostering learner autonomy in different language learning settings.

Understanding the Concept of Learner Autonomy: Definitions and Misconceptions

The change in the roles and responsibilities of teachers and learners in the language classroom has also brought the concept of learner autonomy into the field of language teaching and learning. All learner-centered approaches to language education include autonomy and independence among their aims. The basic ideas of autonomy are in harmony with major innovations in language teaching theory and methodology over the last thirty-five years. The development of discourse analysis, pragmatics, sociolinguistics and functional approaches to grammar has supported a shift towards more communicative approaches in language teaching. And, the idea that language learning should be a process of learning how to communicate also launched the notion of learner-centeredness, which puts the learner rather than the teacher at the center of the process of teaching and learning (Benson & Voller, 1997; Benson, 2001). "Communicative teaching, learner-centeredness and autonomy share a focus on the learner as the key agent in the learning process, and several prominent researchers in the field of communicative language teaching and learner-centered practice have incorporated the idea of autonomy into their work (Benson, 2001, p. 17)".

One of the most quoted definitions of learner autonomy was made by Holec (1981, p.3) as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Elaborating this simple definition, Benson (2001) stated that learner autonomy is the capacity to take control over, or responsibility for, one's own learning; that control or responsibility may take a variety of forms in relation to different levels of the learning process.

Benson and Voller (1997, p. 1-2) suggested that the word 'autonomy' is used at least in five different ways in language education:

— 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.

Discussing the meaning and implementation of learner autonomy in the language classroom, Esch (1997) states that there are three common misconceptions to be avoided. The first common misconception is the reduction of autonomous learning to a set of skills, or to a series of techniques to train language learning skills. This reduction is the negation of the radical content of the concept, and this misconception seems to be increasingly popular at a moment when the range of technical possibilities for accessing information and manipulating data at a distance is increasing. Second misconception related to definition and implementation of learner autonomy is the avoidance of language-learning specific issues. In order to understand and implement learner autonomy successfully, one should consider whether language has specific features which need to be taken into account. Esch asks the question "Is language learning different from any other learning, say physics or geography?" and he says the answer is 'Yes'. Therefore, if one wants to encourage autonomous learning, s/he needs to take language learning specific issues into consideration. Avoiding those specific issues would lead us to a misconception related to understanding and implementing learner autonomy. Third common misconception stated by Esch related to learner autonomy is taking it as learning in isolation. The developments of especially the last three decades (new technologies, self-learning materials, etc.) brought a sense of freedom to language learning. However, this new found 'freedom' has led to confusion with individualization and isolation, but neither of these concepts is in fact relevant to autonomous learning.

Especially the misconception of learner autonomy as learning in isolation has brought the concept of 'interdependence' into the discussion. Benson (2001) states that one of the most challenging developments in the theory of autonomy in the 1990s has been the idea

that autonomy implies interdependence. Kohonen (1992) has supported this thought strongly by stating that "personal decisions are necessarily made with respect to social and moral norms, traditions and expectations. Autonomy thus includes the notion of interdependence that is being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways (p. 14)." Then, we can safely argue that collaboration is essential to the development of autonomy as psychological capacity (Little, 1991).

As there are many different misconceptions related to the concept of learner autonomy, understanding what autonomy is 'not' would also help us to interpret what learner autonomy really means. Little (1991) and Benson (2001) summarized what autonomy "**is not**" in language learning as follows:

— Autonomy **is not** a synonym for self-instruction; that is, autonomy is **not** limited to learning without a teacher.

— In the classroom context, autonomy **does not** require the teacher to relinquish all the responsibility and control to the students; it is not a matter of letting the learners get on with things as best they can.

— Autonomy **is not** something that teachers do to learners, it is **not** another language teaching method.

— Autonomy **is not** a single, easily described behavior.

— Autonomy **is not** a steady state achieved by learners.

To capture all the aforementioned arguments, it is possible to summarize that learner autonomy as applied to language learning means students' taking more control over and having more responsibility for their own language learning process. It does not mean learning in isolation. Autonomous learners do not learn language without a teacher and

without peers. Instead they develop a sense of interdependence and they work together with teachers and other learners towards shared goals (Little, 1991; Benson and Voller, 1997; Littlewood, 1999; Benson, 2001; Koçak, 2003).

What makes autonomy important and desirable?

Answering the question "Why is autonomy desirable?", Crabbe (1993) points out a combination of three arguments: the ideological, the psychological and the economic. The ideological argument is that the individual has the right to be free to exercise his or her own choices, and this right should be applied to learning just as it is applied to other areas of life. The psychological argument is that people learn better when they take control of their own learning because learning is more meaningful and more permanent when the individual is in charge. Having more control in the learning process may also increase motivation and a motivated learner is often a successful learner. And at last, the economic argument is that individuals must be able to provide for their own learning needs because society does not have enough resources to provide the level of personal instruction needed by all its members in every area of learning. Crabbe concludes by stating that the psychological argument is the most appealing of the three arguments because it is pedagogical rather than political.

Kenny (1993) brings a sharper perspective to the discussion of the importance and desirability of learner autonomy as follows:

> Indeed it can be said that only when autonomy is being allowed to function is education taking place at all. For where autonomy is repressed or ignored- in other words where the learner has no say and no being- then what we have is not education but some sort of conditioning procedure; the imposition and reinforcement of dominant opinion. But education as an emancipatory agent empowers

> a person's autonomy, which allows new interpretations of
> the world and possibility of change. (p.440)

Ellis and Sinclair (1989) suggested that helping learners take on more responsibility for their own learning can be beneficial because (a) learning can be more effective when learners take control of their own learning since they learn what they are ready to learn; and (b) those learners who are responsible for their own learning can carry on learning outside the classroom. These two arguments related to importance and desirability of learner autonomy have been supported by some other researchers as well. Dickinson (1995, p. 165), supporting the first argument, stated that "there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught (p. 165)." Supporting the second argument, Lee (1998) pointed out that language learning is a life long process, and that's why it is important to help students become aware of the benefits of independent learning so that they can have the habit of learning continuously, and they can maintain it after they have completed their formal studies.

Scharle and Szabo (2000) explain the importance of giving more responsibility to learners with the help of an American proverb. The authors talk about the student groups who never do their homework, who are reluctant to use the target language, who do not learn from their mistakes, who do not listen to each other, who do not use the opportunities to learn, and then they state that such behavior generally stems from one common cause: learners' over-reliance on the teacher. Then, while answering the question 'Why should you develop responsibility and autonomy?' they use a popular American proverb as follows:

> You can bring the horse to water, but you cannot make him
> drink. In language teaching, teachers can provide all the
> necessary circumstances an input, but learning can only

happen if learners are willing to contribute. Their passive presence will not suffice, just as the horse would remain thirsty if he stood still by the river waiting patiently for his thirst to go away. And in order for learners to be actively involved in the learning process, they first need to realize and accept that success in learning depends as much on the students as on the teacher. That is, they share responsibility for the outcome. In other words, success in learning very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude. (p. 4)

Characteristics of autonomous learners stated by scholars also indicate the importance and necessity of fostering learner autonomy in language learning. Long lists related to the characteristics of autonomous learners have been suggested by many researchers (Dickinson, 1993; Cotterall, 1995; Littlewood, 1996; Breen & Mann, 1997; Sheerin, 1997; Chan, 2001; Benson, 2001). The common characteristics of autonomous learners can be summarized as follows:

Autonomous learners:

— set learning goals

— identify and develop learning strategies to achieve those goals

— develop study plans

— reflect on their own learning

— can work cooperatively

— select relevant resources and support

— are aware of the nature of learning

— assess their own progress

Consequently, the discussion about the importance and desirability of learner autonomy, and the characteristics of autonomous learners indicate that by promoting learner autonomy in their classrooms, language teachers can create more effective language learning environments for their students. This brings us to the issue of 'promoting learner autonomy'. The following section is devoted to reviewing different techniques and approaches to fostering learner autonomy in various language learning contexts.

Promoting Learner Autonomy

The capacity for control over learning has various aspects, and autonomy may take various forms. Therefore, fostering learner autonomy cannot be described as a single approach to practice. Benson (2001, p. 111) suggests six broad headings to classify 'approaches to the development of learner autonomy':

— **Resource-based approaches** emphasize independent interaction with learning materials.

— **Technology-based approaches** emphasize independent interaction with educational technologies.

— **Learner-based approaches** emphasize the direct production of behavioral and psychological changes in the learner.

— **Classroom-based approaches** emphasize learner control over the planning and evaluation of classroom learning.

— **Curriculum-based approaches** extend the idea of learner control to the curriculum as a whole.

— **Teacher-based approaches** emphasize the role of the teacher and teacher education in the practice of fostering autonomy among learners.

The following is a comprehensive discussion of each of the above-mentioned approaches in the light of the theoretical and empirical research on learner autonomy in language learning.

Resource-based approaches

In resource-based approaches, the focus is on the learner's independent interaction with learning resources (Hill, 1994). Therefore, studies related to self-access learning, self-directed learning, and distance learning can be discussed under this heading.

Self-access: In self-access centers, which are generally established in schools or libraries, students can work on their own (or in pairs and groups) with a range of materials such as grammar reference and workbook-type tasks, audio and video excerpts, dictionaries, and reading texts. Most of the self-access centers are equipped with computers for reference and language activities (Harmer, 2001).

Although they have had a central position in the practice of autonomy in many language learning contexts, the effectiveness and usefulness of these centers have been discussed by many researchers as well. Most of the scholars examining the effectiveness of self-access centers suggested that it is important to concentrate not only on hardware and materials (Gardner, 1995; Waite, 1994; Lin & Brown, 1994), but also on procedures such as accessibility of materials, learner training and learner strategies, alternative uses of self-access facilities, teachers' positive attitudes towards the self-access center, and involvement of teachers and learners (Littlejohn, 1983; Barnett & Jordan, 1991; O'Dell, 1992; Aston, 1993; Sturtridge, 1997).

Studies of Miller and Rogerson-Revell (1993), Moore and Reinders (2003), Cotterall and Reinders (2000), and Tamburini (1999) provide guidance for the establishment of effective self-access centers in different learning contexts.

Self-directed learning: Self-directed language learning is the situation where learners study a second or foreign language on their own, under their own direction without the help of others (peers or a teacher), primarily with the aid of self-instruction materials such as software or packages with a set of books and CDs (Jones, 1993). Self-directed learning is described as autonomous modes of learning because it requires the learner to study independently of direct contact with a teacher (Lee, 1998; Gabel, 2001; Reinders, 2000).

The effectiveness of self-directed learning and self-instruction materials has been investigated by many researchers. Cross (1981) found the self-learn programs being motivating and effective while Jones (1998) suggested that the most effective route for language learning appears to be starting with classwork, but adding or going over to self-directed learning at a later stage. Dickinson (1979) argued that a self-directed learning would be most appropriate for the learners who cannot get to classes, and for the classes in which the learners have very varied needs. Learner expectations, beliefs and attitudes appeared to be important issues for the effectiveness of self-directed learning according to studies conducted by White (1999) and Jones (1994). Carver (1984) and Victori and Lockhart (1995) emphasized effective learner training as a precondition for the success in self-directed language learning.

Distance learning: Like self-directed language earning, distance language learning has also been considered an autonomous approach to language learning as it requires the learner to study independently of direct contact with a teacher (Branden & Lambert, 1999; Passerini & Granger, 2000). In a study on distance language learning, White (1995) compared strategy use between distance and classroom language learners. Results

indicated that participants' mode of study was the dominant influence on metacognitive strategy use, and distance language learners employed self-management strategies much more than classroom language learners.

Technology-based approaches

"Technology-based approaches to the development of autonomy are similar in many respects to other resource-based approaches, but differ from them in their focus on the technologies used to access resources (Benson, 2001, p. 136)." Use of technology in language learning has generally been discussed under the heading of CALL (Computer Assisted Language Learning) (Thompson & Chesters, 1992; Legenhausen & Wolff, 1990). Bax (2003) suggests that in the past computer was considered as an aid to language learning but today it is possible to use computers for genuine communication and in the future use of computers in language learning will be as normal and natural as the use of books in today's teaching.

Liaw (1998) investigated the efficacy of integrating electronic mail writing into two EFL classrooms. Results indicated that the use of e-mail helped students use English for communication. In another study, Sullivan and Pratt (1996) compared students in two ESL writing environments (a networked computer assisted classroom, and a traditional classroom). Although writing quality improved in the computer assisted classroom, results suggested that writing environment had no effect on attitudes toward writing.

Discussing the role of the internet in letting go of control to the learner, Yumuk (2002) states that:

> As a new way of processing information, the Internet can
> encourage learners not only to view themselves as being in
> charge of their own learning, but also to perceive teachers
> as facilitators in their learning process. Unlike resources

such as textbooks, journals and other materials used in traditional teaching and learning, the Internet can stimulate learners to find the most updated information in a shorter amount of time. The Internet, with its hyper-linking capabilities to sources from all over the world, gives learners instant access to an enormous amount of information which, as a result, can enhance their desire and curiosity to learn more. (pp. 142-143)

Learner-based approaches

Learner-based approaches to promotion of learner autonomy largely focused on language learning strategies and strategy training. Benson (1995, p. 1) itemized six major learner training methods, which were not independent from each other, as follows:

1. Direct advice on how to learn languages independently, often in the form of self-study textbooks or manuals designed for individuals working abroad.

2. Methods and materials based on 'good language learner' research, which aim to convey insight from observation of strategies used by 'successful' language learners.

3. More open-ended methods and materials, where learners are expected to experiment with strategies and decide for themselves which ones suit them best.

4. 'Synthetic' approaches drawing on a wide range of sources.

5. 'Integrated' approaches that treat learner training as a part of general language learning.

6. 'Self-directed' approaches, advocates of self-directed learning have tended to be skeptical of the idea that students can be taught how to learn, and they propose methodologies where learners in effect train themselves by practicing self-directed learning with the help of self-access resources and counseling.

Rubin and Thompson (1994) and Scharle and Szabo (2000) provided comprehensive resources for developing learner strategies monitoring learning process, establishing self-evaluation, promoting motivation, and developing co-operation.

Classroom-based approaches

Classroom-based approaches basically emphasize learner control over the planning and evaluation of classroom learning. In other words, these approaches focus on changes to the relationships found in traditional classrooms in terms of classroom practice. Littlejohn (1983) investigated the effects of fostering learner control over the planning of classroom learning by giving a group of students a degree of control over the content of learning. Results suggested that "students responded very positively to a movement toward placing more control in their hands. For students who had been described as 'very heavy going,' they began to display considerable energy and enthusiasm for their student-directed lessons, the fruits of which became readily apparent (p. 606)."

Peer teaching can be considered another realization of classroom-based approaches to fostering learner autonomy. Assinder (1991) reported a study in which students were given the chance of teaching each other by preparing video materials to present to each

other. Results of the study indicated positive effects such as increased responsibility, increased participation, increased accuracy, and sustained motivation.

Self-assessment is another important concept in terms of fostering learner autonomy. It "has been a prominent theme, both in the literature on autonomy and in the literature on language testing. Although self-assessment has been linked to the idea of autonomy in the language testing field, greater emphasis has been placed on the reliability of summative self-assessments of language proficiency (Benson, 2001, p.155)."

Curriculum-based Approaches

Going one step further from the classroom-based approaches, in curriculum-based approaches to the promotion of learner autonomy, learners are expected to make the major decisions concerning the content and procedures of learning, with the support of their teachers. Clarke (1991) and Wenden (1988) discuss the basic concepts and their implementations related to promoting learner autonomy by involving students in the process of deciding what to learn and how to learn. In one of the important studies related to curriculum-based approaches, Dam (1995) reported promising results of involving students in decisions about their learning of English throughout a whole school year.

Teacher-based Approaches

Teacher-based approaches to promotion of learner autonomy mainly focus on teacher's role on giving more control to language learners. The discussion of teacher-based approaches can be divided into two basic dimensions: the role of teachers in the practice of promoting learner autonomy, and the role of teacher education in the practice of promoting learner autonomy (Benson, 2001).

Voller (1997) points out three basic teacher roles in autonomous learning: *facilitator*, in which the teacher provides support for learning; *counselor*, in which there is one-to-one interaction with the learner; and *resource*, in which teacher is the source of knowledge

and expertise. After giving the basic teacher roles in autonomous language learning, Voller discusses features of these roles under two headings: psycho-social support and technical support.

"The psycho-social features are:

— the personal qualities of the facilitator (being caring, supportive, patient, tolerant, emphatic, open, non-judgmental);

— a capacity for motivating learners (encouraging commitment, dispersing uncertainty, helping learners to overcome obstacles, being prepared to enter into a dialog with learners, avoiding manipulating, objectifying or interfering with, in other words, controlling them);

— an ability to raise learners' awareness (to 'decondition' them from preconceptions about learner and teacher roles, to help them perceive the utility of, or necessity for, independent learning).

Features related to technical support are:

— helping learners to plan and carry out their independent language learning by means of needs analysis (both learning and language needs), objective setting (both short and longer term, achievable), work planning, selecting materials, and organizing interactions;

— helping learners evaluate themselves (assessing initial proficiency, monitoring progress, and self and peer-assessment);

— helping learners acquire the skills and knowledge needed to implement the above (by raising their awareness of language and learning, by providing learner training to help them identify learning styles and appropriate strategies) (Voller 1997, p.102)."

Scharle and Szabo (2000) suggest three gradual stages teachers should take into consideration while promoting learner autonomy. The first stage is *raising awareness*. In this stage teachers present new view-points and new experiences to the learners in order to make them aware of the concept of taking more control on their own language learning process. The next step is *changing attitudes*. In this stage teachers try to make students practice skills introduced at the first stage, and in this way they try to help learners get accustomed to taking more responsibility. The last stage is *transferring roles*. In this stage there occurs a considerable change in the roles of the teacher and learners in the classroom.

Another important aspect of teacher-based approaches to promoting learner autonomy focuses on language teacher training. Little (1995) discusses the importance of promoting learner autonomy in future language teachers' education. Emphasizing the dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy, Little states that "genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis, the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process, and exploiting the freedom that this confers (p. 179)." In other words, in order to be good promoters of learner autonomy, first of all the teachers themselves should be

autonomous. This can only be possible by making learner autonomy a part of teacher education in two senses: by providing pre-service language teachers with the skills to develop autonomy in their future learners, and by giving them a first-hand experience of learner autonomy in their teacher training process.

Conclusion

This paper was a discussion of the concept of learner autonomy in the context of second and foreign language learning. Being one of the new 'buzz' words in the field of language education (Little, 1991), learner autonomy needs better interpretation by language teachers. By providing different definitions and misconceptions of learner autonomy, and by looking at different approaches to fostering autonomous learning, the discussion carried out throughout this paper aimed at helping language teachers concretize this promising but somewhat abstract term. Although it is possible to draw broad frames related to what autonomy is and how it could best be fostered, it should never be forgotten that actual realization of learner autonomy might change in a particular learning context depending on the specific conditions and challenges of that context. This brings us to the conclusion that more studies should be conducted in order to better understand how the realization of autonomy varies in different language learning contexts, and more guiding materials should be provided to language teachers in order to equip them with necessary tools to promote learner autonomy in their classrooms.

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