

Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching: A Culture Bound Concept

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Abstract

This paper argues that fostering autonomy in the FL classroom is a highly desirable aspiration as research is continuously reporting encouraging echo on the subject. Yet what is lacking in various theoretical as well as empirical discussions is the cultural dimension that is bound to the notion of autonomy. Autonomy is neither an innate characteristic nor is it valued and expected in all cultures, hence educational contexts. What is more, autonomy is a long term evolving feature that requires new-found outlooks from both learners and teachers. The major concern of this work is an attempt to discuss learner autonomy in respect to learners' specificities which are in turn highly shaped by specific socio-cultural educational contexts. The arguments behind learner autonomy as a culture related concept, in the present paper, are associated to Algerian students of English at university level as they constitute the category of learners the author is most familiar with.

Key words: attitude, culture, foreign language learning/teaching, learner autonomy

Cite as: Benaissi, F. B. (2015). Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning and Teaching: A Culture Bound Concept. *Arab World English Journal*, 8 (1).

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awej/vol6no1.31>

Introduction

Among the pedagogical principles that have been revealed by learner-centered approaches is the promotion of learner's self-directed and active participation to his/her learning experience, and it is this way of functioning that brought about "learner autonomy". There are few international and national conferences on FL education that do not have learner autonomy debated from various angles (e.g.1994: Hong Kong conference; 1999: Alak International Language Association (AILA) conference in Tokyo; 2000: Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL), University of Nancy; 2006: The 9th Nordic Conference, Copenhagen; 2014: European Council of Modern Languages (ECML) conference; 2014: DRAL2/ILA conference. Nevertheless, starting from the perspective that educational pedagogy is far from being a global project, we thus raise the following questions:

- Are new learning/teaching practices transferable to all socioeconomic, psychological and educational contexts?
- Do Algerian learners have the desired learning profile(s) for autonomous education requirements?

The proposed research attempts to bring to the surface the question of learner autonomy in environments where traditional FL practice has (and for that matter often still is though in slightly moderate forms) been the norm for decades. It suggests that Algerian university students are adults who have been highly guided all along their previous primary and secondary education, and thus cannot reasonably be presumed to become suddenly autonomous.

The concept of learner autonomy

Autonomy has been examined and defined by various language professionals each referring to it by a particular token and stressing one aspect of it or another. Consequently, labeling as self-reliance, independent learning, and self-direction often accompany learner autonomy in the literature of FL learning/teaching. Concern about this issue has gained so much popularity across borders, inasmuch as we came to refer to "the autonomy movement" (Smith, R. *ibid*) Learner autonomy may be seen as that responsible decision taking attitude the student has throughout his learning experience. Autonomy often carries the connotation of freedom to act, freedom from the teacher's control (rather than from peers or teaching material and facilities), freedom to choose or in short to influence one's own learning. "The autonomous learner is one that constructs knowledge from direct experience, rather than one who responds to someone's instruction" (Benson, 2001). Echoing a similar view as Holec, H (1981) who is the leading figure of autonomy; Dam. L. (1990) restated that the autonomous learner not only sets objectives for his/her own learning, but also selects materials, activities and evaluation tasks that best fit this experience.

Autonomy in FL teaching pedagogy by no means suggests "teacherless learning" to borrow Sheerin's terms (1997) cited in Thanasulas, D. (2000). Sinclair, B. (1997) cites several aspects of autonomy in language learning such as:

- Autonomy involves a learner's capacity and willingness to take responsibility for making decisions about their own learning;
- These capacities are not innate;
- There are degrees of autonomy;
- Different teaching and learning contexts require different approaches to the promotion of learner autonomy.

The issue that may be pointed out in view of the above is the implication (s) that the implementation of learner autonomy will inevitably have on the learner. If/when autonomy is adopted in the EFL classroom, students are undoubtedly:

- 1- discouraged to rely heavily on the teacher;
- 2- expected to develop their own leaning strategies;
- 3- required to make decision about what they learn , how and with whom they learn it;
- 4- expected to evaluate their own progress and weaknesses.

Autonomy in relation to culture

Before stressing the relationship between FLT and culture, it may be worth examining first the concept of culture and attempting to define it in light of the bind it has with autonomy as the title of our paper suggests. Culture has been and is still being defined on different grounds. The fact that this concept has been defined extensively and in various and sometimes opposing ways is no more than a reflection of different theories about understanding human experience. Culture generally refers to shared patterns of behaviour amongst a group of people. Peck (1998, cited in Thanasulas 2008:7) writes:

Culture is all the accepted and patterned ways of behavior of a given people. It is the facet of human life learned by people as a result of belonging to a particular group; it is that part of learned behavior shared with others .Not only does this concept include a group's way of thinking , feeling, and acting, but also the internalized patterns of doing certain things in certain ways...

These patterns are based on common valued principles, beliefs, and assumptions which will determine the dynamic of the group. By the late 19th century, a broad definition of culture has largely been adopted by anthropologists. It commonly refers to the way human beings codify, classify and symbolize their experience of life. Culture here is reflected or manifested through all the behaviors, general way of life of a community, and is transmitted from one generation to the other. On a general and simple note, culture may consist of what particular people do and how they do it in various life circumstances and contexts.

Autonomy in language learning and culture

There has been an argument that learner autonomy is a concept which is based on Western educational tradition and that as such it can only fit in the western educational context. In this respect, Harmer, J. (2005) explains that “attitudes to self-directed learning are frequently conditioned by the educational culture in which students have studied or are studying...autonomy of action is not always considered a desirable characteristic in such contexts”. This same line of reasoning operates in L. Dam's conception of “differential teaching and learning” (interview 2006) when she explains that variations like learners'/teachers' background, language, culture, educational context are all significant.

In a research on the implementation of autonomy to higher education learners in Macedonia Xaferi, B. & Xaferi, G., (2011,p.152) interestingly claim that changes are needed to lead such learners from traditional teaching to independent practice. A major finding of this study is that “...85% of the participants believe that learner autonomy is very important but they mostly do as the teacher instructs”. This is no surprise as learners' conceptions of their roles as well as their teachers have been shaped by previous conventional practice. Being in a similar situation (as the Macedonian ones), Algerian students of English often show comparable reactions.

The Algerian student

The Algerian student evolving in an Arabo-Islamic upbringing possesses some qualities, behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes among others which define him as such.

As an individual, he/she:

- Progresses in a culture of the group, the family, the community;
- Takes decisions with the parents (family);
- Shares experience with others.

As a learner, he/she:

- Considers the teacher as someone necessary for learning;
- Relies heavily on classroom input (provided by the teacher);
- Consults the teacher before taking decisions;
- Learns (inside and outside the classroom) with his/her classmates;
- Takes decisions concerning studies and career with family.

Needless to say that these features need definitely serve as a starting point in any attempt to promote autonomy among this type of learners. Interestingly enough, relating autonomy to sociocultural contexts does in fact stress its ‘acquisitional’ dimension, and in terms of FL pedagogy this simply means that all learners can develop high levels of autonomy if they are directed towards it.

Towards a realistic and efficient FL pedagogy

Realism in our context is to be associated with well- founded elements that influence the success/failure of a teaching/learning experience. Whenever a decision is taken some organization is necessary before this decision becomes truly functional or is implemented. This is because not any new movement guarantees success and improvement; and in order to be efficient we need to:

- Inform learners about modified or new pedagogical perspectives;
- Raise both learners’ and teachers’ awareness about the issue at stake;
- Prepare and eventually train teachers to this reform;
- Adapt the material facilities available as libraries, internet, self- access centres, etc...

Gaining autonomy is a lengthy, progressive and continuous process that requires a revision of the traditional roles of both the learner and the teacher. We cannot reasonably and realistically expect our learners to move from a largely “spoon feed” attitude (in the ‘traditional’ class) to a totally decision taking, responsible one necessary for better language learning. Not only this, autonomy should be a concern from early education so that by the time they get to university; students would have already attained reasonable levels of autonomy as “there are degrees of autonomy”. (Sinclair’s definition of autonomy, 2000). Teachers’ professionalism is needed here to guarantee the smooth and gradual transition between these two learners’ tasks; and rather than advocating abrupt changes in our methodology, it seems more realistic to gradually lead learners to change their attitudes.

Besides, it is widely acknowledged today that there are no two learners alike in terms of mode and rate of learning: some need lengthy and linear explanations; others prefer examples on the basis of which they will construct their hypotheses. There are also those who not only enjoy working with peers, but benefit more and learn better in the group, and those for whom learning

is an individual, solitary experience. The teaching profession needs to take this aspect into account and push learners towards autonomy even when they are engaged in pair or group work: one can at the same time cooperate in a group activity and still keeps an autonomous attitude concerning the decisions that may need to be taken individually. Autonomy in class may be seen as a collaborative process, Ramos, R.C. (2006, 197) for example prompts the teacher saying, “provide autonomous students and try to make them influence others, through project work, tasks and other types of group work where they would interact”. For optimal efficiency, tasks and activities need to be organized together with the learners so as to make them express their preferences and needs. Communication should be at the core of class work as students need to feel free to express personal, original views as well as criticize their peers’ or teachers’. Likewise, learners may be lead towards autonomy when they are invited to have an objective eye on their progress, strengths and weaknesses. The teacher should be there to validate this and propose alternatives for remedy.

Conclusion

It seems reasonable at this stage to strike a chord on autonomy from the other side of the desk, i.e. teacher autonomy. Teacher autonomy is another issue which deserves the attention of the language professionals as it is indeed a prerequisite to any step towards leading learners to autonomy. In the same vein Thanasulas, D. (2000) simply declares that “To posit ways of fostering learner autonomy is certainly to posit ways of fostering teacher autonomy”. Nonetheless, although it seems reasonable to assume that teacher who is not autonomous himself in his profession and classroom practice cannot reasonably guide his learners towards autonomy; we must admit there is little evidence in the literature about teachers’ own perception about this concept (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012; Duong & Seepho, 2014; Shahsavari, 2014).

We have attempted in this paper to associate autonomy in learning with the socio-cultural educational context in which one desires to give it a place. The foremost argument in this work is that the feasibility of learner autonomy depends on the extent to which pedagogical principles are understood, accepted and rooted in our language classes. Tracing back the historical progression of autonomy Smith, R. (2008) concluded his article asserting that “The Autonomy Movement is by no means over, but it seems to have entered a new phase, one of wider diffusion”. It goes without saying that the present piece of work is far from being comprehensive, as we have merely referred to autonomy and culture on theoretical grounds. Empirical studies in similar contexts need to address questions like teachers’ (often denied) resistance to learner autonomy, the lack of material facilities that pave the path towards autonomy, and the difficulty of measuring autonomy. At any rate, it is hoped that further research will come up with more critical theoretical as well as practical views so that learner autonomy will not only be an ideal but a genuine pedagogical principle that not only serves our learners in their educational adventure, but also in their lives as citizens.

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