

Learner Autonomy In Language Teaching And Learning

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Abstract: Learner autonomy has been a major area of interest in foreign language teaching (FLT) for many years. Much has been written about what learner autonomy is, how to promote it, and its implications in teaching and learning. Researches claim that learner autonomy improves the quality of language learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares individuals for life-long learning, that it is a human right, and that it allows learners to make best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom. This article define what learner autonomy is and discusses the ways of fostering learner autonomy in EFL teaching and learning.

Key words: Learner autonomy, role of teacher, learning strategy, cooperative learning, self-report, diary, evaluation sheet, EFL teaching and learning.

Introduction

Learner autonomy, especially in the field of foreign language learning was clearly explained by Holec (1981) in his report under the title of Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning. Learner autonomy refers to the principle that learners should take a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it. They should be involved in decisions concerning setting objectives for learning, determining ways and means of learning, and reflecting on and evaluating what they have learned. According to Holec (1981), learners should be given the responsibility to make decisions concerning all aspects of their own special learning styles, capacities and needs. Fener and Newby (2000), Benson (1997) argue about psychological aspects of learner autonomy. In view of pedagogical Fener and Newby (2000), they point to the fact that each individual has a unique way of constructing his or her own world. Each generates rules and mental models

so that they make sense of experiences. Learning is a search for meaning. Therefore, learning must start with issues around which students actively try to construct meaning not make them memorize and repeat another person's meaning. In formal learning environments, learners can be enabled to construct their own personal learning spaces in accordance with their personal and educational needs. It seems that if learners are given a share of responsibility in the decision-making processes regarding dimensions such as pace, sequence, mode of instruction, and content of study, learning could be "more focused and more purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term" (Little, 1991, p.8). According to Benson, "the key idea that autonomy in language learning has borrowed from constructivism is the idea that effective learning is active learning" (Benson 2001). According to Little (1991), autonomy is essentially a "capacity-for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, an independent action". Phillip Benson has written a great deal about learner autonomy and describes five principles for achieving autonomous learning:

1. active involvement in student learning
2. providing options and resources
3. offering choices and decision-making opportunities
4. supporting learners
5. encouraging reflection

Materials and methods

As Benson (2006) notes, variants on the definition what learner autonomy is defined in the literature, with 'ability' sometimes replaced with 'capacity' (for example, in Little, 1991) and 'take responsibility for' or 'take control of' substituting for 'take charge of'. Some definitions (e.g. Dam, 1995) also include the notion of 'willingness' to stress the point that irrespective of their capacity, learners will not develop autonomy unless they are willing to take responsibility

for their learning. Littlewood (1997) makes a detailed explanation on how autonomy is developed in language learning. He distinguished three kinds of autonomy to be developed relevant to language teaching as follows:

1. Language teachers aim to develop students' ability to operate independently with the language and use the language to communicate in real, unpredictable situations.
2. Language teachers aim to help their students to develop their ability to take responsibility for their own learning and to apply active, personally meaningful strategies to their work both inside and outside the classroom. Helping their students to increase their ability to communicate and learn independently, language teachers also try to reach the goal of helping their students to develop greater generalized autonomy as individuals.
3. In language teaching teachers need to help students develop motivation, confidence, knowledge and skills that they require in order to communicate more independently, to learn more independently and to be more independent as individuals.

In that sense, let us start to find out the best ways of fostering learner autonomy in language teaching. Researches claim that learner autonomy in can be developed language teaching and learning through teaching learning strategies, using cooperative learning, self-reports, diaries, evaluation sheets and creating portfolio. Fostering learner autonomy involves cultivation of learning strategies. In order to learn autonomously, teachers should give students adequate training to prepare them for more independent learning. For the students, strategies have to be learned. According to Oxford (1989), learning strategies are "... specific actions taken by the learner to make learning more easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations" (Oxford 1989). Strategies are the tools for active, self-directed involvement needed for developing L2 communicative ability (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990). Rubin and Wenden

(1987) view learning strategies as “behaviours learners engage in to learn and regulate the learning of a second language”. The best ways of fostering learner autonomy in language teaching is “hands-on” experience. Students need to become independent, self-regulated learners. Self-assessment contributes to learner autonomy (Freeman and Anderson, 2011). This helps them to plan language learning in an efficient way. Language learners need training in learning strategies in order to increase their potential and contribute to their autonomy. Indeed, the teacher should be a model in the use of strategy using. Three sets of strategies are included in this group: Lowering Your Anxiety, Encouraging Yourself, and Taking Your Emotional Temperature. Good language learners control their attitudes and emotions about learning and understand that negative feelings retard learning. Teachers can help generate positive feeling in class by giving students more responsibility, increasing the amount of natural communication, and teaching affective strategies. Techniques like self-reinforcement and positive self-talk which help learners gain better control over their emotions, attitudes, and motivations related to language learning (Oxford, 1993).

Cooperative language learning is an approach which develops communicative competence through socially interactive activities; Learners are directors of their own learning. They learn how to plan, monitor and evaluate their own learning. Cooperative learning is a powerful approach for learner autonomy. Cooperative learning incorporates five elements:

1. positive interdependence;
2. face-to-face interaction;
3. individual accountability and personal responsibility;
4. interpersonal and small group skills;
5. Group processing.

Positive interdependence occurs when group members feel that what helps all and what hurts one member hurts all. It means that building a spirit of mutual support

in the group. Students are encouraged not to think competitively and individualistically, but rather cooperatively and in terms of the group. Teachers not only teach language; they teach cooperation as well.

In fostering autonomous learning there is a role of diaries and evaluation sheets which offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, identify any problems and suggesting solutions. And portfolio creation leads to more autonomous learning. Thomsen (2010) revealed that the portfolio helped learners talk about their learning experiences, and assume an active role in their learning. Portfolios are convenient tools for teachers in the process of getting to know the learners closely as individuals and as learners of English. In addition, it is useful when choosing strategies for individual learners or groups of learners. It includes planning yourself and achieving the plan, taking responsibility for your own role, setting goals for yourself, heading toward them and doing what you have to do, and making a decision about something on your own. Learners should have opportunities to discover what a portfolio is and the purposes of portfolio creation. They can do so by examining sample portfolios and sharing each other's work in progress.

Conclusion

To conclude briefly, learner autonomy can be developed language teaching and learning through teaching learning strategies, using cooperative learning, writing self-reports and diaries, evaluation sheets and creating portfolio. In terms of implementing and developing of learner autonomy, teachers play an important role as teachers are responsible for developing a learning environment conducive to promoting learner autonomy. Teachers help learners set objectives, plan works, select materials, evaluate themselves, and acquire the skills and knowledge needed. Teachers also change students' concepts about the traditional role of the teacher and the learner in the classroom.

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