Autonomous Learning and Teaching in Foreign Language Education

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Abstract. Over the past 25 years, autonomy has been a popular focus for discussion and increasingly influential in foreign Language education. Most research is concentrated on learner autonomy, while teacher autonomy has been seriously neglected. Recently, however, researchers and experts have realized that to enhance learner autonomy, we must enhance teacher autonomy (e.g., Benson 2000; Little 1995; Little, Ridley & Ushioda 2003; McGrath 2000; Thavenius 1999). Teacher autonomy is now recognized as an important factor that affects the development of learner autonomy in foreign language education. However, it is very difficult for teachers to develop autonomy in the classroom especially when learners are used to traditional methods and techniques that teachers play the main role. The concepts of teacher autonomy and learner autonomy have been introduced and widely discussed as the learning responsibility of learners has been paid more attention to so as to improve the learning autonomy in SLA. Therefore, a comprehensive discussion of teacher autonomy and learner autonomy is of utmost importance to foster a better understanding and application of learning autonomy. Autonomy becomes a need for language learners and a must for language teachers who play a key role in developing learners' autonomy.

Keywords: Autonomy, learner autonomy, teacher autonomy

1. Concept of Autonomy

Autonomy, a relatively new concept in the field of education, has been defined differently by different scholars. Benson (2008) agrees with Little (1995) when he argues that, "because the concept of autonomy in learning draws its meaning from the concept of personal autonomy, it is centrally concerned with the kind of learning that best helps people to lead autonomous lives". Autonomous life refers to individual freedom with the "free choice of goals and relations as essential ingredients of individual well-being" (Raz, 1986, as cited in Benson 2008). In this regard, autonomy has to do with individual freedom and human rights for making individual choices. It is a matter of lifelong process rather than a need for a particular situation or course.

There appear to be at least three basic definitions of autonomy, corresponding broadly to its technical, psychological and political dimensions (Benson, 1997):

1. Autonomy as the act of learning on one's own and the technical ability to do so;

2. Autonomy as the internal psychological capacity to self-direct one's own learning;

3. Autonomy as control over the content and processes of one's own learning.

Benson & Voller (1997) hold that the autonomy consists at least five phases:

a) for situations in which learners study entirely on their own;

b) for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;

c) for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;

d) for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;

e) for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning. These definitions, however, are far from explicit enough to be of pedagogical use.

In his model, Littlewood (1999) explicated the word "autonomy" with reference to three related domains: Autonomy as learner, autonomy, as communicator and autonomy as a person. To Littlewood, in order to be autonomous in these areas, students need to have both ability and willingness. Ability concerns having adequate information about the alternatives available and the skills required to carry out the alternatives. Willingness, however, deals with the learners' motivation and confidence to take responsibility for the choices. These four constituents go hand in hand. As such, motivation, confidence, skill and knowledge are essential for all three kinds of autonomy. To be autonomous as leaner, learners should be able to work independently and use appropriate strategies. In order to be autonomous, learners should be able to create their own learning conditions and express their own meaning; they need to have linguistic creativity and employ appropriate communicative strategies.

Benson and Voller (1997) related the word of autonomy to five different concepts:

1. Situation in which students study on their own.

2. An inborn capacity which is supported by institutional situation.

3. Student responsibility for their own learning.

4. The right of learner to determine the direction of learning.

5. A set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning.

Dam (1995) contends that providing the learners the chance of planning and conducting teaching contributes to better learning and increases the capacity to evaluate the learning process. To her, awareness of how to learn facilitates and influences what is being learned and gives an insight into how to learn. Independence in learning is necessary for effective working in society and maximizing the learners' life alternatives. In recent century, learning process is not limited to the classroom environment. The introduction of different kinds of learning such as distance learning, self-instruction learning, and out-of-class learning makes it necessary for learners to practice autonomy in their educational settings. Moreover, autonomy enhances the learners' intrinsic motiva-

tion. Deci (1995) demonstrated that when autonomous learners accept responsibility for their own learning and try to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning, they are intrinsically motivated. On the one hand, achieving success in learning makes them more intrinsically motivated. On the other hand, when they have the chance to decide for their own learning, their security increases. This leads to students' preference to take risk. Ultimately, teachers are required to create conditions for students to think and thus act autonomously. They should help learners to collect, organize and manipulate data for themselves.

2. Learner Autonomy

Holec (1981) was the first person defines the learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's learning". He argues that learner autonomy results from an individual learner's taking responsibility for his or her own learning. According to him, this is a type of ability is not inborn; instead, it should be acquired. Little (1991) holds that learner autonomy is "essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning-a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". Also Little (1995) contends that learners autonomy "aims to equip learners to play an active role in participatory democracy".

Dickinson (1987) believes that learning autonomy is a "situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions". Pemberton (1996) treated it as "the techniques in order to direct one's own learning". Others scholars, however, try to clarify it by describing what an autonomous learner should be. Dam (1995) specifies that "a learner qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation."

In order to help learners enhance their learning autonomy, O'Malley and Chamot (1990) recommend the following nine practical strategies:

1) repetition, when imitating others' speech;
2) resourcing, i.e., referring to dictionaries and other materials;

3) translation, that is, using learners' L1 as a basis for understanding and/or producing the target language;

4) note-taking;

5) deduction, i.e., conscious application of L2 rules;

6) contextualization, when inserting a word or phrase in a meaningful sequence;

7) transfer, i.e., using knowledge acquired in one's first language to remember and understand facts in the L2;

8) inferencing, when matching an unfamiliar word against available information, and

9) question for clarification, when asking the teacher to explain.

These strategies are quite explicit and handy for learners, irrespective of their command of language is.

Ellis and Sinclair (1989) state three reasons "for helping learners take on more responsibility for their own learning." These are as follow:

- Learning effectiveness increases when learners take charge of their own learning because they learn what they want to learn;

- Learners who take responsibility for their own learning can continue learning outside the classroom;

- Learners who know how to learn can transfer their learning strategies to other subjects.

Dickinson (1987) states that autonomous learning must be promoted. He finds five arguments to support it:

1. Practical issues (some students cannot attend to face-to-face sessions)

2. Individual student's characteristics (their attitude, learning styles and learning strategies)

3. The learning objectives (each learner can develop specific strategies and skills)

4. Motivation (autonomy makes free learners)

5. Learning to learn goals (self-reflection, "know yourself"

As it can be perceived, fostering autonomy is not an automatic process to start and develop. There are several points that need to be taken

into consideration and teachers should be aware of their own autonomy as learners. In addition, identifying success, setting goals, having communication as main objective of the target language and creating conditions for learning are important factors teachers must take into account while working towards independence.

3. Autonomous Learner Model (ALM)

The Autonomous Learner Model is a program designed to help learners work towards the goal of independent or autonomous learning. The model was originally developed to meet the diversified cognitive, emotional and social needs of gifted and talented secondary students but has now been successfully adapted for use in the primary years. The model consists of five major dimensions:

1. *Orientation:* understanding giftedness, group building activities, self/personal development

2. *Individual Development:* inter/intra personal understanding, learning skills, use of technology, university/career awareness, organizational and productivity skills

3. *Enrichment:* courses, discoveries, investigations, cultural activities, community service

4. *Seminars:* small group presentations of problematic, controversial, and interesting topics

5. *In-Depth Study:* individual projects, group projects, presentations, assessment of self and others

An autonomous learner is "one who solves problems or develops new ideas through a combination of divergent and convergent thinking and functions with minimal external guidance in selected areas of endeavor" (Betts & Knapp, 1981).

4. Teacher Autonomy

The term teacher autonomy is first defined by Little (1995) as the teachers' capacity to engage in self-directed teaching. After that, researchers have attempted to define teacher autonomy from different aspects. Aoki's

(2000) proposed an explicit definition of teacher autonomy, suggesting that this involves the capacity, freedom, and/or responsibility to make choices regarding one's own teaching. According to Smith (2000), teacher autonomy refers to the ability to develop appropriate skills, knowledge and attitudes for oneself as a teacher, in cooperation with others. Benson (2000) argues that teacher autonomy can be seen as a right to freedom from control (or an ability to exercise this right) as well as actual freedom from control. In short, the fact that all these definitions share is that teacher autonomy is a kind of capacity or ability. The author also believes that teacher autonomy is a capacity of teachers. But, since the ability of these learners may influence the teacher's capacity, the author advocates that teacher autonomy means the capacity of teachers in managing knowledge, skills, and attitudes in the students' acquisition of a language with regard to learners. Other researchers study teacher autonomy with reference to its characteristics. Smith (2001) proposes a very comprehensive set of six characteristics of teacher autonomy as follows:

    A. Self-directed professional action

    B. Capacity for self-directed professional action

    C. Freedom from control over professional action

    D. Self-directed professional development

    E. Capacity for self-directed professional development

    F. Freedom from control over professional development

This summary has analyzed almost every aspect of teacher autonomy. However, it ignores an important element in teacher autonomy, that is teachers' attitudes. The subjective element as teachers' attitudes determines the adoption and successful application of teacher autonomy. Therefore, the author divides teacher autonomy from three dimensions that is the capacity and freedom in knowledge, skills and attitudes. Favorable attitudes towards teacher autonomy are indispensible to the practice of teacher autonomy. Negative attitudes of teachers, hinders the process.

    Classroom is a proper environment to implement autonomy as students can collaborate with one another and the teacher can support them if required. To Nunan (1997), too, classroom is the best setting to

encourage learners to exercise autonomy. In foreign language classroom, teacher is likely to have a major impact on students' development towards autonomy. Teacher autonomy has been defined as the ability to improve one's own teaching through one's own efforts (Lamb & Reinders, 2008). It is usually conceived of as including the ability to understand the students' learning needs and the ability to support them in their development towards autonomy. McGrath (2000) identifies two different but related dimensions of teacher autonomy: i) teacher autonomy as self-directed professional action or development; ii) and teacher autonomy as freedom from control by others. The two dimensions are mutually constitutive: in order for teachers to be self-directed, they need to have freedom from control by others; in order to be free from control, teachers need to be self-directed. Smith (2003) defines teacher autonomy in two independent but interrelated domains: domains of teaching and (teacher-) leaning, which broadens the concept of teacher autonomy to integrate teacher autonomy and teacher-learner autonomy. His framework reflects the multidimensional nature of teacher autonomy as shown in blow. Dimensions of teacher autonomy (adapted from Smith, 2003) in relation to professional action:

A. Self-directed professional action (= "self-directed teaching")

B. Capacity f r self-directed professional action (= "Teacher autonomy (I))

C. Freedom from control over professional action (= "Teacher autonomy (II)") In relation to professional development: Domain of teacher-learning

D. Self-directed professional development (= "self-directed teacher-learning")

E. Capacity f or self-directed professional development (= "Teacher-learner autonomy (I)")

F. Freedom from control over professional development (="Teacher-learner autonomy (II)")

5. Interactions Between Teachers and Learners in the Process of Learning Autonomy

In the process of learning autonomy, teachers and learners need to col-

laborate with each other. As a result, a careful investigation of their interactions is warranted. The teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are interacting with each other. In order to help students to achieve autonomy, teachers need to work with them.

The interactions between teachers and learners are inevitable and of paramount importance in second language acquisition. Thus, both teachers and learners need to understand teacher autonomy and learner autonomy so as to adapt themselves to the classroom learning autonomy. According to Smith (2001), "Teachers also need to constantly reflect on their own role in the classroom, monitoring the extent to which they constrain or scaffold students' thinking and behavior, so as to engage students in autonomous and effective learning".

If students want to learn to take control of their learning, the teacher may need to learn to let learners learn by themselves while providing necessary help. According to different circumstances, teachers' management of autonomy will vary respectively. But learner autonomy cannot be simplified only as freedom from the control of the teacher, freedom from the limitations of the curriculum, even freedom to choose not to learn. In fact, Berofsky (1997) considers that the most important freedom that autonomy implies is "the learner's freedom from self, by which we mean his or her capacity to transcend the limitations of personal heritage". In other words, learner autonomy involves the freedom of learners from educational and linguistic barriers. As a result, it is teachers' autonomy to cultivate a good environment for learners so that learners to acquire and practice the knowledge autonomously.

6. Partnership of Learning

The role of mentor will require a fundamental shift in the traditional relationship between student and teacher. That relationship had traditionally been predicated on the assumption that the teacher and the school would provide the information which the student required. Where that is no longer the case the teacher needs to provide guidance for the student through the task to be done, using pedagogical skills to suggest a range of possibilities to the student and leave open the specific outcomes.

The teacher will then be able to identify whether or not the student has met the objectives specified in the performance criteria and generated the relevant evidence indicators. Bruner's working heuristic of discovery will be created in the partnership of teacher, student and computer. For lifelong learning to take place, there must be a partnership, and there must be a working heuristic of discovery. Without those two factors there will be training, rather than learning. The focus will be utilitarian and specifically focused. The shape and outcomes will be defined by others. The disjunction which has been identified, between learners who are establishing their autonomy and an educational approach that leans towards the prescriptive, it is the prescriptive that is likely to increase.

7. Promoting Learner Autonomy

Autonomy is one's capacity to take responsibility for his/her own learning, whether in an educational context, or independent of a teacher or institution. Therefore, in order to help learners enhance learner autonomy, Wenden (1998) illustrates five general strategies:

a) directed attention, when deciding to concentrate on general aspects of a task;

b) selective attention, paying attention to specific aspects of a task;

c) self-monitoring, i.e., checking one's performance as one speaks;

d) self-evaluation, i.e., assessing one's performance in relation to one's standards;

e) self-reinforcement, rewarding oneself for success. Such strategies outline the basic application with regard to learners.

Different activities that provide learners with the opportunity to work independently can be used to promote learner autonomy. Harmer (2008) presents a range of activities for training learners to be autonomous, some of which I elaborate upon below.

a) Thinking about learning. Learners are provided with the list of 'can do' statements in terms of which they think about their learning. These activities help the learners to reflect on their own learn-

ing. Reflection makes their learning long lasting since they are likely to memorize the things they have learned.

Teaching learners to take notes also helps them to be independent learners. Rather than providing the learners with the notes teachers should provide them with various ways of taking notes (spider gram, point by point, spaghetti, etc.). Once they are familiar with different ways of taking notes they can use these skills independently while reading or attending a lecture.

b) Taking over: Gradually, learners can take over the responsibility for their own learning. Harmer suggests various activities for this. Such activities include asking students to use a dictionary which helps them to learn meaning of new words independently, and asking learners to develop their own questionnaire for a survey they want to carry out. Such activities provide learners with a sense of achievement as well as they boost their confidence.

c) Learning journals. Learning journals help learners to be autonomous. They also develop learners' writing skills, help express their feelings, help the teacher to better understand their learners, provide an opportunity for learners to think both about what they are learning and how they are learning. They enhance their memory of the things they have learned. Learners might be asked to describe their reaction to a lesson or can be asked to write about anything of their interest. Teachers need to provide feedback on students' writings. Along with providing autonomy journal writing promotes provides them with writing practice as well.

d) Forcing agency. Some learners do not just want to take responsibility for their own learning. They feel secure when teachers provide them with the solution to their all problems. Activities like the story circle writing and jigsaw reading activity make learning more structured for students and help them students to contribute something somewhat independently.

e) The self-access centers (SAC). Self-access centers are the centers where learners can choose reading materials according to their own interests. They can visit such centers on regular basis or in their own spare time.

8. Promoting Teacher Autonomy

A teacher who plans to train autonomous learners needs to bear in mind the fact that it is not an easy task to change students who are accustomed to the teacher-centered methods. On the need for making a link between teacher and learner autonomy as goals, Flvia Vieira (cited in Barfield et al. 2001) is quite clear: What's the use of having a concept of teacher autonomy which can accommodate transmissive, authoritarian or even oppressive purposes? (Aoki 2000). There seems to be much justice in this point of view. The fact is that an absolute degree of teacher autonomy (II) (freedom from control over professional action) is probably undesirable for this reason, apart from being unlikely in all but the most 'ideal' circumstances. In other words, restrictions on independent actions are required to prevent abuse, and one appropriate restriction is the argument that self-directed professional action aids students' learning (a more positive way of putting this, with less emphasis on constraints, might be that teacher autonomy necessarily involves interdependence, or 'relatedness', not just individualism. Indeed, this has been highlighted in recent discussions of the concept of learner autonomy. Qualifications of this nature may allow one to see how teacher autonomy can be seen as a legitimate goal of teacher education programs, even when it is not obviously linked to the promotion of pedagogy for learner autonomy. This may be convenient for two reasons: firstly, given the other requirements needed for developing subject knowledge and general pedagogic skills, teachers' focus on promoting pedagogy for autonomy might be seen as overly restrictive in some contexts,; secondly, the promotion of particular notions of and approaches towards learner autonomy can be seen as an inappropriate imposition in non-western settings.

9. Conclusion

Autonomy is a gradual, individual and never ending process of self - discovery. It is a process which a person gradually discovers what autonomy is. An autonomous learner acts individually and in cooperation with others, adopts an active role in social processes of his learning, understands new information with reference to his background knowledge,

and knows how to learn and how to reflect critically on the learning process. He can make accurate decisions during his learning, can act independently when necessary and can expand this knowledge to real life situation. Little (1991) states "the capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wider contexts".

All learning is ultimately autonomous in the sense that learning depends on the efforts of the learners themselves, so autonomous way of thinking should be cultivated and developed among foreign language learners and teachers. It is important to know and understand the principles of learner autonomy before refuting or supporting it. New roles for teachers and learners are emerging and teaching has to be adapted to them. Autonomy requires a fundamental change in educational practices, and teachers and learners need to generate new developmental plans, based on continuous learning and reflection on their learning needs and goals. Exercising autonomy in teaching contexts is contingent upon teachers' preparation as well as students' evolution of their own learning process. Although it is a demanding task, the benefits obtained are long lasting and can be applied not only to language learning contexts, but to all kinds of learning. Autonomy equips students with the power to deal with everyday situations and find solutions to the problems they encounter.

Learner autonomy does not free teachers from their responsibility. They should be more responsible to promote autonomy in learners. Since teacher autonomy and learner autonomy are closely related, the teacher should also be provided with the opportunity to practice autonomy within the given direction. Teacher education or training should provide teachers with the opportunity to have firsthand experience of autonomy.

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