

Investigating Learner Autonomy: The case of Kurdish English language majors

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Abstract

Learner autonomy has become the area of interest by many researchers of foreign language learning in the recent years. However, few studies have been done concerning the case of Kurdish learners' autonomy in learning languages. For this reason, the current study addresses this gap. It intends to investigate to what extent Kurdish learners are autonomous in learning English language. The study is significant in that it gives a broader understanding of the concept of autonomy to Kurdish learners and their language teachers to maintain how important autonomy is in promoting effective English language learning. The research adapts qualitative method in order to examine the views of Kurdish students who are currently studying at Salahaddin University in Kurdistan and their major field is English language learning. It involves six participants from various stages of undergraduate level to have the opportunity to examine autonomy according to different levels of learners' ability of using English language. The results of the study highlight that fortunately the participants showed a great degree of control over their learning. It was indicated that they were able to self assess their learning and design their own learning plans. Exploring their language learning autonomy experiences provide Kurdish learners and academics with a better understanding of how to challenge traditional methods of learning and what strategies to adopt to make learners more independent in the learning process.

Keywords: Autonomy, learning autonomy, self-dependence, individual learning, autonomous learner

Introduction

Since 1960s, language teaching and learning have developed significantly due to the fact that a greater number of people have tendencies towards language learning around the world (Cotterall, 1995). The growth in the desire of learner-centeredness, on one hand, and the rise of a number of 'non-linguistic' concepts such as motivation, affect and autonomy on the other hand, could also be regarded as factors that give more senses to language teaching and learning in the last decades (Little, Ridley, and Ushioda, 2003). Consequently, learner autonomy or independent learning as identified by Candy (1991), as a current emerging theme has become the area of interest by many researchers of foreign language learning in the recent years (see, for example; Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Cotterall, 1995; Benson, 2001; Little, Ridley, and Ushioda, 2003; and Benson, 2009). However, few studies have been conducted concerning the case of Kurdish learners' autonomy in learning languages. For this reason, the present study wants to address this gap. It intends to answer the question: To what extent Kurdish learners are autonomous in learning English language? The purpose is to provide broader understanding of autonomy to Kurdish learners and their language teachers and to maintain how significant autonomy is in promoting effective language learning. The study has implications to language learning and teaching in ways it brings multiple benefits to the process, namely, it allows learners to choose their own way of learning and become independent users of language. It also alerts learners that they have unique roles in learning foreign language and therefore they need to be involved directly in constructing their own learning (Benson, 2001). In addition, autonomy emerged as a

practical solution to overcome the obstacles that come to the way of foreign language researchers and teachers in ways it claims that responsibility for learning should be controlled by learners (see Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012).

The results can be considered significant in that they may give insights to both learners and teachers to think about the best possible ways to develop learner autonomy in order to achieve the best possible results in learning languages.

Based on what was stated above, the following research question was posed:

Q. To what extent are Kurdish learners autonomous in learning English language?

Literature Review

There have been significant improvements towards the interest in autonomy since 21st century and it appears to have become the popular area of researching in language learning and teaching (Benson, 2001). Nevertheless; there were substantial discussions concerning the definition of autonomy, or perhaps more precisely, the meanings that have associated to and also how might possibly boost learners' awareness that success in learning foreign language depends mainly on learners' having a 'responsible attitude' (Scharle and Szabo, 2000: 4). Based on that, this study considers heated discussions of some researchers with regard to defining the concept and how important is it in forming the characteristics of efficient language learner in the following phases:

Definition of Autonomy

Autonomy is not specified to language teaching and learning. It is, rather, a non-linguistic concept that is imported from the field of moral and political philosophy (see Benson, 1997) to foreign language learning through psychology and social theories to highlight the role of learner in language learning process. In theory, the word has been defined as the ability and freedom to deal with your own work which comprises having the right to make decisions as well. Researchers have introduced more competencies concerning autonomy and each has defined according to their own way of understanding about the concept. Candy (1991), for example, identified a significant number of concepts in educational literature that associated with autonomy including self-access, individual learning, independent learning, collaborative learning, self instruction and technology assisted language learning. Similarly, Dam (1995) suggested the concept of 'willingness' as he believes that learners cannot foster autonomy unless they are willing to control their learning. However, the most heated controversies concerning the definition of autonomy in language learning turn around the one that was presented by (Holec, 1981:3) where he believed to be "the ability to take charge of learning by learner". Benson (2009) notes variants on this definition in literature and thinks that the definition is rather detailed and as Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) state; he restates the definition by replacing the concept of 'ability' to capacity and 'take charge' to responsibility in his own studies.

Little (1991), on the other hand, proposed a more convincing suggestion concerning the term and claims that the idea takes different forms which varies according to age, learning progress, learning needs and other factors within the learner. Benson (2001) seems to have more agreement with this explanation and concludes that there is no point with regard to necessity or being too much concerned to identify the concept too precisely as it is "a multi-dimensional capacity" that changes according to different individuals or even the same individual within different time or contexts (Benson, 2001:47).

Making sense of autonomy in learning foreign language

Learning autonomy is significant and very much interested in foreign language learning for many reasons (Lamb, 2009). It allows learners to be more enthusiastic and motivated towards learning. Furthermore, it leads learners to be effective as the teacher will not be always present to control the learning process; therefore it helps learners to be well prepared to function efficiently in the process of learning (Cotteral, 1995).

Nunan (1997) adds further details concerning the characteristics of an autonomous learner. He believes that autonomous learners, in principal, should be able to determine all the aspects of their learning. They have to be involved actively in managing their learning and practice freedom of choice over learning materials and activities. Benson (2001) elaborates that autonomous learners should be aware how to take control over their learning. This does not simply mean that they need to put their knowledge into practice, but rather, it means having the ability and willingness towards learning (Littlewood, 1996).

Autonomous learners are claimed to be more successful in learning as they can identify their own weakness and strengths, their capacity and their ambitions, as a result; they can take control and responsibility (Lamb, 2009). Furthermore; as Lamb emphasizes, one of the major aims of educators is to make learners realise that learning is a lifelong process and requires skills to self-direct themselves in the process. So, the enterprise is not to promote new kinds of learning, but rather; tracking learners` acceptance of responsibility for their learning. This could be attained by improvements in the capacity of being independent and flexible users of the target language. The more learners take responsibilities of their learning (Lamb, 2009), the more they are expected to involve and progress in learning the target language.

Method

To answer the question of this study, the researcher employed qualitative method in which the researcher examined the views of the participants through interview. There were two key factors that encouraged the researcher to carry out the research through interview; namely,

1. "Interviewing is a known communication routine that the interview works so well as a versatile research instrument." (Dörnyei, 2007, p.118). It is the most often used technique in applied linguistic inquires because of its appropriateness for different contexts and various purposes.
2. It will help the researcher to achieve a descriptive data concerning the issue that is studied and then be able to interpret, analyze and compare various collected views respectively (Benson, 2001).

Participants

The investigated sample consisted of six Kurdish students aged (20-22) years, three of them were male and the other three were female. They were all on undergraduate program, studying English language and literature at one of the large universities in Kurdistan. This research approached convenience sampling in which the researcher contacted an ex-colleague at the university and asked for a number of students to volunteer to participate in the study. Once ten students were suggested, the researcher selected six of them from different grades in order to investigate the study according to different levels of English language proficiency.

Instrument

The instrument developed for the study consisted of 14 questions (see appendix) based on two previous works that were conducted in the relevant area by (Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012) and (Kormos and Csizer, 2014). The first question addressed some background details regarding the participants` experiences with English language learning, for example; when they started to learn

English, what grades the students were and the reason for choosing English language as their major academic field. The rest of the questions were all investigating and measuring learning autonomy through questions that explore the extent to which the learners are independent in their English language learning experiences and the opportunities they are seeking to use the language when having a chance. Examples are as follows:

1. What is your experience in learning English without an instructor?
2. What have you done then? Elaborate.
3. Do you usually plan ahead as to when and what you will use in English language?

Procedures

After piloting the instrument with one of the participants, some changes were made and irrelevant questions were removed. Also, the researcher reworded incomprehensible items and prepared the final version. Following that, all other participants were interviewed. The interviews were all conducted online in participants' mother tongue (Kurdish language) and the voices were recorded with their permission. Each interview took around (25-30 minutes). Later on, the study was triangulated for the purpose of insuring the collected data. For this, the views of two lecturers were considered concerning two of the respondents and, fortunately, the reliability of the data was proved because they were in parallel to what the researcher already had attained from the interviewees.

Once data collection process came to an end, the procedure of analysing the data began. The whole conversations were transcribed and translated into English. The initial and major emerging themes were highlighted after composing coding schemes. In the lateral stage, all the emerging themes were categorised under the title autonomy. Each category was identified and examples from responders' quotes were provided. Afterwards, four key themes were compiled based on the schemes and they were analyzed. Finally, the main findings were discussed.

As for the participants' confidentiality, the number codes were given to each responders and referred to as (S1, S2, S3 ad S4) in the study, while analyzing and discussing the results.

Results

In order to examine Kurdish learners' autonomy in learning English language, the detailed analysis of the interviews was provided. The table below demonstrates the coding schemes for the transcriptions, based on which four major themes were compiled and presented.

Code	Categories	Definitions	Examples
Autonomy	Self-dependence	Learners' reliance on themselves in learning language.	"I tried to develop all the skills..."
	Collaboration	Cooperation in learning.	"I ask my colleagues to explain for me."
	Group work	Working with friends on a task.	"You'll have more freedom in group discussions."
	Attitude	Positive attitudes that develop autonomy.	"I try to encourage myself."
	Evaluation	Assessing learning	"I need to learn more"

			vocabularies to extend my speaking ability”.
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Self-dependence and collaborative learning development

What is collected from the interviews indicates that the participants of the study were very initiative and self-dependent in their English language learning experiences. They all state various ways to develop themselves, including extra reading (out of their curriculum), watching English programs and learning new set of vocabularies and practicing them in their daily communication. Within one week, if considered, they devoted much of their time learning new things to improve their weaknesses as found from their responses.

S2, for instance, states:

All of my effort is to reach better English level than I have now. For this, I try hard to develop all the four skills in the meantime. I always communicate in English with my classmates, watch movies to improve my listening and fluency. With regard to improving my reading and writing skills, I always read and post in English on our web blog.

Besides this, group or pair work is the preferred way of studying, particularly in the class time. S3 demonstrates:

I prefer to study in group and I believe that you may learn better and remember things easier; despite having better chances to practice listening and speaking.

S2, in addition, seems to have agreement with this idea and declares:

You will have a good opportunity to share different ideas and views rather than seeing things in one perspective.

S1, on the other hand, raises a new point and claims:

You will have more freedom in group or pair work and feel less stress as you are involving with your classmates and experiencing less anxiety.

Unlike the three views discussed above, S4 seems to be more comfortable working on her own. She has some reasons for that; namely, misunderstanding and ambiguity in discussions while working with classmates. She elaborates as the follows:

While involving in group work; students may misunderstand each other and direct the discussion towards a wrong dimension.

She seems too persistent on her ideas and wants to depend on herself all the times. Though, this view cannot be applied all the times to the group work as other students may also want their ideas to be considered and share knowledge rather than depending on one perspective.

Overcoming difficulties and making English language learning interesting

Another aspect in which the researcher wanted to investigate was to examine to what extent the participants depend on themselves while facing difficulties. For instance, when a hard task is required to carry out; how could they encourage themselves to do it properly and make it interesting. Two of the participants state that they are following their own plans to carry out the tasks by setting goals for themselves to end the task successfully. For example; if the task required performing a presentation, they would practice a lot until they reach the target. S2 declares:

I try to encourage myself psychologically whenever I have an assignment and motivate myself as I can manage to do it successfully. I promote more positive attitudes towards the task, no matter how hard is it; I try to make it enjoyable and enrich my knowledge.

Nevertheless, the other participants claim that they depend on their teachers' plans as they are more experienced and may show them the right way to manage their tasks appropriately.

The interviewees' responses also indicate that they approach learning according to their needs. Some of them think that they should develop their vocabulary in order to promote speaking without difficulties, whereas for some others improving listening skill is more desired as they perceive weaknesses in that area. S1, for example, concludes:

I am aware that I should improve my listening because when I listen to an English program, I cannot follow very well. So, my focus is mainly on that area, I have to be more anxious about my listening skill to develop my English level.

Self-evaluation

The participants generally demonstrate that they are evaluating themselves on a regular basis to assess their abilities. As to when and how they evaluate, three of them indicate that while they are speaking (inside or outside class), they concentrate on themselves. They emphasize on how they can continue their speech without difficulties or what may drive them to interrupt. In this way, they feel that they can point out their weaknesses and consequently develop the areas of their needs.

S2's response concerning self-evaluation is different from the other three participants as he states that self-evaluation should be planned within specific time intervals. Moreover, evaluation should indicate assessing all the skills in parallel. As a result, the needs could be highlighted and consequently developed in best possible ways.

Opportunities to use English language

Considering learners' readiness to seek opportunities to involve in English language communication, all of the participants showed to be very energetic and initiative. This is supported by the respondents' quotes:

S4 comments:

I take any opportunities to speak in English though I know I make mistakes. The main objective is to learn; hence we may learn from mistakes.

S2 adds further details and maintains:

I try to involve into real life communication through online chat groups. For this, I have joined some social networks where I can communicate with native speakers. In this way, I can practice my English every day, because in my opinion, language is something either you use it or lose it.

S1 additionally finalizes that:

I use English inside and outside class times. I would take any chances to communicate in English. I have benefitted from my personality as I am rather an extrovert person.

In conclusion, the interviewees' responses generally point out that lack of native models in their English language learning experiences has affected their learning negatively, specifically their speaking. As the consequence, they have difficulties in producing native-like pronunciation.

Discussion

The primary intention of this study was to find out the answer of the question, "To what extent are Kurdish learners autonomous in learning English language?" What was demonstrated from the results indicates that the learners have a great degree of control over their learning and there was a number of evidences to prove this. Firstly, the learners are generally following some basic ways to improve their English language levels; namely, extra reading, watching movies and writing blogs on the web. Secondly; collaborative learning takes a great part of their English language learning experiences both inside and outside the classroom. Thirdly, they manage to solve the difficulties that hinder their English language learning, mainly through depending on

themselves. Fourthly, they are able to self-assess themselves, point out their needs and consequently design their own learning plans to improve their weaknesses. Finally; they have extended attitudes towards English language learning and exploit any opportunities that involve them into English language practice and use.

Little (1991) insists that learner's awareness with regard to the responsibility for language leaning develops the capacity for independent use of language. From the results of the present study it could be pointed out that the learners showed enough responsibility towards their learning and they did their best to broaden their abilities and expand their engagement with English language learning and use. The triangulation of the study can be regarded as the best evidence that ensures the reliability of the study. While asking two lecturers of the participants about their energy, initiation and independency in their learning, the participants were described to be "independent in learning, studious and very much interested in learning". This best interrelates to what is already achieved by Nunan (1997) in the review of literature where he believed that autonomous learners need to be able to determine all the aspects of their learning by themselves. They have to involve actively in managing their learning and practice freedom over the choice of learning materials and activities.

Besides this, many researchers, (Benson, 2001; Little, Ridley, and Ushioda, 2003; and Benson, 2009) shaded the light on difficulties in involving learners in independent learning, particularly if this has not been part of their cultures and language learning background. Kurdish educational system in this perspective can be observed as operating traditional methods; that is mostly teacher-centered and exam-based, which obviously hinder the development of autonomy. However, this does not mean the students lack the capacity of being autonomous; it is rather due to the educational system and cultural standards where the teachers have the most power and control over the classroom. However, what was achieved by the participants totally contradicted this possibility as the participants manifested a profound role and interest of being self-dependent and making their learning situations ideal both inside and outside the classroom. This has also been maintained by Harmer (2007) as he believes that the best context of learning is the one that students, without being directed by the teacher, lead their learning. In addition, the results also suggested that the responders take any opportunities to involve in real life communication and make choices that, as (Littlewood, 1996) observes, produce actions that determine their goals.

Another point that draws our attention towards the results is that the participants noted to be successful in their learning as they knew about their strengths and weaknesses and were able to work on them in order to develop their levels. This has been proved also by Benson (2001) and Lamb (2009) that if learners have the capability of assessing their own learning, analysing their needs, choosing their own learning strategy and reflecting on their own learning outcomes, they could be regarded as autonomous and effective learners.

Conclusion

The results of this study draw our attention towards some key points as follows. The participants have shown a great degree of control over their learning, and their responses indicate that they are able to self asses their learning, highlight their needs and design their own learning plans to improve their weaknesses. Also, the way they try hard to involve themselves in language and take opportunities to practice it are other points that play a profound role in their achievements. Also, promoting learner autonomy is a process which requires such essential stages as raising awareness, changing attitudes and transferring roles. Above all, students' attitude towards learning affects the way they approach learning effectively.

As a final point, teachers' role in developing learner autonomy in language learning should be considerably attended to since they can provide more autonomous learning context, encourage learners, and develop learning materials and activities that foster learner independency.

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Appendix

Interview on ELL Autonomy

Warm up questions

Where do you study?

What grade are you in?

When did you start to learn English? Why?

1. What is your experience in learning English without an instructor? What have you done then? Elaborate.

2. How much do you deal with ELL in a week? How do you take it yourself to learn as much as possible?

3. Do you prefer to learn individually or in a group? Why?

4. Do you participate in classroom decision? How?

5. How do you maintain your attention when a long task is asked to be carried out? At times you're doing the task; in which way you make yourself interested in the task in order to be able to do it effectively?

6. What do you do in cases when you involve language learning or language use and you do not understand? Can you give specific examples?

7. Is it hard to learn EL? What do you do if you see such? How do you overcome the difficulties? Does anyone help?

8. Do you usually plan ahead to what you want to learn in English? How do you choose what you want to learn? Do you include your teachers into your plans?

9. Do you usually plan ahead as to when and what you will use in English language?

10. What do you do when there is no teacher or others to make sure your work? Do you ever evaluate yourself? When? How?

11. Do you ever use the internet to learn EL? What are you doing? There are language learning programs, which one do you use?

12. Do you help others in language learning? Who? When? Why? Who used to help you?

13. What opportunities are you looking for yourself on the use of EL? Please tell me, what do you do? With whom do you usually use the language?

Triangulation questions for teachers

1. What do you think about your student in terms of (his/her) independence in learning English language?

2. How would you describe (his/her) activeness/participation in the class?

3. How do you maintain (his/her) attention when a task is given to be carried out (for example a project)?