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Issues on Learner Autonomy: Teachers' Effort and Responsibility towards it.

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Abstract

This paper aims to discuss issues on learner autonomy and teachers' effort and responsibility in promoting autonomous learning in English language classrooms. The concept of learner autonomy is a focus of many researchers in different countries. Many researchers and academics consider this phenomenon as a central concern in language learning. In cultivating learner autonomy there is a two-way street; the teacher whose role is highly important in fostering and encouraging learners to learn in an autonomous way and the learner who is responsible for his/her own learning after getting the required need and help from the teacher. However, teachers around the world still struggle with the ways to foster autonomous learning in the language classroom or outside it. Therefore, this study was conducted in three high schools in Gjilan, where 30 teachers were interviewed in order to find out if they promote autonomous learning, and if so, how much effort and responsibility they show with their learners, and their opinions on the necessity in promoting Learner Autonomy (LA) in English classrooms. As a result, study findings show that the interviewed teachers are aware of the importance, but regarding the implementation of learner autonomy however,

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they still struggle on implementing it into practice in their classrooms stating reasons which hinder this important issue in English language teaching.

Keywords: *Learner Autonomy, Issues, ELT teachers*

Learner autonomy and learner responsibility are interrelated topics in language learning education. In order to be successful in learning and searching new things, learners should be aware of their responsibility. In this case this is possible through their teachers' effort towards it. Recently, in the process of language learning and teaching, learner autonomy has become a central issue in many developing countries. Currently, this change is required because of the common phenomenon of learners such as being passive learners and not responsible for the outcome of the things they learn. Hence, if learners do not feel responsible for their own work they can never succeed in learning new things independently.

Autonomous learning has been defined by different researchers whose definitions lead to the same concept. Holec (1988) defines learner autonomy as *the ability to take control over one's own learning*. Furthermore, another researcher (Little, 1991) defines this term as *a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action*. Little (1991) also claims that *autonomous learners understand the purpose of learning, accept responsibility for their learning, share in the setting of learning goals, take the initiative in planning and executing learning tasks, and regularly review their learning to evaluate its effectiveness*. As it is seen, the concept of learner autonomy is described as *responsibility, charge, control, freedom, choice, motivation and making decisions*. Therefore, the learners are autonomous when they are able to take responsibility on their own for the tasks they are supposed to fulfill and ready to take control for their

own learning by having the independent capacity or freedom and being highly motivated to choose the right way or the appropriate things they need to learn.

Promoting Language Learner Autonomy

Researchers have used different approaches for the purpose of finding out how learner autonomy can be enhanced. According to Thanasoulas (2000) activities like self-reports, diaries, evaluation sheets and persuasive communication might foster a certain degree of learner autonomy. Ma and Gao (2010) claim that learner autonomy can be attained by developing syllabuses in the language classroom where learners can make their decisions for their own needs and learning. According to him learners are highly motivated and take great responsibility to work on their own. Moreover, according to a study conducted by Dafei (2007) it can be concluded that the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency is highly interrelated. This results that autonomy indicates levels of English language proficiency which learners possess, and this means that the more autonomous the learner becomes, the more proficient he/she is.

Another researcher (Trinh, 2005) presented two separable goals: to foster learner autonomy, and to develop communicative competence. Accordingly, to foster learner autonomy the author believes that learners should be given the opportunity of choices of the learning content and strategies. Whereas to enhance communicative competence learners should be offered opportunities in the following issues: *use English in planning, monitoring, and assessing their task performance; seeking support from the teacher and classmates; and negotiating meaning.*

Teachers' role in autonomous learning

Many researchers claim that the role of the teacher in learner autonomy is highly important, and therefore consider them as active participants, monitors and consultants who always guide students to better learning and help develop their learner autonomy. According to Nunan (1988) there are nine steps in fostering autonomous learning;

Step 1: 'Make instruction goals clear to learners' - The first strategy that teachers should do employ is to make instructional goals clear to learners.

Step 2: 'Allow learners to create their own goals' - The next step aims to give learners an opportunity to create the content for their own goals. Parkinson and O'Sullivan (1990) report the practical way of learners' involvement in this regard. Their notion of the *action meeting* is reported below;

A mechanism was needed for course management: as the guiding and motivating force behind the course, it would have to be able to deal with individual concerns and negotiate potential conflicts of interest, need, and temperament. As foreshadowed in the orientation phase, the group would now experiment with a mechanism suggested by the teachers, namely a series of Action Meetings. ... [These] would provide an opportunity for individuals to participate (interpersonally and interculturality) in an English-medium meeting, negotiating meaning and authentic content. They would also be a means of facilitating group cohesion and motivation and would be a primary mechanism for ongoing program evaluation by the participants (Parkinson and O'Sullivan, 1990, p. 119-120).

Step 3: 'Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom'- Encouraging learners to use the language outside the classroom is a good idea. There are many

activities which learners can engage in to improve their second language proficiency outside the classroom.

Step 4: 'Raise awareness of learning processes'- As mentioned in the previous section teaching learners how to learn is very important. In this regard, raising learners' awareness of their learning process is something that teachers should do to teach learners the best strategies.

Step 5: 'Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies'- In order to develop learners' ability to choose their own preferred learning styles and strategies, they should be well trained in this aspect. In order to achieve that, teachers should give learners a range of options to choose from. According to Widdows & Voller (1991), learners are able to make their own choices. Their findings showed that learners preferred being active rather than reading and translating passively. Therefore, teachers should think of best ways to address the learners' needs in developing their preferred styles and strategies.

Step 6: 'Encourage learner choice'- In some places the notion of learner choice may not be familiar. However, in such a case it is good to engage learners in decision making process. The way learners decide depends on the teachers' criteria; they can be asked to make decisions between two tasks or they may also be asked to do different tasks at the same time.

Step 7: 'Allow learners to generate their own tasks'- The previous step discussed how to encourage learners in making their own choices. Once this decision is reached, learners should be given opportunities to make modifications and adaptations on their classroom tasks. Accordingly, this can proceed by teaching learners to make their own tasks including developing their own materials. For instance, learners can be given a text lacking questions, so they can be encouraged to

generate questions on their own based on the text they are given.

Step 8: 'Encourage learners to become teachers'- Although teaching is not an easy job, another challenging step is to encourage learners to become teachers. Learners can be given a topic and asked to prepare it in a PowerPoint presentation by bringing the materials created on their own.

This is a good opportunity for them to have the feeling of being a teacher and good practice for their future career. This can be done individually or in a group. By doing so, learners have the opportunity to increase their self-esteem and become more confident.

Step 9: 'Encourage learners to become researchers'- Lastly, encouraging learners to become researchers is among Nunan's steps in fostering autonomous learning. When learners are able to search on their own it means that they have reached an adequate level of autonomy. However, in order to arrive at an autonomous stage, they need much support from their teachers who should be very responsible in addressing this issue.

Furthermore, Cotterall (1995) believes that learners, who consider their teachers as facilitators of learning are ready for autonomous learning, which means that teachers appear to be central in preparing and raising learners' awareness about working independently.

Ways to Foster Learner Autonomy in English Teaching and Learning

Among the different ways to foster English Teaching and Learning, researchers mention some important elements that should be used in order to enhance learner autonomy in teaching and learning. The first principle that teachers and

learners should follow is to change their beliefs about learning. According to Tudor (1992) *teachers need to prepare learners for their new role by developing learners' self-awareness as language learners and their awareness of learning goals and options and of language itself.* They should also be aware of their roles as facilitators, consultants, guiders, and supporters in learning processes.

Not only teachers, but learners as well should change their traditional way of learning to their central role in learning. They should be aware of their roles as managers, organizers, and evaluators. This surely influences their approach of learning and develops learner autonomy.

Furthermore, according to Oxford (1989) *learning strategies are specific actions taken by the learner to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferable to new situations.* In this aspect learner autonomy involves refinement of learning strategies. In order to make learners learn autonomously, teachers should give them sufficient training in order to prepare them to work independently (p. 8).

Accordingly, Weinstein and Mayer (1986) state that *the goal of strategy use is to affect the learner's motivational or affective state, or the way in which the learner selects, acquires, organizes or integrates new knowledge.*

However, as such strategies have to be learnt, it is teachers' job to find a suitable approach applicable to their learners. There are various learning strategies, in which the key component is maximizing learner autonomy. Among them social strategies are highly important because people use the language between them. In this regard, three kinds of strategies are included; *asking questions, cooperating with others and empathizing with others* (Oxford, 1990).

When learners are able to ask questions it means that they have acquired the learning and it results to cooperating with others. Many studies show that cooperative learning affects learners' self-esteem and confidence in a positive way, and as a result, it also increases learners' level of autonomy. In this regard, empathy is also important. If a learner is empathic he/she is able to put his/her self in someone else's situation and therefore, understands the others' point of view (Oxford, 1990).

In cooperative learning, the learners' role is to direct their own needs. Based on many studies, cooperative learning is an influential approach for learner autonomy. The main aim is to create a group of learners which can develop their lifelong learning skills-learner autonomy. According to Johnson (1991) cooperative learning incorporates five elements: *positive interdependence; face-to-face interaction, individual accountability and personal responsibility; interpersonal and small group skills and group processing*. Positive interdependence appears when the members in the group are all for one and one for all, which means that the group is able to support each of the individual member and each member is able to support the group (Freeman and Anderson, 2011).

Making learners report what they think and perform is also a good way of collecting information and see learners' progress. If learners are able to self-report, this means that they are able to introspect on their own introspective progress. Therefore, *the introspective self-report is a verbalization of one's stream of consciousness* (Wenden, 1998). These kinds of reports are expected to offer information on the strategies learners use at the time they do the report (p. 81).

Another kind of report is called a retrospective self-report because of the fact that learners are required to think back in

retrospect of their own learning. There is no limit to what learners say in response as such self-reports are open-ended.

Furthermore, there are two kinds of retrospective self-reports: semi-structured interviews and structured questionnaires. The aim of the semi-structured skill is to be focused on specific skills such as extracting information about learners' attitudes to reading, writing, listening, and speaking, problems they may have come across, or dealing with learning tasks. The aim of the structured interview, on the other hand, is to seek information differently such as by means of questions and statement.

In addition, diaries and evaluation sheets are highly important for learners to evaluate their own progress. This helps collecting and developing learners' thoughts and interpretations that cannot be easily observed but which require time during the inquiry process. Accordingly, they offer learners the opportunity to plan, monitor, evaluate and identify problems that they may face during the learning process (Wenden, 1998). Moreover, the use of portfolios leads to more autonomous learning including planning, taking responsibility, setting goals making decisions and so forth (p. 107).

Accordingly, Shimo (2003) suggests that providing "optional tasks which allow students to make choices" and "decision-making tasks which enable students to plan and organize their learning" will help learners feel the sense of autonomy (p. 175). Furthermore, Thomsen (2010) claims that "the portfolio helped learners talk about their learning experiences, and assume an active role in their learning."

Learner autonomy in cultural context

As we know, education and culture are closely related. Accordingly, techniques and methods used in one culture may

not be applicable in another culture. This is also true for learner autonomy. In this aspect Holliday (2007) states that *the issue of autonomy has often been connected with the individualism and collectivism dimension in cultural difference*. In this regard individualism is connected with the culture where people live their lives in a self- directed way.

Their priority is to make their own desires and feelings as they wish. They make their own choices and are always open to new things. However, collectivism has to do with the people who are group-oriented. They are dependent on the group they belong to. Therefore, learner autonomy functions in an individualistic culture rather than in a collectivist one. Based on the literature, some researchers state that the origin of autonomy comes from the European continent whereas some others say that the origins are rooted in Eastern philosophies.

According to the researcher Pierson (1996), the roots of *learner autonomy* come from Chinese. Despite of the fact that there have been various debates on this, many studies have been conducted relating to those issues and it was found that the national culture is an important factor for fostering learner autonomy (p. 49-58). Pennycook (1997) states that the concepts of autonomy originate from a particular context, and they are appreciated differently from culture to culture. as Although we as humans cannot escape entirely from the cultural assumptions and preconditions that shape us there are always opportunities to make differences (p. 35-53).

Thus, culture is very important in education. Kneller (1965) claims that culture includes the following elements: a community which shares the culture (e.g. *a society*, or *a classroom*); learning practices which are recognized in this community (e.g. *going to classes*, or *practicing language by talking to tourists*) with their associated roles (e.g. *teachers*, *learners*, *learning counsellors*); institutions within this community which

structure learning (e.g. *schools, self-access centers or families*) and tools and products which play some part in the community's learning practices (e.g. *computers, textbooks or students' essays*).

Research Methodology

In order to conduct this study both qualitative and quantitative methods were used. This methodology was appropriate because it helped us find teachers' responsibility and the effort that they show to promote learner autonomy in their teaching classes. Therefore, they answered the following research questions; 1. What does 'Learner Autonomy' mean to English Language teachers? 2. What is the teacher's role in promoting learner autonomy? 3. Does learner autonomy mean learning without the teacher? They also proved the following hypotheses;

- H.1 Teachers' role in promoting Learner Autonomy is essential,

- H.2 Learner autonomy cannot be promoted alone.

The participants of this study were 30 English teachers from three secondary schools in Gjilan. They contributed by answering the questions in the questionnaire and interview.

In this study, the main instruments used were the teachers' questionnaire and interview. The first instrument in this research study was the teachers' questionnaire, which consisted of 10 questions, where the teacher participants were supposed to choose between the following options; *very much, partly* and *not at all*.

The second instrument in this research study was the teachers' interview on learner autonomy consisting of eight questions distributed among 30 English teachers in total. The purpose of the teachers' interview was to find out more

information related to their responsibility and efforts in developing Learner Autonomy and their ELT classes.

Data Analysis

Findings of the teachers' questionnaire render positive results in general and show that 70% of them, which makes up for the majority, stated that they feel responsible in promoting learner autonomy. However, 50% of them claimed that they use different strategies to help learners become autonomous, 12 % chose the option partly and 38% not at all. Regarding the next statement, it is revealed that proficiency in English plays an important role where 85% of the teachers chose the *very much* option for the statement "I have difficulties in promoting autonomous learning to non-proficient students".

In addition, 80% of them stated that they encourage learners search things on their own, 17% partly and not at all 3%. The following results state that the majority of teachers give regular opportunities to complete tasks alone. However, although many researches claim that giving learners opportunities to assess themselves is a part of autonomous learning, the study findings show that teachers do not encourage learners to asses themselves at all, where 68 % chose *not at all* option, 22% partly and only 10% very much.

Furthermore, only 30% of the teachers involve learners in decision making on the choice of learning task and none of them in selecting textbooks, claiming that the textbooks are approved by the ministry of education which does not give them room to choose the materials themselves. Notwithstanding these restrictions, 90% of the teachers said that they encourage learners to use different additional materials for their tasks.

Regarding the first question, in the teachers' interview "What does 'Learner Autonomy' mean to you as an EFL teacher" all of interviewed teachers shared the same opinion where they stated that learner autonomy means students' ability to learn independently as well as their ability to learn material they are interested in. In addition, two teachers mentioned that it is not ability or even a level that every learner can reach since they should be able to set themselves goals and then work hard independently to reach those goals.

Furthermore, all of them consider LA as the learners' capacity to take some control over their learning as well as the ability to act on oneself regardless of what others may or may not be doing. This means that if a student wants more autonomy and has an idea of what he/she wants to learn, guided self-study should be initiated. Moreover, according to the respondents, another piece of the puzzle includes learning outside of usual English classroom, or learning through various websites on the Internet.

In addition, in relation to the second question "What is the teacher's role in promoting autonomous learning" one teacher responded as follows; *their role in this aspect should be more in pinpointing the ways and the sites where autonomous learning may be developed.* Three other teachers stated that they see themselves as motivators and good advisers, believing that teachers can help develop students' learner autonomy by demonstrating how to use available materials to gather and disseminate credible information.

Moreover, five other teachers claimed that they can promote autonomous learning since they can encourage learners to search on the internet for specific topics independently and then discuss them in the classroom. This can be done by suggesting different useful links with different exercises that give immediate results.

As for the statement "Teaching how to learn is very important in developing learner autonomy" the five interviewed teachers claimed that teaching how to learn is very important in developing learner autonomy because learners should not just take any materials and try to learn them but they are supposed to take only the best practices in "how to learn" and try to develop them in the manner that suits their intellect so teachers in this case may explain and give their personal experiences and other scientific arguments that are in favor of autonomous learning. What is more, one teacher stated that teaching how to learn is very significant considering that the material comes the second to teaching how to learn. Students should be taught how to learn and what to learn, they should be taught to highlight the important parts and different techniques to acquire the learning. Additionally, five other teachers stated that teachers are those who are responsible to lead learners toward those paths and make them independent learners.

The following question "How motivated do teachers feel in promoting Learner Autonomy" in general, teachers stated that learners' willingness determines how much the level of autonomy can be promoted to certain learners. Some of them claimed that it depends on learners' proficiency stating that if learners are good at English it makes their job easier.

Regarding the next question "Do the students you teach have a fair degree of learner autonomy" some of the teachers stated that their students are ready to take initiative and control in their learning. However, the majority of them believed that most of the students usually wait for ready-made learning. Some others stated that in the early stages of learning English they don't really develop learner autonomy but after they finish Pre-Intermediate level they start to broaden their aspects of learning English and therefore they start learning new things

from the Internet and other technological devices, which show kind of autonomy in learning.

Results from the question "Do you think that learners can be autonomous without the help of the teacher" show that teachers believe that learners cannot promote autonomy alone because it is teacher's duty to show the path on how to start learning and searching things on their own and learners need their teachers' support and guidance on this issue. A small number of them believed that it is slightly possible for learners who are proficient but they still need the teachers as advisers.

Moreover, concerning the question "What about your own experience as a language teacher – do you encourage your learners to work on their own?" all the teachers stated that they try to advise and encourage learners to search for the useful materials and websites that suit them best. Although some of them stated that they do, most learners do not even try to learn on their own. In addition, respondents claimed that they advise them to pick their 'battles' in the sense that they suggest some of the ways they can learn and also encourage them to join online forums, and alternative books or lessons are all tools.

Results from the question "Is it harder to promote learner autonomy with proficient language learners than it is with beginners" the findings reveal that teachers think that it is easier to promote learner autonomy to learners who are proficient, it also depends on the learners' willingness. If they are ambitious enough in language learning it means that it is possible to promote autonomy to both kinds of learners.

Conclusion

The study findings show that teachers are aware of their inevitable role and responsibility in learner autonomy and it is accepted as a very important issue, stating their role as a

motivator and a good adviser, believing that teachers can help develop students' learner autonomy by demonstrating how to use available material to gather and disseminate credible information. This proves the first hypothesis that teachers' role in developing students' learner autonomy is essential. Therefore, learner autonomy is meant to be the capacity to control learners' own learning, to choose their materials according to their preferences and hold their learning responsibility on their own, which answers the first research question. From the data available from the questionnaire we find out that teachers make some effort in promoting learner autonomy such as; *encouraging them in completing tasks alone, finding explanations to the classroom tasks and using different appropriate materials*. However, the results show that they do not encourage learners to assess themselves neither choose the learning tasks to select textbooks, stating that they do not have enough autonomy in selecting main textbooks because they are offered and approved by the ministry of education which does not give them the opportunity to choose themselves. Based on the results from the teachers' interviews, we may conclude that teachers believe that learner autonomy cannot be developed alone however, learners need their teachers' support in order to promote learner autonomy. Accordingly, this proves the second hypothesis that learner autonomy cannot be promoted alone. However, the overall findings show that students often wait to be served the learning material by their teachers in spite of the latter's efforts to cultivate new learning habits. The results showed that teachers were willing to involve learners in the learning process. In general, they agreed with the idea that teachers encourage learners to be researchers on their own by advising them how to find useful and appropriate materials which help them meet their needs. They also concluded that being autonomous means pursuing life-long learning, which is

possible at different times and in different places. Which conversely results in enabling learners to change the habit of being taught only by the others. Finally, in this regard, the relationship between teachers and learners is inevitable. Teachers have a high degree of responsibility to help learners become researchers, teaching them not (only) what to learn, but also how to learn and work independently. However, the teachers' main concern is the lack of sufficient promotion of learner autonomy at schools.

Recommendations

- It is essential to broaden the possibilities of involving learners in decision making about their preferred tasks.
- Teachers should give learners more opportunities to search and discover the path on how to learn autonomously.
- Teachers themselves should be constant researchers and always search for new techniques and teaching strategies.
- More studies should be conducted in this area in order to raise teachers' awareness about LA.
- Organize workshops to remind teachers and stimulate them by showing effective strategies on how to start promoting LA.

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