Learner autonomy in language learning

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Learner autonomy has become a "buzz" word in language teaching over the last two decades (Little, 1991). Learner autonomy is the shift of responsibility from teachers to learners, and the result of a concatenation of changes to the curriculum itself towards a more learner-centered kind of learning (Thanasoulas, 2000). That is autonomous learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning. The following sections discuss the definitions and implementation of learner autonomy and the reasons to implement learner autonomy.

Definitions of learner autonomy

The term "learner autonomy" was first developed in 1981 by Henri Holec, the "father" of learner autonomy. According to Holec (1981), autonomy is "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". In other words, autonomy is "a situation in which the learner is responsible for the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions (Dickinson, 1987)". Little (1991) further mentions that autonomy is having the "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action". He points out that learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning. Following Holec's definition, Benson (1997) proposes a similar but more critical definition that "autonomy is recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems". In his opinion, autonomy is not only the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning but also learners' right to determine the direction of their own learning.

Drawing upon Holec (1983), Dam (1990) defines autonomy in terms of the learner's willingness and capacity to control or oversee his or her own learning. More specifically, Dam holds that an autonomous learner independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; he or she chooses materials, methods and tasks and even chooses criteria for evaluation. Therefore, an autonomous learner takes an active role in the learning process, generating ideas and eagerly seeking learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the

teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992). That is, for an autonomous learner, learning "is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from events" (Candy, 1991). While there are a variety of definitions of learner autonomy, some consensuses still exist. First, learners should take responsibility for their own learning, rather than depend on the teacher. In addition, learner autonomy requires insights into their learning styles and strategies and an active approach to the learning task at hand. Furthermore, learner autonomy requires a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others (Little, 2002).

However, learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant, renouncing the control over the language learning process. As Benson (1997) puts it, "teachers have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand to stay afloat". In other words, the teacher becomes less of an instructor and more of a facilitator, encouraging learners not to rely on the teacher as the main source of knowledge. Besides, the teacher encourages students to learn for themselves and to make decisions about what they learn. Most important of all, the teacher helps learners to "become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use" (Holmes & Ramos, 1991) because learner autonomy is a perennial dynamic process amenable to educational interventions, rather than a static product, a state, which is reached once and for all (Candy, 1991). In addition, autonomous learning isn't confined to an independent learning environment; instead, a classroom is an appropriate setting for autonomous learning to be put into practice. In the classroom, learner autonomy can be developed by a shift of power from the teacher to the learner and at the same time, the teacher can provide the learner with appropriate help and guidance. Another reason why the classroom is an appropriate setting to develop autonomy is that collaboration is essential to the development of autonomy (Kohonen, 1992; Little, 1996), and Nunan (1997) also sees the language classroom as the best place for encouraging learners to move towards autonomy. Kohonen (1992) stresses this point in the book *Experiential language learning: second language learning as cooperative learner education*s:

Since all members... share a common goal, they are motivated to work together

for mutual benefit in order to maximize their own and each other's learning.

This creates a positive interdependence among the learners: they perceive that

they can reach their goals best when others in the same learning group also do

as well as possible. (pp. 33-34)

Implementation of autonomous learning

While most teachers agree the significance of learner autonomy, they may not fully understand how to incorporate the notions of learner autonomy in their daily teaching. Many researchers have proposed some guidelines to help teachers carry out learner autonomy in the classroom. For example, Dickinson (1992) identifies six ways "in which teachers can promote greater learner independence":

1. Teachers are supposed to legitimize independence in learning by showing that they approve and encourage students to be more independent.

2. Teachers are supposed to convince learners that they are capable of greater independence in learning by giving them successful experiences of independent learning.

3. Teachers are supposed to give learners opportunities to exercise their independence.

4. Teachers are supposed to help learners to develop learning techniques or learning strategies so that they can exercise their independence.

5. Teachers are supposed to help learners become more aware of language as a system so that they can understand many of the learning techniques available and learn sufficient grammar to understand simple reference books.

6. Teachers are supposed to share with learners what they know about language learning so that they have a greater awareness of what to expect from the language learning task and how they should react to problems that erect barriers to learning. Furthermore, Nunan (1997) sets out a scheme proposing five levels for encouraging learner autonomy: (1) awareness, (2) involvement, (3) intervention, (4) creation, (5) transcendence (See Table 1).

Table 1: Nunan's model "Autonomy: levels of implementation" (1997)

Level	Learner Action	Content	Process
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the materials they are using.	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles / strategies.
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer.	Learners make choices among a range of options.
3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning program.	Learners modify / adapt tasks.
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives.	Learners create their own tasks.
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond.	Learners become teachers and researchers.

In terms of courses promoting learner autonomy, Cotterall (2000) addresses the issue of incorporating autonomy into language courses, and proposes five principles which help students and teachers attempt the transfer of responsibility for decision-making which promotes autonomous learning. In his opinion, courses should (1) reflect learners' goals in its language tasks, and strategies, (2) be explicitly linked to a simplified model of the language

learning process, (3) either replicate real-world communicative tasks or provide rehearsal for such tasks, (4) incorporate discussion and practice with strategies known to facilitate task performance, (5) promote reflection on learning.

Reasons for learner autonomy

Cotterall (1995) emphasizes the importance of learner autonomy for philosophical, pedagogical, and practical reasons. Given the right to make choices with regard to their learning, learners are more likely to learn more effectively and feel more secure in their learning. Moreover, learner autonomy helps increase learners' enthusiasm for learning. When the learner sets the agenda, learning is more focused and purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Little 1991). Besides, when responsibility for the learning process lies with the learner, the barriers to learning that are often found in traditional teacher-led educational structures would not arise (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991). Without such barriers, learners should have little difficulty in transferring their capacity for autonomous learning to all other areas of their lives, and this should make them more useful members of society and "more effective participants in the democratic process" (Little 1991).

In teaching, "Nothing happens until the student does something." The more active the student, the more learning that takes place. Letting students do things for themselves through using the language is more efficient than explaining it to them.