

LEARNER-AUTONOMY AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH IN OMAN

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ABSTRACT

In contemporary English language study the concept of the autonomy of learners has ushered in multiple techniques that are implemented by the language instructors in various socio-economic contexts. This paper examines the different ways in which autonomy can be implemented within the paradigm of classroom teaching. It also discusses the nuances of language learning and language acquisition; does autonomy suggest a complete independence to the adult learners of English? This paper is a forum to discuss these ideas and their relevance in the present socio-cultural context. Traditionally, teachers are made solely responsible for the development of the level of the students. However, with modern educational reforms the learners share their part of responsibility in the learning process. Giving autonomy to the students does not negate the crucial role of the teacher but incorporating the learners' feedbacks, requirements and opinions fosters a sense of responsibility in them. It is commonly acknowledged that freedom entails responsibility with it. Autonomy maintains the teacher as the resource person for ready reference and allows a productive interdependence which ushers in new opportunities for learning. This gives a platform to the teachers as well to understand the needs of the learners instead of forcing them to attend the classes reluctantly. The learners can better understand their lapses and lacunae in a spontaneous situation rather than in forced circumstances. Apart from the subject knowledge of the teachers they can develop situational expertise to decide upon the degree of autonomy in their respective courses and classrooms.

KEYWORDS: Autonomy, Language Acquisition and Learning, Reflection, Teacher's Role

INTRODUCTION

Aim

To analyze whether the conception of 'learner autonomy' that is promoted in recent studies related to language pedagogy is suitable for the adult learners of English in the socio-cultural context of Oman. This paper also intends to make a parallel analysis of the perspectives of teachers on learner autonomy.

Rationale/ Importance of the Study

The worldwide social relations have geared up in the last few decades and this attitude accounts for the necessity of harnessing the diverse communities with a common language- undoubtedly English is the most popular choice. Besides Upgraded technology, global communication necessitates a "shared Linguistic code." The prevalence of the ELT and ESL courses indicate this process of intensified global interaction. Language learning can be taken as a social process which overcomes the constraints of geo-cultural divisions. The academic institutions and multinational companies manifest a plethora of bilingual or multilingual faculties. In Oman also local people are interacting in potentially multicultural environments for the economic prosperity of the country. While it has been taken for granted the necessity of learning English as a common 'Lingua Franca,' the techniques of imparting the knowledge of the same has been a polemical issue among its practitioners. The language instructors normally face two types of challenges in their classrooms:

- Motivating the students to accomplish the tasks
- Addressing their diverse needs and ways relevant to the learning process

The remaining section of this paper discusses how the concept of learner autonomy can be applied in the classrooms to overcome these challenges.

Literature Review: Ellis and Sinclair (1989:2) mentioned three reasons how learners can be made more responsible by giving them control over the learning process—

First, learners can best decide upon their individual requirements and necessity to learn certain things. This ensures a volunteered urge to improve in the absence of any external pressure.

Second, if the learners are made responsible for their learning then the process does not stop in the four walls of the classroom. It may be carried on even outside in the form of discussions among the serious learners as a part of social interaction.

Third, sometimes learners can even improvise personalized, subjective and individualized learning techniques which may be applied for improving the learning process. For example, different students have different ways of learning English words. While some prefer the strategy of listening, some like to exchange dialogues (even if they are incorrect) with fluent speakers, some others adopt the technique of taking notes of new words and practising them in their sentence construction, there is yet another group who prefer reading English to cultivate the sense of using proper forms of words. It is difficult to say which technique helps the students the most. It depends on the students' aptitudes which one they prefer over the other. Based on these different strategies students can prepare their own self-study agenda.

The best part of encouraging autonomy is that the process of acquiring the language is not thrust upon the learners by the teachers but rather it develops on the basis of the students' understanding of their requirements. Chomsky has stated in his, "Language Acquisition Theory," that the capacity to acquire and use language is a key aspect that distinguishes humans from other beings. Ellis makes a distinction between 'Naturalistic' and 'Instructed' second language acquisition (1994:12). In the first method language is acquired through general social situations and in the other case it happens through study with the help of guidance. Instructive lessons most often impart the knowledge about the usage of language which means, "The formal properties of the phonological, lexical and grammatical systems," (1994:13). Learner autonomy encourages application of the learnt theories, how they use the language in practical circumstances. To quote Ellis, this enables the learners to demonstrate their, "ability to use [their] knowledge of linguistic rules for effective communication," (ibid). It should be remembered here that there is slight difference between learning and acquisition. While the former is the conscious process of studying, the latter relates to the automated sub-conscious process of picking up a language.

Researchers have mentioned the importance of language acquisition as part of "procedural knowledge", (1990:24) which is beyond the factual information and depends on extensive opportunities to practice. It is a highly polemical issue whether learner autonomy suggests a situation where the process of learning is carried on in the absence of a teacher, at home or in self-access centres through e-learning. However, researchers have promoted a number of ways where learner autonomy is applied in the classroom itself. With the radical development of student-centred educational reforms the idea of developing, 'student-power' came in vogue. With this change the teacher's role also became highly debatable – the role of teacher shifted from directing the process of learning to performing the function, "as a resource or guide for the learners' own self-directed efforts," (2013:30).

METHODOLOGY

We cannot ignore the fact that in practice, language teachers often work in situations where they have certain restraints to allow freedom in the learning process. Smith has rightly observed that, in the process:

Of attempting to understand and advice students, teachers are likely to be engaged in various investigative activities, asking questions which are themselves useful in raising students' awareness of learning....in order to engage students in autonomous and effective reflections on their own learning, teachers need to constantly reflect on their own role in the class room, monitoring the extent to which they constrain or scaffold students' thinking and behavior...(2001: 43-4).

The Test-Teach-Test was partly modified to focus not only at the teaching process but rather on the learning outcome. In the recent language learning process the 'Presentation- Practice-Production,' method has been given importance. This paper is an attempt to inspect various teaching experiences to suggest tasks and activities that would urge the learners to effectively exploit their language resources.

In his latest book Benson has rightly noted in the first chapter (2013:9) that the concept of autonomy became prevalent in the field of language teaching through the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, established in 1971. The role of the teacher is re-established with the necessity to teach the adult learners "how to carry out self-directed learning," (2013:12). Some researchers argued that in order to develop the capacity of taking control of their learning, the learners should be freed from others' directions or control. However, results have revealed that learners, who were forced to acquire the target language in isolation, were at a loss. Scholars have noted a relationship between autonomy and interdependence:

Personal decisions are necessarily made with respect to social and moral norms, traditions and expectations. Autonomy thus includes the notion of interdependence, that is being responsible for one's own conduct in the social context: being able to cooperate with others and solve conflicts in constructive ways, (2013: 15).

Internalization of a capacity necessitates collaborative participation in social interactions. Francesco Barillaro, a researcher in the TESOL Centre, at Sheffield Hallam University carried out a research among the language teachers in collaboration with Director of Studies. In the questionnaire survey it was revealed that the majority of teachers do not view their students as very autonomous. In the socio-cultural context of Oman the teachers also ardently believe that using English outside the classroom is essential for the acquisition of the language. However, the fact remains that many students do not use opportunities to learn English outside class time. The teachers have debated over the idea whether learner autonomy is to be based on the curriculum development or on the decisions of the teachers in their respective classrooms. It must be taken into account that teachers those who are currently teaching in Oman come from different cultural backgrounds. Though, most of the learners are from Oman, yet few come from the erstwhile Arab world, Turkey, Egypt, Africa and parts of Asia. It is quite obvious they have different views of the process of learning and consequently their views on the process of learner autonomy will also vary. These multiple views may be agglomerated through mutual exchanges and suggestions for classroom implementation appropriate to the socio-cultural context of Oman.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Learner autonomy has a plethora of approaches neither of which are absolute solutions to the problem of motivating indifferent students. These approaches are rather relative styles which may be adopted depending on circumstantial requirements, for example the learners' needs, interests and reasons for acquiring the language. With this type of autonomous learning environment the question that often reiterates in academic minds is: 'does it make the presence of the teacher redundant'? Without the supervision of a seasoned teacher the whole process may lead to anarchy. The fact remains that language cannot be learned independently and the teacher provides with the essential "learning tool" to inspect the whole process while channelizing the misdirected.

Teachers can sometimes implement materials which the learners have a desire to explore, to incorporate discussion topics, especially in the speaking courses or even in academic reading courses, which will stimulate their interests. The involvement of learners' while designing of courses will certainly result in a more effective learning environment. Some of the constraints in implementing the concept of learner autonomy may be the traditional beliefs of the teachers, lack of responsible learners, rules and regulations and the expectations of the management. La Ganza gives the most viable definition of this concept. To quote him, "learner autonomy is an achievement, attained interrelationally between the learner and the teacher," (2008:65). It is observable that learner autonomy in the classroom can be implemented in the following ways by the teacher:

- Giving responsibilities to the students instead of orders in maintaining the decorum of the classroom and considering and their reasonable opinions about classroom management.
- The students may be allowed to choose different media to present their thoughts and ideas instead of limiting them to a specified method.
- The students can participate in their own evaluation process by exchanging each other's worksheets against the traditional method of teachers giving their unidirectional opinions. The level of their progress may be assessed by themselves to understand their specific flaws and requirements. It need not be essentially pointed out by the teachers always, which sometimes adversely affects the sensitivity of the adult Arab learners. Thus, peer-assessment of worksheets can be an effective strategy to evaluate their development. When the students are given opportunities to evaluate their class works which is technically termed as, 'cognitive autonomy,' it unconsciously demands their initial engagements with learning activities which stimulating a deeper level of thinking.

The learners must be encouraged to discuss realistic learning goals and their ideas may be included while designing the courses. Instead of dictating the assignments, they should be made to complete certain tasks, if required, by making small groups where they can be more comfortable with their fellow classmates. This habit of collaborating with other students inside the classroom may well be carried on even outside the classes. Cotterall (2000:111-112) has suggested certain ways of course-planning that reflects the learners' participations such as –

- The course should reflect learners' goals in its language tasks and strategies.
- The course tasks should replicate the real-world communicative practices or provide rehearsals for such activities.
- Strategy should be incorporated to enhance and facilitate the performance of such tasks.

- At the end the learners must reflect on their performance and class proceedings. Reflections will motivate the adult learners to understand their problems and to adopt strategies while suggesting the same to their teachers to solve their individual cases.

CONCLUSIONS

Learner autonomy grants a feeling of self-esteem among the adult students and is a guard against frustrations. Different philosophies of learning also support the learners' role in the education process. The importance manifested on their participation and decisions make learning a positive experience. The philosophy of 'constructivism,' maintains that Knowledge cannot be taught but only be constructed by learners. Gradually under the vigilance of expert teachers learners are better adapting themselves to the student-centred methods. Experimental techniques can be studied and discussed between the teachers and the students in the effective application of the same. We can refer to the saying that one can take a horse to the pond but cannot make it drink the water. Similarly the students can be dragged into the classrooms with rules and regulations but their involvement can only be guaranteed if they are made responsible for the degree of learning. Depending on the courses, the level of the students and viable circumstances, autonomy can be supported on several planes with positive outcomes. The extent and application of learner autonomy however, depends on the experience, understanding and perspectives of the subject teachers. The learning and teaching contexts are interdependent and mirror each other to create a long lasting impact.

Contribution to Theoretic Knowledge and Professional Practice: his paper is an attempt to consider the various aspects of student-centred learning and the concept of learner self-management. Keeping in line with Chomsky's theories of 'Language Acquisition,' it may be relevantly argued that performance in a language can improve if the learners can adapt to the learning process according to their needs and expectations. Autonomy does not however mean to randomly allow individualized processes; rather it simultaneously raises the awareness of the students towards their responsibilities to acquire the target language. This paper presents a discussion on certain pros and cons on these aspects of 'learner autonomy,' as an effective strategy of enabling the students to acquire better competence in English Language.

In order to focus on their learning the new users of the language need to apply these methods in their day to day life:

- Understanding new vocabulary and repeating them consistently until the learner confidently remembers them.
- Attempts are to be made to construct sentences with the newly learnt words and to use them in their conversations with classmates, friends and teachers.
- Inculcating the habit of critical thinking and developing the habit of reading new write-ups and essays instead of memorizing the notes given by the teachers. This will enable them to guess the possible meanings of the unknown words adjacently placed in sentences.
- Deciding to use the target language even in casual and non-academic conversations while attempting to express their feelings in that language makes the learner more confident. Thus, goes a famous saying that to acquire the language, we should not only read and write in English but also dream in English and make it our own.
- Man is the best judge of himself. So the new users of English can record their speeches which are uttered casually. Later on it can be critically judged by themselves for further improvements in pronunciation and choice of words.

- Different colleges have introduced the English Clubs where students can participate spontaneously in expressing their ideas, feelings and opinions.

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