Making Autonomous Learners by the Help of Autonomous Teachers

Saeed Ganji Khoosf¹*, Yazdan Choobsaz¹, Mahboobeh Khosravani²

¹English Language Department, University of Sistan and Baluchestan, Zahedan, Iran
²English Language Department, Chabahar Maritime University, Chabahar, Iran

Abstract

Nowadays, learner autonomy is perceived as an unquestionable goal and integral part of language learning methodologies throughout the world. Large amounts of time, energy and money are spent on its promotion and implementation. However, learners' autonomy is studied in isolation. There are hints that autonomous teachers can be more successful in improving the learners' autonomy. A kind of indirect effect will happen here. For making this point more clear, the researchers in this article try to clarify the role of the teachers' autonomy in learners' autonomy. Also the possible direct and indirect effects of teachers' autonomy on the learners' autonomy are discussed. To have an overall and informative investigation, the universal books and newest articles in this area were scanned and skimmed carefully. After all these purposeful studies, interesting and helpful results were gathered and discussed. This study can lighten the way for the teachers who want to prepare learners who take the account of their own learning in the teaching process and consequently pave the way for a learner-centered classroom.

Key words: autonomy, language classroom, learner centered classroom

Introduction

As we all know, Psychology studies animal and human behavior. When we talk about human, it is impossible to separate language from human behavior. Therefore, it is natural that psychology has a lot to do with language. In fact, many psychologists have studied mother tongue and found some learning principles. As D.A. Wilkins (1972) stated: “…. if there really are general language learning principles involved, this cannot be without interests for Foreign Language Learning”

In order to get better results in language acquisition, both native and foreign, one must first of all be competent in Psychological side of process named as language acquisition. This statement can also be addressed to the teachers of foreign language. It is obvious that the learners somehow are not able to perform the learning process as they lack the knowledge of how to achieve this on their own, which requires some guidance and assistance.

Putting an emphasis on the learner in a foreign language learning process has been the greatest possible importance for some approaches. One of them is communicative language teaching (CLT), which emerged with the changed views on the nature of language learning in the 1970s and 1980s. With the introduction of this new and innovative approach teaching English as a foreign or second language, teaching materials, course descriptions, and curriculum guidelines proclaimed a goal of communicative competence.

Active participation as well as acceptance of process-oriented independent learning will only be possible if the proper affective conditions can be created. Research has indicated that negative effects such as anxiety, fear, stress and anger can be obstacles to effective learning (c.f. MacIntyre, 1999; Oxford, 1999). Conversely, positive classroom experiences, which boost self-esteem, motivation and learners' autonomy, can facilitate learning (c.f. Dörnyei, 2001).

* Saeed Ganji Khoosf.
E-mail address: sd.ganji@gmail.com
What is autonomy?

A learners’ dictionary definition of autonomy describes it very simply as: ‘the ability to make your own decisions about what to do rather than being influenced by someone else or told what to do.’ (Collins Cobuild English Dictionary 1995).

What is learner Autonomy?

For a definition of autonomy, we might quote Holec (1981: 3, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997) who describes it as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning'.

On a general note, the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways (see Benson & Voller, 1997):

1. For situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
2. For a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
3. For an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
4. For the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
5. For the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

To all intents and purposes, the autonomous learner takes a (pro-) active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1975). In fact this line of reasoning operates within, and is congruent with, the theory of constructivism. For Rathbone (1971: 100, 104, cited in Candy, 1991), the autonomous learner is a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process. He is not one to whom things merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as the result of his own self-initiated interaction with the world.

Within such a conception, learning is not simply a matter of rote memorization. ‘It is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning on) events’ (Candy, 1991: 271).

According to Little (1991: 34) there are five misconceptions often associated to autonomous language learning. These are, first of all, that autonomy would mean learning without a teacher, secondly that teacher would have to give up all initiative and control, thirdly that autonomy is a method, fourthly that autonomy is an easily described behavior and fifth that it would be a steady state achieved only by gifted learners.

In a recent publication looking at the practicalities of developing autonomy in the classroom, Benson (2003) argues that:

Autonomy is perhaps best described as a capacity … because various kinds of abilities can be involved in control over learning. Re-searchers generally agree that the most important abilities are those that allow learners to plan their own learning activities, monitor their progress and evaluate their outcomes. (p. 290)

Teacher autonomy

Different uses of the term ‘teacher autonomy’:

Since early on, users of the term ‘teacher autonomy’ have focused on different dimensions, as is clear from the following examples:

I. (Capacity for) self-directed professional action: [Teachers may be] ‘autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis . . . affective and cognitive control of the teaching process’ (Little 1995)

II. (Capacity for) self-directed professional development: [The autonomous teacher is] ‘one who is aware of why, when, where and how pedagogical skills can be acquired in the self-conscious awareness of teaching practice itself’ (Tort-Moloney 1997).

III. Freedom from control by others over professional action or development. For example: ‘In the United States teacher autonomy has been declining for at least a decade. first, uniform staff development programs based on research on effective teaching have become widespread. Second, classroom observations have become an integral part of imposed teacher evaluations’ (Anderson 1987).

Commentators describe teachers as having ‘more’ or ‘less’ autonomy. It may both be ‘attacked’ and ‘defended’ and as Little suggests it is not ‘a steady state’. It may also change over time. Writing for ‘American Educator’, Rosenholtz and Kyle
(1984) state that teachers have less autonomy and prestige than twenty years earlier. Thus the degree of autonomy experienced by teachers varies not only according to the person, place and time but also according to external influences.

Clarifying links between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy

Having defined terms in the above manner, we may now be in a better position to clarify possible links between teacher autonomy and the promotion of learner autonomy.

The traditional classroom context is comprised of a social grouping including a teacher and learners, who are working on a task. Since the 1960s, in the area of education generally (e.g., Candy 1991; Rogers 1961), and language learning specifically (e.g., Benson 2001; Holec 1979; Kenny 1993; Little 1991; Wenden, 1987), ideas have been developing concerning the notion of learner autonomy in the classroom and what this phenomenon implies.

On one hand the political dimension of learner autonomy, focusing on the notion of learners’ “taking control” of their learning (Benson, 1997; Pemberton et al. 1996) was considered and on the other hand the more liberal progressive notion of learners’ “taking responsibility” for their learning (Holec 1979; Kohonen 1992), the behavioral notion of learners’ developing systematic “strategies” to help their independence in their learning (Wenden 1987; Dickinson 1992); and the humanistic notion of learners’ “self-direction” and “self-initiation” of their learning (Rogers 1961: 292; see also Kenny 1993; Savage and Storer 1992) as part of a process of ‘experimentation and discovery’ (Saddington 1992: 41) was emphasized.

The findings of La Ganza 2004 led to a theory of the teacher-learner relationship as a Dynamic Interrelational Space (DIS), which conceptualizes learner autonomy as an interrelational construct, whose realization depends as much on the capacities of the teacher as on capacities of the learner. This theory suggests that it is not sufficient to define learner autonomy as the learner’s taking control, or taking responsibility, or knowing how to exercise learning strategies, or being self-directed: the extent to which the learner can realize these achievements depends upon his or her relationship with the teacher.

Learner autonomy is an achievement, attained interrelationally between the learner and the teacher. It depends upon how the teacher and the learner relate to each other: on their capacities to develop their relationship in ways conducive to learner autonomy. Learner autonomy is constantly being negotiated within the teacher-learner relationship. Indeed, as the learner initiates and progresses a piece of work, learner autonomy depends upon the capacity of the teacher and the learner to develop and maintain an interrelational climate characterized by the teacher’s holding back from influencing the learner, and the learner’s holding back from seeking the teacher’s influence. Apart from developing a capacity for restraint, the learner must develop a capacity for persistence in using resources and the teacher as a resource, and the teacher must develop a capacity for communicating to the learner that he or she is concerned for the learner’s educative well-being during the learning process: that he or she has the learner “in mind”. In this way, the teacher “holds” the context together, reassuring the learner who is struggling with the anxieties associated with initiating and progressing his or her own work. The teacher also has to develop the capacity to cope with his or her own anxieties associated with facilitating the learning process while fostering the learner’s autonomy, such as worry about when or not, and, if so, how, to offer help to the learner should the learner not seek the teacher’s influence. The learner’s failure to complete the task would also feel like a failure for the teacher. The teacher-learner DIS is thus unstable in terms of the creation of interrelational climates conducive to learner autonomy, and there is a danger that the educative process might suffer should the teacher-learner relationship begin to reach its limits of cohesion.

Preparing teachers to promote learner autonomy:

Now here are some suggested tips for developing learners’ autonomy. Actually they are not in a fixed and each teacher can pick them based on his/her own class situation. Some of the steps overlap, and can be introduced simultaneously.

1. Convincing teachers of the value of learner autonomy. Of course in the abstract seems to be insufficient. So, it is necessary to focus on the development of teachers’ own autonomy.

2. Make instruction goals clear to learners. A first step in giving learners a choice is to make instructional goals clear to the students themselves.

3. Teachers and learners need to be critical of themselves and their own situations
4. **Allow learners to create their own goals.** This is an interesting and practical way of involving learners in the process of teaching and learning. It also reduces the defensive state of learners toward teacher and the content.

5. **Help learners to find out their own styles and strategies.** In this way the learners are given a chance to being active and get out of the usual and passive manner of learners in the classroom.

6. **Encourage learners to become researchers.** They can search for different materials even those in which teachers have not enough information.

7. **Encourage learners to generate their own tasks.** For example by giving a text and asking them to write their own questions in small groups. Then teacher can exchange the questions with another group.

8. **Raise awareness of learning processes.** Giving learners an opportunity of the *how* of learning can motivate them and encourage their sense of self-centeredness. Show them how to learn (teach them also study skills), what suits them most and how to get most out of it. Make your students think about why you do some activities in classroom, help them to become aware of the purpose

9. **Encourage them to use their second language outside the classroom.** Encourage your students to make friends with other people using English for communication. By activating their language outside the classroom they have a chance to evaluate themselves in real situations.

10. **Ask them to become teachers.** To teach (what they have learned) someone else, family members, friends…

11. **Encourage learner choice.** We can give the learners a relatively modest level of decision-making. For example ask them to specify the topic of panel discussion.

**Conclusion**

Looking at the characteristics of successful language teachers and those of autonomous teachers, one can easily see that there are overlapping features, including awareness of their own teaching, creativity, and problem-solving skills. This suggests that teacher autonomy should be emphasized in initial training, not just in in-service training as it usually is. The mark of autonomous learners is their ability to generate meaningful activities to support the acquisition of forms, and to engineer opportunities to use language items which have to be learned. But many learners need considerable support both in taking advantage of the opportunities they have for developing language proficiency, and, more fundamentally, in understanding the nature and complexity of the task in which they are engaged.

The purpose of this paper has been to articulate a vision of language education that is firmly based on the humanistic tradition of education. This tradition looks for a pedagogical cooperation between teachers and learners. Such a cooperation can only become a reality if learners have the knowledge and skills to play an active role in the planning, implementation and evaluation of their own learning.

**References**


