

The Concept of Autonomy in Second Language Learning

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Annotation

The concept of autonomy manifests the capacity of learner to take control of one's own learning process during his/her lifetime. Autonomy is available in different fields of study at a different level. The concept of autonomy in language learning is connected with communicative approach. The second language learning will proceed most effectively if learners are allowed to develop and exercise their autonomy. In spite of the fact, that Autonomy implies the independent learning, it doesn't decline the role of a teacher in learning, but it points out, the huge deserve of the teacher in forming the Autonomy skills.

Autonomy is a complex socio-cognitive system, manifested in different degrees of independence and control of one's own learning process, involving capacities, abilities, attitudes, willingness, decision making, choices, planning, actions, and assessment either as a language learner or as a communicator inside or outside the classroom. As a complex system it is a dynamic, chaotic, unpredictable, non-linear, adaptive, open, self organizing and sensitive to initial conditions and feedback.

There are different aspects of autonomy: It involves self-confidence and autonomy; usage of individual learning strategies; It depends on learners willingness to take responsibility for their own learning; It is closely related to meta cognitive strategies: planning, making decisions, monitoring and evaluation;

According to Nunan the concept of autonomy in language learning is linked to the communicative approach. The second language learning will proceed most effectively if learners are allowed to develop and exercise their autonomy. The connection between autonomy in language learning and the communicative approach is, therefore, relatively well-developed at a theoretical level. Nunan highlights the steps of autonomy from the lowest level to the highest level of development of learner independence. According to Nunan we can distinguish several steps to develop a degree of autonomy:

Level	Learner action	Content	Process
Level 1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of materials they are using	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred styles/strategies
Level 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
Level 3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning program	Learners are modify and adapt tasks
Level 4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives	Learners create their own learning tasks
Level 5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond the classroom and are functioning as a fully autonomous learners	Learners become teachers and researchers

Jones points out the following aspects of independent learning: class work, homework, self-access, teacher-led autonomy, teach yourself, full autonomy and naturalistic immersion.

Class work and homework are learning activities that require the least amount of independence on the part of the learner. Homework and class work leave students with little freedom. With homework,

students can choose when to do it. With class work, students can only decide if they are going to do it. Naturalistic Immersion refers the method in which two people are put in situations, where they have to use the new language. But Self-access, teacher-led autonomy, self-instruction, and full autonomy are essential components of autonomous learning.

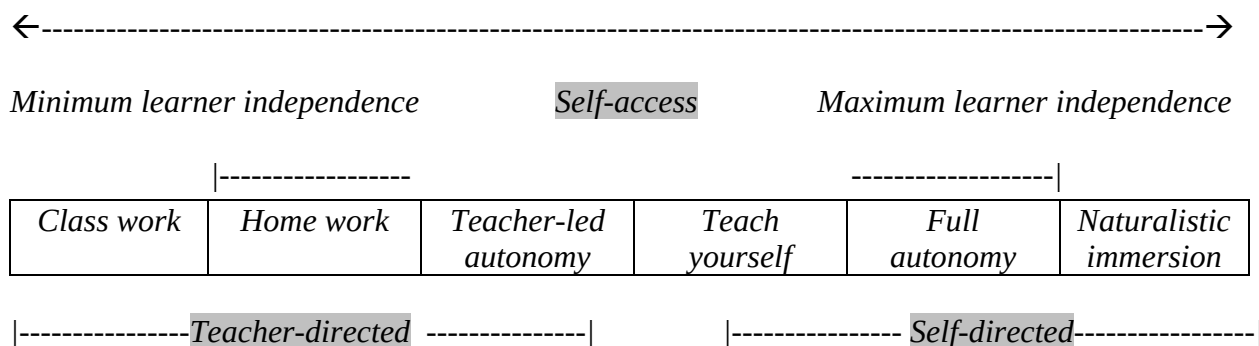
Teacher-led autonomy is autonomous learning activities and strategies that are provoked by teacher intervention. This type of autonomy is usually invoked in a classroom atmosphere. The teacher might teach students skills to help them become more fully autonomous, but will also require students to complete a corresponding independent activity. This kind of autonomy takes place in intensive English programs. Teachers give homework, but also try to help students find other activities that will help them learn on their own.

Jones defines Teach-yourself approach of autonomous learning as self-instruction guided by a syllabus or course that is part of a purchased package that includes books, CDs, and videos to help learn language. Bookstores always have books and audio packages that promise success in language learning.

Dickenson defines full autonomy as the individual instruction based on a syllabus or course designed by the learner. This means that the learner is not part of any institution nor is there an instructor who guides the learner. The fully autonomous learner prepares materials specific to his needs. The learner is completely responsible for organizing a syllabus and selecting the content to be studied. At this level of autonomy, learners really only need access to materials.

Self-access is often used synonymously with other terms for autonomy. It's a method of learning in which students choose their own books, materials etc and study on their own. Self-access can reach into many types of autonomous learning. In fact, full-autonomy would involve complete self-access. The learners would choose all of their own materials.

Benjamin L. Mc Murry presents the diagram in addition to show the role of self-access in the scope of autonomy. Self-access is portrayed as a resource to various types of independent learners. It can be used in a various types of autonomy. The first section of the diagram refers types of learner independence rely on the teacher and the second section shows the three distinct types of student independence.



Reflection and self assessment seem to be the one of very important for implementing Language Learning Autonomy, because reflection and self assessment stand for thinking about how well one did on a learning task. It can be aided by questionnaires, checklists, or by complete review task of what has recently been learned. Having learners evaluate their learning not only develops their self-critical faculties, but also serves to remind them of the goals of the instructional process. It also prompts learners to begin making links between their communicative goals, and the grammatical, at structural means of achieving those goals. Teacher should always consider what opportunities exist for critical reflection and self-evaluation and how might this aspect be enhanced.

Mats Oscarsson, gives six different reasons why self-assessment can be beneficial to language learning.

First, he stresses that self-assessment promotes learning, plain and simple. It gives learners training in evaluation which results in benefits to the learning process.

Secondly, it gives both students and teachers a raised level of awareness of perceived levels of abilities. Training in self-assessment, even in its simplest form, like asking “What have I been learning?” encourages learners to look at course content in a more discerning way.

Thirdly, it is highly motivating in terms of goal-orientation.

Fourth, through the use of self-assessment methodologies, the range of assessment techniques is expanded in the classroom. As a result of using self-assessment, the learner broadens his/her range of experience within the realm of assessment. Fifth, by practicing self-assessment, the students participate in their own evaluation. They, in effect, share the assessment burden with the teacher. Finally, by successfully involving students in their own assessment, beneficial post-course effects will ensue.

Yoko Saito identifies two types of self-assessment according to their purpose: performance-oriented self-assessment, and development-oriented self-assessment.

Performance-oriented assessment measures the outcomes related to selection, certification, placement, achievement, diagnosis, etc. For instance, if self-assessment is used as a placement exam in a university ESL program, it will be administered to the students only once prior to program entrance. In this case, students are asked to evaluate their language ability on whatever is being assessed.

Development-oriented assessment measures the process of learning (usually in a classroom environment) in which self-managed activities are incorporated. It is used as an observation of “the participants for an extended period in order to detect changes and patterns of development over time”. This type of assessment began to receive attention as the result of an increasing interest in the learner-centered approach. In a learner-centered curriculum, learners are encouraged to not only be test takers, but also to be active participants in the assessment process. By incorporating self-assessment into classroom learning, students as well as teachers acknowledge assessment as a mutual responsibility, and not as the sole responsibility of the teacher. Furthermore, a number of empirical studies indicate the presence of increased productivity and autonomy, higher motivation, less frustration, and higher retention rates among learners when development-oriented self-assessment is utilized.

For encouraging learner autonomy Nunan uses different ways: learner strategy training, reflective lessons, learning contracts and learner diaries.

Learner strategy training can be achieved by taking into account explicit instructional goals, free choices, focus on learning process, making opportunities for reflection, self-assessment, explicit presentation of strategies and providing opportunities for individualization.

Explicit goals and making choices among two alternatives of same level are beneficial and have greater degree of student motivation. Teacher should clarify and work out the instructional goals with students. Students should know the purpose and aim of their work, to be involved in learning process. Nunan presents survey, according to which students are told that the content and procedures in the class will be partly derived from their own views on what they like to learn and how they like to learn. They are asked to indicate their attitude by circling a number on the survey. Such kind of tasks allow students to take part in the goal setting, enhances better understanding of teaching formats and focuses on students needs, their motivation to perform a task, their involvement in academic activities.

The activities offered by Nunan for encouraging reflection in language learning are Learner diaries and learning contracts. Learner diaries allow learner to make a “first-hand account” of his or her language learning experiences, and his or her reflections on and reactions to the process. Learning contracts present the contract between Teacher and Learner, It’s done for higher degree of student motivation and responsibility.

LEARNER DIARIES

A learner diary is a reflective, first-hand account by a learner of his or her language learning experiences, and his or her reflections on and reactions to the process. I find it useful to use a guided reflective process in which students complete a series of prompts such as the following.

This week I studied

This week I learned

This week I used my English in these places

This week I spoke English with these people

This week I made these mistakes

My difficulties are

I would like to know

I would like help with

My learning and practicing plans for next week are

LEARNING CONTRACT

1. Period of instruction: From _____ to: _____

2. Scheduled meeting times: _____

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3. Learning objective:

4. Procedures for achieving objective:

5. Resources

6. Evaluation

1. Students reflect on their own learning, and complete a first draft of the contract.

2. In pairs, students exchange contracts and review their partner's contract, considering the following questions:

☐ Does the objective clearly state what the student is to do?

☐ Are the procedures and resources consistent with the objective?

☐ Are the objectives, timeframe etc. realistic?

☐ Will the evidence satisfy an outside observer that the objective has been achieved?

3. Students list three questions to ask their partner about the contract. They also make three suggestions for improving the contract.

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4. Students have a debriefing session with their partner and then revise their contract in the light of the discussion.

How might a contract such as this be used in an independent / distance-learning / Internet-based program?

The main guidelines for encouraging learner autonomy are: learner diaries, questionnaires, evaluation sheets, progress cards, self-reports, videotapes, portfolios and so on. It helps teacher to carry out his/her research and help students reflect on their Language learning. It's very important for learners to have a chance to reflect on their language learning and language learning strategies.

Dimitrios Thanasoulas names a number of activities successfully used for promoting Autonomy in language learning, Among them I present self-reports:

Self-reports

According to Wenden (1998: 79-95), a good way of collecting information on how students go about a learning task and helping them become aware of their own strategies is to assign a task and have them report what they are thinking while they are performing it. This self-report is called introspective, as learners are asked to introspect on their learning. In this case, 'the [introspective] self-report is a verbalization of one's stream of consciousness' (Wenden, 1998: 81). Introspective reports are assumed to provide information on the strategies learners are using at the time of the report. However, this method suffers from one limitation: '[t]he concentration put on thinking aloud might detract from [learners'] ability to do the task efficiently' (ibid.: 83), thus rendering the outcome of the report spurious and tentative.

Another type of self-report is what has been dubbed as retrospective self-report, since learners are asked to think back or retrospect on their learning. Retrospective self-reports are quite open ended, in that there is no limit put on what students say in response to a question or statement that points to a topic in a general way. There are two kinds of retrospective self-reports: semi-structured interviews and structured questionnaires. A semi-structured interview may focus on a specific skill with a view to extracting information about learners' feelings towards particular skills (reading, listening, etc.), problems encountered, techniques resorted to in order to tackle these problems, and learners' views on optimal strategies or ways of acquiring specific skills or dealing with learning tasks. A structured questionnaire seeks the same information but in a different way: by dint of explicit questions and statements, and then asking learners to agree or disagree, write true or false, and so forth.

It could be argued that self-reports can be a means of raising awareness of learners' strategies and the need for constant evaluation of techniques, goals, and outcomes. As Wenden (1998: 90) observes, 'without awareness [learners] will remain trapped in their old patterns of beliefs and behaviors and never be fully autonomous'.

There are a fare amount of activities used by teachers for promoting language learning autonomy. To sum up, . Learner autonomy consists in becoming aware of, and identifying, one's strategies, needs, and goals as a learner, and having the opportunity to reconsider and refashion

approaches and procedures for optimal learning. It doesn't mean, that Autonomous learner doesn't need a teacher, of course, there has to be a teacher who will adapt resources, materials, and methods to the learners' needs. Learner autonomy is an ideal, if we want self-sufficient learners who are capable to take control of their own learning. It is an essential capacity, that can be realized during the whole life of a person.

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