Attaining Motivation and Learner Autonomy to Encourage Independent Study

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Abstract

This paper aims to investigate the student-teachers' beliefs about learner autonomy where English tends to be a target language. The idea of learner autonomy is not new. Yet it has been widely referred to in the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) only over the last decade. Previously, the term referred more directly to practical interventions or *situations* of learning which were more favoured within ELT: 'individualization', and 'learner independence'. The overall study in this article indicates that student-teachers should have a positive approach towards the adoption of learner autonomy principles. Most student-teachers, however, do not want their future students to take part in the decision making process concerning the time and place of the course and the textbooks to be followed. In the light of the previous research done by the researches, teacher-educators are recommended to encourage their students to engage in out-of-class tasks, to involve them in decision-making on the learning or teaching processes and to employ portfolios and teacher logs for the development of practical knowledge and thinking operations. There is an important role for teachers in this process since the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted.

Key words: Learner Autonomy, Motivation, Independent Learning

Introduction

Scharle and Szabó raise the questions: How do you describe a responsible learner? Do they always do their homework? Are they good team workers? Or do they volunteer to clean the blackboard? Are they diligent and obedient? They also suggest that the responsible learners may

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not always have the same tendencies or traits. We do not think of responsible learners as role models, but as learners they accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning, and behave accordingly (3).

Responsible learners do not have to be especially keen on team work, but they are willing to cooperate with the teacher. They "accept the idea that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning, and behave accordingly" (Scharle and Szabó 3).

Responsible students may not always do their home work, but whenever they fail to do it, they are aware of missing an opportunity to expand their knowledge of the foreign language. This is because they consciously monitor their own progress, and make an effort to use available opportunities to their benefit, including class room activities and homework.

Autonomy and Responsibility

In context, the two concepts of autonomy and responsibility are more difficult to distinguish. In both these contexts the role of the teacher is to be only a facilitator to guide the students. The autonomy and responsibility are the attitudes which the students possess in varying degrees. The teacher needs to consciously monitor the work of the students, making them to understand the available opportunities in their real life, including classroom activities; this last point leads us to the question of defining autonomy.

Autonomy in Language Learning

Benson and Voller point out that in language education the term is used in at least five different ways:

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. (1-2).

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Freedom from Teacher-centred Learning

The concept of autonomy adds a meaningful dimension to that process of learning and teaching since it gives students responsibility for their own learning, which renders them more active during the process. Unfortunately, there is an inclination towards teacher-centered learning, and the students are considered as passive receivers of information. However, with the introduction of the notion of learner autonomy, students have grasped more rights independent of the teacher, and they have begun to take an active participatory role in their own learning (Gökçe Dişlen 126).

Learners' Contribution Essential

The saying goes: you can bring the horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink. In language teaching, teachers provide all the necessary circumstances and the input, but learning can happen if learners are willing to contribute. Their passive presence will not be sufficient just as the horse would remain thirsty if he stood still by the river waiting patiently for his thirst to go away. And, in order for learners to be actively involved in the learning process, they first need to realize and accept that success in learning depends as much as on the students as on the teacher (Scharle and Szabó 4).

Some degree of autonomy is also essential to successful language learning. The best way to prepare students to engage in task is by helping them to become more autonomous. Individuals will experience pleasurable sensations when they are performing tasks which are initiated to be challenging enough. It is nourished by, and in turn nourishes, their intrinsic motivation and the proactive interest in the world around us.

Solving the Problem of Learner Motivation

As Scharle and Szabó explains that intrinsically motivated learners are more able to identify with the goals of the learning (7). This explains how autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation: autonomous learners draw on their goals when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning; and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation. In contrast to intrinsic

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motivation, extrinsic motivation lies on the continuum from non-self-determination to self-determination.

Self-confidence and Autonomy

Apart from reinforcing motivation, self-confidence contributes to the development of responsibility in its own right. The learners must believe that they are capable of managing their own learning and they can rely on themselves, and not on the teacher. Precisely, autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective. All learning is likely to succeed to the extent that the learner is autonomous. And the efficiency and effectiveness of the autonomous learner means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom in real life.

The autonomous learner shows initiative regarding in learning, and shares in monitoring progress and evaluating the extent to which the learning is achieved. The deconstruction of traditional language classrooms and courses all over the world has underlined the growing interest in autonomy in recent years. What's more, with the innovations that centre on the learners, learner autonomy, inevitably, has become an exhilarating concept in the field of foreign language learning over the last three decades. Likewise, more recently, learner autonomy has met with renewed interest as the educational sector is witnessing an enormous and rapid development in terms of new technologies, and the past few years have seen the importance of learner autonomy.

Promoting learner autonomy refers to encouraging students "to determine the objectives, to define the contents and progressions, to select methods and techniques to be used, to monitor the procedures of acquisition and to evaluate what has been acquired" (Holec 3). Through this process, eventually, the autonomous learner establishes a personal agenda for learning by setting up directions in the planning, pacing, monitoring and evaluating the learning process. Autonomous learners can freely apply their knowledge and skills outside the immediate context of learning.

Self-access Settings

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A majority of teachers in the English language learning field has been focusing largely on completing the syllabus for their examinations, but little has been done to look at what makes learners become more self-determined enough to take control of their own learning, and the factors that differentiate successful and less successful self-access users. However, learner motivation and autonomy in self-access settings within the curriculum have not been adequately addressed in the literature.

Learning strategies are the thoughts and actions the students engage in consciously or not, to learn new information. The goal of teaching learning strategies is to help students to consciously control, how they learn so that they can be efficient and motivated and independent language learners.

Steps to Remove the Barriers to Learn the Language

With the usual high costs of enrolling in a comprehensive program to learn a language, many students look for ways to improve their linguistic skills without having to make significant financial sacrifices. In addition to financial constraints of learning language, many professionals are unable to dedicate the several hours a week needed in order to make significant improvements. These barriers to learning are reflected in the question often asked in the English classes: "How can I improve my English outside the class?"

The first step towards developing the ability to take charge of our own learning when we accept full responsibility for the learning process, acknowledging that success in learning depends crucially on ourselves rather than on other people. This acceptance of responsibility entails that we set out to learn in a systematic way the skills of reflection and analysis that enable us to plan, monitor and evaluate our learning. But accepting responsibility for our own learning is not only a matter of gradually developing metacognitive mastery of the learning process. It has an equally important affective dimension in their commitment to self-management and their generally proactive approach where autonomous learners are motivated learners.

Autonomous Language Learning Activities

Journal Writing

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Journals are flexible and tolerant to ambiguity and can expose the process and the progression of knowledge. They provide authentic evaluation, described as thoughtful, reflective, considered and specific to circumstances. This method is often recommended to students looking to improve language as a skill on their own time is to keep a reflective journal. To make this even more applicable to the needs of the student they could focus their journal on events that occurred during school, work, travel, social activities or an event that involved an exchange of cross-cultural information. At the very least, a journal logging the general events of the day increases writing ability and it provides an effective means to focus on areas where the learner may experience problems in their speaking, allowing the student to rectify mistakes.

Using Internet and Technology

With the use of the Internet and computers increasing around the world, it seems obvious that electronic means will provide the learning environment of the future. Instant messaging has been quite popular for some time and the rate of usage around the world is increasing. Other forms of communication over the Internet include discussion boards, interactive blogs, and online forums. In addition, many English students are downloading English music, movies, and TV shows that allow them to get exposure to different accents and expressions from around the world. Social networks such as Facebook, twitter and Second Life have the potential to create awareness about language that will drive people at a very young age to become involved in learning language.

Other technological means that can be used to improve language ability are voice-chat programs such as Skype, google talk and messenger programs such as MSN and Yahoo. These voice-chat programs allow people to talk to others around the world in real time and they are free of cost to use. Users can then use these voice programs to call each other and practice oral skills by applying new language items learned through writing and reading. Many students and professionals around the world have lengthy commutes to and from school or work, downloading podcasts onto a listening device makes exposure to spoken English possible on a train, bus, or even while stuck in rush-hour traffic.

Benefits of Autonomous Learning

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The students who are more introverted and concerned about privacy issues, the use of virtual worlds to encourage learning is an attractive option. Instead of sharing personal information with strangers, the learner can instead share information about their virtual character that they have created based on their fantasy and interests. This would be a great way to build both confidence and networking skills with a foreign language. Again, the merits of this approach rely on the studying goals of the learner. In an autonomy-focused classroom, the teacher introduces a range of learning activities and tasks by taking the students' needs and interests into consideration as opposed to a non-autonomous classroom where students are exposed to the activities they are expected to perform.

Conclusion

Autonomy in learning is a process and not a product that many students seek today. Autonomy requires understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses and accumulating a diverse set of resources that will maximize exposure and improvements in speaking, listening, reading, and writing.

It is difficult to improve language skills exclusively through autonomous learning. Skills can be learned by studying independently and with other EFL students, but skills are only truly assimilated when they can be confirmed and responded to by a qualified mentor. In most cases, this is achieved in a formal classroom environment. This benefits the students by preventing false reinforcement of mistakes and encouraging critical thinking when using public means to communicate such as chat sites and Internet forums. By using the activities mentioned in this paper and by becoming more educated about the opportunities presented to bilingual learners and professionals, an increased interest in independent and formal language learning should ensue with great benefit.

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