

Methods and Strategies for Fostering Self-directed Learning in the Target Language Acquisition

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Abstract

Fostering learner autonomy has become the topic of virulent discussion among practitioners, educators, policy makers and administrators for the last three to four decades. The study named “Methods and Strategies for Fostering Self-directed Learning in the Target Language Acquisition” discusses the importance of learner autonomy in the backdrop of different learning theories. This study intends to examine different definitions given to learner autonomy and their multifarious implications. Definitions of Holec, Benson etc. are discussed. In addition to that discussion, the study aims at various ways of fostering learner autonomy in English language learning methods and strategies among plus two students. The study also focuses on different learning theories based on which the development of learner autonomy in L2 acquisition. Over the last three to four decades, discussion on learner autonomy has gathered momentum as it is envisaged to enhance the learners’ interest for English language acquisition and foster motivation to lifelong learning. That is why the topic has become important for teachers and researchers. The study also discusses the meaning and methods of learner autonomy in the first part and then in the second part it focuses on the ways and approaches to foster learner autonomy in English language learning. Different modern theories of learning like The Theory of Constructivism, The Social Cognitive Theory, Humanism, Experiential Learning Theory etc. are also considered to study how they would foster learner autonomy.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, self-instruction, language acquisition, blended learning, phygital learning constructivism, experiential learning, intrinsic motivation, learner potential, humanism

INTRODUCTION

Even though there is a transition from teacher centered to the learner centered classroom, English language teaching methods must improve a lot for the promotion of effective English language learning. In spite of learning English for 12 to 13 years, majority of students, especially plus two learners are not able to read and speak English with good accent. Why is this? The fundamental fact is that the learners are not self-motivated. They still find it a difficult subject. They do not have a well-formed set of learning habits. It is here in this context that learner autonomy gains importance.

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DIFFERENT DEFINITIONS

Initially, the study presents different definitions and their implications of learner autonomy. There are various definitions of learner autonomy by various authors. However, the definitions of Holec, Benson etc. are relevant to be considered.

Holec describes the term “learner autonomy” as the ability to take charge of one’s own learning a psychological perspective, emphasizing broader attitudes and cognitive abilities which enable the

learner to take responsibility for his or her own learning [1]. Holec wrote “Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning”. The ability is not inborn but must be acquired either by natural means or by formal learning. Holec’s report sought to promote learner freedom by developing those abilities which will enable the learner to act more responsibly in his or her field. When foster learner autonomy, it develops learner’s meta cognitive knowledge (what, when and how of the learning) as well. Holec considered autonomy as the attribute of the learner as well as the learning environment.

Researchers defines learner autonomy as “a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others as socially responsible person”. Strategies have long been considered crucial for developing learner autonomy or the ability to manage or control their own learning. Autonomous learners are able to make decisions about their own learning, which take account of the complexities of the learning environment, learning goals, and learner needs and characteristics.

Benson has co-authored three books and published many papers on autonomy. He introduces different versions of autonomy: ‘technical’, ‘psychological’, and ‘political’. He uses these terms to identify different aspects of autonomy. The technical version represents learning language outside the classroom without the direct help of a teacher. This means that learning is learning to learn how to learn. Psychological version focuses on “a construct of attitudes and abilities which allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning. Psychological version refers to learner’s self-motivation, perseverance, and emotional commitment to learning. Political autonomy involves the learner’s control over the process and content of learning. Here the learner’s meta cognitive knowledge works. That is, the learner becomes aware of the context, purposes and the implications of learning (ibid). Oxford’s expanded Benson’s model that identified technical, psychological sociocultural and political critical [2, 3].

One Researchers defines learner autonomy as “the learner willingness and ability to act independently”. The learner is envisaged here as growing increasingly independent of the teacher. In other words, learning does not confine within the four walls of the classroom. S/he decides to learn independently, seeking resources outside the classroom. The learner uses his or her meta cognitive knowledge to take forward learning. The learner applies learning strategies.

Dickinson defines autonomy as “the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions [4]”. Dickinson further clarifies in his book “Self-Instruction” (Oxford university press) how learners can learn foreign language without the direct intervention of a teacher. There are two parts in the book, viz, “Basic Issues in Self instruction” and “Facilitating Learning”. He distinguishes self-instruction from the similar sounding terms or combinations like self-directed, autonomy, self-access, individualized instruction etc.

DEGREES OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

After 1990s, writers came out with the idea that autonomy varies by degrees in accordance with context, age and environment etc. One researcher put forward a model of five level autonomy: Awareness, Involvement, Creation and Transcendence. At first stage, learners become aware of the aims and objectives of ELL and materials and methods of learning etc. They become capable of identifying learner activities, and strategies of their learning. At second level, learner makes his or her self-motivated participation ensured. The learner gets involved in collaborative learning activities facilitated by the teacher. Third stage is learner intervention. That is critical, interpretative learning the learner undertakes. Creation represents the fourth stage in which the learner constructs knowledge by integrating the new knowledge with the existing knowledge. At the Transcendence phase, learners would make link between learning and the world beyond the classroom.

The first model is autonomy as communicator, autonomy as learner and autonomy as individual. The first model says that “autonomy is an ability to operate independently with the language and use

it to communicate personal meanings in real, unpredictable situations. “This focuses on social interactions. And so, this represents autonomy as communicator level. The second model is in the classroom context and hence autonomy means the learner’s ability to take responsibility for one’s own learning and to apply relevant strategies at the learner perspective. The third model is in the wider individualistic level, and it turns out to be a greater generalized autonomy of a high-level goal for individual development.

SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Autonomy as self-directed learning in self access centres engrossed the 20th century. Self-access centres grew in large numbers and remained important until the last decade of the 20th century. Second language acquisition both within and beyond classroom became the topic of discussion towards the end of the 20th century. Classroom learning was the normalized learning in those times and learning outside the classroom, i.e., in self access centres, was considered to be the radicalized way of learning.

Self-Access Centres

The self-access centres were deemed to be learner autonomous centres of second language acquisition. Earlier attempts were made to organize as much centres as possible and later focus was to introduce coursework for learners to assimilate.

Role of CALL

Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) strongly supports and improves effectiveness of L2 learning. The role of CALL is remarkable in promoting learner autonomy in L2 learning during the last many decades. The 21st century has seen tremendous growth of learner autonomy in L2 acquisition with the advent and advancement of internet technology. Learners have become immensely familiar with the digital devices and the digital media. That has improved the level of learner motivation in acquiring language competence. During the COVID-19 pandemic period, a new teaching learning model called blended teaching learning model was introduced, i.e., a combination of both virtual and actual teaching learning modes. Blended teaching learning model offers ample opportunities for fostering learner autonomous ways in second language acquisition. Internet technology and digital media have become extremely popular with the young generation learners.

Distance Education Mode

With the advancement of the internet technology, distance learning has got proliferated and strengthened especially in the 21st century. Online learning, cyberschool, asynchronous teaching, telecast lessons, virtual classroom etc. have become synonymous terms for actual classroom alternative. Various apps such as Google Meet, Zoom, Classroom, Teachmint are being used so as to impart online education to the learners. As there is recording facility embedded with these apps, learners can record the lessons and replay and listen to at their own pace and time. Apart from that, innumerable online courses have been commenced by various universities and other educational institutions for the learners to access at their own fingertips. Internet technology has let loose education democracy at large all throughout the world. ‘Education at the doorstep of the learner’ was the slogan raised towards the second half of the 20th century, but by the turn of the century the slogan changed as ‘education at the fingertip of the learner’. In short, internet technology and distance education have fostered learner autonomy in the English language acquisition in a big way across the country.

Learning in the Native Language Environment

Modern language learning programmes have opened up new vistas for learners to work independently by interacting with the native speakers. Learners in group can go abroad and visit target language community and stay with them for learning English. This practice fosters self-learning and learner independence. Internet technology makes it possible for the students to interact with the native speakers through virtual media as well.

Beyond Classroom Learning

The concept that out-of-classroom learning is comparatively new related to literature reviews on learner autonomy. Initially, the term out-of-classroom learning implied seeking and using printed or video learning materials from both physical and virtual library for accentuating self-learning through learner autonomous ways. But today the arena of the concept of out of classroom learning is getting increasingly widened with the use of internet technology and digital media. Learner autonomy outside the actual classroom would be the focus of discussion in the years to come in the context of the young generation learners have been habituated to using digital devices and media to seek resources for L2 acquisition which expose them to native language speaking environment and experience.

LEARNER AUTONOMY THEORIES

Learner Autonomy Based on Constructivist Theory of Learning

Development of learner autonomy has to be examined in the backdrop of constructivism. Theoretical as well as experimental research was held from time to time so as to free learners from bondage to teacher and textbook and help the learners take initiative and interest in their own learning. Learner Autonomy means that learner becomes able to take charge of and responsibility for his or her own learning [1]. S/he will be more motivated to learning than the one who is reliant on teacher. Efficacious and lifelong learning will be possible if the learner is self-reliant. The Theory of Constructivism envisions making learners autonomous, i.e., self-reliant and creative beyond the classroom and textbook, getting instilled the spirit of enquiry and understanding. The Theory of Constructivism, which has gained much recognition and acclaim in the modern times among teachers, educators, policymakers and researchers, supports with theoretical foundation the research and practice of learner autonomy development both as a means and an end. The Constructivist theory says that knowledge is a construct. English language learners

According to the study, it was stated that “students construct understanding based on past and present experiences”. The learner makes meaning by himself (personal construction) or by a group of learners collaboratively (social construction). Hence, knowledge is not imparted by the teacher but constructed by the learner individually or socially when they interact with the world, they live in. Naturally, the teacher has to create a congenial environment for learning (facilitator). Autonomous learners create a network of learners and use internet technology to exchange ideas, concepts, images, drafts etc. The Theory puts it that learners get motivated to decide his or her own materials and methods of learning (self-directed learning). The learner is not a clean slate s/he comes to learn, but they have their acquired knowledge of the world and past experiences. They make new meaning by integrating present knowledge with the past one.

The Theory of Constructivism holds the view that learners are makers of meaning through constructive interactions with the real world outside. The Theory also expounds freedom of the learner. Learning is more important than teaching. The role of the teacher has to be redefined. The teacher has to motivate learning, organize interactive sessions to touchstone their knowledge through interactivities of what they have already worked out either individually or collaboratively, and at large to encourage autonomous ways of learning among learners. The teacher should enable learners discover resources through digital devices rather than posing himself as the resource person.

Social Cognitive Theory and Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy means to be self-inspired, enthusiastic and perseverance in self-directed learning. Self-motivated learner is more efficacious and autonomous than the one who is not. Learner autonomy principles are consistent with Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory. Learner Autonomy is conceptualized as agentive and intentional learning, especially with regard to second language acquisition. Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) identifies the autonomous learner behaviour as deliberate, self-deciding and self-evaluative. The teacher should re-ascertain his or her role as facilitating learner friendly environment and organizing interactivity sessions for fostering learner autonomy [5, 6].

Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory puts forward the theory that human beings are cognitive by nature and that the learners learn by doing themselves or by observing others do things. It means that learner learns himself or herself, but not taught by anyone [5, 6]. This is true in case of L2 learning, i.e., the learners learn the second language by using it as well as by observing others do use it. But the thing is that the learners must be interested and intentional to take forward their learning uninterrupted for lifelong. As per Social Cognitive Theory, learner efficacy is his or her ability in relation to his or her self-motivation, perseverance and target achievement. Resourcefulness, initiative, and persistence form the core of autonomous learning? [7–10].

Humanism and Learner Autonomy

Humanism posits that the ultimate aim of education is self-actualization which in other words is known as realization of absolute potential or learner autonomy. Humanism attaches greater importance to learners' intellectual, emotional, social, artistic, aesthetic and other skills or capacities to be developed. That means, the theory of humanism takes the learner as a whole or as a total person. Humanism takes into account learners' needs, purposes, interests and choice. Education should be of learners' interest and choice, at their own time and pace. Learners are in charge or control of their learning. Hence it is learner centered or learner directed learning that Humanism recommends.

Humanism also argues for self-evaluation by the learners themselves. It says that self-evaluation is the real evaluation that gives accurate feedback to the learner and that is related to the learners' metacognitive knowledge. External evaluation is rather irrelevant because that does not test what that ought to. Students should learn for their personal contentment and not for grade. Humanism attaches more emphasis to freedom, dignity and potential of the learner. Thus, Humanism advocates for autonomous learning which leads to fulfilment of full potential. The teacher's role is to create an unthreatening, learner friendly environment for learning.

Abraham Maslow (1908–1970), and Maria Montessori (1870–1952) were the prominent theorists of Humanism. Abraham Maslow was an American psychologist who focused his study on human potential rather than behaviour. Maria Montessori was an Italian teacher and physician who developed Montessori Method that attaches utmost importance to individuality and freedom of the learner. Humanism propounds to enable learners undergo various learning processes through collaboration, interactions, experiments and experiences [11–13].

Experiential Learning and Learner Autonomy

Experiential learning methods foster learner autonomy. There is much correlation between experiential learning and learner autonomy. Experiential Learning Methods focus on 'learning by doing', 'hands on approach' etc. The research is on Experiential learning approach, and they found that experiential learning strategies enhance learner levels of cognition, reflection and memory [2, 3]. Some researchers clarifies that successful experiential learners become autonomous learners which enable them to work on either individually or in collaboration with peers. Experiential learning strategies give learners both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Extrinsic motivation like exam grade etc. imparts learners a sense of achievement. But it is intrinsic motivation that helps learners sustain enthusiasm and take on learning as a lifelong process.

CONCLUSION

Out of years of teaching experience of teaching English as a second language at the plus two level, the learning problem learners face has been their inability to speak and read English, in spite of their learning it for almost 13 years. Fear of speaking and reading, lack of knowledge in vocabulary and grammar, faulty pronunciation and bad accent etc. are some of the noted problems. These problems can be solved by adopting learner autonomous ways in practice teaching and learning. Methods and strategies adopted in English language education programmes with a view to fostering learner

autonomy would bring about desirable changes in their learning and motivation to lifelong learning. Blended Teaching Learning Model, CALL, Learning Beyond Classroom, Self-Learning, Maximum Exposure to Target Language Experience, Provision of Resources etc. are some of the strategies to be adopted as learner autonomous ways.

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