

ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING THROUGH LEARNER AUTONOMY

Dr. Nishant Joshi*

*Assistant Professor,
H M Patel Institute of English Training and Research,
Vallabh Vidyanagar, Gujarat
Email: nsjoshi24@gmail.com*

Received : 29-11-2017

Accepted : 20-12-2017

ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the 21st century, education in India is slowly moving towards learner-centered education rather than teacher-centered. However there are innumerable hurdles, challenges and issues existing across the subjects, disciplines and levels of education to transform the whole education system from teacher-centered into learner-centered. This paper is an effort in the direction of learner-centered language education by discussing the concept of 'learner autonomy' in general as well as in the context of English language learning. The paper describes the characteristics of an autonomous learner from the language learning point of view. The paper further unfolds the process of developing learner autonomy by discussing the stages or steps, strategies, techniques and activities with appropriate illustrations. The major aim of the paper is to make the teachers and teacher educators of English become aware of and prepared for the upcoming shifts in the language pedagogy i.e. leading the learners to learner autonomy rather than making them dependent on teachers and classroom teaching.

Key words: *learner autonomy, English Language Learning, English Language Teaching, self-learning, development of learner autonomy*

** Author for correspondence*

INTRODUCTION

It is said that you can bring horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. The teachers can provide the learners all the necessary inputs, materials and practice in the best possible manner but learning can only happen if the learners are willing to learn. Activity 1

Consult literature to find out the salient characteristics of teaching-learning processes prevalent during ancient period. Prepare point-wise comparison of the traditional practices with the contemporary ones and discuss it with class mates.

In the book Basics in Education (2014) prepared and published by the apex educational agency in India, NCERT following real situation of Indian education system has been described which has compelled all of us to re-think and to take concrete steps in the direction of promoting 'learner autonomy' in the education system.

“...the long prevailing beliefs and practices where the teacher was assumed to be the only repository of all knowledge and information, and only the teacher could

determine what and how much was to be transferred to the learner. It was only the teacher who decided what information was suitable for the particular age and stage of the learner. Subsequently, it became the prerogatives of government and school boards to prescribe age-specific curricula that the teacher should transact and the learners must learn. Rote-memory and reproduction of information became the concern of schools, teachers, learners and parents. The learners were reduced to obedience in its worst form. There was no chance or time for the learners to pursue, explore, examine and analyse what they would genuinely be interested in on their own. It was this effective prescription which numbed the creativity and possibilities of innovative action among the learners.”

NCERT (2014)

This situation prevailed in English and other subject classrooms in the last 60 years of post-independence period in India. The teachers of English periodically shifted their methods, approaches and techniques for better learning outputs viz. Grammar-translation, direct, structural, situational, audio-lingual, communicative, functional, using audio and videos, using ICT etc.. However after all these paradigm shifts in the last century, the effectiveness of English language learning has not gained any drastic change or rise. After spending hours and hours in the English classroom from KG to PG, the learners of English in India still have

serious proficiency gaps and issues regarding their English language skills (LSRW), especially their productive skills (SR) which further lead us ponder over introducing learner autonomy in English language classrooms. The present article explores the concept of learner autonomy, characteristics of autonomous learners, process of developing learner autonomy and possibilities of activities in English language classrooms to foster learner autonomy.

Concept of LearnerAutonomy

The idea of learner autonomy was first coined at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues, (CRAPEL), University of Nancy, France, in early 1970s. Its former director, Henri Holec, expressed the need for a term to describe people's ability to take charge of their own learning arose for practical, though idealistic reasons. This led to the first conceptualization of 'learner autonomy' for the first time. Learner autonomy is an "ability to take charge of one's own learning." (Holec, 1981). This means that the English language learners are to be given charge of their own English language learning and the teacher has to support and facilitate only not working as an 'instructor' or 'teacher' all the time. Sinclair (2000) has suggested 13 aspects of learner autonomy in language teaching profession which can become a landmark in our journey for learner autonomy in English language classrooms.

1. Autonomy is a construct of capacity
2. Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning
3. The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate
4. Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal
5. There are degrees of autonomy
6. The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable
7. Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent
8. Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process – i.e. conscious ref and decision-making
9. Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies
10. Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom
11. Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension
12. The promotion of autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension
13. Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures

The above aspects explore innumerable issues, directions and research areas for English language teachers and teacher educators as Sinclair considers learner autonomy an ever changing ‘variable’ that has close connections with learners’ philosophical, psychological, social, cultural background. It also indicates that

mere changing of an approach, a method a strategy or a technique of teaching doesn’t create conducive environment for learner autonomy. NCERT (2014) has suggested a few very good points explaining what the ‘learner autonomy is not’ as follows:

1. Autonomy does not necessarily refer to self-instruction / learning without a teacher.
2. It does not mean that intervention or initiative on the part of teacher is banned.
3. It is not something teachers do to the students.
4. It is not a single easily identifiable behavior
5. It is not a ready state achieved by all learners once and for all.

Thus learner autonomy is a vast and deep concept transforming the learner into an ‘autonomous learner’ who knows decides what to learn and how to learn effectively with or without the help of a teacher and it requires a systematic understanding and planning contextualized in the learners’ varied contexts.

Development of Learner Autonomy

The teachers of 21st century are aware of the term learner autonomy and they have started using ICT for supporting learner autonomy. However the systematic approach to learner autonomy is still lacking in the education system and for that one must understand the ‘building blocks’ Scharle&Szabo, (2000) of learner autonomy i.e. the skills and attitudes need to be learnt by a teacher for promoting the learner autonomy. Scharle&Szabo, (2000) have explained 7 skills to be adopted by a teacher to promote learner autonomy in the classroom.

1. **Motivation and Self- confidence :** Motivation is a pre-requisite for learner autonomy. A teacher needs to encourage intrinsic motivation, the source of which is some inner drive or interest of the learner. Intrinsically motivated learners are more able to identify their objectives, goals and aims of learning and are more willing to take responsibility of the outcomes of the process. It is noteworthy here that rewards and punishment i.e. extrinsic motivation can also stimulate learning but they increase the dependence of the learners. Apart from intrinsic motivation, the learners must be made believe that they are capable of managing their own learning and they can rely on themselves, not only on the teacher. This self-confidence adds to their intrinsic motivation leading them to be prepared completely for learner autonomy creating a platform for the work.
2. **Monitoring and Evaluation :** The teacher is also supposed to make them monitor their own learning process, focus on their process in such a way that they can recognize their own contribution to their learning. 'Such an awareness of the difference that their efforts can make is an essential first step to the development of a responsible attitude' (Scharle&Szabo, 2000). After becoming aware of the learning process, the learner should be guided by the teacher regarding how to evaluate his learning process. With respect to the goals and targets set by the learner, the teacher should develop insights regarding the strengths, weaknesses, future possibilities and future opportunities (SWOT analysis).
3. **Learning Strategies :** Learning strategies serve as a tool to improve one's language competence. The teacher needs to show students the variety of available strategies, help them to find out what works for them. The teacher should also help them to discover how and when to use these strategies. Teachers can bring the students to the thrilling experience of exploring and expanding their own abilities.
4. **Cooperation and Group Cohesion :** Cooperative and collaborative environment in the classroom influences the learner attitude in several ways. It encourages the learner to rely on each other and not only on the teacher. Group work also creates opportunities for feedback from peers. Learners will do things to please the group rather than to please the teacher.
5. **Sharing Information with the Learner :** By sharing relevant information with students, teachers show respect and a willingness to regard the learners as partners in working with a common aim of learning a language. Informing students about the short term and long term aims helps them to identify with these aims and hence to feel more responsible for the outcome.
6. **Consistent Control :** It is very important to establish expectations towards the learner, the limits of acceptable behavior and the consequences of failing to meet

expectations. You may find that as long as you apply the rules consistently, learners are willing to play by these rules. But make sure that you do not become too much strict that may hinder all learner initiatives.

7. **Delegating Tasks and Decisions :** If learners are to take more responsibility for their learning, they need to have more influence on the learning process. This calls for a reallocation of some tasks and decisions in classroom work so that students can get more involved for example in selecting materials or correcting errors. Students are, of course, not trained teachers and cannot take over any teacher role but they are surely able to adopt some of the teacher's roles. It is necessary that the teacher should respect the ways they handle these tasks and expect the learners to deal with the consequences of their decisions. Scharle & Szabo, (2000) rightly points out that "Support them but do not rescue them...or in other words, do not be afraid to let them make mistakes."

Stages and Activities for Developing Learner Autonomy in English Language Classrooms.

1. **Raising Awareness :** It is the starting point. Here the teacher presents new view points and new experiences to the learners and encourage them to bring the inner processes of their learning to their conscious thinking level. Here, at this stage the activities are tightly structured i.e. the teacher has to play his role more than the students because of the assumption that here the learners are the beginners and not yet very responsible and

therefore they need to be told what to do and how to do exactly through clear instructions and guidance by the teacher.

2. **Changing Attitudes :** This is the second step where the focus is on practicing the skills introduced at the previous stage in order to begin changing attitudes. This is a very slow process. It requires a lot of patience and practice on the part of the teacher and the learner both since it takes time to proceed from understanding to practicing new roles, habits, strategies, styles etc. breaking away from old patterns of behavior and haphazard learning processes.
3. **Transferring Roles :** In this third stage, the activities are loosely structured to provide a considerable amount of freedom to the students in deciding, managing and accomplishing tasks to reach the learning objectives and goals. This stage is more demanding for the teacher as it requires a considerable change in classroom management where the students manage every learning process while the teacher skillfully works as the gap-filler whenever required. These activities enhances the learners' skills to take decisions regarding their objectives, strategies and processes of learning. The learner feels more independent in these activities.

The above three stages have been stratified into one or more of the following components under its arena of activities that makes this model more systematic and teacher-friendly.

- I Finding out about your students : These activities focuses on various techniques of collecting information about existing attitudes and knowledge of the students. Based on that a teacher can decide the areas where awareness raising is the most needed. The teacher can design variety of questionnaires, rating scales, inventories to know the learners' awareness about his/her learning skills, habits, attitude, beliefs and doubts regarding English language learning. In addition, the teacher can also use interview, SWOT analysis tasks, written or oral feedback as the tools to know the learners' awareness about his/her learning skills, habits, attitude, beliefs and doubts regarding English language learning.
- ii. Motivation : These activities aim to give confidence to the students. The activities here motivate the learners to know the skills and knowledge they already possess. Some activities can be framed to pose some difficult tasks before them to make them realize that the difficulties are also a part of learning.
- iii. Learning Strategies : These activities are designed to introduce various learning styles (e.g. audio, visual, kinesthetic) and strategies so that the learner can choose, experiment and study what is best for him or her. They become aware about their learning

styles and strategies that further lead them to learner autonomy confidently.

- iv. Community Building : These activities are designed to demonstrate the importance of listening to and cooperating with others in pair and group work and to help students learn about how they share their views, opinions, feelings, ideas with others in the group. These activities make them aware of identifying learning resources in the group members and also learning points from the ongoing discussion.
- v. Self-monitoring : These activities help the learners to monitor their learning styles and strategies as well as to know how they are different from others.

The above discussion on the stages and its components has provided a clear clue in the direction of learner autonomy. In the table given below, there are some sample activities related to each stage and its component, if any. This model given by Scharle&Szabo, (2000) is specially meant for teachers and teacher educators of English language (learning English as a Foreign Language). They have nicely presented sample activities and illustrations for each stage so that the teacher of English can easily experiment in the day-to-day classroom work. Here is an outline of these activities in the following table created by the author on the model and activities given by Scharle&Szabo (2000).

	Raising Awareness	Changing Attitudes	Transferring Roles
Finding About Your Student	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collection of information through questionnaire/check list about their likes, dislikes, habits, experiences related to English language learning • Strengths and weaknesses analysis • Interview 	NA	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Allocating small tasks in the classroom. Take one and pass • Putting their language learning news on the Notice Board • Helping each other to understand a text
Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List the words, verbs, nouns they already know • Guessing the hidden strengths of the classmates • Troubles of the rich and famous • Sharing problems in learning English language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sharing the mood and getting in the mood • Recalling and writing about family morning • Collecting favourite and/or important objects • Finding errors in public announcement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Knowledge sharing • Giving a talk to the class • Variety of role playing • Quiz writing • Finding grammatical patterns in sentences and paragraphs • Correcting classmate's homework • Students/ groups present grammar rules to the class
Learning Strategies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Comparing favourite pastime with various learning styles • Sharing memories of last ten years and with an effort to search why they remembered that • Grouping words / Words of feelings • Identifying Listening difficulties • Experimenting with reading strategies • Making and adjusting guesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listening in order to pick verbs • Look and listen • Linking new words to the old ones • Word families • Linking pictures to words • Finding structure in a text 	
Community Building	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who said what – learning students' names • Close your ears – feeling how it is to share a problem to a disinterested person • Group work analysis • Why don't you listen • Learning about group mates' tastes and skills in learning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Combining sentence halves • Writing a very short story in pair • Essay writing in pairs • Role playing a job interview • Discussing common tastes and interests 	
Self-monitoring	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identifying their self as a language learner • Discovering differences in learning styles • Writing a brief report on how I learn words 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Correcting mistakes in written work • Recording and analyzing a short talk • Monitoring the use of reading strategies • Reviewing the purposes and objectives of the classroom tasks 	

Conclusion

The speed with which ICT and e-learning has started taking charge of our English language classrooms, the future of English language as well as other subject classrooms in general, belongs to learner autonomy and the time has posed before us the challenge to introduce it with the help of passionate experiments and sincere professional commitment since the contexts of learner autonomy are complex, spreading across various disciplines like philosophy, psychology, sociology, culture, ICT etc. However we must embark upon this voyage with the faith that at the end the learner will become finally an autonomous learner that is the

ultimate goal of human life and education, in the words of Lord Buddha Atma Deepo Bhava.

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