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AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING PROCESS

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Abstract: The article discusses the importance of learner autonomy in language classes. Learner autonomy is a new trend in education which emphasizes students' engagement in their own learning. Developing learner independence has an important role in the theory and practice of language teaching. Language learning is a lifelong endeavor, not one that begins and ends in a language class room. Most learners and teachers feel that language learning consumes a considerable amount of time. Learners have to work within and beyond the class room to develop their language skills. The notion of learner independence or learner autonomy moves into an area where learners can direct their own learning. It could mean those learning activities which take place without the immediate intervention of the teacher.
Keywords: autonomy, language, learner, teacher, education, develop, own learning, learning, study.

Learner autonomy is frequently debated among English language teachers and scholars around the world. Since 1970 many studies have been done on how teachers can promote learner autonomy and increase learner independence. Holec, who is considered a father of autonomous learning, defines it as "the ability to take charge of one's learning". [1] Similarly, Little [2] is of the opinion that autonomous learners are cast in a new perspective, have a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, and decision-making, take independent actions and are expected to assume greater responsibility for and take charge of their own learning. While, Thanasoulas [3.] suggests that autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies; take an active approach to learning the task at hand; are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs; are good guessers; attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriateness; develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

Autonomous learning is said to make learning more personal and focused and consequently achieve better learning outcomes since learning is based on learners' needs and preferences. It contrasts with the traditional teacher-led approach in which most decisions are made by the teacher; The use of self-directed learning in a self-access center is one application of this approach.

There are five principles for achieving autonomous learning:
1.active involvement in student learning
2.providing options and resources
3.offering choices and decision-making opportunities
4.supporting learners
5.encouraging reflection

Other features of autonomous learning are:
- the teacher becomes less of an instructor and more of a facilitator
- learners are discouraged from relying on the teacher as the main source of knowledge

- learners' capacity to learn for themselves is encouraged
- learners are encouraged to make decisions about what they learn
- learners' awareness of the own learning styles is encouraged
- learners are encouraged to develop their own learning strategies

Learners' styles and pace of learning may be different from one learner to another and that is why teachers need to be careful in this respect when designing a foreign language lesson. In order to avoid learners' lack of motivation, teachers need to develop learners' metacognitive skills. Wenden identified metacognitive skills as "general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate, guide their learning, i.e., planning, monitoring, and evaluation" [4]. In other words, the term metacognition refers to what a learner knows about how he/she learns a language; it is a process of relating the language learning to the self. Finding out about learner styles and the corresponding learning strategies could be vital when our aim is to foster learner autonomy. The teachers need to apply the information about learner styles and learning strategies when negotiating a learning plan with their students and thus ensuring that the learning activities are appropriate to their needs and learning styles. A teacher that intends to encourage his/her learners' autonomy should not only introduce various learning strategies but also help learners apply them in different circumstances.

Learner self and peer assessment

It is worth noting that there are some differences between student self assessment and peer-assessment. While student self-assessment is a self-control mechanism which fosters after school engagement in learning, peer-assessment encourages cooperation by stimulating social and cognitive development. The self-assessment criteria can also vary depending on the subject.

For instance, while in mathematics lesson the criteria may include math skills, such as arithmetic, problem solving time, in language lessons it may reflect language skills such as reading, writing, or listening.

According to Tamjid and Birjandi [5.] because of the learner-centered approach, self and peer assessment has come to the focus, and it has raised the interest in promoting learner independence. By being involved in giving and receiving feedback, this kind of assessment creates an opportunity for learners to develop critical thinking and to practice professional responsibility.

Seatwork (individual/pair/group)

Although most educators think that this type of classroom activities are related with traditional teacher centered approach, this idea can be denied in modern pedagogy by examining the nature of these activities and the role of teachers in implementation process. Seatwork may be done individually, in pairs or in groups, and depending on the needs of learners and requirements of learning goals, the appropriate type can be chosen by the teacher. If the teacher chooses the activities carefully, for example, preferring those focusing on application of knowledge rather than memorizing some facts, seatwork will definitely help to develop learner autonomy.

As increased intensiveness of seatwork will help to decrease the teacher's role in the process of learning, they will play only the role of facilitator. For instance, a teacher may guide the students by explaining instructions, giving examples, and she or he can involve the students in the activities by asking some questions. Sometimes, a teacher himself or herself may become an active participant of the activity for a short period of time and then change the group in order to support other learners as well. However, by being involved in the activities, the teacher should not try to

control the process but initiate and maintain collaboration.

Homework (individualized)

While the homework was seen as arbitrary workload and its value was underestimated by some teachers in the past, now it is seen as a type of self-motivated learning activity. As homework helps to develop sense of personal responsibility, it will always play a significant role in the process of developing learner autonomy. Long-term project (individual/group)

While homework can be done in a short period of time, projects engage students in one issue for a long period of time. Depending on the requirements of the course and needs of the learners, projects can be done individually or in groups. If the projects are done in groups, they can help develop some teamwork skills, such as collaboration as well. The teacher should let the students discuss and decide how they are going to distribute responsibilities, workload, schedule and other things related to projects. However, it doesn't mean that the teacher should completely leave the students alone, so he or she should have the role of facilitator by guiding and helping them in planning, monitoring and assessment of the projects. Similar to homework, a project can also be finished successfully only if the student takes the responsibility. Therefore, it can be assumed that long-term projects also help develop learner autonomy.

The study reached the following conclusions regarding the perceptions of learner autonomy from both teachers' and students' perspectives and tried to generalize ideas about the effectiveness of some activities as promoters of learner autonomy. It found quite satisfying answers to research questions put forward about the significance of learner autonomy and comparison of certain activities under study which are expected to foster learner autonomy:

- Both teachers and learners understand and accept the importance of learner autonomy, which implies that teachers should feel confident about practicing learner autonomy in certain classroom settings.

- The common positive belief is dominant in both teachers' and learners' attitudes towards practicing learner autonomy due to various beneficial effects such as more engagement of students in learning process and better concentration of learners on studies that are expected as a result of the mentioned practice.

- Individualized homework is the most preferred assignment type by both parties revealing the importance of personalized approach to tasks which gives the audience a clear message.

- The principal approach of an instructor (strict controller of authoritarian class or facilitator and contributor of democratic class) plays a crucial role in successful implementation of learner autonomy. Democratic approach is considered to be the most effective in the mentioned context.

- Learners should be allowed to take part more in self and peer assessment in order to give and receive feedback on their works and performances rather than being judged and evaluated by instructor only.

Independence and autonomy can be encouraged by giving the learners tools for success in their further study. These tools include helping the learners to understand their real goals and to develop skills to enable them to find the answers and information they need in order for them to be successful in reaching these goals. Learners need to be able to be aware of and understand their own learning styles and to use these to their advantage. At the same time, they should be willing to adapt to a more autonomous method of learning. As they gain confidence they will be more able to monitor their own learning which will in turn

make them confident and give them a sense of achievement.

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