

Autonomy in the Teaching/Learning Process

الاستقلالية في عملية التدريس والتعلم

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Abstract:

The concept of student autonomy has garnered increasing attention from educators and scholars, particularly as it has become a cornerstone of language education. In the era of artificial intelligence, interest in fostering learner autonomy is witnessing a renewed emphasis. Given the inherent complexity and diversity of the English language, classroom instruction alone is insufficient to equip students with the comprehensive skills required for proficient use. Even with frequent English classes, it takes considerable time for learners to gain adequate exposure and practice in authentic language use. Consequently, autonomous learning; especially through digital platforms, is assuming a more prominent role in contemporary English language education. The COVID-19 pandemic, in particular, served as a catalyst for challenging traditional pedagogical models, underscoring the necessity of self-directed learning. This article argues that learner autonomy not only enhances English language proficiency but also signifies a paradigm shift toward cultivating the capacity for independent learning at any time and in any context. It is, therefore, incumbent upon educators to design instructional practices that promote autonomy, support students in extending their learning beyond the confines of the classroom, and equip them with the necessary skills to take ownership of their educational development.

Keywords: Autonomous learning, traditional learning, online learning, motivation, and critical thinking.

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ملخص:

لقد اجتذبت فكرة استقلالية الطالب اهتمامًا وثيقًا من قبل المعلمين والباحثين لأنها أصبحت كلمة رئيسية في تعليم اللغة. في عصر الذكاء الاصطناعي، يشهد الاهتمام المشترك باستقلالية الطلاب انتعاشًا. ومع ذلك، فإن اللغة الإنجليزية معقدة للغاية ومتنوعة بحيث لا يتوفر لها الوقت الكافي للطلاب لتعلم كل ما يحتاجون إليه في الفصل الدراسي. حتى لو كان لدى الطلاب العديد من محاضرات اللغة الإنجليزية أسبوعيًا، فسوف يستغرق الأمر عددًا كبيرًا من الأسابيع قبل أن يحصلوا على نوع التعرض وفرص الاستخدام اللازمة لتحقيق تقدم حقيقي. ولهذا السبب، تلعب استقلالية التعلم عبر الإنترنت دورًا أكثر أهمية في تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية الحديثة. خاصة خلال جائحة كوفيد-19، فهو يتحدى نهج التعلم التقليدي ويمثل أيضًا التقدم. تشير هذه المقالة إلى أن الاستقلالية تسهل تحسين مستوى اللغة الإنجليزية، كما تحول جوهر تعلم اللغة الإنجليزية إلى تطوير القدرة على التعلم الذاتي في أي وقت وفي أي مكان. وتقع على عاتق جميع المعلمين مسؤولية التأكد من قيامهم ببناء محاضراتهم لتعزيز الاستقلالية، وإعدادهم للتعلم خارج جدران سياق الفصل الدراسي، ومساعدتهم على تطوير المهارات التي سيحتاجون إليها لممارسة مسؤولية التعلم بفعالية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم الذاتي، التعلم التقليدي، التعلم عبر الإنترنت، التحفيز، التفكير النقدي.

1. Introduction

The concept of "autonomous learning" has long been central to contentious debates within the realm of language education. However, due to its complexity, it lacks a universally accepted definition. Yet, an agreed-upon meaning may be attributed to this concept where an autonomous learner is seen as someone who can take charge of their own learning process without being guided by external forces (Zey and Windmann, 2022), reflecting as such the core aim of education itself; which is learning. This further means that when students engage in independent learning, they often follow their own sequence of steps, utilize different resources, adopt personal learning styles, and evaluate their progress in individual ways. Therefore, to effectively support student learning, teachers should encourage independence instead of imposing a rigid, teacher-designed learning path. In higher education, in particular, educators should aim to form learners who can take responsibility for their own education and gradually reduce their dependence on teachers. Developing students who are able to learn and function autonomously should be one of the key goals of education across levels.

2. Defining Autonomy

Zey and Windmann (2022) explain that autonomy has predominantly been explored through a theoretical lens, with scholars from diverse fields associating it with three significant concepts: 1) self-reliance, 2) moral reasoning, and 3) self-awareness. They consider a morally autonomous individual to be someone who makes choices and takes actions without being influenced by any outside force. From this perspective, autonomy involves the capacity not only to think independently but also to act independently. Likewise, in the educational context, autonomous learners should be capable of organizing their own study processes and utilizing various tools and resources offered by their instructors to implement their learning strategies effectively.

In the same vein, Raya, Lamb, and Vieira (2020:19) define autonomy in language learning as; “the competence to develop as a self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware participant in (and beyond) educational environment, within a vision of education as (inter) personal empowerment and social transformation”. There is a clear vision of the kind of students in the university environment according to teachers that the autonomous students might become. For example, students must become capable of using English as a means of self-expression and self-determination. A similar perspective is shared by Benson (2012) who argues that in language learning autonomy occurs when students become able to set their directions for learning which eventually leads to divergent outcomes. Benson explains that the significance of foreign language learning exceeds the mere acquisition of knowledge about the new language to the ability to use it for diverse communicative purposes along one’s own language (ibid).

On the other hand, Nunan (1997) introduces the five levels of autonomy that refer to the student's actions, comprising; “awareness”, “involvement”, “intervention”, “creation” and “transcendence”.

1. Awareness: Nunan (1997) explains that at this level, students are aware of their learning objectives. They are conscious about the importance of having goals when dealing with knowledge.

2. Involvement: According to the researcher, students engage in choosing their objectives from a variety of available options. Choosing interesting ones can lead to satisfaction in learning the language. (ibid)
3. Intervention: After selecting choices, Nunan (1997) claims that students also engage with modifying and adapting the learning objectives according to their needs.
4. Creation: At this fourth level, students take the initiative to create their learning objectives. Creativity is a must for achievement since it will procure a kind of continuity in learning. (ibid)
5. Transcendence: This is the final level where students can go beyond the classroom and connect their knowledge to the outside world. In so doing, and according to Nunan (1997), students will acquire more information quickly without relying on their teachers.

Autonomy is as such an important element in learning since it drives the students to improve themselves by progressing through its different level.

3. Autonomy as a Goal of Education

Developing in students the ability to make their own decisions about what they learn is one of the overarching goals of modern-day education. Similarly, students' total engagement and responsibility for their learning process are central factors in the context of foreign language learning. Being autonomous implies being involved in all phases of the learning process, where they should make some choices about and during each phase and should control their own learning environment as well.

If teachers want to facilitate the learning of their students, teachers should not impose their teacher-made sequence on their students. Teachers in higher education should prioritize their students' autonomy in their teaching process; that is, give confidence to their students to learn more effectively without their continuous intervention. Brown (2007) claims that one of the important aims of education is to assist students and enable them to function independently of their teachers. He further points out to the various terms used in the literature to describe approaches to develop students' autonomy in higher education including but not limited to: independent study, self-directed learning, student-initiated learning, project- orientation, etc.(ibid).

Essentially, all these terms have shared connotations and basically imply that students need to be able to set up their learning plan and employ diverse resources while teachers act mainly as guides and facilitators. Students should also be able to carry on their learning beyond the educational settings just for the sake of improving their mastery of the English language. The researcher strongly believes that all teachers hold an important responsibility in fostering their students' autonomy which starts with their basic duties as developing engaging well-rounded lectures and goes beyond to encouraging independent thinking, guiding self-directed learning, and creating opportunities for students to take ownership of their educational journey.

According to Kahveci (2023), teachers' attitude towards their students is of paramount importance. The researcher explains that while the quality of teaching methodologies is primarily needed, the quality of the relationship between teachers and students is even more important for success in teaching and learning. However, sometimes, even when students have qualified attentive teachers, they face difficulties in acquiring the English language due also to the limited exposure. Because students do not have time to learn all they need in the classroom and because teachers will not always be around when they wish to use the language in real situations, students have to rely on themselves to learn it during class time as well as outside.

Balancing the constraint of the limited classroom time with the chances for successful language acquisition can be achieved by encouraging students to develop their own learning strategies with the help of their teachers so that as far as possible, they become autonomous students. Language teachers likewise can promote their students' autonomy by integrating appropriate activities to train and encourage students to work independently.

Students are usually presented with the teaching materials and thus they know what they are using. They have therefore the possibility to select and decide about their learning strategy since they can identify the implication of the activity contained in the materials. In that case, many teachers agree on the idea that the students' voices remain one of the essential sources inside the classrooms. It is up to the teachers, to work hand in hand with their students in order to build on them the notion of autonomy for better achievements.

4. Autonomy in Foreign Language Education

Teachers perceive autonomy among their students as the ability of the latter to take control of their learning based on their desire, capability and freedom of choice. For example, students must plan for their learning, in relation to the learning of English as a foreign language. Such planning is expected to lead EFL students to control and direct themselves without someone else's direction, particularly outside the classroom where the teachers is absent. From this perspective, autonomy in language learning implies students setting their directions for learning that guide them to outcomes that are typical to each student, maintaining always the ultimate need behind learning a foreign language which is to be able to use it for real communication. While this is not necessarily a pre-condition for learning a foreign language, it is a prerequisite for relating autonomy in language learning to motivation.

Neupane (2010) suggests that courses that aim to promote student autonomy should have some defining characteristics. In the EFL context for instance, lectures alongside the activities and strategies involved, must reflect the students' goals in learning the target language. This clarity and transparency and are believed to raise their awareness to find ways of identifying goals, specifying objectives, and also identifying resources that help them realize these goals. Additionally, the lectures must be explicitly based on a simplified model of the learning process. Otherwise, if students have no idea of how learning operates, they will not be able to effectively manage their learning. Hence, it is by raising their awareness of language-learning theory that students are likely to adopt learning strategies for themselves. When teachers succeed to imitate real-world communicative tasks through their lectures and activities, there are more chances for promoting both autonomous learning as well as reflection on learning among their students.

Teachers' role combines promoting students' autonomy with urging their students to continue learning over time. For example, the first thing teachers need to do is to include continuing learning as an important lecture in their programs during the academic year. Teachers can also involve students in making a list of all available sources before discussing them and see which are most appropriate for their individual needs and how and where to get hold of them. Teachers need to train students on how

to use those resources and also to put them at their disposal; teachers can develop and schedule self-study projects during class sessions, which students can later reproduce when outside class.

The teacher here is behaving like a democratic teacher, and being democratic and letting students participate in decision-making requires more efforts and management skills than controlling the class from the front. Furthermore, the promotion of students' autonomy is only one view of the teaching-learning relationship. It is seen by many researchers that being a democratic teacher is simply one style of teaching, which fits some teachers who succeed to apply it with ease while others face challenges applying it. Yunianti and Rifai (2021) highlight the need for teachers to adopt different roles during their teaching process, each role is meant to facilitate and foster autonomous learning. In the end, this behavior of the teacher can provide a kind of teacher-student dialogue that is often difficult to develop in a classroom environment based on the traditional center role of the teacher.

5. Freedom of Choice in Learning

Another important point to raise students' autonomy is the need to have freedom of choice. Thus, students cannot simply rely on their teachers' explanations and guidance. They are rather required to be first aware of their own learning style being their basic need, and accordingly take decisions about what suits their styles instead of being the concern of the teacher as the decision-maker. Yet, the teacher's role is to scaffold this autonomy and support students in understanding and making their own choices. Such freedom; i.e., allowing students to take ownership of their learning, plays an equally important role in managing the learning process within the EFL context.

Benson (2011) identifies three dimensions needed to achieve autonomy among learners. The first dimension requires students to have the power to manage their learning model. Benson (2011) explains that this dimension includes the ability of students to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the place, the time and the strategy of learning that are mostly effective for them. The second dimension is concerned with the learning materials. Student can choose their material in accordance with their learning goals and can even diversify their sources beyond what the teachers usually

offer. The third and final dimension deals with self-evaluation where students are invited to regularly assess their progress in terms of knowledge, cognitive achievement as well as the personal psychological factors affecting their success in learning.

6. Promoting Autonomy Through Online Media

Reinders and White (2011) consider the integration of media in EFL classrooms an advantageous strategy for enhancing student engagement, promoting autonomous learning, and supporting language acquisition through authentic and interactive content. This is largely because media can support learning in both online and traditional face-to-face settings. The researchers explain that online media, in particular, encourages independent learning by allowing students to access resources and practice language skills anytime and anywhere. This flexibility not only boosts learners' motivation but also contributes to the development of their language competence outside the confines of the classroom (ibid).

Autonomous learning of English through the Internet is playing an increasingly important role in modern-day English education. It is challenging the traditional learning approach as the overall trends in language teaching have recently moved toward targeting students' autonomy and shifting the responsibility toward the students. Al-Hammoudy (2014) describes; "the student at a low level of proficiency feel more comfortable and less threatened why they participate in online discussion than face-to-face, which are mainly dominated by the high proficiency learners". The researcher argues that online group discussions enhance students' motivation and involvement, which in turn lead to better understanding of the learning content.

Research has shown that spread of technology mode learning or Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL), personal access learning, and distance learning have the potential to motivate students and also boost their autonomy (Benson, 2011; Al-Hammoudy, 2014) which can be also the case in our universities if applied appropriately. Since technology is challenging for some students, consequently, the training and counseling strategies are necessarily to equip them with the necessary skills to cope with this new technology-based learning paradigm. Once more, the teacher's role is to be the counselor and trainer to increase the autonomy of the students with the use of technology.

A substantial amount of research (e.g., Ushioda, 2006; Brown, 2007; Raya et al., 2020) advocates students' autonomy as being strongly associated to many other student variables including willingness to communicate, self-efficacy in determining the success of language learning, the capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, independent learning, and motivation.

7. Motivation and Autonomy in Language Learning Development

These days, the connection between motivation and learner autonomy has received little attention, despite the fact that, for many students, autonomy is closely intertwined with their motivation and success in language learning. According to Gardner (1985:pp193-220); “motivation implies not only a desire to learn a language, but also a measure of an individual's attitude toward working and striving to achieve a learning objective”. The researcher distinguishes two types of motivation; intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Taking foreign language (FL) learning as example, intrinsically motivated students are driven by their love and joy for learning the target language, while extrinsically motivated students are often driven by external rewarding agents that accompany language learning.

The researcher claims that students holding intrinsic motivation are likely to achieve positive learning outcomes, while extrinsic motivation tends more to lead to negative results. Put differently, students who are intrinsically motivated remember the content for a longer period, and this retention is self-sustaining. According to Seven (2020), motivation is improved when students produce high language learning achievement and vice versa, positive learning results are fostered by motivation which in turn accentuates learning success. Overall, motivation plays a significant role in FL achievement. Accordingly, motivation has to be considered as one of the main factors that drive students to learn a FL.

Autonomy, on the other hand, is tightly connected to motivation which is of great main interest for teachers. Both motivation and autonomy are the factors to promote the students' success in the acquisition of the English language. Therefore, autonomy is worth investigating as a great tool to motivate students. One of the main goals for a teacher is to help students become autonomous so that they will be able to deal with their learning. Teachers notice also that having a high level of motivation among their

students is an indicator of greater engagement in classroom activities which proves that motivation leads to autonomy. Consequently, EFL students should usually make greater effort and work more independently to acquire new vocabulary. For that reason, teachers see autonomy as an important element in learning the FL.

According to Najeeb (2013:03); “without self-discipline and autonomous effort, motivation itself would not be sufficient to produce desired language learning results in the long term”. Only individuals who have a strong interest or motivation to learn a FL can have the required discipline to engage in hard work, work outside the classroom, and devotion to learning. Teachers should put a stress on the idea that autonomy is not inherited but should be acquired either by natural means or through formal learning. Autonomy allows students to materialize their learning objectives through constant commitment and hard work.

8. Increase Critical Thinking Through Autonomy

The development of critical thinking skills is another benefit of autonomous students. When students have the autonomy to make decisions about their learning, they are always required to analyze information, make appropriate choices, and evaluate various aspects. This process of critical thinking improves their ability to solve problems, make their own judgments, and approach learning with deeper comprehension. Autonomous students are more likely to question, investigate, and engage in regardful inquiry, contributing to the overall development of critical thinking potentials. However, it permits students to persevere in learning on their own. Autonomy fosters critical thinking, self-reflection, and problem-solving skills, which are essential for success in the 21st century. It allows students to set objectives, and direct their learning independently. This idea places students at the center of their educational expedition, encouraging self-directedness and critical thinking. Otherwise, students’ autonomy not only fosters motivation and critical thinking but also introduces a sense of responsibility. Enabling students to take charge of their learning, enhances flexibility, creating lifelong students well-prepared for the challenges of the future. This sense of responsibility promotes critical thinking and motivates students to actively enroll in their learning.

9. Autonomous Learning Supported by Technology

In this digital Era, incorporating new technologies as tools to simplify teaching and learning has become unavoidable. Different technologies have been implemented over time in education, and teach time they were soon adopted by students and became integral parts of their autonomous learning activities. Quite recently, the Internet has replaced some technologies that became rapidly outdated, leaving space to new emerging ones such as mobile applications that are now easily accessible. Researchers (Reinders and White, 2011) agree that today students have more access to educational resources than they did before due to the huge information delivered by the Internet nowadays. Driven by this concept, universities have integrated the use of technology into the classrooms so as to provide students with the means of promoting and enhancing their autonomy.

In this article, the term technology refers to online media, which plays a strategic role in enhancing students' language proficiency. Furthermore, the use of online media fosters learner autonomy, as students can use their personal laptops anywhere to develop their language skills. It also increases motivation by offering greater flexibility compared to traditional face-to-face learning.

10. Conclusion

This article highlighted the importance of autonomy in education in general and in the EFL context in particular. Though not all students exhibit autonomy in EFL learning, the good news is that it is an achievable goal that requires willingness, combined with efforts and patience. After reaching the university, students can still become autonomous learners and control their learning process. The inclusion of technology can accelerate the process. It can be a valuable aid to scaffold learning in even difficult situations such as during the Covid-19 pandemic when the face-to-face instruction was difficult to achieve. An important consideration in developing our students' autonomy is simply by integrating learning tasks and activities that take into account their needs, goals, interests, and all aspects of student autonomy. In addition, involving students in their learning process by minimizing controlling teaching norms and allowing students to choose what to learn would enhance their motivation for better EFL achievement. However, differences among students should be observed and

further studies are still needed to uncover the factors affecting autonomy and the means and approaches that help us build and promote our students' autonomy.

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