

Balancing Power-sharing in the Classroom: Fostering Learner Autonomy through Collaborative Learning

موازنة تقاسم السلطة في القسم: تعزيز استقلالية المتعلمين من خلال التعلم التعاوني

Loubna Sebbah

University of Algiers 2, sebbah_loubna@outlook.com

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Abstract:

Twenty-first century pedagogy has transformed teaching practices from being teacher-centered to ones that call for student inclusion and autonomy. In this regard, learner autonomy has been perceived as a joint goal rather than an individualized objective. This shift towards balancing power in the classroom highlights the merits of collaborative learning in fostering learner autonomy in the learning process. This article aims at approaching the development of learner autonomy from a social constructivist perspective and highlighting the relation between collaborative learning and learner autonomy development. It is also meant to suggest some practical classroom techniques that revolve around collaboration and critical thinking skills. This would create an inclusive learning environment for the students where they can develop not only their language skills but also their life-long learning skills.

Keywords: Collaborative learning; Learner autonomy; Learner centeredness; Power-sharing; Social constructivism

الملخص:

غيرت بيداغوجيا القرن الواحد والعشرين طرق التدريس التي كانت مرتكزة على الأستاذ إلى أساليب تتمحور حول استقلالية الطالب وإدماجه في التعلم. من هذا المنطلق، أصبحت استقلالية المتعلم تعد كهدف مشترك وليس كهدف فردي بحت. هذا التحول نحو موازنة تقاسم السلطة في القسم يرتكز على ايجابيات التعلم التعاوني لتعزيز استقلالية المتعلم في التعلم. لهذا يهدف هذا المقال إلى دراسة إمكانية تطوير استقلالية المتعلم من خلال التعلم التعاوني من منظور بنائي اجتماعي و كما يهدف إلى تسليط الضوء على علاقة التعلم التعاوني بتطوير استقلالية المتعلم. وكما يقترح أيضا بعض التقنيات التعاونية التعليمية التي تتمحور حول التفكير النقدي الذي بدوره قد يؤدي إلى خلق جو دراسي محفز لتطوير مهارات الطلاب اللغوية بالإضافة إلى مهارات التعلم الاستقلالي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التعلم التعاوني، استقلالية المتعلم، المنهج المتمركز حول المتعلم، تقاسم السلطة، النظرية البنائية الاجتماعية

1. Introduction:

One of the educational systems that were introduced in the Algerian university in 2004 is the LMD system (Licence-Master-Doctorate) with an aim to aid students to take responsibility for their own learning. Among the features of this innovation is adopting learner-centered pedagogies which can promote collaborative learning and prepare students to be autonomous and take charge of their own learning. This is in contrast to the classical system which was adopted in Algerian higher education which stressed teacher dominance and favored individualization and competitiveness over collaboration. Therefore, with the advancement of learner-centeredness, which is meant to centralize the student, it has become vital to incorporate teaching approaches that fortify students' autonomy and inclusion.

It is well-documented that in order for EFL students achieve good learning outcomes, they need to be immersed in a learning milieu that is featured by collaboration to enable students to study thoroughly and autonomously where classmates can influence each other positively to take control of their own learning. One may argue that the aim of education is not favoring only the mastery of language skills but also focuses on developing lifelong learning, employability skills and future professional development, which makes it crucial to balance power-sharing in the classroom through making a shift from individual to group autonomy. The present article aims at highlighting the pedagogic benefit of collaborative learning in fostering learner autonomy. It is also meant to suggest some of the classroom techniques to develop learner autonomy in EFL settings.

2. Learner autonomy defined: A social constructivist perspective

Learner autonomy has been conceived as a controversial issue in the field of English language education. The term autonomy is multifaceted (Benson, 2011) and has been defined differently by researchers. While Holec (1981) and Little (2007) argue that learner autonomy is about the learner's ability to take charge and control of his learning process, some other definitions (e.g. Dam, 1995; Cunningham & Carlton, 2003; Tagaki, 2003) have linked it to having increased motivation, active participation in the classroom and having greater responsibility for learning. In the context of language learning, learner autonomy can hinge on different dimensions such as day-to-day management, the metacognitive processes that students need to undergo while learning, and making decisions about their own learning process (Benson, 2001). On this point, reflection on one's own learning can lead to responsibility which can fuel and propel students to raise their awareness of their own learning, thereby empowering them to make sound choices about their progress as students.

Considering learner autonomy from a social vantage point, Geary (1998), Little (2000), and Jimenez Raya et al. (2007) have argued that the rift between an autonomous learner and an independent one is that being an autonomous learner springs out from social interaction with social agents and does not develop in isolation. This definition rhymes with Holliday's (2003) view which states: "Autonomy resides in the social worlds of the students which they bring with them" (p.117). Moreover, Little (2000) has emphasized the view that the social context, which is fostered by positive interdependence and collaboration, can develop learner

autonomy. Recently, learning has been perceived as a social activity where social agents, such as peers and the teacher, can influence and encourage one another to achieve autonomy in learning and to make students socially responsible as Jimenez Raya et al. (2007) rightly remark: “the autonomous learner is “self-determined, socially responsible and critically aware” (p.01). However, some cultural contexts may favor teacher centeredness which may leverage teacher reliance and decrease students’ participation, making students reluctant or discouraged to be autonomous. For Dickinson (1987), in order to make students more inclined towards autonomy, psychological and methodological preparations, such as raising students’ awareness of the importance of learner autonomy, integrating collaborative skills to help them plan and direct their learning adequately, need to be provided to the students. This can help them to embrace autonomy and encourage them to take control for their own learning process. Therefore, the learning context is seen as pivotal in promoting learner autonomy as long as it is equipped with specific classroom practices that are based on learner centeredness and grounded on social perspectives. This is underscored in Murray’s (2014) view which points out that “individuals can only be autonomous in relation to some social context”. Hence, learner autonomy from a social view requires setting up a learner centered environment which enables the students to be continuously motivated, negotiate their learning outcomes and find solutions to their learning problems, leading to more responsibility and control over their learning process. When students are motivated by the social environment, they can display a higher level of self-confidence and willingness to succeed independently as Scharle and Szabo (2000) pinpoint: “motivation and responsibility can mutually reinforce each other and self-confidence contributes to the development of responsibility in its own right” (p.7). Researchers have started to acknowledge the paradigm shift towards learner-centered pedagogies that integrate collaborative learning where the teacher is regarded as a catalyst or a facilitator of learning and students as active agents who play an active role in directing their own learning process. The subsequent section discusses the relation between collaborative learning and learner autonomy in EFL settings.

3. Collaborative learning and learner autonomy:

The aim of twenty-first-century pedagogy is to focus on placing the student at the heart of the learning process and encouraging collaboration with peers and suitable technologies. Teachers expect their students to play an active role in their learning process and to make good decisions about their learning. For Little (2000), collaborative learning can help the students develop the life skills that lead to being an effective and autonomous learner. Collaborative learning is defined by Dale (1997) as any process that requires students to work in groups to solve learning problems, perform varied tasks, and engage in continuous sharing of knowledge and reflection. According to Vygotsky (1978), collaboration is among the activities that are salient in the learner’s zone of proximal development (ZPD). The latter is defined as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by individual linguistic production, and the level of potential development as determined through language produced collaboratively with a peer or teacher” (Ohta 2001, p.9). From this perspective, Little (2000) has suggested that Vygotsky’s (1978) zone of proximal development provided a clarification for the relationship between collaboration, interdependence, and autonomy, claiming that the ZPD highlights what a learner can do on his own and what he can achieve through the help of more knowledgeable others. Through this scaffolding or instructional

support, the learner can accomplish different tasks on his own, leading to more autonomy in the learning process. Therefore, Kohonen (2010) rightly remarks: “the tasks that pupils can do on their own are within their area of self-regulation. The development in the zone thus proceeds from other-regulation to self-regulation, towards increased autonomy” (p. 6).

Moreover, collaborative learning carries a plethora of advantages. It can develop students' intercommunication, mutual interaction, negotiation skills and critical thinking skills (Pica, 1994), which are essential for this globalized world. When students are provided with the opportunity to work collaboratively, they can develop the capacity to reflect, to make decisions and to be critical thinkers; these characteristics are then displayed through concrete actions and behaviours. The latter may involve opportunities for meaningful choice and agency as well as the ability to act independently to achieve common goals. Regarding the importance of dialogic talks and interaction among students, Hadwin and Oshige (2011) claim: “through dialogue and interaction, individuals learn to engage and control their own self-regulatory strategies, evaluations, and processes by observing, requesting, prompting, or experimenting with self-regulation with a supportive other” (p. 248). Hence, through meaningful dialogue, students can influence each other positively and internalize the necessary strategies and skills that lead to group autonomy as Freidman (2003) points out: “shared or collective autonomy is possible for persons engaged as joint agents who choose to act together as single units” (p.15).

Opting for collaborative learning as a classroom practice can empower students to undergo a meaningful change that is shaped by power-sharing. For the latter to be fostered, dependence and individuality need to be transformed positively to establish strong group cohesiveness which is featured by agency during interaction and continuous action and reflection (Freire, 2000). The next section presents the process to develop learner autonomy.

4. Paving the way to group autonomy: A five-movement journey

To develop group autonomy, Murphey and Jacobs (2000) suggested that students need to go through a process composed of five stages or movements. These consist of socialization, dawning metacognition, initiating choice, expanding autonomy, and critical collaborative autonomy. The first movement, which is socialization, has been defined by Murphey and Jacobs (2000) as involving the “learners in the initial phase of joining a group or class, getting to know fellow group members, and feeling comfortable in the group” (p. 8). The ultimate objective of socialization is to immerse the students in social learning and enable them to have what Murphey (1998) calls “positive identity interdependence”.

The second movement is called dawning metacognition. This stage requires students to evaluate their own learning process through reflective interaction that is based on sharing knowledge and negotiating meaning with their peers. According to Murphey (1998), the tasks that can ease the process of evaluation can encompass active discussion and explanation of the answers through thinking aloud when working jointly on a task. Besides, Johnson et al. (2008) have highlighted the group processing interaction activity to develop students' metacognition. This can be achieved by enabling the students to assess their own progress through peer-feedback and try to identify their learning gaps. It also involves assessment of

how they learn and how well they have achieved group cohesiveness and bonding. This activity focuses more on the active contributions of the group members to foster student accountability.

The third movement is entitled initiating choice. In this stage, teachers need to empower their students to have personal agency or to make choices about their own learning process. Students are heterogenous in nature; thus, it is crucial to cater to their varied learning styles and answer their learning needs. Enabling the students to select the topics or the activities that they find interesting can hone their engagement and raise their willingness to learn. Students can also opt for different roles to play within their groups. These roles can be about “the mechanics of the group, such as the timekeeper and the recorder [...] the encourager, encouraging all members to participate; and the checker, checking to see that everyone understands“ (Murphey & Jacobs, 2000, pp. 8-9).

The fourth movement is called expanding autonomy. Since students started socializing, initiating choices and having metacognitive awareness of monitoring their own learning process, they can internalize these processes and extend autonomy outside the classroom. This fourth movement leads to critical collaborative autonomy, which determines the fifth movement where the student becomes self-regulated. At this level, the student can be empowered to give and receive feedback, engage in regular assessment and monitoring, reflect on his own actions, understand the true value of working with others and contribute to the development of the teaching-learning process. Following this view, Trim (1997) claims that students at this level start to :

Recognise the rights of others and accept the necessary constraints on living in a society in a co-operative spirit. For learners, this means linguistic and cultural awareness, study and heuristic skills and also social skills, an understanding of what is best done alone or in pairs and groups and in the latter case a willingness to engage in democratic decision making. (p. 15)

All these processes can be achieved gradually with the assistance of the teacher whose main role is to provide the students with guidance and modelling to enable them to maintain good learning habits. The next section presents some practical classroom techniques to develop learner autonomy.

5. Classroom techniques for developing learner autonomy :

Student-centred pedagogies stress the active role of the student in the learning process, involving their awareness of the essential metacognitive processes and collaboration for promoting their autonomy. According to Chan (2001), to achieve an autonomy-oriented classroom, pedagogical techniques and activities need to revolve around two main principles. The latter are about involving the student in the learning process and creating a variety of learning conditions and group work to increase student motivation and inclusion.

A number of classroom techniques have been suggested to develop learner autonomy and provide students with the toolkit to be active in and outside the classroom. One of the prominent classroom techniques that are perceived to develop learner autonomy is think-pair-share activity. The latter is a collaborative learning strategy that is based on problem-based learning. It requires the students to first work individually to think about the problem posed by the teacher or peers; second they work in pairs or groups to exchange knowledge and discuss the problem together; third they share their answers with the class, leading to thorough questioning and reflection (Gargi et al., 2013).

Moreover, peer-tutoring has recently gained acclamation in the learning process, for it is considered as a scaffolding technique that can help students to achieve good learning outcomes. Peer-tutoring requires students to work in pairs, involving mixed abilities to provide instructional support to each other (Kunsch, Jitendra, & Sood, 2007). There are different types of peer-tutoring namely : reciprocal peer-tutoring, class-wide peer tutoring and cross-age peer tutoring. On the one hand, in reciprocal peer tutoring, peers work in pairs and assume two roles: a tutor and a student; sometimes one peer acts like a tutor while the other acts as a student, thereby exchanging roles and providing active opportunities to consolidate and monitor their learning (Goodwin, 2001). On the other hand, class-wide peer tutoring requires the students to work in groups to approach learning tasks collaboratively, and peers can exchange roles by being tutors or students (Greenwood, Carta & Hall, 1988). Furthermore, cross-age peer tutoring is another type of peer-tutoring where elder students can teach the younger ones through providing regular feedback and support. Peer-tutoring carries a variety of advantages when it is done adequately. It can develop students' interpersonal and intercommunication skills and lower their affective filter as they constantly work collaboratively. It also raises student autonomy because when collaboration and group work are fostered, the students can generate positive attitudes towards learning and be continuously motivated to complete different tasks autonomously (Scharle & Szabo, 2000). Through group or pair work, students can learn from each other as they exchange ideas and sources of knowledge, and reflect on their own learning process. This technique enables the students to be immersed in iterative questioning which urges them to continuously think for themselves, be creative and find solutions to their educational problems.

Another classroom technique for developing learner autonomy is assessment. It is well-documented that assessment methods can boost students' critical thinking skills since it can help them to evaluate their success and make decisions about their learning. According to Tassinari (2016), the objective of assessment "is to make learners (more) aware of their potential as autonomous learners, and to allow them to be initiators of and responsible for the (self-) assessment process" (p. 123). Assessment methods fall in three categories and each of which has a specific purpose. These encompass summative assessment or assessment of learning, formative assessment or assessment for learning and assessment as learning. While the objective of summative assessment is to measure students' achievement at the end of a course, formative assessment aims at providing students with regular feedback which scaffolds their learning. Besides, assessment as learning is meant to enable students to become aware of how they learn through self-assessment. The latter is defined by Boud and Falchikov (1989) as "the involvement of learners in making judgements about their achievements and

the outcomes of their learning’’ (p, 529). In the context of learner autonomy, self-assessment is associated with the achievement and transformation of power, control and authority from in to outside class, leading to lifelong learning and professional development (Brew, 1999 cited in Tassinari, 2016). As suggested by Tassinari (2016), to ensure that self-assessment is done properly to achieve learner autonomy, the teacher needs to consider its four steps namely : Getting started; Choosing components and descriptors; Assessing one’s own competencies; and Comparing perspectives. To accomplish this aim, there are different types of self-assessment checklists such as KWL chart, learning logs and graphic organizers that can help the students to identify their learning gaps, evaluate their learning process and have more control over their own assessment. For example, the KWL chart, which is an acronym that stands for what we **K**now, what we **W**ant to know and what we **L**earned, can be adopted to enable students to activate their schemata or their background knowledge of a topic and to help them combine their knowledge with new information to generate questions and identify any possible misunderstandings, leading to continuous reflection.

More recently with the outbreak of COVID-19, most Algerian universities have started to opt for blended learning as a more appropriate solution to enhance student learning and solve a number of educational issues. It is revealed that blended learning, which meshes in-person learning with online learning (Marsh, 2012), can promote learner autonomy. According to Osguthorpe and Graham (2003), personal agency, which falls under the third learner autonomy movement suggested by Murphey and Jacobs (2000) namely initiating choice, is also supported in blended learning since it allows students to take control over their own learning process by providing students with the chance to learn at their own pace through deciding when, how and what to learn. Blended learning can also maximize social interaction among students since its main feature is to make students active in and outside the classroom through online learning. This can be accomplished by creating group-related activities that are based on collaborative learning and reflective interaction through the use of Wiki and integrated communication tools (Lee, 2002). For Schwienhorst (2003), blended learning can foster learner autonomy because it is grounded on the principle of flexibility, personalized learning, and collaborative learning which can provide students with learner control and motivation. It is also claimed that blended learning environments comprising eclectic methods and multimedia tools can cater to students’ learning styles and answer their learning needs, which can raise their willingness to learn and boost their academic success.

6. Conclusion :

This paper has dealt with the importance of considering the development of learner autonomy as a result of joint practice rather than as an isolated endeavour. It has approached the development of learner autonomy from a social-constructivist stance which emphasizes the use of collaborative learning techniques to enable students to take control of their own learning and be critical thinkers rather than passive recipients of knowledge. Thus, some of the classroom techniques, which are based on collaboration and reflective interaction, were suggested to promote learner autonomy, thereby balancing power-sharing in the classroom through moving from individual to group autonomy. This process may have a positive impact on students since they will be able to acquire the necessary skills to work collaboratively and develop positive learning habits which involve student motivation, reflection and ownership.

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