

The benefits of learner autonomy education essay



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Autonomy first appeared in the foreign language teaching field alongside the emergence of the communicative approach. Prior to that, autonomy within a classical classroom was virtually nonexistent, that is, the teachers were primarily viewed as having full control over all learning activities and the students rights were confined within the barriers of the institute or school. (Benson, 1997: 2).

The seventies saw a new era of understanding to language, language as a form of communication became increasingly prevalent and new importance was placed on cognitive processes. From this, autonomy emerged as a key feature to foreign language teaching.

The notion of autonomy has now become part of conventional research and custom in Western societies and it seems to have developed into a universally accepted concept as an educational aim, as argued by Benson and Voller (1997: pgno) .

This essay aims to look at the understanding of Learner Autonomy by first outlining some of the existing definitions of autonomy. As well as outlining Next, some of its benefits in relation to language learning will be discussed and then as well as drawing upon a critical evaluation of Learner autonomy in respect to whether or not it can examining whether it can be universally applied to certain all cultures and societies, by analysing the argument that learner autonomy is very much a western concept. In conclusion, The essay will conclude by discussing some of the ways of fostering learner autonomy in learners.

In order to have a clear understanding of learner autonomy, it would be a plausible idea to first be best to consider some of its definitions. One of the most recognised definitions of autonomy was related by Holec (1981: 3) who illustrated defined autonomy as “ the ability to take charge of one’s learning”. At this point, it would be noteworthy to mention that the relevant literature is puzzled with incalculable the countless number of definitions of autonomy and synonyms for this term such as “ self direction” (candy, 1991: pgno) as well as and “ andragogy” (Knowles, 1983: pgno) The sheer number of terms and definitions display the increasing importance that scholars and researches attach to it. So far, we are able to indentify that the term autonomy has created great controversy inasmuch as linguists and educationalist have failed to reach a consensus on its definition as it is indicated by the following definitions.

According to Little (1991: 4), he defines learner autonomy to be is defined as “ essentially a matter of the learner’s psychological relation to the process and content of learning- a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action”.

“ Capacity” as Little (1991: 4) states is referred to the planning, evaluating and monitoring of learning activities and comprises of both the process and content of learning.

However, Paiva (2006: pgno) expresses repudiates that the definitions produced by Holec and Little on the basis that they do not account for other vital factors, such as educational and economic contexts, which hinder the learning process.

Many other works from various authors and researchers have also added to the discussions encompassing autonomy. Dickinson's work (1987: 27), for example, views autonomy as " a mode of learning – one in which the individual is responsible for all the decisions with her learning and undertakes the implications of these decisions".

However, Pavia (2006: pg no) indicates that it is uncommon for language learners to possess the ability to draw up and implement all of the choices they make about their learning, especially if you take into consideration that, majority of the time, learners will depend upon the materials written by other authors.

The suppositions displayed held by Dickinson (1987) and others represent the highest level of autonomy (it is not clear what you mean here). In essence it allows the learner to be completely free in order to choose how, what and when to learn without any external restrictions, such as those found within formal education. This notion is also described in Crabbe's (1993: 443) ideological argument:

" The individual has the right to be free to exercise his or her own choices as in other areas and not to become a victim of choices made by social institutions".

This is the way which philosophy views autonomy Through the lens of philosophy, being " autonomous is to be a law to oneself; autonomous agents are self governing agents (Buss, 2002: pgno)". While for Pennycook (1997: 39) it is:

“ the struggle to become the author of one’s own world, to be able to create one’s own meaning, to pursue cultural alternatives amid the cultural politics of everyday life”.

As Candy (1989: pgno), in his own opinion, outlines the threat that dangers of formal education can display to the on learners independence to make their own decisions. The learners own infringement creates learning to take place, and learning is viewed as the product of one’s self-initiated interface with the world. (what you mean is not clear!)

Freire (1997: pgno) comprehends autonym autonomy to be the learner’s faculty and freedom to be able to dispense and in dispense the knowledge that is taught to him or her. However, the purpose here is not to ignore the significance of the teacher’s role within the learning environment. As Freire (1997: pgno) points out, that the teacher’s role is not to only to relay knowledge, but also to create abundant opportunities for learners to construct knowledge.

Benson (1997: pgno) and others associate the notion of autonomy as a feature of a learner’s identity. In other words, autonomy as is a right, entailing the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning process. This decisive aspect of autonomy entails the goal of social conversion as well as the option to act and think independently in order to become the keeper of one’s own world.

Based on the notion of autonomy, Benson (2001: 2) asserts that the “ concept of autonomy is grounded in a natural tendency for learners to take control over their learning”. What is understood by “ natural tendency” here

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is that it is accessible to all individuals, although individual differences also have to be taken into consideration since autonomy may be viewed by some in different ways and levels depending on the characteristics of each learner and the given context they are placed in (sentence is bare long, break it up into two). In addition, the author disputes that learners who somewhat lack autonomy somewhat still have the ability to build autonomy given that they are placed in the correct settings and provided full preparation. The author He further lays importance upon the teacher's ability to structure his or her teaching and learning, since this will be a major key in shaping the influence it he has upon the learner in terms of imparting automony, which can either be positive or negative in the development process of autonomy amongst the learners.

Another vital point that must be outlined here are the three key understandings of learner autonomy in respect to language teaching, which are the technical, the political and the psychological. The technical autonomous learner is the one who can demonstrate pure independence with or without formal instruction and also possess the necessary skills and techniques which allows them necessary to learn a language. The political understanding attaches importance to the management of the content and the development of one's own learning, whereas the psychological understanding describes autonomy as the ability to take responsibility of one's own learning (Benson, 1997: 193). In essence, an individual learners must possess certain qualities from either one of the three versions mentioned above in order to be autonomous in their learning.

According to Leni Dam (1990, cited in Gathercole, 1990: 16) a learner can only be defined as an autonomous learner when they independently set goals and aims, select materials, organise useful tasks and be able to evaluate one's their own progress. To all intent and purposes, the autonomous learner's ability to become diligent allows them to take an active role in their own development, through gathering ideas and participating in various learning opportunities, as opposed to acting upon the stimuli of the teacher. (Boud, 1988: pg no).

However, some would argue that such characteristics encompassing the autonomous learner seem far bound from reality. This stands to reason, for most of the traits attributed to the "autonomous learner" are not commonly found in the average learner. For example, Benn (1976, cited in Candy, 1991: 102) shapes the autonomous learner to be an individual:

"whose life has a consistency that derives from a coherent set of beliefs, values and principles and who engages in a still continuing process of criticism and re-evaluation."

In the same vein, we also find that some researchers have identified an autonomous learner to possess an insight into their learning techniques and strategies; they are good at making speculations and have an open mind and approach to the target language (Omaggio, 1978, cited in Wenden, 1998: 41-42)

Some of these points mentioned above may be necessary but should not be seen as absolute stipulations for the development of learner autonomy since many other factors may need to be taken into account such as motivation,

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learning strategies, language awareness and learner needs. For example, the characteristic that learners need to be able to assess their learning styles can be based around a metalanguage that learners need to acquire in order to be viewed as an autonomous learner while the ability to make good speculations and being tolerant to the target language mainly pertains to motivation. It is noteworthy to mention that many view autonomy to be a process rather than a product and that the learner does not become autonomous rather he or she works to that stage (Candy, 1991: 115).

(Check Benson book to maybe bring a wrap to the definition side of the essay)

If we are able to define autonomy and describe it from various angles of control over learning, it would be logical and important to outline the significance (or and benefits of learner autonomy as well the reasons for it.

As it has been made mentioned of earlier that in recent years a substantial amount of interest in autonomy in language learning has taken place, and it has a become favourable aim to pursue purely upon three causes on three grounds: The psychological, the practical and the philosophical.

The psychological understanding for promoting learner autonomy within the classroom, which is the understanding that is most likened favoured by educationalists, is purely based upon the fact that learners progress much better when they take control of their own learning. Candy (1988: pgno) points out that when learners are engrossed in making selections or decisions regarding the rate, mode, progression and the content, learning becomes more significant and efficient. In addition, learners who play a role

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in the decision making aspect of the programme often are often more motivated, a learner who is well motivated is deemed a successful learner. From this it may be presumed that learner autonomy can eliminate many of the motivational issues that learners face when learning a language.

The practical advantage or rationale of learner autonomy rises from the necessity to offer more existing language teaching situations where traditional approaches may not be suited. As Tudor (1993: p.90) points out, that the understanding of this is due to the fact that the teacher may not always be accessible to aid the student so therefore learners therefore will have to take the initiative to learn on their own. Also learners may not be able to afford or possess have the free time to attend language schools or institutes so in effect they may have to seek alternatives in achieving their goals. And lastly, as Crabbe (1993: p.90) states, that a particular society may not be able to offer such facilities or resources to all the people in every area of learning. In this situation, learners have to acquire their own learning requirements, and that is, either individually or collectively, as to get the knowledge they require.

Lastly, the philosophical aspect of autonomy which benefits the learner is the conviction that every person has the full right to make their own choices in their learning as well as in other aspects of life. There is also the notion that societies are often better off when individuals are free to make decisions and are not confined by social establishments (Crabbe, 1993: p.90). Therefore with such freedom of learning, learners will confidently maximise their choices they make within life.

Additionally, others have outlined three interconnected propensities in language teaching in regards to the benefits of conveying learner autonomy: learner centeredness, individualisation and an increasing acknowledgment of the political element in language learning (Benson & Voller: 1997: 6). Other reasons and benefits for encouraging learner autonomy amongst language learners are:

An increasing growth of eagerness in learning a language (Thonsoule check site).

Taking a pro active and independent approach to learning and making choices regards to which learning tasks or beneficial to one's own progress as personal contribution in decision makings directs the learner to more efficient learning (Dickinson, 1995: 165).

When a learner obtains the ability to take responsibility for his or her learning process then the restrictions to learning which commonly exists in the classical teacher centred educational organisations may not surface (Little: 1991: 8).

However, it is important to mention that other researches feel that there is insufficient evidence to display that there is a direct relationship between planning and the actual outcome. Therefore there should be an increase in practical research and a gradualist approach since autonomous learning usually produces unexpected outcomes (Nunan cited in Finch, 1997: 8).

With this understanding of the implication of learner autonomy and its benefits as well as the various definitions, it seems that the main aim is that

all learners must become independent of the teacher. according to Dickinson (1992: 2) argues that the teacher is to possess assume more of a facilitative role in promoting autonomy in respect to conveying the process of learners rather than the content of that learning. Therefore, it is stressed by many advocators that learner autonomy does not negate the need for teachers and it also does not encourage self-study without any direction from the teacher whatsoever.

Little (1995: 179) indicates that learners do not become autonomous involuntarily in formal settings and at times they find it difficult to ponder reflect on the learning process. So therefore Teachers must therefore equip their learners with appropriate knowledge and tools in order to reach impart autonomy; in other words, to give them a helping hand by giving the learners ample amount of opportunities to develop the ability to take responsibility of their own learning Dickinson (1992: 2). Some of these may be through the following:

Encouraging independency in learning by the teacher displaying full approval and encouragement towards learners becoming more responsible of their learning

Providing learners opportunities to practice independent learning

Helping learners to perceive the language as a system

Helping learners to develop their learning strategies so that they can practice their independence.

Teachers can share knowledge they already possess about the language in order to make students more aware of what to anticipate from language learning.

Therefore it is to be understood that, in order to successfully encourage learners to become embarked more independently in their learning, highly relies on the teacher must to redefine its their role within language education (Hill 1994: 214). However On the other hand, it this may be difficult for teachers to be able to achieve mainly because teachers they themselves lack the knowledge of making this the transition of being the purveyor of knowledge to a manager of learning resources (Sheerin, 1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 63).

Despite the implication and benefits that have been mentioned earlier there still seems to be a room for critical concern. The main concerns with autonomy as an aim for education are is the deficiency of authentic theoretical foundation (Benson 2001: 17). Also there seems to be a lack of research conducted in performance results in comparison to the learners who have been taught traditionally, teacher centred teaching, and those who are “ autonomous learners” (Hill 1994: 214). This argument has caused authors such Pennycook (1994: 44) to warn educators to take a gradualist approach:

“ to encourage ‘ learner autonomy’ universally, without first becoming acutely aware of the social, cultural and political context in which one is working, may lead at best to inappropriate pedagogies and at worst to cultural impositions”.

In essence, for autonomy to progress as a universal goal there has to be certain factors taken into consideration and if they are not they could possibly hinder learner autonomy and the benefits of it as stated by Pennycook (1994). It must be noted that certain cultural attitudes may either facilitate or restrain limit the acquisition of such skills in acquiring a language, and may restrict or aid the development of autonomy (Ho & Crookall: 1995: 237)

Social interaction in Chinese culture or communities influenced by Chinese culture tend to view the teacher and student to be part of a “ relational hierarchy” (Chang and Holt, 1994: 105). This hierarchy here is comprehended understood as the underlying relation between the teacher and the student; that is, the Chinese student views the teachers as an authority figure in the classroom and the student’s sincere respect for that figure whose authority is not to be questioned. Scollan and Scollan (cited in Ho & Crookall: 1995: 237) make some important observations have observed and reported in detail on the relative perceptions on authority of Asian and Western students, noting that:

“ The Asian focus on care, nature and benevolence (or their absence) of the person in authority while the westerner tends to focus on the restriction, limitation and dependence of the person over which the authority is exercised.”

Therefore this assumes that the way This seems to suggest that the concept of authority held by Asian students renders the teacher wholly responsible for development of the student’s interlanguage. understand the concept of

authority, seems to suggest that teachers are expected to have authority of the students by taking charge of the learners were as. In In the case of autonomous learning, autonomy, however, the teachers are is seen to take a step back and allows students to take charge in their own learning rather than acting on the stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988: pg no).

The psychological implications for learner autonomy require the learner to possess the ability to question the teacher, content, pace as well as playing a role in the decision making aspect of the programme. Of course, than this concept may not be applicable to a certain extent with in Asian cultures since many cross cultural studies have shown that the Chinese respect for authority is the Chinese preoccupation with face (wording unclear), that is, when one communicates in Chinese culture one must be fully aware of safe guarding the self image of others, their feelings and that they should not be confronted openly. Therefore, this sheds light upon why some Chinese students may not challenge the teacher's role or choice in regards to content or curriculum. vice versa Similarly, the teacher will also find it difficult to transform its their role into a facilitator who works with the students in order to find solutions.

Therefore, being autonomous according to the definitions and descriptions given is that the learner must be able to become independent of the teacher, that is, to a certain extent posses the ability to express one's own thoughts and opinions' which may vary or oppose the teacher. It is quiet relatively clear to conclude that Chinese students would find the concept of autonomy to be uncomfortable and perhaps it is even a concept which is deemed unconceivable to exists in Chinese culture (Ho & Crookally, 1995: 237).

However, Littlewood (cited in Nakata, 2011: 902) asserts that the teacher's presumptions of Asian learners being obedient, passive etc. do not coincide with what learners in reality want, regardless of the fact if whether it does not correspond with their behaviour in class. Research concludes (WHAT RESEARCH? PUT IN THE SOURCES!) that Japanese students do not actually view the teacher as a an authoritative figure head whose ideas and opinions' should not be opposed and that the teacher is responsible for the evaluation of their progress and learning which is very interesting piece of finding. Therefore it may strongly suggest that there is potential for autonomy to be established in certain cultural settings or, to a certain extent, some of its principles and features may have to be overlooked in certain settings.

Pennycook (1997: 48) argued that autonomy, in the learning of foreign language setting, should consist more of an approach where the student is able to “ find a voice in English” and to “ confront a range of cultural constructions as they learn English”. More recently, Schmenk (2005: 112) points out that the idea of autonomy as a universal concept relies solely upon “ glossing over” some of the queries regarding of what autonomy comprises of in a particular social, cultural, or institutional learning context. Therefore this will be devoid some of the particular characteristics and thus facilitate for “ homogenization” (Benson, 2001: 70). However Schmenk does understand the value of autonomy along as educators realise that it is not a universal concept and that it contains constraints within particular settings (NOT SURE WHAT YOU MEAN) (Schmenk, 2005: 115).

However, even though cultural considerations have been a major concern in the learner autonomy debate, authors such as Pennycook and Schmenk still

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retain its importance. However, in defence of the universal relevance of the fundamentals application of learner autonomy, Little (1999: 60) who takes on the view that they are deeply embedded in suppositions about the psychology of learning which are not culturally specific. Others have also stated that the ways in which teachers will undergo fostering learner autonomy must be contextually appropriate (Benson, 2001: 70).

Therefore it can be understood from this that are certain implications that can develop if autonomy goes viral becomes a universal construct across a wide range of cultures, that is, that educators risk becoming culturally blind when they overlook the fact that autonomy is very much a Western innovation and that its ideas and concepts are deeply rooted within Western tradition and ideologies. Further, if autonomy has the goal of being conveyed applied universally then it overlooks the fact that most of its participants who will supposedly gain from fostering learner autonomy are from a wide range of cultural backgrounds (Schmenk, 2005: 2).

Throughout this essay there has been certain mention of 'fostering autonomy', that is to find ways of enhancing effective ways in which autonomy can be fostered by placing learners in control of their language learning (Benson, 2001: 123). However, to point out that learner autonomy is something that can be fostered does not consequently mean to decrease it the level of skills which need to be acquired, rather it should be understood that the learner as well as the teacher can work out solutions which will enhance the learning experience through creating a friendly environment categorised by honest and open feedback. Where the This includes the respecting of other's opinions and ideas of others are respected and the

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acceptance of self-improvement as an aim and cooperation rather than competition (Candy, 1991: 337). To promote methods of fostering learner autonomy is to also promote methods of fostering teacher autonomy as both are interdependent. However, the following will concentrate on the learner in terms of what they can achieve even though the success of the student does rely, to a certain degree, upon the teacher to redefine its role (Benson: 2001: pg from teachers role).

Wenden (1998: 79-95) suggests an excellent way to get students to recognise their own strategies whereby learners collect information about certain learning tasks and activities. The learner is given a task in which they have to report back on what their thoughts are regarding the task they are completing. This style of self reporting is called introspective, as learners have to reflect upon what they are doing at the time of the assigned task which is in essence a verbalisation of their conscious. This assumed method allows the teacher to note the strategies that the student is using at the time of the report. However others feel that when the learner is forced to think out aloud he or she may lose focus on being able to complete the task efficiently, thus possibly rendering the result of this report inauthentic and provisional. (Thansoulas online).

However, it has been pointed out that self-reports can be a tool to raise an understanding into the learner's strategies and a requirement and a continuous evaluation of the learners goals and aims (DOESN'T GO WITH THE FIRST HALF OF THE SENTENCE!). As Wenden (1998: 80) points out, "without awareness learners will remain trapped in their old patterns of beliefs and behaviours and never be fully autonomous".

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One of the main goals of education is the ways in which it can adjust learners' beliefs regarding themselves and outlining to them that their failures in success have been brought about from the lack of effective strategies as opposed to the potential they may possess (Gardner, 2010: 2). Therefore, one of the most effective ways suggested by Wenden (1998: 107) that represents this notion of self-realisation is the method of diaries and evaluation sheets, which potentially evaluates, plans and monitors their learning as well as identifying any shortcomings that may occur while learning.

This method simply entails a learner to create a diary in order to keep a record of their daily or weekly tasks in learning the language. The student writes down their thoughts and feelings of how they feel about certain tasks they have accomplished and suggests new ways they can overcome their shortcomings. Parallel to diaries, students can write a report on their expectations of the language course they have embarked on then they can fill out evaluation sheets or reports on their outcome of the course. These types of activities should help learners to put their learning to better perspective gain a better perspective of their learning and help them to manage their learning more efficiently (Wenden, 1998: 102)

So far it is understood from the discussions and debates is the continuous emphasis that the teacher has not abandoned its his authority, rather the teacher has redefined his role in assisting the learner who experiments and creates hypotheses in their endeavour to master the language and, in essence, help the learners to become independent in their learning.

Therefore it may be understood that learner autonomy is best achieved

when the teacher acts as a facilitator. Therefore the teacher places herself between a continuum between transmission and interpretation. An interpretation teacher has the conviction to the belief that one can organise thought, interpretate and deal with facts and that learners already posse a lot of knowledge and they have the capacity to reorganise that knowledge. (Benson & Voller, 1997: 99). The transmission teacher's believes that there are limits in subject disciplines and content and that at times students may find it difficult to uphold some of the standards that branch out of these two factors. (Benson & Voller, 1997: 100).

(conclusion)

4 LATA MAYBE !! The authors also point out that although the technical and psychological may give the learner the confince he or she requires and equip them with the skills to become autonomus, they tend to decrease social difficulties to the level of the individual.