Try to Gain an Insight into Learner Autonomy

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Abstract: In China the current English teaching in colleges and universities is mostly "teacher-centered". Both teachers and students admit that although there are some language activities in class, teacher talk takes up most of the time. But promoting learner autonomy is a trend in current language teaching in the world. The authors believe that learning by its very nature is autonomous. This paper proposes learner-centered teaching method, discusses the conditions for learner autonomy and suggests that teacher and learner should work cooperatively towards autonomy.
Key words: learner autonomy; autonomous learner; learner-centered teaching

1. Definition of Autonomy

Learner autonomy has many synonyms, such as "independence" (Sheerin, 1991), "self-direction" (Candy, 1991), etc. Generally, the term autonomy has come to be used in at least five ways (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 2):

1 for situations in which learners study entirely on their own.
2 for a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning.
3 for an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education.
4 for the exercise of learner's responsibility for their own learning.
5 for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

It is noteworthy that autonomy can be thought of in terms of a departure from education as a social process, as well as the roles of the participants in the learning process. It is necessary to try to gain insights into what learner autonomy means and consists of. In David Little's terms, learner autonomy is "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" (Little, 1991: 4). Leni Dam (1990) defines autonomy in terms of the learner's willingness and capacity to control or oversee his own learning. More specifically, she holds that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals, chooses materials, methods and tasks, exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks, and chooses criteria for evaluation.

To all intents and purposes, the autonomous learner takes an active role in the learning process, generating ideas and availing himself of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting to various stimuli of the teacher (Boud, 1988; Kohonen, 1992; Knowles, 1983). For Rathbone (1971: 100, 104, cited in Candy, 1991: 271), the autonomous learner is a self-activated maker of meaning, an active agent in his own learning process. He is not the one to whom things merely happen; he is the one who, by his own volition, causes things to happen. Learning is seen as the result of his own self-initiated interaction with the world.

Within such a conception, learning is not simply a matter of rote memorization; "it is a

constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from (or even imposing meaning on) events' (Candy, 1991: 271).

Like the different definitions of autonomy, "inventories' of characteristics showed by the autonomous learner abound. Benn (1976, cited in Candy, 1991: 102) likens the autonomous learner to one "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", while Rousseau (1911, cited in Candy, 1991: 102) regards the autonomous learner as someone who "is obedient to a law that he prescribes to himself". Within the context of education, though, there seem to be seven main attributes characterizing autonomous learners (see Omaggio, 1978, cited in Wenden, 1998: 41-42).

1. They have insights into their learning styles and strategies.
2. They take an active approach to the learning task at hand.
3. They are willing to take risk, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs.
4. They are good guessers.
5. They attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriateness.
6. They develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply.
7. They have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

Here, some comments with respect to the preceding list are called for. The points briefly touched upon above are necessary but not sufficient conditions for the development of learner autonomy, and many more factors, such as learner needs, motivation, learning strategies, and language awareness, have to be taken into consideration. In view of this, the attempt will be made, in subsequent sections, to shed some light on some of the parameters affecting, and interfering with, learners' self-image as well as their capacity and will to learn. It is of consequence to note that autonomy is a process, not a product. One does not become autonomous; one only works towards autonomy. One deduction of viewing autonomy in this way is the belief that there are some things to be achieved by the learner, as well as some ways of achieving these things, and that autonomy "is learned at least partly through educational experiences and intervention" (Candy, 1991: 115).

2. A Trend towards Learner Autonomy

If we take a long look at babies, it soon becomes apparent that young children are powerhouses of energy and motivation to learn. Small children are natural autonomous learners, constantly asking "why?", "how?", "what?". They are self-directed and their parents should keep these naive explorers of life from harm. As soon as children go to school, however, the curricula, class content and learning processes are usually, often with good reasons and intentions, organized for them.

Why therefore has there been a movement away from teacher-centered learning towards student-centered learning or autonomy? Candy (1991) argues that there has been interest in self-directed learning through the ages, and that this interest increased from the 1960s and has accelerated in more recent years. Heron (1993) believes that there are many arguments for

autonomy in leaning. Firstly, he argues that learning by its very nature is autonomous, that is, nobody can make you learn and indeed no one can memorize facts, understand ideas or practice skills for you. Heron maintains that interest and commitment are self-generated and any attempts to impose or negate them interfere with learning. Secondly, he believes that compliance with a program completely directed by others leads to conforming behavior in order to survive "the system". Thirdly, Heron cites the doctrine of natural rights formulated in the 17th century and now described as "human rights" as being the right of children, workers, research subjects and also students in higher education to participate in decisions that relate to them. Fourthly, Heron believes that learning should involve the whole person, "a being that is physical, perceptual, affective, cognitive (intellectual, imaginative, intuitive), conative (exercising the will), social, political, psychic and spiritual" (Heron 1993: 15). All, he believes, is achieved best through learner autonomy.

3. Learner Autonomy and Dominant Philosophies of Learning

Before discussing learning strategies, motivation, and attitudes of learners, it would be pertinent to probe into learner autonomy in relation to dominant philosophical approaches to learning. The assumption is that what is dubbed as learner autonomy and the extent to which it is a permissible and viable educational goal are all too often "based on (and thus constrained by) particular conceptions of the constitution of knowledge itself" (Benson, 1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 20).

In this section, three dominant approaches to knowledge and learning will be briefly discussed, with a view to examining how each of them connects with learner autonomy. Positivism, which reigned in the twentieth century, is premised upon the assumption that knowledge reflects objective reality. Therefore, if teachers can be said to hold this "objective reality", learning can only "consist in the transmission of knowledge from one individual to another" (Benson & Voller, 1997: 20). Congruent with this view, of course, is the maintenance and enhancement of the "traditional classroom," where teachers are the promulgator of knowledge and holder of power, and learners are seen as "containers to be filled with the knowledge held by teachers" (ibid.). On the other hand, positivism also lends support to the widespread notion that knowledge is attained through the "hypothesis-testing" model, and that it is more effectively acquired when "it is discovered rather than taught" (ibid.). It takes little effort to realize that positivism is incongruent with, and even runs counter to, the development of learner autonomy, as the latter refers to a gradual but radical separation from conventions and restrictions and is inextricably related to self-direction and self-evaluation.

Constructivism, within applied linguistics, is strongly associated with Halliday (1979, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 21). As Candy (1991: 254) observes, "one of the central tenets of constructivism is that individuals try to give meaning to, or construe, the perplexing maelstrom of events and ideas in which they find themselves caught up". In contrast to positivism, constructivism holds the view that, rather than internalizing or discovering objective knowledge (whatever that might mean), individuals reorganize and restructure their experience. In Candy's terms (Candy, 1991: 270), constructivism "leads directly to the proposition that knowledge is something "built up by the learner" (Candy, 1991: 270). In other words, language learning does not involve internalizing sets of rules, structures and forms; each learner brings his own experience and world knowledge and relates them to the target language or task at hand.

Apparently, constructivism supports, and extends to cover, psychological versions of autonomy that belong to learners' behavior, attitudes, motivation, and self-concept (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 23). As a result, constructivist approaches encourage and promote self-directed learning as a necessary condition for learner autonomy.

Finally, the critical theory, an approach within humanities and language studies, shares with constructivism the view that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered and learned. Moreover, it argues that knowledge does not reflect reality, but comprises "competing ideological versions of that reality expressing the interests of different social groups" (Benson & Voller, 1997: 22). Within this approach, learning concerns issues of power and ideology and is seen as a process of interaction with a social context, which can bring about social change. Then, certainly, learner autonomy assumes a more social and political character within the critical theory. As learners become aware of the social context in which their learning is embedded and the constraints their learning implies, they gradually become independent, dispel illusions, and can be thought of as "authors of their own world" (ibid.: 53).

4. Conditions for Learner Autonomy

The concern of the present study has so far been with outlining the general characteristics of autonomy. One thing that should be restated is that autonomy is not a product ready made for use or merely a personal quality or character. Rather, it should be clarified that autonomous learning is achieved when certain conditions are obtained: cognitive and meta-cognitive strategies on the part of the learner, motivation, attitudes, and knowledge about language learning, i.e., a kind of meta-language. To acknowledge, however, that learners have to follow certain paths to attain autonomy is equal to asserting that there has to be a teacher who is responsible for showing the way. In other words, autonomous learning is by no means "teacherless learning". As Sheerin (1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 63) concisely puts it, "teachers have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand to stay afloat".

Probably, giving students a "helping hand" may affect learner autonomy, and this is mainly because teachers are ill-prepared or reluctant to "wean students away from teacher dependence" (Sheerin, 1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 63). After all, "it is not easy for teachers to change their role from purveyor of information to counselor and manager of learning resources--and it is not easy for teachers to let learners solve problems for themselves" (Little, 1990, cited in Gathercole, 190: 11). Therefore, such a transition from teacher-centered to learner-centered is awash with difficulties. At any rate, learner-centered--which is ancillary to autonomy--"is not a single, unitary concept, but rather a continuum along which various instructional situations may be placed" (Candy, 1991: 205). It is just these "instructional situations" that need discussion and in the following part, it is of utmost importance to gain insights into the strategies learners use in their learning of the target language, as well as their motivation and attitude towards language learning in general.

4.1 Learning Strategies

A central research project on learning strategies is the one surveyed in O'Malley and Chamot (1990). According to them, learning strategies are "the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information" (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990:1, cited in Cook, 1993: 113)--a definition in keeping with the one provided in

Wenden (1998: 18): "Learning strategies are mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so". To a great or lesser degree, the strategies and learning styles that someone adopts "may partly reflect personal preference rather than innate endowment" (Skehan, 1998: 237). We will only briefly discuss some of the main learning strategies, refraining from mentioning communication or compensatory strategies.

A. Cognitive Strategies

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 44), cognitive strategies "operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning". Learners may use any or all of the following cognitive strategies (see Cook, 1993: 114-115):

repetition, when imitating other's speech;

resourcing, i.e., having recourse to dictionaries and other materials;

translation, that is using their mother tongue as a basis for understanding and/or producing the target language;

note-taking;

deduction, i.e., conscious application of L2 rules;

contextualization, when embedding a word or phrase in a meaningful sequence;

transfer, that is, using knowledge acquired in the L1 to remember and understand facts and sequences in the L2;

inferencing, when matching an unfamiliar word against available information (a new word etc);

question for clarification, when asking the teacher to explain, etc.

There are many more cognitive strategies in the relevant literature. O'Malley and Chamot (1990) recognize 16.

B. Metacognitive Strategies

According to Wenden (1998: 34), "metacognitive knowledge includes all facts learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations". In a sense, metacognitive strategies are skills used for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning activity; "they are strategies about learning rather than learning strategies themselves" (Cook, 1993: 114). Let us look at some of these strategies:

directed attention, when deciding in advance to concentrate on general aspects of a task;
selective attention, paying attention to specific aspects of a task;
self-monitoring, i.e., checking one's performance as one speaks;
self-evaluation, i.e., appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards;
self-reinforcement, rewarding oneself for success.

At the planning stage, also known as pre-planning (Wenden, 1998: 27), learners identify their objectives and determine how they will achieve them. Planning, however, may also go to while a task is being performed. This is called planning-in-action. Here, learners may change their objectives and reconsider the ways in which they will go about achieving them. At the monitoring stage, language learners act as "participant observers or overseers of their language learning"

(ibid.), asking themselves, "How am I doing? Am I having difficulties with this task?", and so on. Finally, when learners evaluate, they do so in terms of the outcome of their attempt to use a certain strategy. According to Wenden (1998: 28), evaluating involves three steps: 1) learners examine the outcome of their attempt to learn; 2) they access the criteria they will use to judge the strategy; and 3) they apply the strategy.

4.2 Learner Attitudes and Motivation

Language learning is not merely a cognitive task. Learners do not only reflect on their learning in terms of the language input to which they are exposed, or the optimal strategies they need in order to achieve the goals they set. Rather, the success of a learning activity is, to some extent, contingent upon learners' stance towards the world and the learning activity in particular, their sense of self, and their desire for learning (see Benson & Voller, 1997: 134-136). As Candy (1991: 295-296) says, "the *how* and the *what* of learning are intimately interwoven. The overall approach a learner adopts will significantly influence the shape of his or her learning outcomes". In another words, language learning--as well as learning in general--also has an affective component. Gardner and Macintyre (1993: 1, cited in Graham, 1997: 92) define "affective variables" as the "emotionally relevant characteristics of the individual that influence how she/he will respond to any situation". Other scholars attach less importance to learners' emotions, and claim "social and psychological factors' give a more suitable description of students' reactions to the learning process. Among the social and affective variables at work, self-esteem and desire to learn are deemed to be the most crucial factors in the learner's ability to overcome occasional setbacks or minor mistakes in the process of learning a second, or foreign language. Therefore, it is necessary to shed some light on learner attitudes and motivation.

Wenden (1998: 52) defines attitudes as "learned motivations, valued beliefs, evaluations, what one believes is acceptable, or responses oriented towards approaching or avoiding". For her, two kinds of attitudes are crucial: attitudes learners hold about their role in the learning process, and their capability as learners (ibid.: 53).

In a sense, attitudes are a form of metacognitive knowledge. At any rate, "learner beliefs about their role and capability as learners will be shaped and maintained by other beliefs they hold about themselves as learners" (ibid.: 54). For example, if learners believe that certain personality types cannot learn a foreign language and they believe that they are that type of person, then they will think that they are fighting a "losing battle," as far as learning the foreign language is concerned. Furthermore, if learners labor under the misconception that learning is successful only within the context of the "traditional classroom", where the teacher directs, instructs, and manages the learning activity, and students must follow in the teacher's footsteps, they are likely to be impervious or resistant to learner-centered strategies aiming at autonomy, and success is likely to be undermined.

In a way, attitudes are "part of one's perception of self, of others, and of the culture in which one is living or the culture of the target language" (Brown, 1987: 126), and it seems clear that positive attitudes are helpful in increasing motivation, while negative attitudes have the opposite effect.

Although the term "motivation" is frequently used in educational contexts, there is little agreement among experts as to its exact meaning. What most scholars seem to agree on, though, is that motivation is "one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second or foreign

language (L2) learning. Motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning and later the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process" (Dornyei, 1998: 117). According to Gardner and MacIntyre (1993: 3), motivation is comprised of three components: "desire to achieve a goal, effort extended in this direction, and satisfaction with the task".

It is obvious that in language learning, people are motivated in different ways and to different degrees. Some learners like doing grammar and memorizing; others want to speak and role-play; others prefer reading and writing, while avoiding speaking. Furthermore, since "the learning of a foreign language involves an alteration in self-image, the adoption of new social and cultural behaviors and ways of being, and therefore has a significant impact on the social nature of the learner" (William, 1994: 77, cited in Dornyei, 1998: 122), an important distinction should be made between instrumental and integrative motivation. Learners with an instrumental orientation view the foreign language as a means of finding a good job or pursuing a lucrative career, in other words, the target language acts as a "monetary incentive" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993: 3). On the other hand, learners with an integrative orientation are interested in the culture of the target language; they want to acquaint themselves with the target community and become an integral part of it. Of course, this approach to motivation has certain limitations (see Crookes and Schmidt, 1991, cited in Lier, 1996: 104-105), but an in-depth analysis is not within the purview of this study. The bottom line is that motivation is "a central mediator in the prediction of language achievement" (Gardner & MacIntyre, 1993: 3), as various studies have shown.

4.3 Self-esteem

Closely related to attitudes and motivation is the concept of self-esteem, that is, the evaluation the learner makes of himself with regard to the target language or learning in general. "Self-esteem is a personal judgment of worthiness that is expressed in the attitudes that the individual holds towards himself" (Coopersmith, 1967: 4-5). If the learner has a "robust sense of self", to quote Breen and Mann (1997, cited in Benson & Voller, 1997: 134), his relationship to himself as a learner is unlikely to be blemished by any negative assessments by the teacher. On the other hand, a lack of self-esteem is likely to lead to negative attitudes towards his capability as a learner, and is to the detriment of his cognitive performance, thus confirming his view of himself as incapable of learning.

5. Learner Autonomy does not Mean Learner Isolation

Because the term autonomy seemingly focuses attention on individuality and independence, it is sometimes assumed that learners make the best and fastest progress when they work on their own. According to this view, classrooms are not necessary. This, however, is a mistake.

Human beings are social creatures, and we depend on one another in an infinite number of ways. Without the stimulus and comfort of social interaction, for example, our development is disastrously impaired. The truth is that we learn from one another. Thus, the independence that we exercise through our developed capacity for autonomous behavior is always conditioned and restricted by our inescapable interdependence. In any form of learning, therefore, it is necessary for us to depend on others even when we exercise our independence.

This implies a positive view of classrooms as places where teachers and learners can collaborate to construct knowledge. More precisely, classrooms are physical environments where teachers and learners have the opportunity to become a learning community. When the focus of

learning is a second or foreign language, the target language is inevitably learned most effectively through interaction and the language itself is one of the principal tools with which that collaborative and interactive process is shaped.

Now that we have examined some of the factors that may enhance, or obstruct, the learner's willingness to take charge of his own learning and his confidence in his ability as a learner, and now that we appreciate that classrooms and teachers cannot be eliminated, as learner autonomy cannot be obtained in isolation, it is of consequence to consider possible ways of promoting learner autonomy that can be adopted by the teacher in class. To say that learner autonomy can be promoted is not to reduce it to a set of skills that need to be acquired. Rather, it is taken to mean that the teacher and the learner can work towards autonomy by creating a friendly atmosphere characterized by "low threat, unconditional positive regard, honest and open feedback, respect for the ideas and opinions of others, approval of self-improvement as a goal, collaboration rather than competition" (Candy, 1991: 337).

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