

Learner Autonomy in language learning: Students' Beliefs and Attitudes

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to investigate students' beliefs and attitudes about Learner Autonomy. This study was conducted in three secondary schools in Gjilan. The participants of this study were 300 students who participated by completing the questionnaire which consisted of 15 questions, where they identified their beliefs and attitudes towards learner autonomy. The study findings indicate that learner autonomy is a new concept in Gjilan, however, students feel positive about the implementation of learner autonomy in language learning. The majority of the participants indicate that learner autonomy promotes willingness, voluntariness, motivation and challenge in English language learning. It is also concluded that learner autonomy promotes life-long learning. By being autonomous participants agreed that it allows them to make choices about how they learn. However, according to the participants learner autonomy does not mean learning alone, but they believe that teachers should be more responsible and encourage learners to work more autonomously. Therefore, the findings show that learners need to be motivated by teachers and guided on how to plan their own learning by giving them better chances for creating their own work.

Keywords: *Learner autonomy, language learning, students' beliefs, attitudes*

Introduction

The incorporation of learner autonomy is very essential nowadays. Recently, researchers have shown a great interest to raise teachers and learners' awareness in promoting learner autonomy in their teaching and learning process. It is defined as the capacity to control learners' own learning, to choose their materials according to their preferences and hold their learning responsibility on their own.

It is true that reaching that stage is not easy however, in order to make learners autonomous, the role of the teachers is very important. They should be very responsible in acting as good facilitators, counselors and controllers who should guide learners how and what to learn. Additionally,

it is believed that if learners are involved in decision making process their leaning is more purposeful which refers to encouraging learners to work independently. Therefore, in order to support this phenomenon, teachers should have the ability to behave in autonomous way and create a teaching atmosphere where autonomy is easily accepted.

Literature review

Learner autonomy has been defined differently by various scholars. Holec (1988) cited in Hafner & Miller (2011, p. 69), define learner autonomy as “the ability to take control over one’s learning” Some others describe this term as a “capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (Little, 1991, p. 4).

Moreover, according to Benson & Voller, (1997) cited in *Dimitrios Thanasoulas* (2000, p.2) the term autonomy is used for: “cases when students learn on their own”, “in self-directed learning a set of skills may be learned and carried out”, “for the practice of students' duty for their own learning”, “for the right of learners to choose the path of their own learning”.

According to Hobrom (2004) there are four main performers in the learner autonomy picture; *the learner, the teacher, the materials* and *the learning context* as well. Therefore, it is the learner who certainly is expected to have the willingness to take responsibility and courage to work and convey on their own without relying on others. The role of the teacher is without a doubt important too in independent learning. They should perform as a good facilitator, guide, and instructor, as well as face the challenge to make learners independent. Additionally, choosing the right materials is another challenge in independent learning. Teachers should always be aware of the material they choose since it has always to be suitable for the learners’ needs according to their level. Hence, to be successful in developing learner autonomy the learning environment should be stimulating and meaningful.

In order to start taking the responsibility of being autonomous students need to be motivated. Therefore, autonomous learning is also considered to raise the motivation of learning rather than allow students to provide the content of learning and speed to their own needs, which enhances to lead to better language learning (Dickinson, 1995; Dörnyei & Csizér, 1998 cited in Limuro & Berger 2010, p.127).

‘Autonomy does not only mean having the right of choice in learning situations, or being responsible for the duties they take, but also for

permitting and stimulating learners, through the process to begin describing who they are, what their opinion is and what kind of task they would like to do” (Kenny 1999, p. 440). Littlewood (1996: 428) defines an autonomous person “as the one who has his own independence in making decisions and carrying out the choices which rule his or her actions”. Therefore, this is a competence of two principles – *ability* and *willingness*’.

Accordingly, the proverb shown below says a lot and best summarizes different authors’ opinions related to learner autonomy;

Give a man a fish, and you feed him for a day.

Teach a man to fish, and you feed him for a lifetime.

Chinese proverb

As it is noticed from the above mentioned proverb teaching learners how to learn is better than getting them used to being spoon-fed. Lifelong learning can be defined as a process which is practiced throughout the life, by being able to learn at different times and places. This means that schools or teachers cannot always provide learners with all knowledge in their lives. It is better for them to be more responsible for their own needs and know to think how to learn. Therefore, it is time for teachers to think of the best ways how to teach their learners be autonomous by doing autonomous learning on their own, instead of doing it for them.

In addition, according to Dam (1995) learner autonomy means “a readiness to take charge of one’s own learning and willingness to serve to one’s needs and purposes”. She further states that learners are autonomous when they understand the reason they are learning and accept responsibility for their duty. Moreover, Dam defines that learners are in the center of learning when they are able to be actively involved in the learning process. In order to implement such environment the author mentions some prior conditions;

- “A willingness on the part of the teacher to let go, and on the part of the learners to take hold”
- “An understanding of what to do and why and how it should be done, this applies to teachers as well as learners”
- “An experience-based insight into the learning process for both teachers and Learners”
- “An atmosphere of security, trust and respect”. (Dam, 2000).

Such conditions cannot be implemented in a day. It is teachers’ duty to give their learners

opportunities to become autonomous by introducing it to them gradually. Another key issue in promoting learner autonomy is the continuous learners' self-evaluation and evaluation of others (Dam, 1995). Learners by evaluating themselves and their peers probably become aware of their own learning. In order to support this process, the author mentions logbooks and portfolios as very supportive things in raising this awareness. By using those logbooks learners can record the activities they do throughout the lesson, they also write new vocabulary and note their homework.

Additionally, other significant things mentioned by the author in promoting autonomous learning is managing the physical position of learners in the classroom. She mentions of tables where learner can be seated in groups by giving those advantages; "Quick discussions, exchange of opinions, cooperation, and supporting individual learner participation" (Dam, 2010).

When it comes to analyzing the definitions from different scholars mentioned above, it is clearly realized that most of them consider the term autonomy as a concept of "responsibility", "charge", "control", "freedom", "choice", "motivation" and "making decisions". These words are regarded as ones which lead to the same concept. Therefore, the learners are autonomous when they are able to take responsibility on their own for the tasks they are supposed to fulfill and ready to take control for their own learning by having the independent capacity or freedom and being highly motivated to choose the right way or the appropriate things they need to learn.

This then make them autonomous in making decisions on their own instead of being dependent on the teacher. Autonomy puts learners into the all attention of learning by letting them free to choose whatever they want which means that this is totally different from traditional classroom situation, where the teacher is in the center and the learner must follow him/her, everything is chosen by the teacher and the learner autonomy is not engaged. Hence, in autonomous learning the roles are exchanged.

A brief history of the rise of autonomy in language education

The early history of learner autonomy in language education begins with the *Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project*, It was recognized in the publication of Holec's (1981) seminar report, where he defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Some other essential work is found in the early issues of the journal

M'elanges P'edagogiques and in papers presented at a 1976 seminar at the University of Cambridge (Harding-Esch 1977). Experiments done in the field of autonomy were encouraged by humanistic expectations which were stimulated by the 'political turmoil and 'counter-cultures' of late-1960s Europe (Holec 1981; Gremmo & Riley 1995).

Holec (1981) handled autonomy "as a feature of the learner, and later on it was used to describe learning situations". Moreover in the book on self-instruction, Dickinson (1987: 11), autonomy has been defined as 'a matter where the learner is entirely responsible for all of the things he/she choose with his/her learning and the realization of those decisions' cited in Benson (2001 p, 22). Accordingly, those experiments were done for the learners who were not able or did not have the opportunity to attend the classroom course, and show that there was a great interest in autonomy in 1999s.

Characteristics of Learner Autonomy

There are three versions classified on autonomy: *technical* autonomy, *psychological* autonomy, and *political* autonomy (Benson 1997 cited in Chiu 2005. p 29):

Technical autonomy is defined as the process of learning the language outside the classroom or on one's own, meaning without the help of the teacher at all. Moreover, it is stated that the main concern of this point of view on autonomy comes to provide language learners with the skills in order to deal with their learning independently or outside the educational environments.

The *psychological* autonomy is characterized as the learners' capacity to be responsible for their own learning. This definition is compatible to the concept in self direct learning and self-access language learning.

The *political* autonomy is defined as the learner's control towards the progress of their own learning. It is realized that in this version of autonomy learners have the rights of language learning and take control of the things that they choose to learn. Young (1986) cited in Chiu (2005. p 30) stated that the main idea inside this version of autonomy "is that of authoring one's own world without being subject to the will of others". By defining so, he connects language learning to the matters of having the power and control in critical pedagogies, which 'supports the political version 'of learner autonomy.

Research methodology

This chapter reports on a questionnaire on learner autonomy conducted with 300 hundred students in three secondary schools in Gjilan. The objectives were to assess students' beliefs and attitudes on learner autonomy. The findings may serve as a helpful guide for teachers to develop learner autonomy.

Methods

Quantitative method is used for the questionnaire. This methodology helped us find students' beliefs and attitudes on learner autonomy in language learning. The students' questionnaire was taken from the Likert scale model. It consisted of 15 questions where the participants were supposed to choose between the following options for the statements; *Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly Agree.*

Findings

This chapter shows the percentages of the results from the students' questionnaire, for the questions and statements regarding to the participants' beliefs and attitudes about learner autonomy in language learning, however a detailed explanation and analysis of the results are shown in the following parts.

Results from the Students' questionnaire

Student opinions about LA	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly agree
1.I am informed about the concept of Learner autonomy.			26.64%	36.63%	36.63%
2.Learner Autonomy promotes lifelong learning.				29.97%	69.93%

3. Independent study in the self-access center is an activity which develops learner autonomy.			9.99%	19.98%	69.93%
4. Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn.			3.33%	43.29%	53.28%
5. Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners.		13.32%	26.64%	53.28%	6.66%

Student opinions about LA	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
6. Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy.		6.66%	23.31%	29.97%	39.96%
7. Learner autonomy means learning alone.	59.94%	23.31%	16.65%		
8. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than			6.66%	26.64%	66.6%

those who lack confidence.					
9.Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms.			3.33%	26.64%	69.93%
10.Learning how to learn is very important in developing learner autonomy.				23.31%	76.59%

Student opinions about LA	Strongly disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
11.Out-of-class tasks promote learner autonomy.				9.99%	89.91%
12.Motivated language learners are more likely to practice learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.				26.64%	73.26%
13.The teacher has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy.				9.99%	89.91%
14. To become autonomous, learners need to				46.62%	53.28%

develop the ability to evaluate their own learning.					
15. Learner Autonomy promotes willingness, voluntariness, motivation and challenge in English language learning.			6.66%	13.32%	79.92%

Conclusion

The tables above show the percentages from the students' questionnaire where they gave their opinion about learner autonomy in language learning. It can be concluded that in general learners feel positive and hopeful about the incorporation of learner autonomy in language learning. Further details will be shown in the analysis part of the results from the research instrument.

Analysis of the results from the students' questionnaire

Results from the students' questionnaire show that, students believe that learner autonomy makes their learning more meaningful as well as bring them different opportunities to work on their own and make them more responsible. It is also realized that learners need their teachers support in order to promote learner autonomy.

As it is shown in the Table above, for statement **1' I am informed about the concept of Learner autonomy'** there was no one who strongly disagreed or disagreed, **26.64%** of them were neutral, **36.63%** agreed, and **36.63%** strongly agreed.

In addition the results from the statement **2' Learner Autonomy promotes lifelong learning'** show that no one selected the options strongly disagreed, disagreed nor neutral however **29.97%** agreed and **69.93%** strongly agreed.

Results for the next statement **3 'Independent study in the self-access center is an activity which develops learner autonomy'** are as follows; **9.99%** neutral, **19.98%** agreed and **69.93%** strongly agreed.

Furthermore for the statement **4 'Autonomy means that learners can make choices about how they learn'** show that **3.33%** were neutral, **43.29%** agreed and **53.28%** strongly agreed.

Regarding to the results for the statement **5 'Individuals who lack autonomy are not likely to be effective language learners'** show that **13.32%** disagreed, believing that learner can be effective even if they do not show any effort to work independently, **26.64%** were neutral, **53.28%** agreed and **6.66%** strongly agreed.

For the statement **6 'Involving learners in decisions about what to learn promotes learner autonomy'** the results are as follows; **6.66%** disagreed **23.31%** neutral, **29.97%** agreed and **39.96%** which makes the majority strongly agreed with that.

The **7th** statement **'Learner autonomy means learning alone'** shows different percentages where **59.94%** strongly disagreed, **23.31%** disagreed and **16.65%** were neutral.

The results for the statement **8' Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence'** show that **6.66%** of the learners chose the option neutral, **26.64%** agreed and **66.6%** strongly agreed.

For the next statement **9' Learner autonomy cannot be promoted in teacher-centered classrooms'** only the options; neutral, agree and strongly agree were selected with **3.33%**, **26.64%**, **69.93%**.

Further on for the statement **10' Learning how to learn is very important in developing learner autonomy'** again only two options were selected with **23.31%** for agree and **76.59%** for strongly agree.

It is also realized that learners consider tasks given outside the class really helpful in promoting learner autonomy where they give positive results for agree **9.99%** and **89.91%** for strongly agree for the statement **11' Out-of-class tasks promote learner autonomy'**.

Moreover, they range motivation at a highest importance by giving the percentages **26.64%** for agree and **73.26%** strongly agree for the statement **12 'Motivated language learners are more likely to practice learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated'**.

In this issue the role of the teacher is also considered highly important where learners give those percentages for the statement **13 'The teacher**

has an important role to play in supporting learner autonomy' with **9.99%** agree and **89.91%** strongly agree.

The **14th statement** 'To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning' gives those percentages; **46.62%** for the option agree and **53.28%** strongly agree.

Finally, for the statement **15 'Learner Autonomy with the help of technology promotes willingness, voluntariness, motivation and challenge in English language learning'**, **6.66%** of the learners were neutral, **13.32%** agreed and **79.92%** strongly agreed.

Conclusion

This study has provided some information on students' perspectives concerning the use of autonomous language learning. It mainly focuses to the understanding that learners accept learner autonomy as a very helpful phenomenon however we should not forget the assistance which should come from the teachers by encouraging learners and advising them to the best paths because as it was shown from the results learners as well believe that learner autonomy cannot be promoted on their own.

Another important finding of this study was that learners were at the willingness to be involved in the learning process. In general, they agreed with the idea that students should be involved in the decision making process regarding to the selection of the materials which meet their needs. Hence, the cooperation between teacher-learner is a significant component in the development of learner autonomy in language learning. On the basis of the results there should be enough room for more motivation and collaboration among teachers and learners by bringing learners more strategies and giving them more opportunities to work independently.

Appendix 1; Students' Questionnaire

Please give your opinions about the statements below by choosing between Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, or Strongly agree, for the questions 1- 15. There is no right or wrong answer. The purpose of this questionnaire is to find out some essential general information regarding student's beliefs attitudes towards learner autonomy in language learning.

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