# How to develop learner autonomy?

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**Abstract.**
The issue of leaner autonomy is of general concern in SLA community. Over the last two decades, the concepts of learner autonomy and independence have gained momentum, the former becoming a 'buzz-word' within the context of language learning (Little, 1995, P. 178). It is a truism that one of the most important spin-offs of more communicatively oriented language learning and teaching has been the premium placed on the role of the learner in the language learning process (Reinder, 2010). It goes without saying that this shift of responsibility from teachers to learners does not exist in a vacuum, but is the result of changes to the curriculum itself towards a more learner-centered kind of learning. The current presentation is an attempt to present some preliminary reflections on learner autonomy, review the key issues related to the topic and finally it does its best to delineate how the learner autonomy can be fostered within a classroom situation.

**Keywords:** learner autonomy, self-regulation, self-direction, critical thinking, decision making

## 1. Introduction.

In several theoretical papers about the definitions of learner autonomy, probably the most frequently cited one is Henri Holec's definition. Holec (1981, p. 3, as cited in Dislen, 2011) defines autonomy as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning'. Holec (1981) explained that autonomous learners have the ability to make all the decisions related to their learning: from determining objectives and defining the content to selecting methods, monitoring and evaluating what has been learnt.

Little (1991, as cited in Little 1997) extends Holec's definition by adding a psychological dimension, and he argues that autonomy is not exclusively or even primarily a matter of how learning is organized. According to the researcher, autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action, but it also entails that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning.

For this reason, Benson (2001, as cited in Dam, 2011) prefers Little's definition and argues that this definition adds a vital psychological aspect to Holec's definition in that it describes autonomy as control over the cognitive processes involved in effective self management of learning.

According to Dickenson (1987, as cited in Kumaradivelu, 2003), autonomy is not synonymous with self-instruction and self-direction. To him, *self-instruction* refers to situations in which learners are working without the direct control of the teacher; and *self-direction* refers to situations in which learners accept responsibility for all the decisions concerned with learning but not necessarily for the implementation of those decisions. Zimmerman (1990) also distinguished self-regulation as metacognitively, motivationally, and behaviorally active participant in their own learning. In line with Zimmerman, Ellis (2008) believes that self-regulation is the ability to monitor one's learning and make changes to strategies that one employs. It involves the ability to exercise control over one's attitudinal/motivational state.

Reviewing the literature indicates that scholars such as Cotterall (1995), White (1995), Littlewood (1999), Little (2002), Schmenck (2005) and Vickers & Enn (2006) have enriched our understanding the concept of autonomy. They postulate promoting learner autonomy is a matter of helping learners to:

- develop a capacity for critical thinking, decision making, and independent action;
- take responsibility for learning and for using appropriate strategies;
- face heavy psychological demands to confront learners weaknesses and failures;
- discover their learning potential and give up total dependence on the teacher.

While different scholars tell us what learner autonomy actually is, according to Kumaravadivelu (2003) they also tell us what it is not: Autonomy is not independence, that is, learners have to learn to work cooperatively with their teachers, peers, and the educational system; Autonomy is not context-free, that is, the extent to which it can be practiced depends on factors such as learners' personality and motivation; and Autonomy is not a steady state achieved by learners, that is, autonomous learners are likely to be autonomous in one situation, but not necessarily in another (Kumaravadivelu, 2003, p. 134).

Perhaps the best summary of all these definitions and with which the researchers agree is provided by Benson (2001, P.47 as cited in Schuchlenz, 2003) who described learner autonomy as "a multidimensional

capacity that will take different forms for different individuals, and even for the same individual in different contexts or at different times".

**2. Components and domains of autonomy.**

Littlewood (1996) defines an autonomous person as one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his or her actions. To him, this capacity depends on two main components: *ability* and *willingness* Ability depends on possessing both *knowledge* about the alternatives from which choices have to be made and the necessary *skills* for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate. Willingness depends on having both the *motivation* and the *confidence* to take responsibility for the choices required.

Three years later, Littlewood (1999) proposes a distinction between two *levels* of self-regulation which he calls "proactive" and "reactive" autonomy:

- Proactive autonomy: learners are able to take charge of their own learning, determine their objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been acquired;
- Reactive autonomy: enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) thinks there are two complementary –narrow and broad- views on learner autonomy. The former involves, simply, enabling learners to learn how to learn which includes equipping them with the tools necessary to learn on their own, and training them to use appropriate strategies for realizing their learning objectives. The latter treats learning to learn a language as a means to an end. Then Kumaravadivelu (2003, p. 141) took a step further by naming the narrow view as "academic autonomy " which enables learners to be strategic practitioners in order to realize their learning potential, and the broad view as "liberatory autonomy" which empowers learners to be critical thinkers in order to realize their human potential.

**3. Degrees of Autonomy.**

Nunan (2000, as cited in Onozawa, 2010) contends that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept, that all learners could be trained to develop a degree of autonomy. He summarizes five levels of autonomy as follows:

1. Level 1: awareness - learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the program and encouraged to identify the learning strategies implicit in the tasks making up the methodological component of the curriculum.
2. Level 2: involvement - learners become involved in modifying materials. Learners will be involved in making choices from a range of goals, a selection of content and a variety of tasks.
3. Level 3: intervention - learners are involved in modifying and adapting goals, content and learning tasks.
4. Level 4: creation - learners create their own goals, content and learning tasks.
5. Level 5: transcendence - learners transcend the classroom, making links between the content of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom. At this level, learners begin to become truly autonomous by utilizing in everyday life what they have learned in formal learning contexts.

**4. Why Fostering Learner Autonomy?**

Several researchers in the area of communicative language teaching and learner-centered practice have incorporated the idea of autonomy in their work. To begin with, Dickinson (1995) provides five reasons for the promotion of learner autonomy in language learning: practical reasons, individual differences, educational aims, motivation and learning how to learn foreign languages. Another justification for developing learner autonomy in language learning has been proposed by Coterall (1995). The researcher lists three basic reasons, philosophical, pedagogical and practical, for implementing learner autonomy in language classrooms. Little (2000) also reports that development of learner autonomy in language learning relies on the claim that in formal educational contexts, reflectivity and self-awareness produce better learning.

**5. How Can Learner Autonomy be promoted?**

To posit ways of fostering learner autonomy is certainly to posit ways of fostering teacher autonomy, as 'teachers' autonomy permeates into [learners'] autonomy' (Johnson, et. al. 1990, as cited in Dam, 2011). Dam (2011) cites three ways to foster learner's autonomy: self-report; diaries and evaluation sheets, and learners' belief and attitude.

Self-report is a good way of collecting information on how students go about a learning task and helping them become aware of their own strategies is to assign a task and have them report what they are thinking while they are performing it.

Diaries and evaluation sheets offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, identifying any problems they run into and suggesting solutions.

Inasmuch as the success of learning and the extent to which learners tap into their potential resources in order to overcome difficulties and achieve autonomy are determined by such factors as learners' motivation, their desire to learn, and the beliefs they hold about themselves as learners and learning per se, it is manifest that changing some negative beliefs and attitudes is bound to facilitate learning.

Little (2004) also believes that in formal educational contexts, learner autonomy entails reflective involvement in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating learning. He states that the development of autonomy in language learning is governed by three basic pedagogical principles as follows:

- learner involvement: engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process (the affective and the metacognitive dimensions);
- learner reflection: helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning (the metacognitive dimensions);
- appropriate target language use: using the target language as the principal medium of language learning (the communicative and the met cognitive dimensions) (Little, 2004).

To foster autonomy, Dörnyei (2001, as cited in Onozawa, 2010) specifies two crucial and practical classroom changes: increase learner involvement in organizing the learning process, and make a change in the teacher's role. He also emphasizes that the key issue in increasing learner involvement is to share responsibility with learners in their learning process, recommending several ways to achieve this. Among these are to give learners *choices* about as many aspects of the learning process as possible, to give students positions of *genuine authority*, to encourage *student contributions* and *peer teaching*, to encourage *project work*, and to allow learners to use *self-assessment* procedures when appropriate (Dörnyei, 2001, as cited in Onozawa, 2010).

According to Benson (2008), fostering autonomy does not imply any particular approach to practice. In principle, any practice that encourages and enables learners to take greater control of any aspect of their learning can be considered a means of promoting autonomy. As Lee (1998) clarified the fact that autonomy is not a teaching method to be implemented through lesson plans so teachers need to develop a sense of responsibility and also, encourage learners to take an active part in making decisions about their learning to foster autonomy.

**6. Final Remarks.**

This presentation is far from comprehensive, as I have only skimmed the surface of the issue. Many more topics are missing such as the role of curriculum in learners' autonomy different models of L2 autonomy and the like. However, the main point of departure for this presentation placed on the degrees of learner autonomy and how to develop autonomy in an EFL/ESL classroom. Despite the significance of autonomy, it is crystal clear that there has to be a teacher who will adapt resources, materials, and methods to the learners' needs. But even if learner autonomy is amenable to educational interventions, it should be recognized that it "takes a long time to develop, and--simply removing the barriers to a person's ability to think and behave in certain ways may not allow him or her to break away from old habits or old ways of thinking" (Candy, 1991: 124 as cited in Thanasoulas, 2000).

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