**Autonomous learning**

**INTRODUCTION**

The concept of individual autonomy has been central to European liberal-democratic and liberal-humanist thought since the 18th century, and was identified by Kant as the foundation of human dignity. Growth of interest in autonomous learning as an educational goal can be identified in changes that occurred in the twentieth century in social sciences, psychology, philosophy, and political science. The concept of autonomy in language learning is connected with the communicative approach both historically and theoretically. Gremmo & Riley (1995: 152-3) have argued that “the rise of autonomy in language learning in the 1970s and 1980s was connected to a rejection of behaviorist assumptions about the nature of second language acquisition”. It was developed with the works of Little (1991), and was influenced by researches from beyond the field of language education. In 1991 Little claimed that the capacity for autonomous learning presupposes that “the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning” (1991:40).

Little (1995) referred to changes in educational philosophy and technology, language-learning theory, political beliefs, communications and employment. He also pointed out that the recognition in learning is now more important than knowledge (cited in Finch, 2000). In language learning this humanistic trend produced a widerange of series of investigations, and the new researches in learning proved that teacher is only responsible for presenting new information in a variety of ways and he/she should refer to learning styles as possible. It is up to the learner to take this information and process it. Once the new lesson is introduced, the student takes control of information and processes it; so that he/she “learns” it. So in language teaching, the “magic” is not in teaching techniques. The solution to the problem lies in student responsibility. Language is essentially pragmatic and social; and it is as “a tool for communication”, where individuals with personal needs and intentions, learn to express themselves whilst, at the same time, as competent members of their group, they share and maintain social reality. This approach to language provided the rationale for the “Communicative Approach” to language learning and teaching with its emphasis on communicative functions, individual needs, social norms and “autonomy” (Nunan, 2000).

Perhaps theoretically communicative theory and autonomy are connected with researches on learner’s agendas and the effectiveness of instruction (Nunan, 1995). Nunan also has verified that in the classroom there is often a mismatch between what teachers and learners believe is being learned. He argued that “while the teacher is busily teaching one thing, the learner is very often focusing on something else” (1995: 135). Later other researchers have doubted in the effectiveness of direct instruction in language learning. Most of them have adopted the effectiveness of communicative approach in second language learning and its dependence upon the learner’s self-directed efforts to process linguistic input. Nunan (1995) believed that second language learning will proceed most effectively if learners are allowed to develop and exercise their autonomy. Moreover, Finch (2000) claimed teachers should prepare a non-threatening learning environment and allow the learners to follow their own learning path. Consequently discovering the new way of learning and acquiring learning skills are up to learners. This is the path of the autonomous learner, and provides a blueprint for the

autonomous learning.

1. **Learner Autonomy**

The concept of learner autonomy was first introduced into the ongoing debate about L2 learning and teaching by Henri Holec in a report published by the Council of Europe in 1979 (Holec, 1981). According to Holec autonomous learners are capable of setting their own learning objectives, defining the “contents and progressions” of learning, “selecting methods and techniques to be used”, monitoring the learning process, and evaluating learning outcomes (1981: 3). The ability to take charge of one’s learning in this way it is “not inborn

but must be acquired either by “natural” means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way” (ibid.). Also in 1995 Learner autonomy has been defined as a “capacity for active, independent learning and learners accepting responsibility for their learning and sharing in the decisions and initiatives that give shape and direction to the learning process” (Little, 1995:4). Furthermore, Little (1995) suggested that learners who take responsibility for their learning are more likely to achieve their learning targets and hence likely to maintain their motivation. This acceptance of responsibilityhas both socio-affective and cognitive implications: it involves at once a positive attitude to learning and the development of a capacity to reflect on the content and process of learning under conscious control. Learners who are encouraged to take responsibility for their own work, by being given some control over what, how and when they learn, are more likely to be able to set realistic goals, plan programs of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, and evaluate and assess their own work. They are able to learn how to learn from their own successes and failures. The effectiveness of self-instruction in language learning is unknown for most of the teachers and “very few of instructions are solidly based on research results or the results are inconclusive” (Little, 2000:23). Likewise, Little (1995), Tort-Moloney (1997), McGrath (2000), Smith (2000), Aoki and Hamakava (2003), Huang (2005),

Sert (2006), Viera (2007), Smith and Erdoğan (2007) and Burkert and Schwienhorst (2008) provide evidence that teachers who themselves are not autonomous language learners may have a negative influence on the development of autonomy in their students.

Nunan (2000) stated that the importance of learner autonomy understood as the capability\_ not an inborn ability \_to govern and regulate one’s own thoughts, feelings, and actions freely and responsibly. It helps learners to find their individual learning styles, and start to believe in their own abilities and, finally, be autonomous learners. Generally “it highlights an important continuing role for teachers in promoting the psychological attributes and practical abilities involved in learner autonomy and in engaging students’ existing autonomy within classroom practice (Smith, 2008:2).

1. **The Characteristics of Autonomous Learners**

Ellis and Sinclair (1989:2) state that there are three reasons for helping learners take on more

responsibility for their own learning. Those are: 1) Learning can be more effective when learners take

control of their own learning because they learn what they want to learn; 2) Learners who are responsible for their own learning can carry on learning outside the classroom; and 3) Learners who know about learning can transfer their learning strategies to other subjects.

Coinciding with Breen and Mann's study as quoted by Benson (2001:84)), he presents the following characteristics of autonomous learners:

1. They are able to see the relationship to what is to be learned, to how they will learn and to the

resources available as one in which they are in charge or in control;

2. They are in authentic relationship to the language they are learning and have a genuine desire to

learn that particular language;

3. They have a robust sense of self that is unlikely to be undermined by any actual or assumed

negative assessments of themselves or their work;

4. They are able to step back from what they are doing and reflect upon it in order to make decisions

about what they next need to do and experience;

5. They are alert to change and able to change in an adaptable, resourceful and opportunistic way;

6. They have a capacity to learn that is independent of the educational processes in which they are

engaged;

7. They are able to make sense of the environment they find themselves in strategically;

8. They are able to negotiate between the strategic meeting of their own needs and responding to the

needs and desires of other group members.

The last description is connected with the Good Language Learner research, published by Naiman et al. in 1978 and cited in Weden (1991:121). Interestingly enough, while this research was carried out to determine the characteristics of successful language learners, all or almost all of the aspects it

discovered seem to be closely related to the issue of autonomy. Here is a brief overview of the

findings as adapted from Weden dealing with good language learners:

1. They find a style of learning that suits them (*i.e. adapt learning situations to their personal needs*

*and try to get something out of every situation*)

2. They are actively involved in the learning process (*i.e. plan other activities outside class to get*

*better practice, try to cope with their problems*)

3. They try to figure out how the language works (*i.e. devise techniques to improve their*

*pronunciation etc.*)

4. They know that language is used to communicate (*i.e. have good techniques to practice*

*communication and look for opportunities to do so*)

5. They are like good detectives (*i.e. look for clues, make guesses, ask questions and ask for*

*corrections*)

6. They learn to think in the target language

7. They realize that language learning is not easy and learn to overcome their feelings of frustration,

lack of confidence.

Besides, becoming autonomous learners means that they have to be independent, highly motivated and

self-directed learners and along with the teacher, they have to control their own learning process.

1. **Nunan’s Autonomous Language Learning Model (NALLM)**

Since teacher’s role is merely to help learners take on more responsibility for their own learning and to play the least dominant role inside and outside of the class, In implementing autonomous language learning model, the learners are introduced to the following nine steps to language autonomy in brief introduced by Nunan (2003:193).

1. **Making instructional goals clear to learners**

To make learners be actively involved in teaching learning process, a teacher has to make his or her

specific instructional goals clear to learners. For example, one of the stated goals in a curriculum is to

make comparisons such as *Which do you prefer, tea or coffee?* or make plans such as *We’re going to*

*visit our grandmother for our vocation next month.*

**4.1. Allowing learners to create their own goals**

Starting by evaluating their English language needs and reasons why they are studying English the

learners are asked to create their own goals. It is expected that by knowing their own short and long

terms goal to study English whether for their future study or future careers, they will do their best

to achieve them. The teacher in this case just provides assistance in re-evaluating the learners’

skills goals. Lee (1998) says that this teacher support is a crucial factor for developing autonomy.

The teacher checks whether or not they have achieved each small goals every week.

**4.2. Encouraging learners to use their foreign language inside and outside the classroom**

Having known their English language goals to meet, the learners are encouraged to use their

English inside or outside the classroom and make use some facilities an institution has or even

they are out of campus, they are still encouraged to stay contact with English by watching English

Language TV programs or by listening to English radio channels, English pop songs, or by reading

English language newspapers. magazines or novels.

**4.3. Raising awareness of learning process**

To make students become autonomous learners is not an easy task to do as it needs their awareness

and motivation to get actively involved in the learning process and to use their EFL ability to

communicate inside or outside the classroom, and to raise the learners’ awareness of their own

appropriate learning strategies is one of a teacher’ tasks.

**4.4. Helping learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies**

Teachers should know that every student has their own learning styles and strategies; however,

they have to focus them on learner-centered classroom due to the fact that students do not like

classes in which they sit passively reading or translating as Widdow and Voller, (1991) add that

the students do not like classes where the teachers control everything. Therefore, radical changes

in the content of courses, and especially in the types of courses that offered, and the systematic

retraining of EFL teachers in learner-centered classroom procedures are steps that must be taken.

**4.5. Encouraging learner choice**

According to Nunan, (2003:200), the notion of student choice may be a relatively unfamiliar or

even alien one in some foreign language contexts. He further explains that in such a case it is

preferable to engage the learners in a relatively modest level of decision-making in the first

instance. So, if the data for a lesson include a reading passage and listening test, learners might be

asked to decide which they would rather do first, the reading or the listening but if some disagree or

the teachers are uncomfortable with the idea of students doing different things at the same time, it

can, then, put to a class vote.

**4.6. Allowing learners to generate their own ideas**

Having encouraged learners to make choice, the next step is to provide them with opportunities to

modify and adapt classroom task. This could be preliminary step to teaching students to create their

own tasks.

**4.7. Encouraging learners to become teachers**

Assinder (1991:228) once said*, “I believe that the goal of teaching each other was a factor of*

*paramount important. Being asked to present something to another group gave a clear reason for*

*work, called for greater responsibility to one’s own group”*. it is no wonder that when she gave her

students the opportunity of developing video-based materials with they subsequently used for

teaching other students in the class, they could present them successfully. The success of each

group presentation was actually measured by the response and feedback of the other group; thus

there was a measure of in-built evaluation and a test of how much had been learned. Being an

‘expert’ on a topic noticeably as Assinder further explained, increased self-esteem, and getting

more confident week by week and gave the learners a feeling of genuine progress.

**4.8. Encouraging learners to become researchers**

Finally Nunan (2003:2002) explains that it is possible to educate learners to become language

researchers. A teacher gives them a chance to work together beyond the classroom as a community

of ethnographers, collecting, interpreting, and building a data bank of information about language

in their worlds (Darwowidjojo, 2001:313). Similarly Naiman, Frohlih, Stern,&Todesco, (1978)

explains they are like good detectives as they try to look for clues, make guesses, ask questions

and ask for correction by their own ways. All students, as a matter of fact, moved out of the Basic

English in ‘regular’ English classes, and two moved into ‘honor’ English as accomplishment were

real and meaningful for these students.

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