

MOVING FROM TEACHERS DEPENDENCY TO LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ENGLISH CLASSES

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Abstract: Over the past three decades, learner autonomy has become a central issue in the field of language education. This study aims to provide a comprehensive review of the literature on learner autonomy by examining its key themes since its emergence in language teaching. These themes include the concepts of learner responsibility and independence, the impact of classroom context in both Western and Eastern educational settings, and the evolving role of the teacher in the learning process.

Keywords: learner autonomy; language learner; classroom teacher

INGLIZ TILI DARSLARIDA O'QITUVCHILARGA QARAMLIKDAN MUSTAQILLIKGA O'TISH

Annotatsiya: So'nggi o'ttiz yil davomida til o'qitish sohasida o'quvchi avtonomiyasi markaziy mavzulardan biriga aylandi. Ushbu tadqiqot til o'qitishda avtonomiya tushunchasi paydo bo'lganidan boshlab uning asosiy yo'nalishlarini tahlil qilish orqali tegishli adabiyotlarni keng qamrovli ko'rib chiqishni maqsad qiladi. Ushbu yo'nalishlarga o'quvchining mas'uliyati va mustaqilligi, G'arb va Sharq ta'lim tizimlarida o'quv muhiti kontekstining ta'siri hamda o'qituvchining ta'lim jarayonidagi o'zgaruvchan roli kiradi.

ПЕРЕХОД ОТ ЗАВИСИМОСТИ ОТ УЧИТЕЛЯ К БОЛЬШЕЙ САМОСТОЯТЕЛЬНОСТИ В ПРЕПОДАВАНИИ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА

Аннотация: На протяжении последних трёх десятилетий автономия учащихся стала центральной темой в области преподавания языков. Данное исследование направлено на всесторонний обзор литературы по автономии учащихся посредством анализа её ключевых аспектов с момента её появления в языковом обучении. К этим аспектам относятся понятия ответственности и самостоятельности обучающегося, влияние контекста обучения в западных и восточных образовательных системах, а также изменяющаяся роль преподавателя в процессе обучения.

Introduction. In its most basic sense, autonomy can be defined as an individual's capacity to take responsibility for their own learning. However, this notion is more complex than it initially appears. Benson [1] argues that clearly defining autonomy is essential for two main reasons. First, construct validity is a fundamental requirement for research, meaning that autonomy must be described in terms of observable behaviors in order to be effectively investigated. Second, educational programs and innovations

aimed at promoting autonomy are more likely to succeed when they are based on a clear understanding of the behavioral changes they intend to develop.

At the same time, autonomy cannot be confined to a single, fixed definition, as it may be expressed in a variety of forms. Therefore, it is important for researchers and practitioners to specify how autonomy is conceptualized within their particular contexts. Furthermore, although learner autonomy involves a shift toward greater learner responsibility and independence, it does not imply a diminished role for teachers. On the contrary, teachers remain essential figures in the learning process, acting as facilitators who guide and support students while creating conditions that encourage the development of autonomy. From this perspective, it is the responsibility of language teachers to recognize and foster the factors that contribute to learner autonomy, as it serves as a foundation for lifelong learning.

The Birth of Autonomy in Language Learning

The Council of Europe (CoE) initiated the Modern Languages Project in 1971. According to Benson [1], one significant outcome of this initiative was the establishment of the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy, France, which soon became a central hub for both research and practical developments in the field of language learning. The center was founded by Yves Chalon, who is widely regarded as a pioneering figure in the development of learner autonomy. Following his death in 1972, leadership of CRAPEL was assumed by Henri Holec, who remains an influential figure in this area. Holec's [2] report for the CoE is considered one of the earliest and most significant contributions to the conceptualization of autonomy in language learning.

This project primarily focused on providing adults with opportunities for lifelong learning. As noted by Benson [1], the approach developed at CRAPEL was strongly influenced by ideas from the field of self-directed learning, which emphasize the importance of developing individuals' abilities to take greater responsibility for managing both their own learning and their roles within society. Consequently, CRAPEL established self-access language learning centers, where learners were given access to a wide range of second language materials, enabling them to experiment with and engage in self-directed learning practices.

As previously discussed, autonomy is not viewed as a fixed or absolute concept. For this reason, research in this field has explored various processes and factors that influence the development of autonomy. In addition, these studies have sought to identify different levels of autonomy demonstrated by language learners. The present section provides a brief overview of the most reliable and well-established findings from research on learner autonomy within classroom contexts.

Learner Autonomy in the Western and Eastern Classroom Context
As noted earlier, some scholars argue that the concept of autonomy originated within the European context. However, other researchers contend that the idea has much deeper historical roots in Eastern philosophical traditions. For instance, Pierson [3] demonstrates that principles related to autonomy and self-directed learning can be traced back to Chinese intellectual thought as early as the Sung Dynasty. Riley [4] was among the first to question whether the concept of autonomy is culturally appropriate in all educational contexts, particularly in language learning. According to Benson [1], Riley's concerns focused on the experiences of non-European students studying in European institutions where autonomy was promoted as a key educational objective.

Subsequent research addressing these concerns revealed that national culture plays a significant role in shaping the conditions necessary for the development of autonomy. In this regard, Pennycook [5] argues that concepts such as student-centered learning, individualism, and autonomy are rooted in specific cultural contexts and may be interpreted and valued differently across societies. Based on these findings, it can be suggested that Western approaches to autonomy in language teaching may not be universally compatible with all learners' styles. Supporting this view, Rees-Miller [6] presents evidence from a study involving Asian learners who were taught using Western learning strategies. The results indicated that these learners performed less successfully than the control group, as they avoided using their own established strategies, such as rote memorization.

In conclusion, Pennycook [5] cautions that promoting learner autonomy without careful consideration of social, cultural, and political contexts may result in inappropriate teaching practices and the imposition of culturally biased educational models. The Classroom Context and Learner Autonomy A number of studies have explored how autonomy is understood and experienced within the language classroom. The existing literature suggests that classroom-based approaches designed to promote autonomy primarily focus on giving learners opportunities to make decisions about the management of their own learning. As noted by Benson [1], positive outcomes have been reported in studies where learners were encouraged to take a degree of control over planning and evaluating their classroom activities. These findings indicate that learners are capable of managing such aspects of their learning, provided they are given appropriate opportunities along with sufficient guidance and support.

Moreover, these studies collectively emphasize the importance of fostering learner autonomy within the classroom through both teacher support and learner collaboration. The results also demonstrate that when learners are actively involved in decision-making processes, they are able to develop essential cognitive skills that enhance their learning.

In addition, Breen and Mann [7] have attempted to connect the practical application of autonomous language learning with the underlying principles that drive it in classroom settings. Their research suggests that the development of autonomy can be understood as a gradual process, which involves: (i) the learner's progression through different stages, (ii) the development of the classroom group as it moves through similar phases, and (iii) the dynamic relationships that exist between the individual learner and the group at each stage.

According to Breen and Mann [7], in classroom environments where learners have traditionally been conditioned to rely heavily on the teacher or the group, a shift toward autonomy may lead to two possible strategic responses. Learners may either display counter-dependence by disengaging from the learning process ("dropping out") or attempt to establish independence from the group. This stage can serve as a transitional phase, ultimately contributing to the development of a more mature form of autonomy characterized by interdependent relationships among learners. They further describe the "autocratic" classroom as one in which authority is dominated either by the teacher alone or collectively maintained by both the teacher and the group through established practices. When teachers begin to promote autonomous learning, this structure may temporarily give way to a phase of relative uncertainty, where roles,

responsibilities, and learning objectives become less clearly defined. As this process unfolds, new forms of interaction and relationships between learners and others in the classroom are likely to emerge following these stages of development.

The Classroom Teacher and Learner Autonomy
Empirical research has demonstrated that teachers' instructional styles significantly influence learner motivation, which in turn affects the development of learner autonomy. A study by Deci et al. [8] found that students taught by autonomy-supportive teachers exhibited higher levels of intrinsic motivation, perceived competence, and self-esteem compared to those taught by more controlling instructors. Deci et al. [8] also refer to similar findings reported by Ryan and Grolnick (1986), while Jelsma (1982) observed that teachers tended to adopt more controlling behaviors when students appeared distracted or inattentive, and less controlling approaches when students were engaged. Based on these findings, Deci et al. [8] suggest that highly motivated and autonomous learners are more likely to elicit autonomy-supportive behaviors from teachers, whereas less motivated students may prompt more controlling responses.

The role of teachers in promoting autonomy has also been examined by Voller [9], who emphasizes the importance of teachers having a clear understanding of the beliefs and attitudes that shape their perspectives on autonomous learning. He argues that regardless of whether autonomy is viewed as an inherent right or a long-term objective, teachers assume multiple roles, including facilitator, counselor, and resource provider. Voller [9] further outlines three key assumptions underlying the development of autonomy. First, language learning is an interpretive process, which necessitates a gradual transfer of control to the learner. Second, teaching practices should reflect this perspective by incorporating negotiation and collaboration with learners. Third, teachers should engage in continuous self-monitoring in order to evaluate their instructional strategies and the nature of classroom interactions. Another important contribution is provided by Chan [10], who conceptualizes learner attitudes toward language learning along a continuum ranging from dependence (teacher-directed learning) to independence (learner-directed learning). According to this view, learners may function at different points along this spectrum, with those closer to the dependent end requiring greater teacher support, while those nearer to the independent end demonstrate higher levels of autonomy.

In addition, several models have been proposed to facilitate the development of learner autonomy in classroom settings. One notable framework is presented by Nunan [11], who argues that learners may not initially be aware of what is most beneficial for their learning. Therefore, instructional materials should aim to gradually develop learners' skills and knowledge, ultimately enabling them to make informed decisions about their learning. Nunan [11] identifies five progressive levels of autonomy. The first level, awareness, involves helping learners understand the goals and content of the materials they use. The second, involvement, encourages learners to select their own goals from available options. The third level, intervention, allows learners to modify and adapt learning objectives and content. The fourth, creation, enables learners to formulate their own goals and tasks. Finally, transcendence refers to learners' ability to extend their learning beyond the classroom and connect it with real-world contexts.

As illustrated by this model, certain stages are more easily integrated into teaching materials than others. The process begins with raising learners' awareness of the underlying goals, content, and strategies, followed by active participation in selecting

learning options. Learners then progress to modifying and shaping their learning experiences, before ultimately taking full responsibility by designing their own goals, materials, and tasks. At the highest level, learners are able to utilize external resources and apply their learning independently.

Importantly, Nunan [11] notes that these stages are not strictly linear, as learners may move flexibly between different levels depending on their needs and context.

Conclusion. The shift in language instruction from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach has placed greater responsibility on learners for managing their own language development. As a result, many language programs now encourage learners to become autonomous by developing the ability to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, enabling them to take a more active role in directing their learning processes. In line with this perspective, Weaver and Cohen [12] argue that learners should be supported not only in acquiring a language but also in “learning how to learn” and “learning how to use” the language effectively. However, they emphasize that learners should not be left entirely on their own, as they require explicit training to develop awareness and competence in applying a wide range of learning strategies. The present study demonstrates that although learners may eventually be capable of working independently, they often continue to rely on teacher guidance, both during and even after reaching a certain level of autonomy. This review of the literature has also shown that learner autonomy can be successfully fostered within classroom settings across both Western and non-Western contexts. Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that promoting autonomy within traditional classroom environments requires a significant transformation of the teacher’s role, taking into account appropriate pedagogical approaches as well as cultural considerations. In conclusion, the findings of this study highlight that learner autonomy and the language classroom—along with the active role of the teacher—are closely interconnected and mutually supportive.

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