CONCEPTUALIZING TEACHERS AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE CLASSROOMS

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on learner autonomy (henceforth, LA) in language classroom setting. LA is an engagement in a process of reflective practice in learning process. In what follows, I will first discuss concisely the concept of LA; next I will briefly discuss the work of possible differences among attributes affecting LA; finally, I will elaborate LA for language classroom, and will suggest how LA might be conceptualized according to LA principles. In the language classroom, LA is usually associated either with students or teachers. Moreover, LA as it stands for, generally considered as encouraging students to become more autonomous. Following Nasri, Dastjerdy, Rasekh and Amirian (2015), however, I suggest that gender, background, and experience as a valuable feature contribution to promote LA.

Key words: Attributes, Autonomous, Concept, Engagement, Language Classroom.

Introduction

There have been numerous definitions of learner autonomy. From the viewpoint of Benson (2006), Dam (2009), and Xu (2009) learner autonomy can be described as a learners' readiness to take responsibility, plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning progress. In language learning context, being an autonomous learner does not necessarily mean without support from the teacher (Schwienhorst, 2003, Zhuang, 2010). Instead of "working independently", it means "creating opportunities for learners to exercise their capacity for autonomy" (Hafner, and Miller, 2011).

In the new literacy, autonomous learning is regarded as the possibility of raising learner autonomy through three major pillars involving students in design-learning, structuring students-centered approach and encouraging learning responsibility (Little, 1991). Being an autonomous learning is highly valued in an academic context. It is

considered as one of the objectives of higher education.

A great deal of effort has been made to ensure that learner autonomy is evoking mental and intellectual activities. However, understanding the concept of learner autonomy is not enough for determining how a particular student is able to use his/her awareness in learning. The challenge of this paper is to provide a theoretical and practical framework that link attributes to learning theory and teaching practice.

Autonomous Language Learning Methods/ Strategies

Autonomous language learning is a way of independent learning that is the ability associated to take charge of one's own learning (Holec, 1981) or a sense of interdependence. There is no single method for instructional techniques and procedures for autonomous learning. Ellis (2010) and Pawlak (2014) even cautioned against a formula for 'being' autonomy in the classroom, though they still recognized a number of pedagogic intervention such as individual factors, linguistic variables and contextual aspects. The varied strategies that encourage students to take control of their learning include

technical, psychological, political, and social orientations (Benson, 1997; Holliday, 2003; Oxford, 2003).

For the teacher to take an autonomous development to support learning autonomy in his class, Little, Hodel, Kohonen, Meijer, and Perclova (2007), suggested that the teacher should scaffold students learning by involving three pedagogical principles of learner development, learner reflection, and appropriate target language use. First, the teacher can explain the draft of the learning objectives and the learning process and then invite the students to decide which suits them together. During and after the learning process, the teacher and the students reflect on which parts the students get more benefit from preparing the objective of the lesson and how it help them to acquire the knowledge. Finally, the teacher engaged his students in appropriate target language use.

In a review of teachers' role, Riley (1997) found evidence of both teachers as resource and teachers as counselor in teaching context. After reflecting on the evidence for different roles, he stated that teachers are responsible to assist the student to

become autonomous learner. He also clearly stated at least 15 differences between those roles. Riley's conclusion intuitively makes senses. Indeed, newer summaries of research have agreed on the teachers' role to help the students become more efficient in their learning process.

If expectations of LA are made clear to students, LLA is more likely to emerge as Ebrahimi, Sattar, and Shojaee (2015) found on their study of LLA in conversation class. They indicate that many students appreciated language learning process when they get involved in deciding in learning continuum. They also reported that the more autonomous the students are, the more strategies they applied as autonomous.

The Matter of Individual

The rationale for considering individual differences to implementing learner autonomy was influenced by Harmer (2011) notion of ones' differences. He also goes to the variances of age, aptitude, personalities, learning styles, language levels and motivations. For him, it is important to involve attributes in response to successful autonomous learning projects. Moreover, teachers as mediators of raising learner autonomy

may also differ in terms of their gender, educational degrees and experiences in taking such responsibility.

In the following explanation, it is found that the teachers' role was addressed by the negotiation and cooperation. In response to the idea of autonomy, a teacher should not abandon his right of organizing and directing the class but involving students in decision making processes regarding their competence (Alibakhsi, 2015). Additionally, to create a more enthusiastic learner, the teacher should apply six approaches of learner autonomy including resource-based, technology-based, teacher-based, classroom based, curriculum-based, and learner-based approaches (Benson, 2001). These approaches are a prerequisite for the development of learner autonomy (Balcikanli, 2010).

Teachers' attributes as the powerful component of promoting learner autonomy focus in three areas covering teachers' gender, educational background, and experience. Nasri, et al. (2015) in the evaluation of teachers' practices of autonomous learning found that teachers with different educational degrees, genders, and levels of experience have different autonomous

learning practices. They also claimed that male and female teachers' autonomy-promoting practices are also significantly dissimilar. Thus, this work has established several insights about the teachers' attributes and the widely accepted roles they play in actual practice. For the purposes of this paper, three particular points are important.

First, teachers' gender can significantly affect autonomy-supportive practice. To understand the role of teachers' gender in autonomy-promoting practices, the elaboration findings of Nasri, et al. (2015), make a good starting point. The simple view of the effect describes female teachers shared the responsibility easily to students to decide the learning objectives (Kocak, 2003) and experienced more in doing out-of-class activities (Arabski, 1999). Other studies, however, also have shown that female teachers are more creative and have more autonomy-supportive strategies than male teachers (Varol and Yilmaz, 2010).

Second, teachers' educational degrees are claimed as the dominant factor in leading the development of learner autonomy. A teacher should be oriented towards learner autonomy as a goal. To do so, the teacher as the subject of promoting learner autonomy accounts his education as a valuable resource to develop aspects of teacher autonomy. Further, McGrath (2000) shapes a conception of teacher education associated with teacher development, teacher research, reflective practice, and action research. From this issue, a consistent link between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy represents in the different ways. However, the capacity of controlling over learning or teaching is regarded as the grounded of autonomous learning.

Further, teachers' levels of experience may also affect the practice of learner autonomy. As reported by Nasri et al. (2015) teachers believe that experience increases the teachers' skills for time management promoting autonomy of their learners. The relationship between teachers' experience and teacher autonomy remains an undemanding relationship to conceptualize, however, and this is perhaps partly because the two construct; experience and skills are belonging to two different parties that might affect each other.

As the teacher plays a key role in developing language learner autonomy, what is needed is a teacher training program to cultivate an autonomous mind and develop those autonomous teaching skills. As explained in the beginning of this section, we can see that that teachers' attributes presented a challenge to most EFL teachers, especially when students had long been accustomed to 'teacher centered' style of instruction, and valued the opinions of the teacher more than their own. To overcome this difficulty, teachers must themselves be autonomous models in order to help their students become autonomous language learners. Only when the teacher is autonomously aware will teaching students to learn from independent learning be a natural process.

Interpretations of LA in Language Classroom

Ideal autonomous learning in language classroom requires the students to get involved in every stage of learning process. The primarily concern is on the responsibility and control whereas the students responsible for learning and control over the learning process,

teachers responsible for teaching and control over the teaching process (Benson and Huang, 2008). In this sense, they argue that autonomous is related to students-teachers practice in the classroom.

Autonomous gained attention in language learning as teachers prepared students to become more discerning students of the increasing amounts of regulating their learning process. These understanding tend to be associated with autonomy-supportive teachers (Joshi, 2011; Yan, 2012) whereby autonomization focuses on the use of the target language. It is notable that some broader interpretations of autonomous language learning also exist. For example, Lou, Chaffee, Lascano, Dincer, and Noels (2018) assert that the conceptualizations of autonomy can be understood through the intertwined roles of autonomy and psychology in language learning. Indeed, others have recognized various ways of defining Language Learning Autonomy (Henceforth, LLA), including those that engage two different notions as agency and identity (Lantolf&Thorne, 2006; Norton, 2000).

This literacy attempted to see the focus of LLA from sociocultural

constrains. Although these developments inspired literacy practices that considered the importance of social dimensions, LLA practices still tended to treat as self-determination theory as well. In other words, misconceptions and contentions of the concept of LLA and SDT are understandable to be occurred. This gap prompted interpretation can be found in Lou, et al. (2018) and Lee (2017) work.

Rather than limit interpretations of LLA to rigid parameters, my view is that LLA can involve a range of variables, depending on the context. This does not mean that anything relies on a particular factor. Drawing on both LA and LLA, I have identified a range of dimensions that have been associated with successful LLA. It is acknowledged that, when LA takes place in Language Classroom, one should be metacognitively aware of which processes are engaged and to what degree, nor will these necessarily be visible by others. Admittedly, some processes, such as planning the learning objectives may involve more complex ideas than others, but the view is taken that teacher-students interaction to decide the goals of learning together in a way that draws on any of these

processes constitutes LA to varying degree.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to outline teachers' attributes and to establish the importance of autonomous learning in language classroom. I hope that the particular focus on "teachers' characteristics" which I have proposed here and my emphasis on the need to take note this features may enable further connections to be made between the pursuit of learner autonomy and ongoing work in the overall area of language teaching. Possible areas of practice and research suggested by the emphasis on teachers' individualities in this article might include in-depth investigations of different types of teachers' characteristics and its impact to the enhancement of students' autonomy. Teacher autonomy and development may, then, represent particularly fruitful areas for future professional development programs by those with interests in this topic.

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