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Learner autonomy in foreign language education and in cultural context

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Abstract

The present paper is a brief review of the theoretical concepts about learner autonomy focusing on highlighting the main themes on learner autonomy in foreign language education and in cultural context as a globalized construct. These themes are based on the concepts of learner responsibility and independence, the importance of the autonomy in foreign language education in both the Western and Eastern style and the role of the culture in the concept of learner independence. The present study also shows that although learner autonomy means a reshaping of the view that the learner is responsible for learning, students and teachers still have their responsibilities of teaching and learning in the language learning process and all this process happens in the frame of the culture as a multifaceted and much-debated concept.

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1. Introduction

Learner autonomy in language education is interpreted in various ways in the literature using various terms, such as 'learner autonomy', 'learner independence', 'self-direction', 'autonomous learning', 'independent learning' (or in German language 'Autonomie der Lernenden', 'lernende Unabhängigkeit', 'Selbstbestimmung', 'autonomes Lernen', 'unabhängiges Lernen') and all these items have been used to refer to similar concepts.

Some researchers have claimed that the origins of the autonomy are rooted in the European continent. On the contrary, there are researchers claiming that the very idea of autonomy has deep historical roots in Eastern philosophies. Pierson (1996: 49-58) has shown that ideas of autonomy and self education have roots in Chinese thought dating back to the Sung Dynasty. Riley (1988: 12-34) was one of the first researchers to raise the issue of the cultural appropriateness of the idea of autonomy in language learning. Benson (2001) states that Riley's concerns were associated with the fate of non-European students in European educational institutions that adopted autonomy among their goals. Studies related to these concerns were conducted, and it was discovered that the national culture was found to be an important factor in the provision of a cultural setting for fostering autonomy. Pennycook (1997: 35-53) describes that the notions of student centered education, individualism, and autonomy derive from a particular context and that these concepts will be structured and valued differently across cultural contexts.

2. On the theoretical concepts

Holec (1981: 3) describes the term 'learner autonomy' as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". The concept of learner autonomy, promoted by Holec and others in the context of language education in Europe, has in the last twenty years become influential as a goal in many parts of the world (Benson, 2001; Benson and Voller 1997; Cotterall and Crabbe 1999; Little et.al. 2000). Several arguments may be used in favor of developing autonomy in language learners: for example, that autonomy is a human right (Benson, 2000); that autonomous learning is more effective than other approaches to learning (Naiman et.al., 1978) and that learners need to take charge of their own learning in order to make the most of available resources, especially outside the classroom (Waite 1994: 233-42). Although the label enjoys more currency in Europe, this item is also in the United States established as promoting the learning strategies as important tools for language learners [Ofxord, 1990; Wenden, 1987; Wenden, 1991). Benson (1997) distinguishes three broad ways of talking about learner autonomy in language education: 1. a 'technical' perspective, emphasizing skills or strategies for unsupervised learning: specific kinds of activity or process such as the 'metacognitive', 'cognitive', 'social' and other strategies identified by Oxford (1990); 2. a 'psychological' perspective, emphasizing broader attitudes and cognitive abilities which enable the learner to take responsibility for his/her own learning; 3. a 'political' perspective, emphasizing empowerment or emancipation of learners by giving them control over the content and processes of their learning.

As well as these different views as to what constitutes learner autonomy, there are different interpretations of its scope. Some writers are concerned with the independent use of language; others focus on independent language learning; while others interpret learner autonomy more generally, in terms of being a fulfilled and/or effective *citizen* in a democratic society. Candlin (1997), for example, refers to "autonomy in language, learning, and, above all else, in living". The variety in these views of autonomy is reflected in the range of possible approaches to fostering autonomy in learners – approaches which are often linked to broader ideas of learner-centred education (Tudor, 1997). A technical perspective on autonomy may emphasize the development of strategies for effective learning: this approach is often referred to as 'learner training' (Oxford 1990, Wenden, 1991). A psychological perspective suggests fostering more general mental dispositions and capacities (Holec 1981: 3); while a 'political' perspective highlights ways in which the learning context can be made more empowering for the learner (Benson, 1997; Little, 1996). In addition, approaches to fostering autonomy may focus on technology or other resources; on the learner him/herself; and/or on decision-making in the learning context (Benson, 2000). However, the individualistic connotations of this term have led some writers (Brookfield, 1986) to emphasize the value of *inter*dependence: the ability of learners to work together for mutual benefit, and to take shared responsibility for their learning. This is in accord with recent sociocultural theories in psychology (Vygotsky, 1978) and in the study of second language acquisition (Lantolf, 2000), whereby learning occurs through interaction between people and with 'mediating objects' such as learning materials, which 'scaffold' learning (Bruner, 1979).

3**. Culture and learning autonomy**

It seems to be true that none of us can escape entirely from the cultural assumptions and practices that have shaped us, although at the same time we might believe in the existence of human universals. According to Riley (1988: 12-34), on one hand anthropology sets out to account for the variability of human cultures, to describe and explain human nature; on the other hand ethnography sets out to describe and explain what it means to be a member of a particular culture.

Culture is important for language learning and education because these phenomena take place within a culture (or different cultures), which influences their form (Coleman, 1996) and because culture is inextricable from language, and so constitutes part of the content of language learning and education (Roberts et.al. 2001). Like autonomy, 'culture' is a multifaceted and much-debated concept; indeed, it has been rejected entirely by some writers, partly because of its association with national stereotypes (Atkinson, 1999: 625-54). Perspectives on culture parallel in some ways the perspectives on autonomy mentioned above. Roberts et al. (2001) distinguish between behaviorist views of culture which focus on patterns of observable behavior, cognitive views which see culture as located in the minds of individuals, symbolic views which see culture as a social system of signs, and ideological views which see culture as shaped by power.

According to Kneller's (1965) definition of culture, a particular culture of learning would involve the following elements: a community which shares the culture (e.g. a society, or a classroom); learning practices which are recognized in this community (e.g. going to lessons, or practicing language by talking to tourists), with their associated roles (e.g. teachers, learners, learning counsellors); institutions within this community which structure learning (e.g. schools, self-access centres or families); and tools and products which play some part in the community's learning practices (e.g. computers, textbooks or students' essays). As Smith (1997) points out, the literature described above has tended to assume that culture is national and monolithic, leading to generalizations which may not be easy to apply in particular learning situations. One example of this is the issue of 'what culture' a particular learner comes from, which is more complex than it may seem.

4. Learner Autonomy in FLT in the Republic of Macedonia

For several years I have worked at the Department of German Language and literature at the Faculty of Philology, University "Goce Delčev" in Štip, R. Macedonia. My specialization is German linguistics. Its tuition covers all eight terms of studies for bachelorship. I have prepared a special e-learning program for each term so far. In these studies the basic foreign language for most students is in German. The German language is an obligatory subject, and if a student chooses just this one, he meets it in each term. One of preconditions for enrolment of this subject - German language – is a good knowledge of German as it is taught at a secondary school. My intention in the teaching process is to describe the autonomous learning within an institutional context in Macedonian education and it is the means as well as the aim for the development of learner autonomy. "Goce Delčev" University – Štip is an open institution where large number of foreign students recognized the high educational values. Since the foundation of the University until today, a large number of foreign students from all over the world (especially from Turkey) recognized their future at our University. At the time being at the University Goce Delčev in Stip about 250 students from abroad (mainly from Turkey) are enrolled, about 80 only in this academic year. All foreign students are supposed to attend the B2 (C1 optional) course in Macedonian language (for two months) and should sign a Contract for beginning a course for learning Macedonian language organized by the Institute of languages at the Faculty of Philology. The lectures for these candidates are intensive and take place six days in a week. The students that applied for the Macedonian language course in this academic year will enroll in the particular study program the following academic year. On the occasion of the enrollment, the students will be officially published on the rank lists of accepted candidates within the envisaged quota – 10% of the study program they apply for. Provided that the selected study program is full, the students will be enrolled in the study program they selected as second or third option. In the 2010/2011 academic year, more than 2.800 new students won a study book, and already in the academic 2011/2012 3.500 new students had recognized their future at the University "Goce Delčev". Thus, currently studying at the University "Goce Delčev" about 20.000 students, future professionals in various fields. In 2011/2012 total 180 foreign students from Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Greece, Germany are enrolled in various faculties, such as Faculty of Medical Sciences and Faculty of Natural sciences and engineering.

Setting up an autonomous learning environment, which is not teacher-centered but learner-centered, puts certain demands on teachers as well as students. Autonomous learning may be described as what takes place in situations in which the teacher is expected to provide a learning environment where the learners are given the possibility consciously to be involved in their own learning and thus become autonomous learners. Each educational institution in Macedonian education is expected to conduct its activities by emphasizing the importance of motivating students to learn autonomously and helping them develop abilities to learn how to learn, to discover and solve problems, and to act independently through interdependence in response to social changes, no matter whether they come from different culture, in this case whether they are from Europe or Asia. Learner autonomy, which is stressed in educational reform in Macedonia, seems to be expected to have a social as well as an individual dimension. We are inclined to suppose that the strong attachment of members of Macedonian culture to their in-groups and the importance they attach to mutual support might provide ideal interpersonal environments for the development of autonomy.

We accept the Littlewood's (1999: 71-94) five generalizations about autonomy and how it might develop in the context of second or foreign language learning: Students will have a high level of reactive autonomy, both individually and in groups: Groups of students will develop high levels of both reactive and proactive autonomy. Many students will have experienced few learning contexts which encourage them to exercise individual proactive autonomy. Foreign students who are studying with Macedonians in a same group show the same capacity for autonomy as other learners when studying a foreign language. The language classroom can provide a favorable environment for developing the capacity for autonomy. Judging from the above proposals, we might expect foreign students to develop high levels of autonomy when they are engaged in group-based forms of learning such as cooperative/collaborative learning, experiential learning, and problem-based learning. Littlewood suggests that at the individual level there are no intrinsic differences that make students in one group either less, or more, capable of developing whatever forms of autonomy are seen as appropriate to language learning. The crucial factors that underlie whatever differences might be perceived are cultural and educational traditions, past experiences, and the contexts in which learning takes place.

5. Summary

With this paper we can conclude that the learner autonomy has to be interpreted as a complex process in the frame of a cultural and in globalized context, too. In recent years, the importance of developing learner autonomy in language education has been one of its more prominent themes in my country as well as in the West and East. In spite of agreement concerning its importance, there remains a good deal of uncertainty about its meaning in teaching and learning a foreign language.

Autonomy has a social as well as an individual and cultural dimension. The promotion of learner autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension. Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures and nations.

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