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Towards self-regulated learning in school curriculum

Seifodin Rajabi

Department of English Language Teaching, Kermanshah Branch, Islamic Azad University. 6718997551, Kermanshah, Iran

Abstract

The concepts of learner autonomy and self-regulated learning have gained voice throughout the recent years as constructs characterizing successful and proficient learners. Self-regulation refers to the process through which learners systematically direct their thoughts, feelings, and actions toward the attainment of their goals. As far as educational enterprises are concerned, the school curriculum should cater for opportunities to equip learners, especially in the primary stages, with a repertoire of techniques and strategies for self-regulation so that they accept the responsibility of their learning in the educational system. If this goal is accounted for by the educationists and curriculum developers, much energy and money would be saved and the educational goals and objectives can be set and achieved in a process of negotiation with the learners. Such an educational system with its emphasis on individual learner moves towards humanizing the school curriculum and learner autonomy by considering student voices and interests. This article tries to shed some light on the concepts of self-regulation and learner autonomy emphasizing the need to integrate interesting and motivating self-regulation strategies into the educational system with the prospect of encouraging students to take more responsibility of their life-long learning.

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1. Introduction

The concepts of learner autonomy, independence, and self-regulated learning have attracted a lot of attention throughout the recent years. More recent learning and teaching approaches have placed much emphasis on the role of the learner in the learning process. As Thanasoulas (2000) points out, "the shift of responsibility from teachers to learners does not exist in a vacuum, but is the result of a concatenation of changes to the curriculum itself towards a more learner-centered kind of learning". (p. 1)

Another important concept in the area of independent learning is that of Self-Regulated Learning (SRL) which has shown itself as a new concept in education in general and in the field of second/foreign language learning in particular. The concept of self-regulation or self-regulated learning has been defined by different scholars. For example, Boekaerts (1999) defines self-regulation as the ability to develop knowledge, skills, and attitudes transferable from one learning context to another and from learning situations in which this information has been acquired to a leisure and work context. According to Cubukcu (2009), one of the major causes of students' failure in their learning is the lack of self regulation. Borkowski & Thorpe (1994) describe underachievers as more impulsive, having lower academic goals, being less accurate in assessing their abilities; more self-critical and less efficacious about their performance and tending to give up easily than achievers. On the other hand, self regulators are easily

identified in the classroom as being self starters, confident, strategic and resourceful, and self-reactive to task performance outcomes (Cubukcu, 2009).

In the traditional view of education whose trace can still be found in many communities especially in the developing countries, the teacher is viewed as the knower whose job is to transmit his/her knowledge to the students who are viewed as passive recipients of that knowledge. In such a view, as Freire (1993) puts it, education is conceived of as an act of depositing, in which the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. Freire makes use of the banking concept of education to describe such a conception in which the students' roles do not exceed the mere receiving, filing, and storing of the deposits. Criticizing such a view, Freire (1993) argues for education as the practice of freedom. In other words, the goal of education should be towards the individual independence and self-regulation.

The alternative which Freire supports is the problem-posing education where individuals develop their capacity to perceive critically the way they exist in the world. Within the same lines of reasoning it should be noted that such a view is aimed at preparing the individual for exerting all his/her potentials in an effort to come up with the tools necessary for change towards the better. As far as the educational enterprises at primary stages are concerned, attempts should be made to provide the individual learners with a repertoire of techniques and strategies for self-reliance and self-direction so that they become less dependent on others.

2. The major theoretical perspectives underlying self-regulation

Self-regulation has been examined in several perspectives the most important of which have to be discussed here. The reinforcement theory of self-regulation, as the first perspective, derives from the work of Skinner. In this perspective, self-regulated behavior involves choosing among alternative courses of action, by deferring an immediate reinforce in favor of a different, and usually greater, future reinforces (Hergenhahn and Olson, 2008). There are three key sub-processes, as these writers point out, underlying self-regulation in reinforcement theory: self-monitoring, self instruction, and self-reinforcement.

Developmental perspectives on self-regulation define it as progressive cognitive changes in learners that allow them to exert greater control over their thoughts, feelings, and actions (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). It should be noted at this time that cognitive developmental theories establish a strong link between private speech and the development of self-regulation. The primary way in which we use language to regulate our mental functioning is through private speech (Lantolf & Thorn, 2007, p. 201).

From a social cognitive perspective, research has indicated that self-regulated learners believe acquisition of proficiency is a strategically controllable process and accept responsibility for their achievement outcomes (Zimmerman et al., 1992). As Zimmerman (1998) notes, self-regulated learners are metacognitively aware of strategic relations between self-regulatory processes and learning outcomes, feel self-efficacious about using strategies, have academic goals of learning, have control over debilitating thoughts and anxiety, and believe that strategy use will help them attain goals at higher levels.

Social cognitive theory views self-regulation as comprising three processes: self-observation (or self-monitoring), self-judgment, and self-reaction. People judge observed aspects of their behavior against standards and accordingly react positively or negatively (Hergenhahn and Olson, 2008). This process is by no means independent of environment. Students who judge their learning progress as inadequate may react by asking for their teacher assistance, which alters their environment. This environmental influence, as Hergenhahn and Olson argue, can assist the development of self-regulation.

Self-judgment refers to comparing current performance level with one's goal. Self-judgment depends on the type of self-evaluative standards employed, properties of the goal, importance of goal attainment, and attributions.

As far as self-evaluative standards are concerned, goals may be defined in terms of absolute or normative standards (Hergenhahn and Olson, 2008). Absolute standards are fixed while normative standards are based on performances of others. Normative standards frequently are acquired by observing models.

Vygotsky (1978) lays the principles of a social-constructivist theory of stages of development of internal self-regulation. In Vygotsky's view, learning occurs within a sociocultural environment through the learner's interactions with a more competent person, who mediates the learning. Self-regulation in this theory is achieved by moving through three stages: (1) *social speech*, that is, interaction with the more capable person, who models higher-order thinking skills; (2) *egocentric speech*, that is, overtly giving oneself instructions for applying such skills; and (3) *inner speech*, denoting mental self-guidance, a sign that the learner has fully internalized such skills.

3. Self-Regulation

Prior to defining self-regulation, attention should be paid to another similar concept which has been used interchangeably; i. e. learner autonomy. Richards and Schmidt (2002) define learner autonomy as "the principle that learners should be encouraged to assume a maximum amount of responsibility for what they learn and how they learn it. This will be reflected in approaches to needs analysis, content selection, and choice of teaching materials and learning methods." (p. 297). Learner autonomy, as Kumaravadivelu (1994) argues, involves: helping learners learn how to learn equipping them with the necessary means to self-direct their own learning, raising the consciousness of learners of the learning strategies they seem to possess intuitively, and making the strategies explicit and systematic so that they are available to improve the learning abilities of other learners as well.

Self-regulation or self-regulated learning (SRL) refers to the process through which learners systematically direct their thoughts, feelings, and actions toward the attainment of their goals (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1994). Self-regulation, in a sense, involves activating and sustaining goal-directed actions and behaviors. Zimmerman (1998) defines self-regulation as self-generated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors that are oriented to attaining goals. In his view, self-regulation is a self-directed process through which learners transform their mental abilities into academic skills.

The current understanding of self-regulated learning, as Boekaerts (1999) puts it, has been informed by three schools of thought: (1) research on learning styles, (2) research on metacognition and regulation styles, and (3) theories of the self, including goal-directed behavior. Pintrich (1999), in a similar vein, describes his model of SRL, specifying three categories of strategies that students should have access to in order to regulate their own learning, namely (1) cognitive learning strategies which help students to attend to, select, elaborate and organize information in such a way that deep-level understanding is possible, (2) metacognitive and regulation strategies which reflect the student's intention to plan, monitor and regulate their cognitive strategies, and (3) resource management strategies which refer to activities that manage and control the material, and internal and external resources that the learner has at his disposal to reach his or her goals.

4. Attributes of self-regulated learners

Santrock (2004) describes self-regulated learners as those who: set goals for widening their knowledge and maintaining their motivation, are aware of their emotions and learn how to manage their emotions, regularly monitor their progress toward a goal, modify their strategies on the basis of their progress, assess hindrances that may arise and make adjustments.

To be more specific, Zimmerman (2002, p. 66) lists the following component skills of SRL as used by learners: setting specific proximal goals for oneself adopting powerful strategies for attaining the goals monitoring one's performance selectively for signs of progress restructuring one's physical and social context to make it compatible with one's goals managing one's time use efficiently self-evaluating one's method attributing causation to results adapting future methods.

5. Promoting self-regulation in school curriculum

Several techniques have been proposed in the literature on independent learning to foster self-regulated learning and learner autonomy. Among such methods is raising the consciousness of learners on the attributes of successful and independent learners (Kumaravadivelu, 1994). Nevertheless, several other techniques are enumerated here as means for building upon and promoting self-regulated learning in school curriculum. It should be noted that the proposals made here are by no means limited to the school setting at any specific level and can be equally utilized at any context with educational affinity.

First, the learners can be directed toward self-regulated learning through the materials. In fact, properly developed, textbooks and other teaching resources seem to be potentiality capable of promoting learning through interaction. By involving the learners in a reciprocal mode, materials can direct learners towards self regulation. Once involved in the contents of the materials, learners have the opportunity to draw upon their own internal resources to do the activities and accomplish different tasks; hence moving towards independence.

Second among the techniques is the consultation with an expert, especially the teacher. In this method, the learner receives advice from and negotiates solutions to his learning problems with an expert. Through such a process of negotiation, the learners receive the kind of support they need for independent learning. Third, with advances in educational technologies in recent years, learners are able to direct their own learning. However, there is the need to provide the learners with training on the use of new technologies as applied to their field and level of study.

Still another technique which is much more in line with the aims of this paper relates to the process of curriculum development in the school context. As far as the curricular decisions are concerned, learners should be given a voice in decision making, goals and objectives setting, content selection, and evaluation procedures among other things. In other words, through the process of negotiation with the learners, curriculum-developers and teachers can account for students' needs and interests hence motivating them to take more responsibility of their own learning. In fact, such an approach is more in line with the process syllabi in which the teachers shift the responsibility for making decisions to the students. This is best done with the presence of the teacher as a guide.

Another useful approach towards self-regulation in the school curriculum is team/group work. In classes where learners have the opportunity to work with their peers, the prospect of self-regulation appears to be more promising. In such contexts, students are free to change their roles and as a result be able to take charge of their learning gradually. An equally effective approach towards self-regulated learning regards strategy instruction. The strength of such an approach lies in the fact that the learners receive training on different kinds of strategies such as metacognitive strategies which enable them to direct their learning throughout their lives since they possess the necessary tools to do so.

6. Metacognitive strategies

As noted in the preceding section, one of the ways in which the learners may feel the kind of confidence to rely on their own is through strategy instruction. A comprehensive discussion of the different types of learning strategies is among the aims of this paper; however, a touch on metacognitive strategies seems inevitable at this point since metacognitive strategy use is one of the major determinants of independent and self-directed learning. In pursuing their goals, as Hergenhahn and Olson (2008) contend, learners select methods they believe will help them.

Common among such methods are rehearsal, elaboration, organization, comprehension, monitoring, and affective techniques. In order to understand the concept of metacognitive strategy, it is necessary to shed some light

on the term meta-cognition. Metacognition can be defined simply as thinking about thinking (Anderson, 2005). It is the ability to make your thinking visible. It is the ability to reflect on what you know and do and what you do not know and do not do.

Meta-cognitive strategies, in Cohen's (2008) terms, are indirect strategies used to monitor the self while engaged in an activity such as reading. Anderson (2005) hypothesizes that the meta-cognitive strategies play a more significant role because once a learner understands how to regulate his or her own learning through the use of strategies; learning should proceed at a faster rate. Vandergrift (2002) emphasizes the essential role of metacognitive strategies: "Metacognitive strategies are crucial because they oversee, regulate, or direct the language learning task, and involve thinking about the learning process" (p. 559). O'Malley and Chamot (1990) strengthen the importance of the role of metacognitive strategies when they state that "students without metacognitive approaches are essentially learners without direction or opportunity to plan their learning, monitor their progress, or review their accomplishments and future learning directions" (p. 8).

7. Conclusion

Self-regulation, strategy use, and autonomy are often used interchangeably in the literature. However, Hurd (2005) argues that a practical distinction might be to interpret being autonomous as an attribute of the learner, self-direction as a mode of learning and self-regulation as the practical steps taken by learners to manage their own learning.

For the learner to become autonomous, as Cohen (2008) points out, he must identify, rehearse and apply learning strategies, structure his own learning, and critically reflect upon his own learning processes in order to be able to utilize his acquired skills, inside and outside the classroom. Learner autonomy is a more umbrella term than metacognitive strategies in that the former comprises mastery of other learning strategies such as cognitive strategies, communication strategies and socio-affective strategies. Moreover, Dickinson (1994) in defining learner autonomy interprets *taking responsibility for one's own learning* as meaning that the learner is involved in making the necessary decisions about his learning. Dickinson further posits that a fully autonomous learner, in addition to the use of metacognitive strategies, would make decisions about objectives, ways of reaching those objectives, materials, sources of input, activities himself.

A strong correlation has been found between learner autonomy and self regulation. According to Wenden (1991), in the cognitive literature on learning and instruction, autonomous learning has been referred to as self-regulation. The ability to take responsibility for learning as an accepted definition of learner autonomy often refers to learners' ownership of many learning processes which have been traditionally owned by teachers such as setting goals; setting learning methods, materials and tasks; monitoring and evaluating progress. These strategies have been used in the literature to describe both autonomous and self-regulated learners.

Furthermore, psychological preparation along with strategic training, Kumaravadivelu (1994) suggests, are the two main steps to promote learner autonomy. The primary task of the teacher who wishes to promote learner autonomy, is to help learners take responsibility for their learning and bring about necessary attitudinal changes in them. "This psychological preparation should be combined with strategic training that helps learners understand what the learning strategies are, how to use them for accomplishing various problem-posing and problem-solving tasks, how to monitor the performance, and how to assess the outcome of their learning" (Kumaravadivelu, 1994, p. 40).

As far as teaching and classroom practices are concerned, two issues need to be stressed. First, self-regulation requires something more than instruction (Dembo and Eaton, 1997). Students must feel that a strategy is effective and then control its use. It follows that it may take weeks or months of practice before a student demonstrates a new

self-regulatory behavior (Dembo and Eaton, 1997). Second, as Dembo and Eaton suggest, the classroom context must be conducive to the development of self-regulatory behavior.

Moreover, as Holec (1981) points out, self-regulated learning is an umbrella concept which may lead a person to autonomously learn at different levels. At this point it seems reasonable to argue that SRL is strongly associated with learner autonomy. It could be argued that developing learners' ability to self-regulate their learning is of great importance to the development of learner autonomy.

In conclusion it should be noted that integrating courses in which learners receive instruction on the use and control of metacognitive strategies and other equally effective self-regulatory skills in primary and secondary school seems necessary. That is, once equipped with self-regulatory assets, even students who have experienced failure for a long time would be encouraged to accept at least parts of the responsibility for their learning and progression. In this way, much time and energy will be saved.

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