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# Autonomous learning: A teacher-less learning!

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**Abstract**

Holec (1981) describes autonomy as, "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (cited in Thanasoulas, 2000). The term autonomy has sparked considerable controversy, inasmuch as linguists and educationalists have failed to reach a consensus as to what autonomy really is. In fact, autonomy in language learning is a desirable goal for philosophical, pedagogical, and practical reasons. But what is oppressed here is the role of teacher. Considering autonomous learning as an unbridled learning is as ludicrous as to assume that an infant can grow up with the help of his/her mother. In the realm of language teaching, teachers scaffold students towards independence using variety strategies in order to help students develop autonomy. Despite such explanations as many practitioners does not consider autonomous learning as synonymous with teacher-less learning, many view the construct of learner autonomy as being synonymous with self-access and especially with technology-based learning. The writer held if being autonomous is to take some charges on the part of students, since the capacity of taking charges of one's own learning in not innate but it must be taught, there would be much need for guidance. As Thanasoulas (2000) declares it would be nothing short of ludicrous to assert that learners come into the learning situation with the knowledge and skills to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, or to make decisions on content or objectives. The present paper was an attempt to elucidate the concept of autonomy from philosophical and theoretical perspectives and also to provide some pedagogical implications in order to value the role of teacher, as the primary scaffolder in the educational classroom, in consolidating the autonomy of learners.

*Keywords:* Autonomy, liberatory autonomy, learning strategies, chaos complexity

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For many years we have been hearing that autonomy is important. Immanual Kant held that autonomy is the foundation of human dignity and the source of modality, (cited in Hill, 1991, p. 43). Accordingly, autonomy has been heralded as an essential aim of education. Autonomy like many philosophers' favorite words is not the name of one single thing; it means quite different things to

different people. However, Hill (1991) claims, "Little progress can be made in debates about autonomy until these different ideas are sorted out." (p. 44).

Learner autonomy in language education is interpreted in various ways, and various terms such as 'learner independence', 'self-direction', and 'independent learning' have been used to refer to similar concepts. It is noteworthy that autonomy as a social process can be interpreted in terms of a point of a departure from education as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending to the construction of knowledge and the roles of the participants in the learning process. In the field of language learning, there is much concern about what techniques can be employed by teachers in order to help those students who are unable to develop skills to learn, to assess and to control their own learning (Ustunlouglu, 2009). A growing number of research studies are focusing on investigating the causes of this failure, with many writers (including Rivers, 1992; Brindley, 1990) offering suggestions for improvement. One area of study is autonomy, defined as the degree of responsibility students take for their own learning, as proposed by Brindley (1990).

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The concept of learner autonomy has in the last twenty years become influential as a goal in many parts of the world. Accordingly, Palfreyman and Smiths (2003) maintain several arguments may be used in favor of developing autonomy in language learners: for example, that autonomy is a human right; that autonomous learning is more effective than other approaches to learning; and that learners need to take charge of their own learning in order to make the most of available resources, especially outside the classroom (p. 1).

Benson (1997) distinguishes three broad ways of talking about learner autonomy in language education:

● 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);

● a 'psychological' perspective, emphasizing broader attitudes and cognitive abilities which enable the learner to take responsibility for his/her own learning;

● a 'political' perspective, emphasizing empowerment or emancipation of learners by giving them control over their learning. (cited in Palfreyman & Smiths, 2003, p. 3)

As Omaggio (1978) states there seem to be seven main attributes characterizing autonomous learners:

1. Autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
2. take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
3. are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;
4. are good guessers;
5. attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
6. develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
7. have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language. (cited in Thansoulas, 2000)

Thanasoulas (2000) in his article "What are Learner Autonomy and How Can It Be Fostered?" describes three approaches to knowledge and learning, and debates how each of them is in contact with autonomy:

a) Positivism: This school of philosophy premised upon the assumption that knowledge reflects objective reality. Therefore, if teachers are to be considered the holder of this reality, learning occurs by the transmission of that knowledge from one person to another. Derived from this perspective, we imagine traditional classrooms in which the teachers are considered as the purveyors of knowledge and wielders of power; learners are deemed to have vessels which are going to be filled with the knowledge held by teachers. On the other hand, positivism also lends support to the widespread notion that knowledge is attained by dint of the 'hypothesis-testing' model, and that it is more effectively acquired when 'it is *discovered* rather than *taught*' (ibid.) (my italics). It takes little perspicacity to realize that positivism is incongruent with, and even runs counter to, the development of learner autonomy, as the latter refers to a gradual but radical divorce from conventions and restrictions and is inextricably related to self-direction and self-evaluation.

b) Constructivism is an elusive concept, one of the central tenets of which is that individuals try to give meaning to events and ideas in which they find themselves. In contrast to positivism, constructivism posits the view that, rather than internalizing or discovering objective knowledge (whatever that might mean), individuals reorganize and restructure their experience. In Candy's terms (cited in Thanasoulas, 2000), constructivism 'leads directly to the proposition that knowledge cannot be taught but only learned (that is, constructed)', because knowledge is something 'built up by the learner'. Apparently, constructivism supports psychological versions of autonomy that appertain to learners' behaviour, attitudes, motivation, and self-concept. As a result, constructivist approaches encourage and promote self-directed learning as a necessary condition for learner autonomy.

c) Finally, critical theory, an approach within the humanities, shares with constructivism the view that knowledge is constructed rather than discovered or learned. Moreover, it argues that knowledge does not reflect reality, but rather comprises 'competing ideological versions of that reality expressing the interests of different social groups' (Benson & Voller, 1997, cited in Thamasoulas, 2000). Within this approach, learning concerns issues of power and ideology and is seen as a process of interaction with social context, which can bring about social change. Certainly, learner autonomy assumes a more social and political character within critical theory. As learners become aware of the social context in which their learning is embedded and the constraints the latter implies, they gradually become independent, dispel myths, disabuse themselves of preconceived ideas, and can be thought of as 'authors of their own worlds.

According to Kuaravadivelu (2003, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 176), in postmethod pedagogy, there are two views of learner autonomy, a narrow view and a broad view. A narrow view seeks to develop in learner a capacity to learn to learn, whereas the broad view goes beyond that to include a capacity to learn to liberate as well. Helping learners learn to learn involves developing in them the ability to take charge of one's own learning. Taking charges, according to Holec (1981, cited in Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p. 176) means to (1) hold responsibility for determining the objectives; (2) to select methods and techniques; (3) for monitoring their progress; and (4) for evaluating what has been acquired.  This definition might bring out some misconceptions among many practitioners; among them is the lifeless role of teacher in the class. Little (1991) seems to make a useful statement on what autonomy is NOT: (1) autonomy is **not** a synonym for self-instruction; in other words, autonomy is not limited to learning without a teacher; (2) in the classroom context, autonomy does not entail an abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher; it is not a matter of letting the learners get on with things as best they can; (3)  autonomy is not something that teachers do to learners; that is, it is not another teaching method; (4) autonomy is not a single, easily described behavior; and (5) autonomy is not a steady state achieved by learners.

Referring to Kumaravadivelu's (2006) broad and narrow concept of autonomy, he elucidates two kinds of autonomy: academic and liberatory. Accordingly:

While the narrow view of learner autonomy treats learning to learn a language as an end in itself, the broad view treats learning to learn a language as a means to an end, the end being learning to liberate. In other words, the former stands for *academic autonomy*, while the latter, for *liberatory autonomy*. If academic autonomy enables learners to be effective learners, liberatory autonomy empowers them to be critical thinkers. (p. 177)

### 2.1   A critical look at teacher's role

In the literature on language teaching and learning, there are many variations upon the basic idea of autonomy. The underlying assumption is that teachers and students view the processes in which they are mutually engaged from very different perspectives and that this is likely to influence the ways in which they make sense of a notion such as autonomy. From the teachers' perspective, autonomy is primarily concerned with institutional and classroom learning arrangements within established curricula. In other words, from the teachers' perspective, autonomy tends to imply the learner taking control of arrangements whose underlying legitimacy is unquestioned. From the learners' perspective which Benson (2008) views as tangential to, rather than opposed to, the teachers' perspective autonomy is primarily concerned with learning, in a much broader sense, and its relationship to their lives beyond the classroom.

Little (1991) stressed that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are interdependent, and that teachers wishing to promote greater learner autonomy need to "start with themselves", reflecting on their own beliefs, practices, experiences and expectations of the teaching/learning situation. However, learner autonomy does not imply that the teacher becomes redundant abdicating his/her control over what is transmitting (Thanasoulas, 2000). In fact the teacher's role in maintaining a learning environment in order to enhance the autonomy of learners in the process of learning is critical. The learning environment, also, is taken as a site for democratic practices and this provides another rationale for learner-centered education. Teachers in this model are not viewed as "bank-clerks" who make deposits into empty students. A key concept here is that of the hidden curriculum (the knowledge, values, and beliefs that schools present to students and others), not by what is explicitly being taught, but by the process in which the actual instruction takes place (Loporchio, 2006 cited in Jacobs & Farrell, 2010, p. 18). The point being that if schools and society talk about democracy but classroom practices do not reflect this because they are overly autocratic, students may be less likely to know how to function in a democratic learner-centered setting or even how to insist on this method if they recognize that they are being denied this right (Jacobs & Farrell, 2010). Along the same line, appreciating diversity and democracy are challenge in humanist thinking and acting is the linking of autonomy and humanity. As Hassaskhah (2005) submitted: "that language teaching should be democratic has long become a fact" (p. 54). Autonomy is not isolated individuality but it is the way a person relates to the other. It's the agency of the situatedness of people, as Veugelers (2011) declares. Developing autonomy and humanity is not a natural process, but an interactive process between people under social and political power relationships. Enhancing autonomy and humanity is part of social, cultural and political developments. Like autonomy that can not be separated from humanity, human development can not be separated from social, cultural and political struggle for a world of social justice. From a humanist point of view social change is not possible without strong and critical autonomous people (Veugelers, 2011).

### 2. 2 Autonomy and learning strategy

Emphasizing this continuum, Zimmerman (1998) claim  that  learners  who  are  able  to  self-

regulate the locus of control throughout the learning experience are strategic learners. Those learners learn through the positive experience of a good performance, through the experience of others, through verbal persuasion, and through a positive physiological state, and eventually develop their self-regulatory skills to the point where they become self-regulated learners and take control of their (Ustunlouglu, 2009). In second language education Learner Autonomy involves second language learners gaining awareness of their own ways of learning such as learning styles and learning strategies, so that they can utilize their strengths and work on their weaknesses (Benson, 2007, cited in Jacobs and Farrell (2010, p. 18). However, according to Jacobs and Farrell (2010), focusing on learner strategies is important in second language education because research has indicated that our students can actually learn how to successfully manipulate their own strategy use. However, focusing on learning styles is more difficult to manipulate because it is within the nature of the learner himself or herself; in other words, learning style is the given (Jacobs and Farrell 2010).

## 2. 3 Autonomy and chaos complexity

Paiva (2006) argue that autonomy is a socio-cognitive system nested in the SLA system. It involves not only the individual's mental states and processes, but also political, social and economic dimensions (cited in Paiva, 2011, pp. 63). It is not a state, but a non-linear process, which undergoes periods of instability, variability and adaptability. It is an essential element in SLA because it triggers the learning process through learners' agency and leads the system beyond the classroom. Paiva (2011) holds, "Autonomous learners take advantage of the linguistic affordances in their environment and act by engaging themselves in second language social practices" (p.63).

Autonomy changes for reasons that are, usually, entirely internal to itself, such as a willingness to learn in a more independent way. In Paiva and Braga (2008), it is argued that 'autonomy, in the perspective of complexity, encompasses properties and conditions for complex emergence, and is inextricably linked to its environment'. (cited in Paiva, 2011, p.63) Likewise, its dynamic structure governs the nature of its interactions with the environment in which it is nested. In this sense, the language learner agent influences, and is influenced by, his/her social practices in a constant movement of organization and reorganization, a process that, paradoxically, possesses a certain degree of freedom and dependency. Murphy (2011) argues, "Despite the lack of a single, universal theory of autonomy, there is agreement on the educational importance of developing autonomy and that autonomy can take a variety of forms, depending on learning context and learner characteristics." (p. 17)

## 2.4 How to achieve autonomy

That learners have to follow certain paths to attain autonomy is tantamount to asserting that there has to be a teacher on whom it will be incumbent to show the way. In other words, autonomous learning is by no means "teacher-less learning" (Thanasoulas, 2000). As Sheerin (1997, cited in Thanasoulas, 2000) succinctly puts it, teachers have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand to stay afloat. Probably, giving students a "helping hand" may put paid to learner autonomy, and this is mainly because teachers are ill-prepared or reluctant to 'wean students away from teacher dependence. After all, it is not easy for teachers to change their role from purveyor of information to counselor and manager of learning resources. Kumaravadivelu (2006) holds Meaningful (liberatory) autonomy can be promoted in the language classroom by, among other things:

- encouraging learners to assume the role of mini-ethnographers to investigate and understand how, for instance, language as ideology served vested interests.

- asking them to reflect on their developing identities by writing diaries… related to the social world
- helping them in the formation of learning communities where they develop into unified, socially cohesive, mutually supportive groups seeking self-awareness and self improvements.
- providing opportunities for them to explore the unlimited possibilities offered by online services and bringing back to the class their own topics for discussions, and their own perspectives on those topics. (p. 178)

Clearly, as Kumaravadivelu (2006) claims such a far-reaching goal cannot be attained by learners working alone; they need the willing cooperation of all others who directly or indirectly shape their educational agenda, particularly that of their teachers.

Thanasoulas (2000) also outlines three ways in order to foster autonomy: (1) self-report, (2) diaries and evaluation sheet and (3) persuasive communication. To him, there are two types of self-report: introspective and retrospective. The main goal of the first, introspective self-report, is help learners become aware of their own strategies, and in the latter, retrospective self-repot, students are asked to think back to retrospect on their learning. It could be argued that self-reports can be a means of raising awareness of learners' strategies and the need for constant evaluation of techniques, goals, and outcomes. The purpose of the second method, diaries and evaluation sheet, according to Thanasoulas (2000) seems to alter learners' beliefs about themselves by showing them that their putative failures or shortcomings can be ascribed to a lack of effective strategies rather than to a lack of potential. It is through the second way, diaries and evaluation sheets, which offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, identifying any problems they run into and suggesting solutions. This approach as Thanasoulas (2000) brings is based on the assumption that when learners are faced with convincing information about a situation, 'they can be led to re-examine existing evaluations they hold.

Nowlan (2008) suggests journal writing and using the internet and technology for having autonomy in language learning. Furthermore, Rao (2003) finds that the use of portfolios works satisfactorily with his students.

> As an assessment device, portfolios not only encourage students to participate in the process of evaluation, but also motivate students to improve their English learning in a comprehensive way. In addition, portfolio evaluation takes individual differences into consideration and involves everybody in the assessment process, including students, teachers, and peers. Most importantly, portfolios connect learning, assessment, and instruction and stress improvement, effort, and achievement. With the use of portfolios, students can document the planning, learning, monitoring, and evaluation processes. This can help raise students' awareness of learning strategies, facilitate their learning process, and enhance their self-directed learning. (p. 120)

## 3. CONCLUSION

What permeates this article is the belief that in order to help learners to assume greater control over their own learning, it is important that teachers help them to become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use. In other words, autonomous learning is by no means teacher-less learning. The study shows that students do not perceive themselves as sufficiently autonomous, that they are unwilling to take responsibility and that they continue to see the teacher as a

dominant figure who is the decision maker in the classroom. Thus, this study highlights the need to integrate learner independence into the language curriculum, with a well-structured focus, delivery, and content.

Autonomy as a socio-cognitive system is not a state but a no-linear process which undergoes variability. Thus, autonomous learners take advantage of the linguistic affordance in their environment and act by engaging themselves in second language social practices. Hence, being autonomous, in initial state, involves being scaffolded by teachers in order to enhance the process of learning. Without this, it would be difficult to implement independent learning in a coherent way and to attract institutional commitment. Meanwhile, teachers, of course, need to experience autonomous learning themselves and need to be committed to self-development. The questions of how teachers can be psychologically prepared and which skills and knowledge are needed for autonomy should be addressed as well. Students need induction sessions and support so that they can become familiar with independent language learning materials, equipment and resources. Thus, designated advisors working at the Self-Access Center will be able to provide students with appropriate approaches.

To sum up, the results indicate that students do not perceive themselves as autonomous enough in language learning and teachers need the ability to move their students towards autonomous learning. Respecting student ideas, sharing decisions in teaching, learning goal setting and leading students towards taking responsibility for their learning rather than prescribing the learning process will all increase student motivation, and thus, foster success.

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