



AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF THE APPROACHES THAT PROMOTE LEARNER AUTONOMY IN LITERATURE TEACHING

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ABSTRACT

The objective of the present study is to explore the notion of learner autonomy in considerable detail and to explain its relevance in literature teaching. It then provides a broad overview of the extent and ways in which learners can be trained to develop their ability to learn independently. It is noted with some degree of frustration that the teaching of literature in many universities turn into a massive process of explanation by the teacher or even translation. There is no room for learners to respond or to involve themselves in the class. Keeping in mind the problems that exists in our educational institutions, the current research is an earnest endeavor to bring out a positive connection between learner autonomy and literature teaching.

Key words: Autonomy, literature teaching, self-direction, learner training, learning strategies, approaches.

1. Introduction.

“If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day. If you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime” (Confucius)

The issue of promoting learner autonomy has been the subject of debate over the past three decades. The term ‘learner autonomy’ was first formulated in 1981 by Henri Holec.

According to him ‘autonomy’ is the learners’ ability to take charge of one’s own learning. Educationalist have long been insisting on having an education system which fosters independence and motivation for the learners to learn. Undoubtedly, it is an issue of paramount importance today. Therefore, the focus of the study is to explore the concept of learner autonomy and then examine its relevance in the field of literature teaching. It then offers a wide range of techniques, learner training and learning strategies that may be used to nurture learner autonomy with regard to teaching literature.

Learner autonomy might sometimes seem to be unpredictable and disruptive to learning in the classroom. However, the present analysis is by no means intended to be exhaustive, but rather a guide for teachers who wish to take this aspect of teaching systematically into consideration. Researches suggest that classroom tasks are the most effective means of promoting autonomous language learning habits (Dam, 2001). It is important to note that classroom tasks greatly encourage autonomous learning behavior. The concept of learner autonomy is not simply engaging learners to a certain task. It is the teaching methodology that enables the learners to take control of their own learning and to become “empowered to engage in learning independently” (Benson & Voller, 1997).

The present study aims at reviewing the literature on learner autonomy, learner training and learning strategies that contribute towards building up of learner autonomy in literature teaching. The study also suggests the evidence of significant relationship between autonomy and learning outcome.

2. Definition of Learner Autonomy

The term ‘autonomy’ refers to the state of being free from the control or power of another person or ideas. The notion of autonomy is found not only in the field of education but also in areas like medicine, business management and organizational management. Autonomy in the field of education according to Benson (2001) and Holec (1981) means ‘the learner’s ability to take control of one’s own learning. It enables the learner to move from dependency to independency. Independence, autonomy and the ability to control learning experiences are indispensable parts of a literature classroom.

On the other hand, learner autonomy is misinterpreted by many teachers. They often consider autonomy with lack of discipline and possibly chaos in the classroom. As a result, the

teacher falls back upon a more traditional classroom approach in which he/ she imparts information about the author, the background of the work, the main theme and so on. Learners are expected to memorize all these and reproduce it at the examination.

In the real sense of the term, autonomy means the learners 'potential to decide for himself/ herself what to study, why, when, how, with whom and for how long. Similarly, Holec (1981) further identified that 'learner autonomy is about *potential* learner behavior, i.e. the *capacity* or *ability* to learn independently'. The concept of autonomy varies depending on a variety of factors: for example, one language learner will have high level of autonomy when choosing a text to read outside the class but tend to be completely dependent on the teacher while he is inside the class. While another learner might be very enthusiastic on one day and none at all on the following day. Therefore, it is mandatory for teachers to identify that, learners' levels of autonomy are variable and that each learner is different from the other.

3. Autonomy in Literature Teaching

A literature classroom is a world worth exploring and a world worth explaining. Widdowson (1975) rightly noted that literature teaching is at heart 'a matter of developing learners' creative abilities'. The first encounter with new literary work may be crucial for the learners who are about to explore the unknown territory of literature. Usually, the first impressions colour their feelings about the whole enterprise which they are engaged in. They might approach the new experience with a mixture of curiosity, excitement and apprehension. At this juncture, the teachers' role is very crucial. They must provide a supportive atmosphere that will be reassuring to the students.

The first imperative to teaching literature is usually to try and to draw the learners' attention to the text. In order to catch the attention of the learner easily, it is always advisable to use representational materials. Such texts demand readers' response and personal interactions. The findings of McRae (1991) confirmed that 'representational material opens up, calls upon, stimulates and uses areas of the mind, from imagination to emotion, from pleasure to pain'. Increased use of such materials in the classroom can contribute towards developing learners' creative and critical thinking, power of imagination, new and different experiences, feelings and emotions. This, in turn, promote development of the individual as a whole person.

Secondly, the teachers must be sensitive enough to recognize, accept and appreciate learners' individual differences with respect to their personal interpretations, responses and ideas. There is a wide range of individual differences among the learners. These differences can result in differing paths of development and that one teacher cannot be expected to manage all such differing paths in his/her teaching. So there is a great need for a balance in teaching: a balance in helping individuals to develop their personal and individual potential on one hand and, on the other, motivate the learner to be more independent and self-directed. Undoubtedly, literature teaching offers an ideal context for independent and self-directed educational goals. Educationalists look forward to an education system that fosters independence and motivation rather than passivity and dependency. Burner (1966) believes that 'instruction is a provisional state that has its object to make the learner or problem-solver self-sufficient'. The motive of literature teaching is to elicit students' own thoughts and feelings on the issues. It is important for learners to feel that their knowledge and life experience can still provide valuable guidance. The teachers' ultimate goal in literature classroom is to set the mood, create interest, and spark curiosity. Literature, in a sense, is something that should be taken out of the classroom context and replaced into a living reality.

4. Approaches to Teaching literature

The endless problem of how to teach literature, has in recent years become increasingly guided by the dominant aim of promoting learner autonomy. However when the teacher introduces literature in the classroom, the aspect of autonomy vanishes and it becomes a teacher-centered approach where the teacher is the main authority figure. Most often, the teacher employ traditional classroom approach in imparting information. The learners are somehow expected to have the ability to retain all this in and prepare themselves for the end goal of testing and assessment. Many a time, the teaching of literature turn into a massive process of explanation by the teacher. The classroom time is devoted to a step by step interpretation led by the teacher. The students are the passive listeners. There is little or no room for the learners to respond or to involve themselves in the class. As a result of the teacher-centered approaches, the aspect of learner autonomy is completely denied and the learning outcome is measured only through objectively scored tests and assessments.

Learner autonomy can be achieved only through an approach where the teacher and the students play an equally active role in the teaching learning process. Little (2002) points out that, ‘the teachers’ role is to create and maintain a learning environment in which learners can be autonomous in order to become more autonomous’. The teachers’ central aim here is to train learners, facilitate their learning and overall comprehension of the material. To understand better, the approaches to teaching literature, it is essential to understand the three main teaching methods in educational pedagogy: *direct instruction*, *inquiry based learning* and *cooperate learning*. These methods help the teacher obtain a clear understanding of how to take control over their classroom and help learners to be co-participants in the learning process.

4.1. Direct instruction

In this approach, the teacher structures lessons in a straight forward and simple manner. Direct instruction is designed to build upon the existing skills and knowledge. It allows the teacher to introduce new skills or concepts in a relatively short period of time. Benson (2006) discovers that, ‘learners do not develop the ability to self-direct their learning by being placed in situations where they have no other option’. Direct instructional strategies are academically focused and effective because it is based on principles like gaining students’ attention, strengthening correct responses and imparting corrective feedback. Studies prove that students learn the basic skills more effectively when they receive the instructions directly from the teacher.

The notion of direct instruction is crucial in the promotion of learner autonomy. The teachers should include an explanation of *why* they are doing certain tasks, *why* is it useful and *what* they learn from it. The teachers are expected to make sure that the classroom activities are not carried out blindly (Wenden 1986). In direct teaching model, students learn by observing and imitating the teacher’s process. Once the learners come to know the impotence of certain techniques and tasks, they can develop the capacity to implement them in different contexts and situations, and become more responsible for their own learning.

4.2. Inquiry based learning

It is a method of teaching that emphasizes student exploration and hand-on learning. Here the teacher acts as a coordinator, providing necessary guidance and support for the students in their learning process. Inquiry based learning is a student centered approach where the learners

are active participants in the classroom. The aim of this teaching strategy is to help students explore, express and value their own responses. The teacher acts as a ‘resource’ person who answers questions, provides assistance, encourages progress and thus foster in them a sense of autonomy and motivation to learn.

Through the process of exploring and expressing learners become less dependent on the teacher and more interested in finding their own meaning. The findings of Penny Ur (1996) also reveal that ‘it is helpful to think of the learning and teaching of a piece of literature as a process containing three main stages: encounter and impact, understanding and familiarization, analysis and interpretation’. Shared activities in group make impact on learners’ intellectual and emotional growth. The effort and personal investment that the learner puts forward on a literary text, sharpen his/her responses and motivates them to extend the understanding of the text by personal reading at home. The following are some of the strategies to be used with literature students in order to reinforce responses from the learner:

- Encourage learners to develop their own questions, based on the text.
- Read the text as often as possible to develop thinking about literature.
- Stimulate students to create a strong sense of response to questions, by letting them work individually, in pairs and in large groups.
- Involve students in discussions.
- Let the learners to work in group to answer questions.
- Encourage silent reading.

A number of enjoyable student-centered activities are very important while working with literature students. Moreover, a variety of activities helps the teacher to concentrate on their weakness in particular skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing.

4.3. Cooperative learning

Cooperative learning focuses on group work and a sense of community feeling. It is based on the belief that students learn best when working with and learning from their peers. Well planned pair and group work can be a very fruitful method to motivate students, encourage active learning, and develop creative and critical thinking. Group work is a means of increasing learners’ confidence in the foreign language. Learners from different life experiences and background can act as a rich marshalling device to enhance learning. In addition, pair work

encourage learner independence and cooperation. It can lesson stress in learning and allow greater freedom to explore his/her responses and interpretations. Another important point that the teacher need to be aware of while assigning a group work is to make sure that he/she provides the students with a number of choices to choose from. Murray (1999) consider learner autonomy as a process whereby learners exercise control and assume responsibility of their learning by making decisions or choices. In addition, Cohen (1998) stresses the importance of the word ‘choice’ in his definition and states that it is the distinguishing element among the non-strategic processes. Teachers should encourage the learner to have their own learning styles. Learners must have the freedom to choose learning materials and to use the most appropriate strategies for their learning. The teacher only suggests certain topics to form the content of the learning and leaves the door open for the learner to choose their own topics and learning styles. This would build up learners’ level of confidence and competence. Katz & Assor (2007) identified that by providing students with an amount of choice, teachers create an autonomy supportive environment

5. Learner Training and Learning Strategies

‘Learner training’ refers to the techniques and procedures used for training learners to expand their capacity to be more autonomous. Holec (1981) discovers in his studies that ‘the capacity to be autonomous is not innate, but needs to be trained’. Similarly, Ellis & Sinclair (1989a) asserted that ‘learner autonomy aims to help learners consider the factors which affect their learning and discover personally suitable learning strategies so that they may become more effective learners and to take on more responsibility for their own learning’.

Studies prove that systematicity is a serious issue in learner training. Teachers use certain learner training techniques in their classrooms. These techniques are often found to be unprincipled and unsystematic. Researchers in the field of learner training stresses the issue that, the promotion of learner autonomy needs to be carried out in a very systematic manner, so as to be beneficial to the learner.

Learning strategies are always purposeful and goal-oriented. Strategies attract considerable focus in the field of literature teaching. According to Rubin, (1975) strategies are ‘techniques or devices which a learner may use to acquire knowledge’. Strategies enhance learners’ ability to be flexible, effective and independent in their learning activities.

There are a number of different types of strategies available to the learners (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989; Wenden 1991). However the two major categories of learning are: Metacognitive strategies and Cognitive strategies. Metacognitive strategies can also be called 'Self-management strategies'. They are techniques that allows people to take charge of their own learning. It involves awareness about learning, planning, evaluating and monitoring. Learners often tend to show an increase in self-confidence when they use metacognitive skills. It is general and can be applied to all kinds of learning, irrespective of the subject.

O'Malley et al. (1985) defines cognitive strategies as 'those which involve actually manipulating the subject matter'. They are different for different subjects and tasks. For instance, the cognitive strategy used by a learner who is learning to sing, is different from those used by a language learner. When it comes to language learning, cognitive strategies include repetition, organization, summarizing, guessing the meaning from the context and using imagery for memorization.

A systematized learner training includes activities and procedures which combine metacognitive and cognitive strategy training. As McCarthy (1998) investigated, 'learner training in certain explicit areas can broaden the horizons of the learner and may empower him/her to become autonomous in some or all aspects of language learning'. In addition, Ellis & Sinclair (1989a) have confirmed in their studies that 'learner training is aiming to improve effectiveness of learning and effective learning is part of autonomy'. All the above studies reveal that if we train our learners towards using effective strategies, autonomy will automatically follow.

Conclusion

Various researches and my own experience as a teacher prove that learner autonomy has become the most desired goal of literature teaching program today. Most of the issues raised in this study is not new to literature teachers. However, the present article is an earnest attempt to investigate the ways in which greater learner autonomy can be enriched through the teaching and learning of literature. Greater autonomy, in return, serves as an investment for the rest of their lives.

Further, it has been suggested that literature teaching is an ideal context for nurturing the individual learners' intellectual as well as personal development. Learner training and the use of

appropriate strategies is an indispensable part of literature teaching. In other words, it is a gate way to helping students to increase their self-learning abilities.

There are a wide range of strategies available to make the literature teaching more effective, but it is not possible to describe all in great detail in this article. Yet, it is hoped that the familiar methodological strategies and procedures illustrated, will put a fresh momentum into the teaching of literature, to stimulate students' desire to read, respond and to be self-directed. More particularly, the study is also aimed to provide some enlightenment, which will stimulate teachers to use appropriate, explicit and systematic learner-training activities for their own students.

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