



GlobELT: An International Conference on Teaching and Learning English as an Additional Language, Antalya - Turkey

New approaches on learner autonomy in language learning

Ozlem Yagcioglu^a*

^a *Dokuz Eylul University, School of Foreign Languages, Izmir 35160, Turkey*

Abstract

Learner autonomy in foreign language teaching and learning has been a favourite topic for a long time. Since the beginning of the millennium year, there have been lots of studies to promote learner autonomy in different levels of foreign language education at different schools and at different universities. In recent years, many new approaches and innovations have been used to develop learner autonomy in foreign language education. Helping foreign language learners to become autonomous is one of the fundamental and the universal duties of all of the foreign language educators have. Learners who think that their learning styles and their efforts are necessary to develop the learning methods and approaches can be successful in learning new foreign languages. They can also give positive energy to their teachers or professors to develop their teaching methods and techniques. The concepts of 'autonomy' and 'responsibility' are two crucial requirements in learning and both of them require active practices. Responsibility and autonomy are not easy to distinguish. Responsibility and autonomy are not easy to distinguish. In this paper, their importance and their differences will be explained. The reasons of developing responsibility and autonomy will also be explained. New approaches on learner autonomy in foreign language learning and teaching will be highlighted. Language learning strategies will be handled. Sample classroom activities will be shared. Useful websites, blogs and books on learner autonomy will be suggested.

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Peer-review under responsibility of Hacettepe Üniversitesi.

Keywords: Learner autonomy; learning strategies; sample classroom activities

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy and learner responsibility are the fundamental topics in foreign language education. If the learners are not aware of their responsibilities, they can never be successful in learning new things. Learners who do not know their responsibilities in their class hours can easily demolish the enthusiasm and they can give negative

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +90-232-301-0939; fax: +90-232-301-0860.

E-mail address: ozlemycgcl@gmail.com

energy to many learners who intend to learn new languages. Learner autonomy, learner responsibility and motivation are always related with each other as no one can learn new things if they are not enough motivated. To increase the learner responsibilities and to help the autonomous learners, teachers should know some essential classroom applications. It is hoped that this study will help foreign language educators to prepare different kinds activities in their classes.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. What is learner autonomy?

Moore states that;

“The Sheffield Hallam definition of learner autonomy starts with the premise that an autonomous learner takes responsibility for his/her own learning. In doing this:

They can identify:

- *their learning goals (what they need to learn)*
- *their learning processes (how they will learn it)*
- *how they will evaluate and use their learning*
- *they have well-founded conceptions of learning*
- *they have a range of learning approaches and skills*
- *they can organize their learning*
- *they have good information processing skills*
- *they are well motivated to learn*

Thanasoulas (2000) illustrates this:

“It is noteworthy that autonomy can be thought of in terms of a departure from education as a social process, as well as in terms of redistribution of power attending the construction of knowledge and the roles of the participants in the learning process.”

It has also been mentioned by Little (2015):

“Learner autonomy is a problematic term because it is widely confused with self-instruction. It is also a slippery concept because it is notoriously difficult to define precisely. The rapidly expanding literature has debated, for example, whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behaviour; whether it is characterised by learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is a psychological phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on a complementary teacher autonomy (for a comprehensive survey, see Benson 2001).”

2.2. What makes an autonomous learner?

Good lesson plans, modern teaching techniques and approaches help language learners to be autonomous learners.

Scharle and Szabó (2000, p. 4) indicate:

“In theory, we may define autonomy as the freedom and ability to manage one’s own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well. Responsibility may also be understood as being in charge of something, but with the implication that one has to deal with the consequences of one’s own actions. Autonomy and responsibility both require active involvement, and they are apparently very much interrelated.”

If learners feel themselves happy and active in their class hours, they can be autonomous learners. Using the same teaching method or the same approach can make the learners bored and unhappy in their class hours. Different kinds of methods and approaches will be useful to make them autonomous learners.

2.3. Why should we develop responsibility and autonomy?

Scharle and Szabó (2000:4) state that;

“The saying goes: you can bring the horse to water, but you cannot make him drink. In language teaching, teachers can provide all the necessary circumstances and input, but learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute. Their passive presence will not suffice, just as the horse would remain thirsty if he stood still by the river waiting patiently for his thirst to go away. And, in order for learners to be actively involved in the learning process, they first need to realise and accept that success in learning depends as much on the student as on the teacher. That is, they share responsibility for the outcome. In other words, success in learning very much depends on learners having a responsible attitude.”

Responsibility and autonomy should be developed for the following reasons:

- To have better class hours
- To create joyful class hours
- To have more successful and happy students
- To have more students who have self confidence and respect
- To create creativity and giftedness

2.4. What are learning strategies and why are they important?

As Chamot and O`Malley (1994, p. 58) indicate:

“There are two major reasons why we integrate learning strategies into the instruction of academic language and content. The first is the theoretical consistency of learning strategies with the cognitive view of learning which underlies CALLA (Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach). The second is the impressive amount of research that supports using learning Strategies with academic language and content information.”

Chamot and O`Malley (1994, pp. 59-60) further illustrate this:

- “Based on the theory and research related to learning strategies, there are four basic propositions that underlie the use of learning strategies in CALLA.*
- *Active learners are better learners.*
 - *Strategies can be learned.*
 - *Academic language learning is more effective with learning strategies.*
 - *Learning strategies transfer to new tasks.*

It has also been mentioned by Chamot and O`Malley (1994, pp. 60-61):

Learning strategies are defined as thoughts or activities that assist in enhancing learning outcomes. Strategies by definition are probably performed with awareness or else they would not be strategic, although the same mental operations can be performed without awareness once they are proceduralized and have the same beneficial results with learning. Three broad categories of learning strategies have been proposed in the cognitive literature and our own research. These types of learning strategies are based in part on theory and in part on the observation that students report using what seem to be executive skills with learning tasks while also using strategies that apply directly to the learning activities. The three types of strategies are as follows:

- **Metacognitive Strategies-** Planning for learning, monitoring one's own comprehension and production, and evaluating how well one has achieved a learning objective;
- **Cognitive Strategies-** Manipulating the material to be learned mentally (as in making images or elaborating) or physically (as in grouping items to be learned or taking notes); and
- **Social/Affective Strategies-** Either interacting with another person in order to assist learning, as in Cooperative learning and asking questions for clarification, or using affective control to assist learning tasks."

2.5. What is motivation?

As it has been mentioned by Hadfield and Dörnyei (2013, p. 1):

"Language teachers frequently use the term "motivation" when they describe successful or unsuccessful learners. This reflects our intuitive belief that during the lengthy and often tedious process of mastering a foreign/second language (L2), the learner's enthusiasm, commitment and persistence are key determinants of success or failure. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases learners with sufficient motivation can achieve a working knowledge of an L2, regardless of their language aptitude, whereas without sufficient motivation even the brightest learners are unlikely to persist long enough to attain any really useful language."

2.6. Motivation and vision in language teachers' development

Motivation is essential for language teachers' development, because they can achieve to do lots of useful activities in their classes and they can often follow the latest innovations on their professions, if they are motivated well or if they know how to motivate themselves. A fresh perspective is always crucial in motivational teaching. Lesson plans have to be prepared according to the age groups, language proficiency, socioeconomic backgrounds and according to the previous language learning history. When teachers enter the classroom, they are aware how languages should or should not be taught and how languages should be learnt effectively. Two teachers can apply the same methods and techniques for the same courses in different classes. Students in one teacher's class can be more active, talkative and cheerful during the class hours and students in the other teacher's class can be quite and stressful. They can also get bored. This is because of the differences in the teachers' mindsets. The teachers' vision of themselves in the future is a very important issue for their students, because how students engage with new ideas and how they are grown as professionals depend on their attitudes and their teaching methods. (Dörnyei & Kubanyiova, 2014: 22- 24)

2.7. What are the new approaches in language learning?

The wonder approach

L'Ecuyer (2014) states that;

"Wonder, innate in the child, is an inner desire to learn that awaits reality in order to be awakened. Wonder is at the origin of reality-based consciousness, thus of learning. The scope of wonder, which occurs at a metaphysical level, is greater than that of curiosity. Unfortunate misinterpretations of neuroscience have led to false brain-based ideas in the field of education, all of these based on the scientifically wrong assumption that children's learning depends on an enriched environment. These beliefs have re-enforced the Behaviorist Approach to education and to parenting and have contributed to deadening our children's sense of wonder. We suggest wonder as the center of all motivation and action in the child. Wonder is what makes life genuinely personal. Beauty is what triggers wonder. Wonder attunes to beauty through sensitivity and is unfolded by secure attachment. When wonder, beauty, sensitivity and secure attachment are present, learning is meaningful. On the contrary, when there is no volitional dimension involved (no wonder), no end or meaning (no beauty) and no trusting predisposition (secure attachment), the rigid and limiting mechanical process of so-called

learning through mere repetition become a deadening and alienating routine. This could be described as training, not as learning, because it does not contemplate the human being as a whole.”

Gifted and talented students can start to enjoy listening to their courses and attending their courses with the help of the wonder approach. Because they can feel the importance and the meanings of learning.

Happy learning approach

As it has been mentioned by Veenhoven (2014:4):

“The word 'happiness' is used in various ways. In the widest sense it is an umbrella term for all that is good. In this meaning it is often used interchangeably with terms like 'wellbeing' or 'quality of life'.”

Seligman (2002:102) states that;

“Happiness in the present moment consists of very different states from happiness about the past and about the future, and itself embraces two very distinct kinds of things: pleasures and gratifications.”

When students realise the pleasures and the gratifications of their own lives, they can start to study their courses heartily and happily. With the help of the warm-up activities and the group work studies, students can feel their own pleasures.

Learning languages with the ICT

As it is stated by UNESCO (2009-2014);

“Information and Communication Technology (ICT) can contribute to universal access to education, equity in education, the delivery of quality learning and teaching, teachers' professional development and more efficient education management, governance and administration”

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants consisted of 90 university students at Dokuz Eylul University in the city of Izmir in Turkey. Their ages ranged between 19 and 22.

3.2. Teaching procedure

The participants were asked to reply to the following questions during the 1st and the 2nd weeks of their courses:

- Do you like listening to music while studying English?
- Do you like drawing pictures?
- Do you like taking photos?
- Do you like acting and dancing?
- Do you like using the internet?
- Do you like using your mobile phone for learning English?

- Do you like cooking?
- Do you like travelling?
- Are you an optimist or a pessimist person? Why?
- Do you live alone or with your family?

According to the answers of the questions I asked, different classroom activities and methods were used to motivate my students in my class hours.

3.3. Sample Classroom Activities

1. Using Quotes:

This warm up activity was a 5 minute activity. Students were asked to bring quotes which could give positive energy to their partners in their classes.

2. Using the pictures and the photos from the internet

This activity was used to teach some gestures and the pronunciations of some words

3. Using music and some songs in the classroom

According to my students' music tastes, I used some songs while they were writing their compositions or paragraphs in the class hours.

4. Using Word Charts:

Students described their words and drew the pictures of the words they were given.

5. Using Photos:

Students brought the photos they had taken and showed them to their partners or to their classmates and talked about them.

Students were asked to use the internet and they were asked to bring pictures and photos on different kinds of hobbies to their speaking classes. They were asked to do pair work and group work activities with the following quotes by using their pictures and their photos:

They were also asked to bring pictures and photos to their speaking classes. They used their pictures and photos while talking about the following titles and quotes.

- **Be A Pessimist or Be Hopeful and Optimistic** (Ben-Shahar, 2012, p. 91)
- *You see things; and you say, "Why?" But I dream things that never were; and I say, "Why not?"*- George Bernard Shaw
- **Insist on Perfection or Recognize when good enough will do** (Ben-Shahar, 2012, p. 156)
- *Settle for a choice that meets your core requirements rather than searching for the elusive best.*- Barry Schwartz
- **Surrender to Negativity or Bring positive energy wherever you go** (Ben-Shahar, 2012, p. 174)
- *Wherever you go, no matter what the weather, always bring your own sunshine.* - Anthony D' Angelo
- **Dwell on Failures or Focus on Successes** (Ben-Shahar, 2012, p. 265)
- *Wherever your attention goes, your energy flows and life grows.*- Brian Bacon
- **Never too old:** (Tishio, 2012, p. 15).
- *You are never too old to set another goal or to dream a new dream.*-C.S. Lewis

Objectives

- 1- To give students the chance to practice English as much as possible.
- 2- To teach students new words on optimism and positivity
- 3- To teach students new words on gestures which could be useful in the global world
- 4- To teach students how to communicate effectively
- 5- To teach them pronunciations of the new words effectively
- 6- To teach students how to use the internet and their mobile phones effectively for their language

learning studies.

4. Findings

4.1. Students' Attitudes

All the students in my classes were very active and bright students. They were interested in learning English as a second language and they liked learning English with different kinds of classroom activities which motivated them effectively. They also liked using the internet and the google for their studies.

Students in my classes were not attending my classes regularly in the first and the second week of my courses. Their attitudes completely changed after the third week of their courses. They became more positive thinkers and learners. They had a desired future self-image (vision) and created their own visions to learn English as a second language more effectively after participating the classroom activities which motivated them during the class hours.

4.2. Students' Perceptions

All the students found the teaching tasks very useful and they realised that they improved their language skills effectively. They brought their quotes, pictures and photos regularly to do their warm up and pair work activities. Their fluency and accuracy improved day by day rapidly while doing their pair work activities with their pictures, photos and quotes.

During the first and the second week of my courses, students in my classes were attending my classes half-heartedly. They were not interested in learning English as a foreign language. Classroom activities which were used in my classes helped them to motivate themselves and their communication skills improved day by day.

They became enthusiastic and active students who were interested in learning new things. They started to ask me and the other instructors to give them more topics to talk about during the class hours and they also wanted to study the grammar tests full-heartedly.

5. Conclusion

Motivation and learner autonomy are the essential issues in human's life. People can achieve lots of things and struggle against lots of problems, if they can be motivated well or if they can know how to motivate themselves. Motivation is a very important subject for our students. Students can be more active and talkative, if they can be motivated with the new and modern approaches effectively

Up to here, the definitions of the words of 'learner autonomy' and 'motivation' have been given. The role of motivation and vision in language teachers' development has been told. Motivating language learners through vision has been explained. How the classroom activities can be used with the new approaches and methods effectively has been explained. Sample classroom activities have been suggested.

I hope this study will help my colleagues to do more joyful and happier classes. It is also hoped that students will be more creative and optimistic after being motivated by the teachers or professors of their classes.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all of my students who participated my classes full heartedly and I would like to thank all of the readers of this study for their interests. I would also like to thank the directors of the School of Foreign Languages to give me permission to do this study.

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