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Learner autonomy and autonomous learning: Some suggestions for English language learners

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Article Info

Abstract
The acquisition of English as a foreign language in Vietnamese higher education institutions is still passive, resulting in the ineffective use of the language in real-world contexts. Many studies have demonstrated that autonomy promotes students' self-reliance and responsibility while developing significant learning experiences. This article aims to investigate the function and beneficial impacts of autonomy in the process of language learning. Some practical strategies for fostering learner autonomy in EFL are also provided, enabling students to be independent of their teacher, actively engaged in language learning, and take charge of their language learning process.

1. Introduction

Learning is increasingly viewed in the modern world as a continuous process that takes place outside of traditional educational environments like schools. People may now learn new skills and information at any stage of life, frequently customized to meet their personal or professional goals. Furthermore, there are other contexts outside the workplace in which knowledge may be applied into practice. Our skills and knowledge can be useful in social interactions, personal interests, and community tasks. This change highlights the value of flexibility and continuous education. To properly handle the abundance of information that covers them, potential workers must have a deeper awareness of the modern world. As a result, learner autonomy and the growth of self-sufficient people with the capacity to autonomously adjust to changing economic needs and circumstances are given priority in learning standards (Benson, 2000, p. 111) [5]. The most important thing when it comes to providing instruction in foreign languages is to help pupils become more independent in their learning (Benson, 2001, p. 1) [6].

According to the Vietnamese government, English is the most important foreign language taught in Vietnam at all national education levels, particularly in higher education (Loi, 2011) [19]. In order for Vietnamese higher education students to effectively engage in a global professional context, the Vietnamese government and the Vietnamese Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) stated in the legislative paperwork that they must possess a sufficient level of English language proficiency. (Education and Training Ministry, 2004). Given the expectation and efforts to position English as a language for global integration, the future workforce, educated at universities, is ill-equipped to meet the increasing demand for foreign language competency in order to stay competitive in the current knowledge-based economy. According to the findings from several comprehensive studies, students who feel that they have some control over their education are generally happier (Acat & Donmez, 2009; Harun, N.F., Yusof, K.M., Jamaludin, M.Z., & Hassan, S.A.H.S., 2012; as quoted in Butzler, 2014) [2, 15, 7]. Therefore, in order for students to actively participate in their own education and compete in the modern knowledge-based economy, they must demonstrate autonomous learning abilities.

2. Autonomy in language learning
2.1. Definitions of autonomy and learner autonomy
"The ability to take charge of one's own learning" was the definition of autonomy given by Holec (1981, p. 3) [16]. But according to Holec, "capacity" frequently replaces "ability," and "take charge of" is frequently substituted with "take responsibility for" or "take control of" one's own learning. In other words, autonomy is defined as language learners' ability to manage their own learning using suitable approaches in order to achieve the required level of language competence. The definition's central claim is that autonomy is a trait that defines learners rather than a product of learning environments. According to Dang (2010) [11], the idea of autonomy includes students' "capacity" to assume accountability for the entire learning process as well as their "ability" to direct their own education. While Holec (1981, p. 4) often discussed the elements of "taking charge of one's own learning," emphasizing planning, material selection, self-evaluation, and recording learning progress According to Little (1991) [17], psychology is the foundation of learner autonomy. Dickinson (1987, p. 11) [15] defined autonomy as "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions," expressing a viewpoint that was shared by the scholars previously stated. While autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm, and method of their learning, monitoring its progress, and evaluating its outcomes (Holec 1981, p.3) [16], in Little (2000a, p. 69) [18], he combined Holec's definition and his own: "Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action".

The word "learner autonomy" is not fresh in the history of education; it has been defined and explained in many ways in relation to language acquisition, and it has been referred to by several names in the literature. The concept of learner autonomy was previously "associated with a radical restructuring of language pedagogy," according to Allwright (1988, p. 35) [3], which included "the rejection of the traditional classroom and the introduction of wholly new ways of working." Understanding the aim of their program, taking ownership of their education, participating in the formulation of learning objectives, taking the initiative to organize and carry out learning activities, and routinely reviewing and assessing their progress are all characteristics of autonomous learners (Little, 1991) [17]. To put it another way, learner autonomy calls for a proactive approach to both self-management and interpersonal interactions, as well as a positive outlook and the ability to reflect. The ability to take charge of one's own learning in terms of managing the cognitive process, learning content, and learning management was defined and explained by Benson (2001, p. 47) [6] (Benson 2001, pp. 76-103) [6].

2.2. Learner autonomy and language proficiency
Autonomous learning is more efficient than non-autonomous learning. In other words, the enhancement of autonomy necessitates improved language acquisition. Autonomous learners focus on their learning and implement successful learning practices. As a result, autonomy encourages youngsters to learn more independently. As Benson (2001, p. 189) [6] stated, several advocates of autonomy are primarily concerned with the ability to learn well in terms of personal aims. Many studies have examined the close association between learner autonomy and language competency. (Ablard and Lipschultz 1998; Corno & Mandinach 1983; Zhang & Li 2004) [1, 8, 31]. The findings claimed that learner autonomy may assist learners enhance their language competence and concluded that autonomous learners were high-achieving students who used varied autonomous techniques. They also stated that the more autonomous a learner gets, the greater his chances of achieving high language competence. As a result, students must understand the value of learner autonomy in order to facilitate the language acquisition process and rely on themselves when learning a language.

3. Suggestions for fostering learner autonomy
Although autonomy may eventually lead to increased language competency, determining whether autonomous learners learn more than non-autonomous learners requires significant empirical support. However, several well-documented research have found a link between autonomy and successful learning, indicating some practical strategies to increase learner autonomy.

3.1. Active learning strategies
According to Holec (1981) [16], autonomy is gained through "natural means" or "formal learning" rather than being innate. Learner autonomy is attained through classroom instruction and strategy development, which are characterized as techniques of acquiring the abilities required for autonomy (Benson, 2001, p. 11) [6]. Autonomous learners may use techniques such as a) identifying an appropriate learning approach, b) establishing learning goals, c) determining learning material and speed, d) overseeing the learning process, and e) objectively assessing learning successes (Zhuang, 2010) [10]. According to Gardner and Belland (2012) [14], including various active learning methodologies into courses has the potential to boost student learning. Teachers can use a variety of resources to encourage learner autonomy, such as social networking sites or online learning websites, where students can exchange language with other language learners and explore an endless, useful source of information for self-directed learning. Also, news or documentaries on television might be beneficial for pupils who are interested in furthering their education outside of the classroom.

Self-regulated learning is an additional term that is currently employed to motivate students to establish their own learning objectives, evaluate their progress, and assess their learning process. This learning approach can result in better results and higher motivation. Active learning (AL) is a comprehensive concept that covers an extensive range of learning and teaching strategies that are designed to enhance the academic performance of students. (Carr, Palmer & Hagel, 2015) [9].

3.2. Motivation for learning and autonomy
The function of motivation in learning is crucial as it has the ability to shape the content, schedule, and approach in which individuals acquire knowledge, thereby establishing significant effects on their performance (Schunk & Usher, 2012) [27]. Some researchers (Pintrich, 1999; Vandergrift, 2005) [24, 29] suggest that autonomy is a consequence of motivation. Argues that independent language learners gain additional motivation when they successfully attain their targeted learning objectives. Conversely, learners who

consistently encounter difficulties in acquiring a language may have a pessimistic orientation towards the target language, leading to a decreased tendency to participate in independent tasks. They suggest that only those with a strong desire to acquire a language possess sufficient discipline and dedicate themselves to diligent effort and commitment in studying the language of their choice. Moreover, Dörnyei and Ushioda (2013) [22] determined that motivation, autonomy, and learning achievement are interconnected in an ongoing way. Hence, in order maintain students' engagement in the independent learning process, it is essential for students to possess both extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. In other words, to harness the power of motivation, the instructor may require students to work diligently through whatever course demands may arise, while also encouraging students to freely pick activities or goals that are "interesting and fun to do" (Noels *et al.*, 2003, p. 101) [22]. An investigation conducted by Nuray Okumus Ceylan (2021) [23] also examines the correlation between learner autonomy and motivation. The results suggest a moderate positive association between motivational attitudes (such as the value of the work, perceived self-confidence, and orientation towards learning goals) and characteristics of autonomy (including readiness, competence, and responsibility) in the process of language acquisition. This research confirms the notion that intrinsic motivation serves to strengthen learners' tendency to take responsibilities for their learning outcomes and that enabling students greater autonomy may promote intrinsic motivation.

3.3. Innovative teaching methods
Conventionally, the instruction of English in Vietnamese institutions has predominantly depended on lecture teaching and other specialized methods, sometimes referred to as a "teacher-centered approach." This instructional approach leads to a state of passive learning where in pupils rely on their teacher. Hence, it has been demonstrated that adopting a student-centered approach is of the greatest significance in fostering lifelong learning (Spencer & Jordan, 1999) [28]. A student-centered approach prioritises the use of diverse teaching approaches to transform the role of instructors from simply transmission of knowledge to facilitators of student learning. Moreover, students who participate in this instructional approach demonstrate greater success compared to others in fostering fundamental understanding, advanced problem-solving skills, and analytical thinking. Fundamentally, in order to cultivate the ability of independent learners, instructional methods should be focused on fostering students' responsibilities for establishing their own learning requirements, objectives, and results. Furthermore, it is essential that students actively participate in the process of developing and organizing the learning experience, assessing its value, and understanding its significance.

An investigation conducted by Johnmarshall Reeve and Sung Hyeon Cheon examines the impact of teaching methods that promote autonomy on the development of learner autonomy. The study revealed that teachers have the potential to acquire autonomy-supportive teaching techniques, which greatly strengthen students' intrinsic motivation and involvement. These approaches involve the inclusion of significant explanations for educational tasks, recognition of students' emotions, and delivery of alternatives within organized learning settings.

Autonomy-supportive teaching refers to the use of a student-centered approach and an accommodating interpersonal approach that facilitates the precise implementation of seven instructional behaviors that promote autonomy. These behaviors serve two objectives: to enhance intrinsic motivation and to facilitate internalization. Drawing on the principles of self-determination theory and empirical evidence, researchers established and carried out several teacher-centered and methodologically demanding interventions that focus on empowering teachers with the necessary professional development opportunities to enhance their autonomy-supportive skills.

Johnmarshall Reeve and Sung Hyeon Cheon emphasizes that teaching that promotes autonomy not only enhances students' motivation and involvement but also creates a more positive classroom atmosphere and increases teacher satisfaction. The technique described is in accordance with the concepts of self-determination theory, which highlights the need of promoting students' autonomy in order to enhance both the efficiency and the enjoyment of the educational procedure.

3.4. Cooperative and Collaborative learning
Learning, in fact, is a naturally social process. Autonomous learners engage in linguistic social behaviors. Collaborative learning reflects a substantial change away from traditional teacher-centered or lecture-centered classrooms. In collaborative classrooms, the note-taking process may be combined with additional methods focused on student discussion and active participation in the tasks assigned. Autonomy and self-directed learning do not imply that the learning process occurs alone, without the active participation and assistance of classmates. Instead, collaborative learning is beneficial when groups of students work together to solve a problem or accomplish a task in an intentionally planned way. To generate collaborative learning circumstances, the teacher should present students with challenging tasks or questions, which could encourage enthusiasm and interest in their study activities.

Cooperative learning involves use of small groups of students to improve both individual and collective learning. Teachers establish learning objectives, organize group activities, supply essential information, and supervise the process. This strategy encourages interdependence among group members by considering each student to account for their role and collectively responsible for the group's success. It encourages students to build cooperation, interpersonal skills, and a greater grasp of the topic via mutual communication and collaboration.

Takad Ahmed Chowdhury (2021) [10] investigates how cooperative and collaborative learning might promote student autonomy in English Language Teaching (ELT). According to the study, both cooperative and collaborative learning are learner-centered techniques that promote active, shared, and inductive learning. These approaches encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning while also acknowledging and appreciating their peers' efforts. The study discovered that cooperative learning, which consists of small groups directed by the instructor, acts as a basis for collaborative learning, in which students work together more independently. This sequence helps students build the skills and confidence needed for self-directed learning.

3.5. The teacher
Although learner autonomy is defined as the ability of students to take responsibility for and control over their own

learning, this does not prevent the teacher's engagement in the autonomous learning process. According to Sanprasert (2010) [26], higher education can help students develop and maintain their learning autonomy. Language teachers can increase their students' autonomy by providing adequate training that encourages them to work independently. Indeed, Firth noted that providing students with self-monitoring and self-correcting skills enables them to realize their ability to educate themselves without relying much on instructor teaching. Holec (1981) [16] had the similar belief that autonomy is not inborn but must be learned through "natural means" or "formal learning". So, rather than just transferring material, the teacher should be viewed as a facilitator, giving resources and assistance while leading the learning process. Furthermore, instructors can assist in providing comments on students' assignments, supporting and consolidating their independent learning. The instructor must also include the usage of technology into the curriculum in order to offer students with opportunities to promote and enhance their autonomy. A recent study conducted by Mubarak S. Aldosari and Haroon N. Alsager (2023) [4] examines the impact of self-assessment, resilience, and creativity on the development of learner autonomy in task-supported language learning. The study discovered that including self-assessment into the learning process boosts students' resilience, creativity, and autonomy. This technique enables students to critically evaluate their own progress and skill development, fostering a greater feeling of autonomy.

4. Conclusion
In order to fulfill the demands of global integration in terms of economics and education, it is critical to boost English language skills for the target workforce, thereby improving the quality of English learning and teaching at the tertiary education level. Hence, it is fundamental that the three crucial components, namely the school, teacher, and students, collaborate closely in the process of learning and teaching, wherein students are seen as self-reliant and competent learners. During the learning process, the instructor, acting as a facilitator, helps to provide materials and give direction to pupils. In order to do this, the instructor must possess knowledge of carefully crafted lessons, a substantial commitment to promoting learner autonomy, and, most crucially, complete proficiency in technology and other essential abilities to ensure successful autonomous learning among students.

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