



Examining learner autonomy in English language teaching and learning: concepts and measurements

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Abstract: *Learner autonomy is widely believed to play an important role in English education. It is said to benefit learners in the journey of learning English. Various discussions on different aspects of learner autonomy can be found in the field of English language education. This article aims to explore how learner autonomy is defined in the literature, and how learner autonomy is measured. The discussions in this article are hopeful to make humble contributions by shedding more lights on learner autonomy in terms of its definitions and measurements.*

Key Words: *learner autonomy, English language education, concepts, measurements.*

1. INTRODUCTION :

Learner autonomy is thought to have evolved from a fringe antithesis to traditional and established teaching practices to become a widely recognized feature of modern education, particularly in the context of foreign language learning. In the last twenty years, learner autonomy in language education has become influential as a goal in many parts of the world (Benson and Voller, 1997; Cotterall and Crabbe, 1999; Sinclair, 2000; and Benson, 2001).

Fostering learner autonomy has three key benefits that can be noticed. 1991 (Little). First, when students get involved in the process of making decisions, “learning should be more focused and purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the long term” (Little, 1991, p. 8). Second, as the learners take their responsibility for their learning, the constraints between learning and living that are generally found in the traditional teacher-centred training modes, should be minimized. Lastly, it is accepted that when a student is autonomous for her/his own learning, it is more likely that (s)he will be responsible in other area of her/his life, and, as a result, (s)he will be a useful and more effective member of the society (Little, 1991).

Acknowledging the importance of learner autonomy in English language teaching and learning, this article aims to explore learner autonomy based on the conceptualizations and the ways learner autonomy is measured in literature.

2. CONCEPTUALIZING LEARNER AUTONOMY:

Learner autonomy is undeniably a multi-layered idea that may be seen from various angles. As a result, there have been numerous attempts to theorize it. The first, the frequently quoted and the influential in language education is definitely the Holec’s (1981) definition. Holec defines learner autonomy as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (Holec, 1981, p.3). It dates back to Holec’s (1981) report for the Council of Europe’s Modern Language Project. This definition interprets autonomy as a capacity that can be developed, and a list of characteristics were also named, including ‘determining the objectives, defining the contents and the progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.), and evaluating what has been acquired’ (Holec, 1981, p.3). It can be noticed that when Holec defined learner autonomy he did it with adult studying foreign language in self-access centers in mind. Therefore, it focuses on the technical or methodological aspects of learning that enable students to succeed in such settings. In other words, learner autonomy proposed by Holec (1981) tends to refer to the cognition and metacognition learners possess to be autonomous. Inspired by the work of Holec (1981), Little (1991) picks up on and expands the notion of autonomy as a capacity of the learner. The scholar defines autonomy as: “a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action. It presupposes, but also entails, that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation in the process and content of the learning. The capacity for autonomy will be displayed both in the way the learner learns and in the way he or she transfers what has been learned to wide contexts.” (Little, 1991, p.4)



Learner autonomy has also been defined using frameworks. Learner autonomy is described by Benson (1997) in terms of three perspectives: technical, psychological, and political-critical. The technical perspective is confined to 'the act of learning a language outside the classroom and without the intervention of a teacher' (Benson, 1997, p.19). This aspect emphasizes learning-to-learn in order to promote independent life-long learning. Skills or strategies are vital for unsupervised learning: specific kinds of activity or process such as the metacognitive, cognitive, social and other strategies identified by Oxford (1990). In the psychological version, autonomy is defined as a capacity, 'a construct of attitudes and abilities which allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning' (*ibid.* p.19). Therefore, the psychological perspective involves investigating mental and emotional characteristics of learners and relating them to the development of autonomy. The political version refers to the "learners' control over the process and content of learning" (*ibid.*). This perspective also focuses on students' becoming aware of the context of learning, such as the purpose and the implications of learning a particular language, and the potential for personal and social change provided by learning another language.

Benson and Voller (1997) provided a framework that breaks down the definitions of learner autonomy into five categories. The term 'autonomy,' according to the two researchers, refers to (1) settings in which students study fully on their own; (2) a set of abilities that may be learnt and implemented in self-directed learning; and (3) an inborn ability that is suppressed by institutional education; (4) for the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning; and (5) for the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning. In this definition, three aspects are recognized: the technical (situations in which learners study on their own, a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning), the psychological (an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education, responsibility) and the political-critical (the right to determine the learning).

Littlewood (1999) conceptualizes learner autonomy in a framework of proactive and reactive autonomy, employing frameworks to express the notion in a similar way. The former refers to an experience of autonomy in which the learner sets the direction of learning, regulates the activity, and self-evaluates his/her progress independently of the teacher. The focus is on volition, choice and action that affirm one's individuality and separateness from the group. In contrast, the latter – reactive autonomy refers to a form of autonomy in which the learner regulates their own learning once direction has been set by the teacher. Once this direction is articulated, learners are able to autonomously organize their resources to achieve the goals they choose from among those suggested by the teacher. With regard to teachers' beliefs and views toward learners' autonomy, he therefore proposes two versions, the strong and the weak pedagogies. The strong version of pedagogy for autonomy refers to the kind of practice that creates space for student-directed learning, whereas in the weak version of pedagogy for autonomy, the teacher, or the institute, determines the curriculum and the syllabus leaving very little room for students to express their needs. It can be noticed that the proactive autonomy is similar to Holec's definition, emphasizing the technical aspect of autonomy. The latter, reactive autonomy refers to the political-critical aspect mentioning the learner choices in learning.

Oxford (2003), in attempting a systematic framework of learner autonomy, strongly disagrees with Benson (1997)'s theoretical framework of learner autonomy for disregarding the sociocultural perspective. She argues that (1) the model privileges the political dimension; (2) a necessary piece, the sociocultural perspective, is missing; (3) learning strategies are located only in the technical version. Oxford (2003) offers a framework of four perspectives which she believes is "more systematic and comprehensive" (p.76). The perspectives include the technical focusing on the physical situation; the psychological stressing characteristics of learners; the socio-cultural emphasizing mediated learning; and the political-critical centered on ideologies, access, and power structures.

To summarize, while scholars approach learner autonomy in diverse ways, four dimensions of learner autonomy have been recognized in the proposed configurations: technological, psychological, political-critical, and socio-cultural. The technological, psychological, and political-critical aspects are the three most addressed, whereas the socio-cultural part is the least explored. Drawing on these definitions, it can also be discovered that the definitions of learner autonomy are divided into four sets of elements. These are cognitive/metacognitive elements (abilities or capacities to set learning goals, choose learning materials, plan learning activities, monitor and self-evaluate progress), affective elements (willingness), political-critical elements (freedom/control/choices) and social elements (cooperating with others). The cognitive and metacognitive elements seem to be the most predominant in the definitions.

3. MEASURING LEARNER AUTONOMY :

Measuring learner autonomy is undeniably a difficult task (Benson, 2001; Takagi, 2003; and Mynard, 2006). It is difficult to measure learner autonomy, according to Mynard (2006), because it is unclear whether language learning occurred as a result of the use of autonomous learning skills or as a result of other factors. Meanwhile, Benson (2001)



acknowledges that learner autonomy is a complex concept, and that determining how autonomous learners are is difficult.

Scholars (Benson, 2001; Mynard, 2006; and Le Thi Cam Nguyen, 2012) feel that there are a variety of strategies that may be used to calculate learner autonomy in order to solve the challenges. The commonly recognized instruments to evaluate the autonomy levels include interviews, questionnaires, journals, observation, frameworks, diary, self-assessment, students' evaluations, students' reflective writing, and portfolios (Dam, 1995; Pickart, 1995; Smith, 2001; Benson, 2001; Spratt, Humphrey & Chan, 2002; Nachi, 2003; Chong, 2003; Nunes, 2004; Villa and Armstrong, 2004; Mynard, 2006; Sert, 2006; Natri, 2007; Nicoll, 2007; Ramires, 2014; Le Thi Cam Nguyen, 2012; Pichailuck & Luksaneeyanawin, 2017; and Nguyen Van Loi, 2017).

In terms of using learners' tactics as indicators of learner autonomy, Mynard (2006) believes that the strategies that learners use indicate their amount of learner autonomy. Other difficult to assess signs include the ability or aptitude to plan, reflect, and evaluate. Mynard (2006) also states that in order to assess this capacity, researchers can use the following tools:

- Interpretative research approaches
- Small-scale research and first-person narratives
- Interviews
- Learner journals
- Observation
- Frameworks
- Researching without a framework

Benson (2001), who agrees that assessing learner autonomy is difficult, notes that learner autonomy is a complex concept. He does, however, believe that autonomous activities can be identified. He suggests posing the following study questions as guiding questions:

- Do people make and use a learning plan?
- Do they participate in classroom decisions?
- Do they reflect upon their learning?
- Do they initiate changes in the target language?
- Are they able to create situations of learning for themselves?
- Are they able to monitor and self-assess their own performance?

Researchers use a variety of study approaches to investigate learner autonomy, according to the literature. In her search for a rigorous tool to measure learner autonomy, Le Thi Cam Nguyen (2012) recommends following three principles: (1) having a clearly defined notion of learner autonomy based on which any accounts of learner autonomy can be analyzed and measured; (2) looking at learner autonomy from a variety of perspectives and employing both qualitative and quantitative methods to collect data as each can supply equally variable, but different data; and (3) ensuring that the data collected is accurate.

4. CONCLUSION :

It is widely accepted that learner autonomy is identified as a multi-faced concept. This article has attempted to examine how learner autonomy is defined and measured by the scholars in the field of English language education in the literature. The presentation of the definitions indicates that learner autonomy is approached differently: by either concepts or frameworks. However, the scholars share a common point that learner autonomy features various aspects which are technical, psychological, political-critical, and sociocultural. In terms of the ways learner autonomy are measured, it is demonstrated that there are many tools to use in understanding the autonomous level of the learners. Researchers are advised to apply a variety of tools at the same time to secure the validity of the results.



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