

## DEVELOPMENT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING

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***Abstract:** The issue of learner autonomy has been debated for a few decades, as it has been one of the main goals in the process of teaching and learning. Foreign language teaching and learning have placed learner autonomy at the top of the most targeted achievements since student/learner-centered approaches have proved their success in language education. The objective of this paper is to analyse the roles of the teachers in the development of learner autonomy in EFL courses, focusing on the roles of the teacher as a trainer, facilitator and resource manager who is able to implement different strategies in order to achieve their goal.*

***Keywords:** foreign language teaching, learner autonomy, teachers' roles*

### **Introduction**

The concept of learner autonomy has been widely debated when referring to teaching and learning foreign languages for over thirty years. Autonomy in education is connected to the feedback that learners provide, although this may happen without the educators being able to control it. It is rather related to the ability to take control of what has been learnt, independently or in various social contexts. Another issue that has been raised is the level of efficiency achieved by students who are not reliant on their teachers and feel autonomous in their use of language in written or oral production. Although teachers encourage autonomy inside and outside the classroom, the level of efficiency varies due to some factors that are presented by this paper.

As Richard Smith (2008:395) underlines, the concept of autonomy was “imported originally from the fields of politics and moral philosophy” and it offers numerous aspects that can be analysed and a series of definitions that are useful in our attempt to understand the value of the concept in EFL courses. Phil Benson (2006:22) reviews the literature on autonomy in language teaching and learning “from its origins in the mid-1970s up to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the turn of the century, however, interest in autonomy has grown considerably”. He notices that learner autonomy has been linked to numerous other fields, such as

“language education research – learning strategies and self-regulation, motivation, individual differences and sociocultural approaches, and teacher development – as well as the fields of philosophy and education policy”. Nevertheless, there is a common opinion, that freedom in learning is different from autonomy and that this freedom will always be constrained by the instructor who needs to maintain some control over students’ output. Holec’s definition is one of the most quoted ones: “Autonomy in language learning depends on the development and exercise of a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action; autonomous learners assume responsibility for determining the purpose, content, rhythm and method of their learning, monitoring its progress and evaluating its outcomes. (in Benson 2006: 21)

### **The debated issue of learner autonomy**

The contrast between the amount of knowledge a learner is willing to process (‘self-directed learning’) and the ability to acquire it (‘learner autonomy’) has also been analysed in the specialist literature (as summarized in Benson 2006, 2007, who names it “distinction”). This contrast depends on numerous factors, such as: learners’ intellectual capacity, learners’ access to knowledge, technology and information, to the extent that the process of decision-making remains completely dependent on the learners’ capacities. Moreover, there are forms of learning (distance learning, e-learning, blended learning) that require the learner to be autonomous, but they do not necessarily develop autonomy.

Thus, the role of the instructor (teacher, trainer) remains essential, as they are able to develop practical skills and involve the learners in social interactions that develop learner autonomy and combine each learner’s developed autonomy with face-to-face group practice. Although at the beginning of the discussions about learner autonomy there were numerous voices that argued against the role of the instructor, twenty years later, theoreticians are more involved in classroom practices and develop hands-on approaches that are useful in increasing learner autonomy. In fact, as Benson underlines (2006), “this views learner autonomy as ‘a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with others, as a social, responsible person’”.

However, there is still a gap between educational practices and the concept that learners have an innate capacity to become autonomous. On the one hand, educational practices and theories tend to start from the presupposition that the vast majority of learners lack autonomy and need so need to be trained, without taking into consideration the level of autonomy

that each learner has already acquired from various everyday experiences. On the other hand, the less spread assumption that learners of various background cultures are capable to control what they learn, as all human beings are born with a certain degree of autonomy and they can put into practice their learnt abilities. To some extent, both theories prove their point. In my opinion, there should be a middle way of combining the two, as training is needed and autonomy is innate and learners can use basic skills without being supervised. For more developed skills, supervision is necessary and required in order to gain expertise in a certain field, such as the ability to speak more languages autonomously. The support offered by instructors is essential, regardless of the form of education chosen by learners. Supportive activities focus on learners' existing autonomy and are perceived as the basis for the development of learner autonomy and, consequently, for progress, which is essential in the motivational process. The attempt to fit all learners into a certain educational pattern has proven faulty, that is why groups learners should be divided into groups according to their learning needs and not necessarily according to their level of training. Learners may gain an increased autonomy in a group where they feel comfortable to show their level of knowledge. Once they get that autonomy, they may get out of their comfort zone and enter the groups that have the same level as they do. For example, in learning a foreign language, there are introvert students with an advanced level of English who are not comfortable with students of their own level who are extrovert. In a group of intermediate students, they acquire the autonomy needed to function in an advanced group or in real life situations. Instructors need to be aware that 'the ideal autonomous learner' is a preconceived notion, and students are persons who need to be considered outside of the group.

### **Stages in the development of learner autonomy**

The aim of all educational processes is to develop autonomy and the stages of such a process are: identifying the contents; establishing the syllabus, methods and techniques to be used; identifying the assessment procedures. These stages depend mainly on the instructor who takes into consideration learners' profile. Learners must also establish their own goals, reflect on their progress, and seek opportunities to practise without instructors' supervision.

When adult learners have not acquired independent learning skills at a younger age, foreign language instructors encounter difficulties in having learners forget the rules and regulations imposed by school teachers who did not master basic strategies to encourage autonomous learning.

Furthermore, adult learners are often reluctant to change and believe that approaches used in their early stages of learning are the basis of educational process. Instructors need to overcome these misconceptions and present their own analysis of the educational process to learners in order persuade learner of the importance of developing both learner and teacher autonomy.

The question “could the learners do this by and for themselves?” should be replaced with the affirmative statement: Learners can do everything by and for themselves form an early stage in the educational process.

Foreign language instructors have a wider a range of methods that they can use to conceptualise and put into practice learner autonomy, in terms of strategies for independent and individual learning.

These definitions of learner autonomy are well-established in the literature and help instructors to coordinate educational strategies with student need.

### **Conclusions**

Autonomy implies willingness on the part of the learner who must be responsible for their own learning. However, the capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate. Although complete autonomy is an idealistic goal and there are several degrees of autonomy, developing autonomy requires awareness both from the instructor and the learner. Autonomy takes place both during the educational process and in real-life experiences as it has an individual and a social dimension.

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