

Learner Autonomy as a New Paradigm in the Language Center of the “Benito Juárez” University of Oaxaca

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Introduction

Learner autonomy is an increasing trend in many educational contexts throughout the world; however, it is relatively new in Mexico. Autonomy is related to awareness, independence, decision-making, self-control, self-directed learning, attitudes and beliefs. Autonomy also reflects cultural values and personal behaviors. In this paper I present some insights on autonomy which arose from my work in the Language Center of the “Benito Juárez” University of Oaxaca (UABJO). First, this paper briefly reviews the historical development in the area, and then summarizes and interprets the relevant data obtained from some English teachers currently working in that institution.

Learner autonomy is not something that can be taught easily, but something more practical related to skills, capacities, responsibilities, situations and social contexts. One of the participants in this study thinks learner autonomy seems like a dream because in Mexico unfortunately the educational system is completely teacher-centered. However, if we want to promote learner autonomy, we have to change many attitudes, perceptions and practices in order to adopt it as an educational philosophy.

Justification

When I selected learner autonomy as a research topic, I had in mind two main purposes: a) to examine the theoretical knowledge about learner autonomy as presented in the “Autonomy and Self-Directed Learning Course” in the Master’s Program in Applied Linguistics of the Language Center, and b) to become more aware about the importance of learner autonomy in English teaching in the Bachelor of Arts Program in the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language at the Language Center.

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As English language teachers, we need to revitalize our knowledge and change our routines in the classroom, but we are sometimes afraid of abandoning our old ways of teaching. Some language teachers see themselves as responsible for transmitting language knowledge to the students, and so they exercise control over how it is transmitted. These kinds of teachers provide information and give sufficient grammatical explanations. They think that students are only responsible for paying attention to what the teacher is telling them. On the other hand are the teachers who exercise less control over the language that students produce; they promote the idea of students being directly responsible for their own language development, which may be interpreted as teachers do not take any responsibility for this.

According to Scrivener (1994), the above types of teachers can be labeled as the "explainer" (the former) and the "involver" (the latter). However, there is a new wave of teachers moving towards a third kind of teaching, the "enabler", i.e. the teacher who promotes learner autonomy through sharing the responsibility and negotiating the contents of the course with their students. These teachers work with different techniques and materials so that their students finally assume total responsibility for their learning. I think as teachers, we could provide important major benefits if we promote learner autonomy in our English centers.

Historical Context

The Council of Europe Language Project initiated its activities in 1971 in order to improve the learning and teaching of European languages, especially English, first under the direction of the British applied linguist John L. Trim and then under J. A. Van Ek. Both scholars concentrated on an analysis of the needs of adult learners. The result was a new kind of syllabus which focused on learner autonomy. In it, the interests of minority groups were taken into account according to the new trends in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, ethnolinguistics and other educational and philosophical disciplines (Gremmo and Riley, 1995).

Prominent French scholars in this field were Yves Chalon, who researched and implemented new insights in "autonomy" and "self-direction", and Henri Holec, who subsequently continued and expanded the discussion about "autonomy" (Benson, and Voller, 1997). As a result of these discussions, the Self-Access Centers emerged in Europe, especially in France, and 10 years later there was a national project in Mexico sponsored by the Secretary of Public Education and The British Council to provide some public universities with Self-Access Centers as an alternative way to learn English.

In Oaxaca, efforts to foster these new studies began in early 1994. One of the pioneers in introducing this relatively new tendency of autonomy, self-directed learning and learner autonomy was Angeles Clemente. She promoted, in collaboration with other language teachers, the installation of a Self-Access Center at the Language Center of the State University (UABJO).

Although the concepts of self-directed learning and learner autonomy have been around for various decades, these were quite novel for us as Mexican teachers. The concepts of autonomy and learner autonomy related to teaching and learning languages arose as a primary consequence of the Self-Access Centers in Mexico. These terms have gained more importance as a part of finding an educational ideal. "Autonomy" and "learner autonomy" have influenced and created new expectations in the teaching and learning of languages.

Methodology

This investigation was conducted using the qualitative method and an ethnographic approach for two main reasons: first, because the qualitative method focuses on programs, processes and situations as a whole that are greater than the sum of their parts, giving detailed attention to settings, idiosyncrasies and context; and second, because the ethnographic approach better helps us to understand the interrelations among different aspects of an educational phenomenon. As Dobbert (1982) states: "The ethnographic approach supports the conviction about traditions, roles, values and norms in a society producing regularities that help to explain a single or group behavior in a right way creating a real image of the studied group and contributing in the comprehension of a wider social group with similar characteristics" (p. 35).

Participants

The subjects in this study consisted of nine English teachers (four Mexican, three American and two Canadian) who are currently working as English teachers in the Bachelor of Arts Program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the Language Center of the U.A.B.J.O. All of them speak English fluently. Their education ranges from a Bachelor of Arts (seven) to Master's Degree (two). Their experience in teaching English is five years on average. Six teachers have taken at least one course or workshop on learner autonomy. (See Appendix).

Instrument

Although the qualitative method uses a varied number of instruments for gathering the data, for this specific project I designed an anonymous openended questionnaire (appendix 2) which contained 18 items divided in four major areas: attitudes and beliefs on language learning (# 1-4); concepts and definitions about learner autonomy (# 5-10); syllabus and materials (# 11-14) and activities and training to promote learner autonomy (# 15-18). There were no "correct" or "incorrect" answers to the questions since they were designed to evoke beliefs, opinions and suggestions. The data were also complemented by information from informal conversations with some of the English teachers who work at the Language Center with me. One of the teachers is researching this field as a thesis topic. The data obtained from the questionnaire are discussed and interpreted by sections in the following parts of this paper.

Discussion of the Results by Sections

I) Attitudes and beliefs on language learning

Items # 1-4 were concerned with the teacher's opinions about their beliefs and previous

experiences as language learners because all the participants have had previous studies in foreign languages, e.g. French, German, Italian, Latin, Dutch, etc. The basis for this section was the premise that previous language learning processes can influence how a teacher teaches a language. "All teachers were once students, and their beliefs about teaching are often reflections of how they were taught" (Richards, 1995). If teachers feel strongly about how the language should be taught, or they believe that there is an optimum age for learning a language, they may reflect these beliefs or preconceived notions in their classes. For example, teacher G mentioned that "he was most successful in his study of Latin because he began at age 12." Subject H said that "I use in my teaching 100% my previous experiences as a language learner and also use the techniques that best served me, and I add them to my English classes." Referring to this issue, Richards (1995) says that for many teachers experience is the primary source of beliefs about teaching. A teacher may have found that some teaching strategies work well and some do not. Additionally, subject E mentioned: "My previous experiences helped me to better understand some of the learning attitudes found in my current students." Equally important was the opinion of teacher D who responded: "I think one of the biggest advantages [of previous experiences] is that I can 'predict' to a certain extent."

Item # 4 dealt with the English teachers' opinions about the attitudes of their learners towards the language. The English language represents different things to different people. Some associate this language simply as a means of making money or doing business, as teacher D commented: "Students associate English with better job opportunities, improvement in personal, economical and professional field, and even with fashion." Moreover, teacher F stated: "Learners associate English as 'cool' or superior somehow because of perception of the U.S. with money and power. They think that English is difficult to pronounce or spell." Likewise, teacher I said that some students come with the idea that English is difficult.

Learners' beliefs are influenced by the social context of learning and can influence both their attitude toward the language itself as well as toward language learning in general (Tumposky, 1991). For example, students who had been told that memorizing vocabulary is important to learn English will spend more time on that activity.

Holec (1987) states that the language learner should go through "deconditioning" to change their preconceived ideas or prejudices about the language learning process. This "deconditioning" could be achieved by introducing some commonly preconceived notions for class discussions, such as "spelling is one of the major difficulties in learning French" (p. 145).

II) Concepts and definitions about learner autonomy

Statements # 5 - 10 evaluated the teachers' concepts or definitions about learner autonomy. To begin with, I must mention that 100% of the participants positively agreed on the need for learner autonomy for many reasons. For example, subject D responded: "I think, it would be wonderful if we could really be self-directed learners. But for me, it

seems like a dream because unfortunately our educational system is completely teacher-centered. We would have to change many things/aspects, attitudes of teachers, students and authorities to reach that concept." The opinion of subject F was: "I agree with learner autonomy. Generally, I think learners who are more successful are those who are more autonomous, so it is logical to try to encourage or promote learner autonomy. In that way learners identify the language and the language learning as something more than just a classroom activity. They will take responsibility for it." Besides, teacher E stated: "I agree with learner autonomy because I was an autonomous-oriented language learner and I know it work if one really wants to succeed at learning a foreign language. I never depended 100% on a teacher". And also, participant C mentioned that "if learners find their own way of learning, they would not depend on the teacher to advance in their learning process."

I wanted to separate the definition of autonomy in general from learner autonomy in the questionnaire, so item 6 was aimed at autonomy in general, and teachers expressed different ideas. For example, teacher A classified autonomy in general by degrees, i.e., complete autonomy when the learner learns by him/herself, and semi-autonomy when the learner learns with a teacher and takes on some of the responsibility for the learning. Participant C defined autonomy as a tool for self-studying not depending on others to develop learning. Subject D mentioned: "autonomy is being independent and responsible for making decisions." Additionally, subject G defined autonomy as similar to 'free will'. He said that we have the innate capacity to make decisions based on experience. The key distinction for me, however, is the role of experience. Once we acquire experience, we acquire norms (whether linguistically expressed or not) and decision-making is inevitably based on norms. However, subject H was more specific. She stated that autonomy is do it yourself, by yourself, for yourself.

Although some of the participants have not taken any courses on learner autonomy or self-directed learning, their responses were related in some aspect with the definitions of autonomy. According to Little (1996), autonomy is a capacity for independent behavior, and autonomy is also the goal of all developmental learning. This is a wide definition and it is related to the learning process. However, Pennycook (1997) stated that autonomy as a concept or educational goal does not exist elsewhere. This notion of autonomy will be different in different educational contexts.

In the case of the Mexican context, teachers identify or define autonomy differently from Clemente (2000) who analyzes: a) institutional autonomy understood as self-government in Mexican universities, and b) teacher autonomy seen as the freedom to make decisions about the content and methodology issues. Both concepts are more familiar to Mexican language teachers. However, teachers do not often relate autonomy with learning, and most of them do not know the concept of learner autonomy. For this reason, as Clemente proposed, item 7 inquired as to what degree teachers understand learner autonomy. Their definitions varied. For instance, subject D stated that learner autonomy is the capacity to direct your learning, deciding on the strategies to follow, your goals, and whether you need to ask for help or orientation. Subject G responded: "I understand it as process of power, negotiation between the learners and the members of their learning

community influenced strongly by their respective larger social contexts." Another participant defined learner autonomy as when learners can perform a learning activity by themselves. All of these concepts can be embraced by the following definition:

In formal educational contexts, the *basis* of learner autonomy is acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning; the *development* of learner autonomy depends on the exercise of that responsibility in a never-ending effort to understand what one is learning, why one is learning, how one is learning, and with what degree of success, and the *effect* of learner autonomy is to remove the barriers that so easily erect themselves between formal learning and the wider environment in which the learner lives. (Little, 1996, 1)

To the English teachers in the Language Center, the autonomous students are those who as subject A defined "take responsibility for their learning." This view is very similar to participant D's who stated "autonomous students are not waiting for teachers to give all the information and directions; they are able to direct their own learning strategies." Teacher H defined autonomous students as those who ask when they do not understand, students who read a newspaper even when it is not a class assignment, students who look for language exchange partners and also students who are creative in finding ways to learn which work for them. However, because social environment and culture are very important factors in learner autonomy, item 9 inquired: "How autonomous are Mexican students?" Most of the participants agreed that Mexican learners are not very autonomous. Responses to confirm this view follow. According to participant D, "To be honest I think Mexican students are not really autonomous at all. We as students, look at ourselves as the 'receivers' of information and at the teacher as the 'provider.'

A quite different opinion was maintained by subject H. She stated that: Mexican autonomous students vary widely, come and go in waves. Usually my students start with very low levels of autonomy, and at the end of a year are highly autonomous. Some students will always be more autonomous than others. As a group I find Mexican students passive, rather than autonomous, however that is really a gross over statement.

This participant also divided autonomous Mexican students by sex:

In general Mexican females are more passive than males, in class females are more passive, outside of class they are more autonomous, more likely to find partners, etc., (but only if the family permits), but again this is exaggeration. Family problems tend to reduce autonomy. This I have noted when students mention stuff in their journals.

Why these perspectives? Some teachers associate activity with autonomy. They think that if students participate a lot in classes, they will become autonomous learners, and if the students are passive, they will not be autonomous. But, according to Wright (1987, pp.45-46), the teachers' and learners' role is more complex than active. There is a complex set of interacting factors, both interpersonal and task-related. The interpersonal factors that Wright discusses social role, status, and power, all of which determine the

social distance between teachers and learners, and attitudes, beliefs, personality and motivation. In some cases, personality makes learners timid, and for that reason they do not like to actively participate in class; however, they are able to make their own decisions in order to improve their learning and become autonomous.

This brings up another important point. In the Mexican context there is a tendency to associate learner autonomy as a Western cultural tradition. For example, subject B said: "Perhaps in other countries the students are more autonomous than in Mexico," and subject C agreed on the idea that autonomy is certainly a Western tradition. Participant D was more specific. She stated: "Autonomy is an attitude more than a 'tradition'. Unfortunately, here in Mexico our attitudes towards learning (and many other things) are very passive. We tend to wait for someone else to take the responsibility to direct us. We do not usually like to be leaders." This statement can be related with the following statement:

Autonomy is not a language learning process which can be learnt as if it were a set of rules or strategies. Rather autonomy is seen as a *way of being* in the world; *a position from which to engage* with the world... Autonomy is not an ability that has to be learnt..., but a way of being that has to be discovered or rediscovered. (Breen and Mann's, 1997, p. 134)

Understood as a capacity for independent behavior, autonomy is the goal of all developmental learning. Whether we focus narrowly on first language acquisition or more generally on processes of socialization and acculturation, it is clear that development is incomplete until the individual can operate as an independent member of the society in which he or she is a member. Clearly, "independent" in this context carries an infinity of possible implications, all determined by local cultural constraints. (Little, 1996, p. 4)

III) Syllabus and materials

Questions # 11-14 included issues related to syllabus and materials used in the daily English sessions. *New Interchange* by Jack Richards is the textbook currently used by the teachers at the Language Center. However, most of the participants in this study agreed that this textbook does not promote any kind of learner autonomy because it is very teacher-centered. In spite of the textbook being based on the communicative approach, it is the teacher who has to guide the class, giving instructions, explaining grammar and at times acting as a "collector of information." According to subject D, "the book tries to be communicative, and it is in a certain way. There are many activities for student interaction, but this does not really mean that it is helping learners to become a self-directed learners." This statement was made by subject F, who said that *Interchange* helps very little, and that it does not work too well outside the classroom. The textbook's table of contents is the syllabus that teachers follow, and the content itself was not designed to have students work by themselves. The syllabus' contents were created for student guidance by the teacher and not for learner autonomy. To complement it, some teachers require their students to work for "X" number of hours in the Self-Access Center, but the syllabus does

not promote autonomy. In order to promote learner autonomy, the Language Center teachers should take into account the proposal of Nunan (1997) when he suggests two key curricular domains for implementing learner autonomy: the experimental content domain, and the learning process domain. The former has to do with the topics, themes, language functions, and linguistic content that make up the syllabus. The latter relates to methodology, and is concerned with the selection, creation, modification and adaptation of learning tasks and procedures.

Some teachers' opinions were that the materials which promote the best learner autonomy are newer texts because they have self evaluation tasks and exercises that state the objective of the activity, thus making learners consider their learning strategies. These kinds of tasks encourage students to use other sources of information such as dictionaries, magazines, reference books, and interviews. According to subject F: "the materials that best promote learner autonomy are any kind of authentic material: magazines, movies, newspapers, etc. One of the newest of these materials is the Internet; you can do what you want with it and there is no start or finish." But, of course authentic materials are also the most difficult to use successfully.

Nunan (1997) addresses this issue, and proposes five levels for encouraging learner autonomy: 1) awareness, which make learners aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the program and encourage them to identify the learning strategies implicit in the tasks that make up the methodological component of the curriculum; 2) involvement, which gives learners the opportunity to choose from a range of goals, a selection of content and a variety of tasks; 3) intervention, which involves learners in modifying and adapting goals, content and learning tasks; 4) creation, where learners create their own goals, content and learning tasks; and 5) transcendence, where learners transcend the classroom, making links between the content of the classroom and the world beyond it.

Learners begin to become truly autonomous utilizing in everyday life what they have learned in formal learning contexts. I think teachers not only should be more aware of the materials or textbooks they are selecting to promote learner autonomy, but should also encourage students to bring to class some examples of "realia" (T-shirt messages, labels, instructional booklets, slogans, songs, etc.) These materials are not only appealing to the learners, but can be used as a way to introduce students to decision-making by asking them to think what this material might be good for, and to decide what they want to do with it.

IV) Activities and training to promote learner autonomy

Items # 15-18 concerned the activities that teachers suggest could be more practical in order to promote learner autonomy and activities they expect their students to do to become autonomous. For example, subject B said that apart from encouraging her students to study in different skills of the language by themselves, she hopes they decide to study in other places such as libraries. Participant D expects her students to be responsible with homework and assignments, to do personal research, to never remain silent or passive when they have a doubt, to be their own evaluators, and to go to the Self-Access

Center. Subject H asks her students to do vocabulary lists, notebooks, and journals in which students write on a specified or a free topic. In this way, the students are obliged to learn new vocabulary. She also requires her students to do at least 10 hours of extra work each month with Self-Access worksheets. Which worksheets they choose is up to them. In contrast, subject E mentioned that not all students are candidates for autonomy. Even if the teacher actively promoted learner autonomy, it is the students' disposition that is the deciding factor.

The keyword for activities and training might be negotiation between teachers and learners. Teacher should promote negotiation in order for learners to find out what types of activities might help them better achieve the objectives they have in mind. Students should be aware that they can not always expect immediate results. Serrano, (2000) points out that each class may gradually build up a bank of different activities and tasks classified by the kind that learners were previously familiar with before the experience. New activities may be suggested by the teacher and other sources, and those produced by the learners themselves. Serrano also states that teachers should encourage learners to choose, combine, adapt or design activities that the learners themselves think are more appropriate, especially if those activities reflect real-life ones. She states that these activities are better than those suggested by the textbook.

Discussion

The data in this paper showed significant aspects and differences. In the first section, which deals with attitudes and beliefs on language teaching, Many teachers related learning a language with some underlying learning theories, such as the fact that there is an optimum age to learn a language, or language learners need specific aptitudes as Broca and Wernicke proposed in the early 1900's (Crystal, 1987, p.260-61). Other teachers think learners are "conditioned" by external factors affecting their learning. This attitude reflects a behaviorist view dating back to B.F. Skinner. Finally, very few teachers believe in the cognitive process as a way to learn language. Teachers should avoid these misconceptions in order to help students achieve learner autonomy.

In the second section, which dealt with concepts and definitions about learner autonomy, I discovered that the teachers' concept of autonomy and learner autonomy is very similar to the one proposed by different authors mentioned in this paper. A few of the participants had not previously taken any courses related with this area; however, they agreed that learner autonomy should be fostered by the language teacher. It is true that autonomy exists in more than one definition (Little, 1991; Benson, 1997; Holec, 1997; Pennycook, 1997; Clemente, 2000), but all of them have one thing in common: the focus on the learner as a main concern. Nevertheless, it could be that in the Mexican context, learner autonomy does not fit well. This is because of the educational system that makes the student dependent on the teacher beginning in the earliest years of formal education. Mexican students see the teacher as responsible for conducting all the activities in the classroom, so language teachers have to be aware that more efforts are needed if they want to promote learner autonomy among Mexican students as a new learning trend.

In the third section related to the syllabus and materials, it is interesting to remark that the teachers indicated that although *New Interchange* is based on the communicative approach in terms of methodology, it does not promote any kind of learner autonomy, so there is not direct relation between the textbook and learner autonomy. Language teachers might adopt the five-level model proposed by Nunan (1997) (awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence) in order to incorporate these five levels into their daily practice. As Nunan points out, even at relatively early stages, some learners are able to modify materials, and make links back and forth between the classroom and the world beyond the classroom. Learners should also use the Self-Access Center as a valuable resource to obtain materials according to their learning interests and goals.

The result of the fourth section concerning activities and training to promote learner autonomy showed me that it is necessary to develop a permanent program to teach students how to consider and understand some of the factors that affect their learning, and how to discover strategies that help them become more effective and independent learners. Because students have specific needs, teachers need to understand their students' objectives in order to help them by providing opportunities to explore and practice the L2 and by creating new activities so that their acquisition is an on-going process. As language teachers, we can not demand autonomy if we do not help learners to become autonomous. Once we have helped them to find their own preferred way of learning, we can permit them to be responsible for constructing their own knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to provide insights into the attitudes, beliefs, concepts, activities and materials related to learner autonomy in the context of Language Center at the UABJO. Dependency is a natural part of the Mexican culture, so a paradigm shift where students take control or participate actively in their learning process requires times and patience. I also consider that the Self-Access Center of the Language Center is a valuable resource; if we as English teachers motivate our students to use it in order to promote, practice and achieve learner autonomy, the results will be profitable for both learners and teachers.

Finally, the English teachers have to be specially trained if learner autonomy is intended to be used as a new paradigm in the philosophy of teaching and learning English in the Bachelor of Arts Program in Teaching English as a Foreign Language at the Language Center of the UABJO.

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