

Key Concept: Learner Autonomy

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Learner autonomy is an important pedagogic concept in foreign language learning and teaching today and in addition, it is considered to be a significant educational goal. For the learner to become autonomous, he must identify, rehearse and apply learning strategies, structure his own learning, and critically reflect upon his own learning processes to then be able to utilise his acquired skills, in and beyond the classroom. Crucially, autonomy is primarily concerned with learning rather than teaching, as its development is viewed to be a cooperative learning process that can be guided (not directed) by the teacher.

Lernerautonomie ist ein wichtiges didaktisches Konzept im Bereich des Fremdsprachenlernens und -lehrens und stellt des Weiteren ein entscheidendes pädagogisches Lernziel dar. Um autonom zu werden, muss der Schüler Lernerstrategien identifizieren, einüben und anwenden können, sein eigenes Lernen strukturieren und seinen eigenen Lernprozess kritisch betrachten können, sodass er seine erworbenen Fertigkeiten anwenden kann, sowohl in der Schule als auch außerhalb. Lernerautonomie als Konzept bezieht sich primär auf das Lernen (nicht auf das Unterrichten an sich), da die Entwicklung von Autonomie als kooperativer Lernprozess betrachtet wird, der vom Lehrer angeleitet (jedoch nicht dirigiert) werden kann.

Origins of the Concept of Learner Autonomy

From the perspective of educational philosophy, it was John Dewey who set the groundwork for the development of the concept of learner autonomy in his publication *Democracy and Education*. He stressed the need for the creation of a collaborative teaching environment which fosters a child's continuous development in learning rather than the pure acquisition of knowledge and subject matter (Dewey 1966; reviewed in Benson 2001: 25-27).

The pedagogic concept of learner autonomy in foreign language teaching originates the foundation of the *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues* (CRAPEL) at the University of Nancy in the 1970s. A group of teachers and researchers conceptualised learner autonomy – the most influential figure being Henri Holec (the director of CRAPEL). His frequently cited definition of learner autonomy is: "To say of a learner that he is autonomous is [...] to say that he is capable of taking charge of his own learning". (Holec 1979: 4)

Current Perceptions of Learner Autonomy

More recent definitions have added further dimensions to learner autonomy. For instance, Dam proposed a wider concept that considers, among other factors, the social aspect of learning:

An autonomous learner is an active participant in the social processes of classroom learning, but also an active interpreter of new information in terms of what she/he already and uniquely knows. Accordingly, it is essential that an autonomous learner evolves an awareness of the aims and processes of learning and is capable of the critical reflection which syllabuses and curricula frequently require but traditional pedagogical measures rarely achieve. An autonomous learner knows how to learn and can use this knowledge in any learning situation she/he may encounter at any stage in her/his life. (Dam *et al.* 1990: 102; Dam 1994: 505)

Further definitions have sought to highlight that learner autonomy is not specific knowledge the learner possesses but rather, a capacity that allows him to direct his own learning:

- “Essentially, autonomy is 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 to the process and content of his learning”. (Little 1991: 4)
- “[Learner autonomy is] the capacity to take control of one’s learning as one that established a space in which differences of emphasis can co-exist”. (Benson 2001: 50)

In current discussions, the concept of learner autonomy is frequently associated with a so-called ‘learning to learn’ approach:

Autonomous learning can be promoted if ‘learning to learn’ is regarded as an integral part of language learning, so that learners become increasingly aware of the way they learn, the options open to them and the options that best suit them. (CEFR 2001: 141)

Crucially, learner autonomy is cross-culturally valid, yet bound to be interpreted differently by different cultures. This is highlighted by Sinclair who points out that learner autonomy is a concept that “accommodates different interpretations and is universally appropriate” (Sinclair 2000: 13). Sinclair in total presents thirteen aspects of learner autonomy – one of which is the cultural aspect. A further significant factor she refers to and that has not directly been stated in the previously cited definitions is that there are certain degrees of autonomy. This entails that “learners will find themselves at different points along the continuum for different tasks.” (Sinclair 2000: 8). An acknowledgement of this has significant implications for foreign language teaching.

Implications for Foreign Language Learning and Teaching

The awareness that learner autonomy must be fostered in foreign language education across different tasks requires certain teaching approaches and a specific conceptual design of instructional materials that facilitate its development. This has received considerable attention by scholars, who have created specific 'motivation', 'learning strategies', 'community building' and 'self-monitoring' activities to cater for these needs (see: Scharle & Szabó 2000). What is more, current teaching approaches such as task-based language teaching acknowledge that a key goal is for learners to become autonomous users of the foreign language and thus consider this in the design of their conceptual teaching framework (Errey & Schollaert 2007). Similarly, Kumaravadivelu in his concept of the postmethod condition in which he presents a set of strategies that are to act as guidelines for teachers, stresses the need to equip students with self-directed learning skills and strategies:

Because language learning is largely an autonomous activity, promoting learner autonomy is vitally important. It involves helping learners learn how to learn, equipping them with the means necessary to self-direct their own learning, raising the consciousness of good language learners about the learning strategies they seem to possess intuitively, and making the strategies explicit and systematic so that they are available to improve the language learning abilities of other learners as well. (Kumaravadivelu 1994: 39-40)

In sum, it must be taken into account that although the teacher, his instructional approach and the pedagogic materials he employs can facilitate the development of learner autonomy, learner autonomy is not a method in itself (Little 1991). Rather, it is an "important, general educational goal" (Sinclair 2000: 5) that can be achieved by employing a variety of methodological options and raising the learner's awareness of his own learning process.

General list of readings

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