LEARNER AUTONOMY AND LANGUAGE CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT IN POST METHOD ERA
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Abstract
One of the main important characteristics of post method era is learner autonomy. Cotterall (2000) elaborates on five principles for promoting learner autonomy that teachers and curriculum designers should consider. They are as follows: Learner goals, the language learning process, tasks, learner strategies, and reflection on learning. It is found that the syllabus in an autonomous–based classroom is a process syllabus and it is developed through the interaction between the teacher and the learners. This paper tries to shed light on the nature of an autonomous-based classroom and discuss its main features in details.

Keywords: post method era, autonomy, curriculum design

Introduction

The characteristics of post method are three-fold: (a) evaluation of the scope and nature of methods, (b) redistribution of theorizing power among practitioners and theorizers, and (c) learner autonomy and language learning strategies. This presentation focuses on the last mentioned characteristics of post method that is learner autonomy and its role in language curriculum development.

What is meant by learner autonomy?

Autonomy is usually defined as the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one’s own learning.

One of the earliest and most frequently cited definitions of autonomy is found in Holec’s report to the Council of Europe, where autonomy is described as ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’. Taking charge has mostly meant as teachers giving learners a set of cognitive, metacognitive, and affective techniques that they can use for successful learning (1981, cited in Benson 1997. P.19). Holec elaborates on this basic definition as entailing the following:

• determining the objectives
• defining the contents and progressions
• selecting methods and the techniques to be used
• monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.)
• evaluating what has been acquired
A second important development has been a growing emphasis on the psychology of learner autonomy. Although Holec frequently discussed the qualities of autonomous learners, his description of taking charge of one’s own learning which emphasized planning, the selection of materials, monitoring learning progress and self-assessment, arguably focused on the mechanics of day-to-day learning management.

In contrast, Little (1991, cited in Besnson, 2001) placed psychology at the heart of learner autonomy. In his interesting recent definition, Little combined Holec’s definition with his own as follows:

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. (P. 4).

Pennycook (1997) defined autonomy as, “developing strategies, techniques or materials in order to promote individual self-development” (P. 45).

According to Littlewood (1999), all of the definitions of autonomy have included these central features:

- Students should take responsibility for their own learning. This is both because all learning in any case can only be carried out by the students themselves and also because they need to develop the ability to continue learning after the end of formal education.
- ’Taking responsibility’ involves learners in taking ownership(partial or total) of many processes which have traditionally belonged to teacher, such as deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods and evaluating progress.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) makes a distinction between narrow view broad views of learner autonomy.

The broad view treats leaning to learn a language as a means to an end, the end being learning to liberate. This kind of autonomy empowers them to be critical thinkers in order to realize their human potential. (Libratory autonomy goes much further than academic autonomy by actively seeking to help learners recognize sociopolitical impediments placed in their paths to progress, and by providing them with the intellectual tools necessary to overcome them).

The narrow view of learner autonomy involves simply, enabling learners to learn how to learn. This enabling process includes equipping them with tools necessary to learn on their own and training them to use appropriate strategies for realization their learning objectives. The primary focus then is on the learner's academic achievement through strategic engagement.

Cohen (2007) argued that language learning and language use strategies can have a major role in helping shift the responsibility for learning off the shoulders of teachers and to those of the learners.
Learner autonomy and language curriculum development

Five principles for promoting learner autonomy that teachers and curriculum designers should consider are as follows: (Nation, & Macalister, 2010,p.42; Cotterall, 2000).

1. Learner goals

2. the language learning process

3. tasks

4. learner strategies

5. reflection on learning

The application of each of these principles is now taken into consideration.

Learner goals

In a course which tries to promote language learners’ autonomy, time is devoted to raising learners’ awareness of ways of identifying goals, specifying objectives, identifying resources and strategies needed to achieve goals, and measuring progress. Decisions about language, texts, tasks, and strategies to focus on during the course are made in relation to the stated goals of the learners.

However, not all learners actually know what the aims of the lesson are, or know what the objective of a particular exercise is. In order to be aware of these things, a learner has to be active; this involves things like reviewing the lesson beforehand; taking note of the statement at the top of the exercise saying what the exercise is trying to teach, and listening carefully to the teacher when she introduces the lesson and the activities.

The language learning process

Language learners should be aware of the language learning process since only in that case they would be able to manage their own learning process. Cotterall (2000) believes that Learners can only be autonomous if they are aware of a range of learning options, and understand the consequences of choices they make. Only a model of language learning "would enable learners to judge about the role of input texts and tasks, to trial alternative strategies, and to seek feedback on their performance"(p.111).

Tasks

Tasks could be communicative real world tasks or they can be a practice for real world tasks. This means that the tasks in which the course provides preparation, practice, and feedback should be those in which the learner will participate in the future.

There are two aspects of the curriculum we need to focus on in order to foster autonomy. One is what the teacher says about classroom tasks as learning activity. The
other is the actual design of tasks and whether they have any element that models learning activity (Crabb, 1993, p.449).

**Classroom discourse about tasks**

The classroom negotiation might be about the purposes of tasks, about the nature of the difficulties (linguistic or strategic) that are experienced in doing the task and about appropriate learning and communication strategies to meet those difficulties. These three areas sum up an important part of the ability to be an autonomous learner. Crabb (1993) identifies the following features regarding classroom discourse about tasks:

1. It is important for learners to be able to perceive a match between a particular type of activity and a particular learning purpose already identified.

2. It is important for learners to be able to diagnose what their difficulties are in performing the task. If they have difficulty with listening, is it because the speaker is speaking too fast, is it because the learner does not have enough vocabulary, is it because the learner does not have enough background knowledge in the topic that is being spoken about? Each diagnosis suggests a different strategy.

3. It is important for the learner to be able to select appropriate strategies to meet an identified communication difficulty or learning goal.

**Task design**

Task design can provide models of learning activity. We need, therefore, to look critically at task design to decide how far it models independent learning procedures in addition to providing for group learning.

Tasks that are likely to model independent learning are characterized by certain features: the performance goal of the task is transparent; the task, or a version of it, is easily staged by someone working on their own; the learners are able to perceive improved performance in doing the task.

**Learner strategies**

Learner autonomy is based on the concept of choice. This principle states that there is a choice of strategic behaviour for language learners and it is up to the learners themselves to decide which strategy would be more useful. In fact an independent learner would:

1. select and implement appropriate learning strategies;
2. monitor and evaluate their own use of learning strategies;
3. monitor their own learning;

Oxford (1990) states that language learning strategies:

- allow learners to become more self-directed
- expand the role of language teachers
- are problem-oriented
• involve many aspects, not just the cognitive
• can be taught
• are flexible
• are influenced by a variety of factors).


From the psychological perspective, we define L2 learner strategy being a specific plan, action, behavior, step, or technique that individual learners use, with some degree of consciousness, to improve their progress in developing skills in a second or foreign language. Such strategies can facilitate the internalization, storage, retrieval, or use of the new language and are tools for greater learner autonomy.

The sociocultural perspective starts with society (its culture) not the individual, as the fundamental unit. This perspective explores material tools, and non-material tools (language) that are handed down from ancestor and that contain societal knowledge from which individuals can learn.

Oxford (1990, cited in Kumaravadivelu 2003) offers a comprehensive taxonomy of learning strategies. Her system consists of six strategy groups, three direct and three indirect. Direct strategies are those that directly involve the target language. They are composed of memory strategies for remembering and retrieving new information, cognitive strategies for understanding and producing the language, and compensation strategies for making do with the limited, still-developing proficiency in the target language. They are all considered direct strategies since they require mental processing of the target language. Indirect strategies are those that support and manage language learning without directly involving the target language. They are composed of metacognitive strategies for coordinating the learning process, affective strategies for regulating emotions and attitudes, and social strategies for learning and working with others. Notice that many of the strategies suggested by Oxford are learner-centered, that is, they represent actions taken by learners to maximize their learning potential.

Learner Training

According to Ellis and Sinclair (1989, p. 10), teachers can have an active role in learner training by: negotiating with learners about course content and methodology, if appropriate; sharing with learners, in a way that is accessible to them, the kind of information about language and language learning that teachers have but that is not always passed on to learners; encouraging discussion in the classroom about language and language learning; helping learners become aware of the wide range of alternative strategies available to them for language learning; creating a learning environment where learners feel they can experiment with their language learning; allowing learners to form their own views about language learning, and respecting their points of view; counseling and giving guidance to individual learners when possible.
In order to carry out these objectives and to make learner training truly meaningful, Wenden (1991, p. 105 cited in Kumaravadivelu 2003) suggests that learner training should be: Informed, Self-regulated, Contextualized, Interactive, and Diagnostic.

With the help of their teachers and their peers, learners can exploit some of the opportunities to get autonomous by:

- identifying their learning strategies and styles to know their strengths and weaknesses as language learners.
- stretching their strategies and styles by incorporating some of those employed by successful language learners.
- evaluating their language performance to see how well they have achieved their learning objective(s).

- reaching out for opportunities for additional language reception or production beyond what they get in the classroom.
- Trying to have teacher's feedback regarding how well they can have autonomy.
- Learning to cooperate with other learners to carry out certain projects.
- Finding opportunities to communicate with competent speakers of the language.

Two important benefits of these activities are: Learners gain a sense of responsibility for aiding their own learning and that of their peers. They also develop a degree of sensitivity and understanding toward other learners who may be more or less proficient than they are.

**Reflection on learning**

Critical thinking about the language learning process would improve the process of learning. Individual's learning awareness growth would improve the autonomous learning. Therefore activities which prompt learners to reflect on their learning aim to enhance learners' insight into their learning processes. Reflection is thus an integral part of the process of exercising autonomy, yet for most learners it does not come naturally and needs to be developed. Strategy or learner training programmes, either embedded in the materials or as stand-alone elements, can be effective.

Reflection helps students to think about their own strengths and weaknesses with a view to making a plan for future action. Thus, for example, teachers might ask students to complete a questionnaire in which they profile their feelings about aspects of language.

**Learner Autonomy and the Process Syllabus**

As we discussed learners autonomy focuses on the point that it is the learner rather than the teacher who is responsible for the learning process. Allwright(2005) includes that "the notion of the process syllabus reinforces the idea that such a decision is necessarily the product of negotiation not just something the teacher decides on and then simply imposes on learners in a lesson (p.11).In an autonomous –based classroom,
the syllabus emerges from the process of negotiation. Therefore, it is believed that the syllabus in such classes is process based. The process syllabus seems largely to transfer the decision-making to the learners. In this type of syllabus, it is usually refer to learning points rather than teaching points. Because learners decide what to learn and how to learn.

**CALL and learner autonomy**

Learner autonomy in material development could be fostered by the use of computers. Computers are often said to support learner independence and interdependence while facilitating and enabling the construction of knowledge about the target language and the development of language skills. However, language no longer exists independently of the computer as suggested by Warschauer who claims that “learning to read, write, and communicate in the electronic medium [is seen by language learners] as valuable in its own right” (Warschauer, 2000, p. 46).

Autonomous learners know how to formulate research questions and devise plans to answer them. They answer their own questions through accessing learning tools and resources on-line and off-line. Moreover, autonomous learners are able to take charge of their own learning by working on individual and collaborative projects that result in communication opportunities in the form of presentations, Web sites, and traditional publications accessible to local and global audiences. Language professionals who have access to an Internet computer classroom are in a position to teach students valuable lifelong learning skills and strategies for becoming autonomous learners. (Shetzer & Warschauer, 2000, p. 176).

Benson argues, however, that “claims made for the potential of new technologies in regard to autonomy need to be evaluated against empirical evidence of the realization of this potential in practice” (Benson, 2001, p. 141). Indeed few studies give a thorough description of what learners do when they are in the process of becoming autonomous language learners and fewer still give a detailed description of the development or exercise of learner autonomy in a technology supported language environment. The relationship between CALL and learner autonomy is either discussed at a theoretical level (Levy, 1997) or remains a starting point on which design principles and decisions are based.

**Teacher Roles in Autonomous-based Classrooms**

In learner autonomous world of language learning the teachers’ role is reduced and they become facilitators. But this does not mean that teachers become passive in learning process; teachers still have various roles: they can teach language relevant to tasks in hand, judge and give instruction in strategies which help retention.

Teachers should enhance autonomous learning because it is of great significance for their students. Also they should teach strategies to learn language autonomously. It is the teacher responsibility to foster the students’ ability of autonomous learning by designing class activities and create positive atmosphere, a language context and make students want to learn and know how to learn.
Teachers should develop autonomy because language learning is unique to each student. Ellis and Sinclair (1989) outline the teachers can play an instrumental role in learner training:

- Negotiating with learners about course content and methodology, if appropriate
- Sharing with learners, in a way that is accessible to them, the kind of information about language and language learning that can teachers have but that is not always passed on to learners
- Encouraging discussion in the classroom about language and language learning.
- Helping learners become aware of the wide range of alternative strategies available to them for language learning.
- Allowing learners to form their own views about language learning, and respecting their points of view
- Counseling and giving guidance to individual learners when possible.

Four suggestions of ways in which the teacher can promote learner independence (Dickinson, 1994, p. 6)

1. by legitimizing independence in learning through demonstrating that teachers approve and encourage learners to be more independent;

2. The second way in which the teacher can promote greater independence is: by convincing the learner that she is capable of greater independence in learning, probably most effectively by giving her successful experiences of independent learning.

3. It could be done by giving the learner increasing opportunities to exercise her independence; by helping the learner to develop learning techniques (learning strategies) so that she can exercise her independence.

Conclusion

In order to improve language learners’ performance, whether it is teaching or learning, we need a sense of ownership, and power, driven by an exploratory attitude and working within a curricular framework that is flexible and dynamic enough to allow for individual explorations. (Cotterall, 1995). Therefore courses designed to promote learner autonomy must encourage learners to set personal goals, monitor and reflect on their performance, and modify their learning behavior accordingly.
REFERENCES


