

# **Learner Autonomy in Second Language Learning**

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## **Abstract**

The study aims to explore learner autonomy in language education. A wide range of developments are noticed in learner autonomy research with changing conceptions. Thus, this study critiques the review of literature on learner autonomy. The study highlights pedagogical issues concerning learner autonomy. A great deal of research has significantly widened the theoretical and empirical aspects of learner autonomy. Since, Sinclair (2000) suggests a number of aspects of learner autonomy. One of them is that the learner is willing to take responsibility for his/her own learning. This responsibility makes learner independent. Implications of learner autonomy at all level in general, higher education level in particular, have been a matter of great concern in language education. The study suggests some ways through which learner autonomy can be promoted. The review reports that learners develop autonomy when they own responsibility for their learning inside and outside the classroom.

**Keywords:** Learner autonomy, Teacher autonomy, Pedagogical issues, Autonomy models.

## **Introduction**

Changes in the world of research and second language teaching have incorporated new trends in terms of teaching and learning practices at higher levels. New methodologies have replaced the old ones. Such shifts were made to improve learning and teaching practices. Early research in second language suggests that the idea of learner seemed to be passive and did not have much space in the classroom. However, learners' participation was not remarkable. They were not even motivated to play an active role in learning. To say so, this practice is still common in South Asian contexts wherein the teacher is the sole authority in the classroom. With the changes in methods, learners began to have much space in the classrooms and they were strongly encouraged to interact and take part in academic activities which enriched their understanding and made learning a comfortable experience for them. Moreover, a remarkable growth interest in learner and their learning has examined a number of pedagogical issues. Researchers and practitioners have focused the areas and one among them is learner autonomy in language learning. According to Reinders (2000) these developments in teaching and learning practices

have brought forth learner centered approaches in teaching. A great deal of research in the areas of psychology, education, sociology, applied linguistics has enhanced our understanding of how language learning takes place. This shift however created interest in learner autonomy.

Learner autonomy has been a centre for research in second language education. The idea of learner autonomy is associated with a number of teaching approaches such as cooperative learning, independent learning, self –directed learning, project based learning, E learning. Language autonomy covers all these approaches in teaching practices at all levels in education. A number of definitions are given by researchers, however, one among these is Holec's (1981) definition that is still cited in autonomy studies.

To begin talk on autonomy, I cannot forget to mention Holec (1981) who treated autonomy as an attribute of the learner. While, to Dickinson (1992) autonomy is the 'situation in which learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions' (p. 11). This makes a sense that learner has to take charge of what he/she learns and relearns. The learner plays main role in learning. The idea of learner autonomy was basically linked with language pedagogy which replaced traditional classroom practices with new ones (Allwright, 1988). Research on autonomy shows that traditional teaching practices proved to be obsolete in developing conceptions of pedagogy in the world. Autonomy research suggested practitioners to redesign language pedagogy and make efforts to improve teaching practices at all levels in education.

Researchers such as Holec (1981), Benson (2006) Little (2000) Borg and Al Busaidi (2012) introduced autonomy and implemented in the classroom research. Thus, the impact of such change in language teaching and learning posed a couple of questions for practitioners. The questions were associated with pedagogical issues. Addressing such issues, Smith (2003) conducted research and stated association of weak and strong pedagogies with learner autonomy. In weak pedagogy, students lack capacity while strong pedagogy, learners are autonomous in advance to some degree.

There is a considerable interest and influence of autonomy research in language education. First, it emerged from Council of Europe. This idea was promoted and implemented by researchers in educational settings

In this study, I critically review the existing literature on learner autonomy including teachers' perspectives about it in second language education. The present study actually aims to discuss learner autonomy from all dimensions and focuses on the changing paradigms in globalizing autonomy research.

### ***Definitions of autonomy***

Little (1999) defines autonomy as 'a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (p. 4). Dickenson (1992) describes autonomy as 'the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions' (p. 11). Moreover, according to Little (2003), autonomy entails decision-making, critical reflection and social interaction. However, Oxford (1999) sees autonomy as ability, attitude, action and achievement. Her analysis of autonomy leads to greater achievement. I cite Crabb (1993) who discusses learning more meaningful and more permanent if the learner is in the position to hold responsibility of learning. This motivates the learner, and he/she becomes successful learner. This is psychological statement because learners learn better when they are in charge of their learning.

In earlier studies, learner autonomy refers to learning situation without a teacher was considered to be incorrect idea and it was corrected with that learner autonomy tends to be identified as a capacity to take control of learning which can be established and employed in the classroom (Little, 1991). Recently, a number of changes have been incorporated in curricula in European countries concerning goal of autonomy in education. The study of Sinclair (2000) is worth reading in this context. Thus, focus on learner autonomy has given significance to teacher who structures and restructures curricula to implement in classroom settings. With this focus, pedagogy for autonomy operates effectively. For example, if learners take control or charge of their learning, then the teacher needs to learn to let it go. Such idea makes a sense that the teacher can take on board need to promote learner autonomy.

### ***Studies on learner autonomy***

Benson (2006) describes concepts of autonomy research in educational policy and discusses some directions for further inquiry in the field. Thus, autonomy is associated with self-regulation, motivation and socio-cultural theory. Learners learn in autonomous atmosphere of teaching about the choice of their material, learning goals, learning opportunities and self-

evaluating process. These are some of the characteristics of autonomous learning in language education. The study on learner autonomy was conducted by Ahmadzadeh and Zabardast, (2014) to describe and heighten learners' self-autonomy in foreign language learning. This study actually created a platform for future studies in the researcher' context.

Autonomy from learner and teacher perspectives is very revealing in the study of Joshi (2011). He investigated learner autonomy through questionnaire and semi structured interviews. The study was conducted in Nepal. The results indicated that learners were reported to be engaged in activities based on autonomy. Moreover, learners are also supported by teachers who promote autonomy and encourage autonomous activities in classroom. To sum up, the study suggested positive attitude of learner and teacher to autonomy which should be fostered in learning. Learner autonomy has received a considerable focus in applied linguistics. It has been described and explored in various ways in research. Research on autonomy in language education is conducted using mixed method approaches. The approach entails in depth understanding of the phenomenon. Recently, the study of Al Busaidi and Al-Maamari, (2014) indicated teachers' perspectives on autonomy. It reflected on varying perceptions of language teachers including their new trends in autonomy research. The study is very rich in the sense that it examined teachers' perceptions about LA. This was the gap identified in research on LA.

Al Asmari (2013) researched learner autonomy from teachers' perspectives. It was conducted at Taif University. The study focused English language teachers practices of learner autonomy in classrooms. The study suggested that teachers should make autonomous learning as an integral part of their teaching practices. Moreover, trainings are required for learners to assist them develop ability to take charge of their learning

Balçıkkanlı (2010) studied learner teacher beliefs about LA at Gazi University, Turkey. The data were collected through questionnaire and interviews to determine learner teacher attitude toward autonomy. The results shows that positive attitude was determined in learner and teacher about learner autonomy. The study also suggested that learner and teacher were very positive to practice autonomy in learning because it helps learners to be responsible for their learning.

Nga (2014) in PhD thesis defines learner autonomy as learner's willingness and ability to take responsibility to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate his/her learning in tasks that are constructed in negotiation with and support from the teacher

These studies indicate that learner autonomy research may be center in applied linguistics. First, autonomy was explored from learner perspectives but later a lack in research was identified in the field of teacher autonomy. Now, the above reviewed literature entails that autonomy in learning may be maintained if learners are supposed to be free in learning. Since, it may be clear that human nature needs freedom. So learner should be free to make choice of in their learning. Teachers should let learners be free to create and generate material in learning, design curricula for themselves. The role of teacher is very significant in promoting autonomous learning activities from primary to university levels in education.

### ***Learner Autonomy Models***

Some researchers operationalized the idea of autonomy as a matter of degree. The study of Nunan (1997) suggested five models of autonomy such as awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence. These models could report activities of learner development in textbooks. To sum up Nunan' (1997) overall idea is to make learners aware of pedagogy and its implications in their learning. Furthermore, three stage model of autonomy was introduced by Littlewood (1997) which included language acquisition, learning approach and personal development. Language acquisition refers to an ability to operate independently and use language to communicate personal meanings in real life. In classroom setting, it engaged learners who are able to take responsibility for their own learning. The three stage model of Littlewood (1997) can be simply put as autonomy as communicator, autonomy as a learner and autonomy as a person. Simultaneously, autonomy of three stage model was presented by Macaro (1997) which involved 'autonomy of language competence, autonomy of language learning competence, and autonomy of choice and action' (p. 170-172). Benson (2001) attempted to model learner autonomy which engaged control over learning under umbrella of important headings such as learning management, cognitive processing and the content of learning. However, Benson (2006) addressed this approach limited to the framework of language learning.

### **Pedagogical perspectives of LA**

Little (1999) described three pedagogical perspectives of learner autonomy. First, autonomy empowers learner, second it is proper use of language and last but not least is language as a cognitive tool. However, fundamental principles of learner autonomy are suggested by Little (2007) as follows.

- 1. Learner involvement.** This refers to learners who are engaged in classroom activities. By doing this, they feel fully involved in active learning and their role as a passive learner is no more.
- 2. Learner reflection.** Learners are given time to reflect what they learn and unlearn. This freedom in learning helps them develop reflective thinking. By this principle, learners learn how to reflect their learning and teaching.
- 3. Target language use.** Learners feel free to use target language in and outside classroom. Their focus in language learning is the appropriate use of target language. By two principles, involvement and reflection, the use of target language is maximum. Medium of instruction

These three pedagogical principles entail active learning in classroom. Teachers should be careful in taking care of practicing the principles in teaching and learning practices. In the similar vein, Benson (1997, p.1-2) noted various connotations of learner autonomy. These connotations help teachers to take notice of their teaching in classroom. First, learning situations in which learners completely depend their own learning. Second, a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning. Third, an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education. Fourth, the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning and last but not least, the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning'

### **Teacher autonomy**

The idea of learner autonomy as Little (1995) discusses is based on teacher autonomy in two ways. First, it is not reasonable to expect teachers to strengthen autonomy in their learners if they have no knowledge of what it means to be autonomous learner. Teachers must have an ability to apply same reflective teaching practices and self-managing procedures in their classroom teaching. In this context, it is basic notion that teacher practitioners should experience autonomous language skills in their teacher trainings, and then they can contribute to fostering (development) of learner autonomy in their teaching and learning practices. As a result, learners take control of their learning keeping in mind models of teachers. Let us agree to the point of view of Holec, Benson and Little that learner autonomy in language education focuses not only on out class learning but also classroom practice. Teachers play a pivotal role in fostering autonomy taking into account out of class and classroom perspectives. This trend was developed in research that teachers' autonomy may be highlighted to understand learner autonomy in depth. Researchers cited above discuss teachers' role in promoting autonomy in

language classes. It is very essential to know that teachers should be able to understand what autonomy is in language education. If they are familiar then they can work to promote it and foster learning practices.

The questionnaire developed by Al Asmari (2013) focuses on teachers' perceptions and teaching strategies in learning. It is divided into three sections. First, current situations in teaching, second, teaching strategies and third, futuristic aspects of LA.

Borg and Al Busaidi (2012) developed a questionnaire to examine learner autonomy. It is considered to be reliable and valid in LA research. Earlier developed questionnaires focus only on learner, however, this questionnaire covers learner and teacher points of view about autonomy in language learning. To me, it sounds balanced and can be replicated in own context. It is five point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree) to strongly disagree).

Joshi (2011) also developed a questionnaire to investigate learner autonomy. This was valid and reliable too to collect data from learners at university level. This also contributed to this exiting literature on autonomy research.

### **Promoting learner autonomy**

Learner autonomy may be summarized up learner autonomy in three major areas in language learning education. First, learning should be meaningful and effective. Second, learners hold responsibility for their learning. Third, when learners hold responsibility, they of course become more active in learning (Little, 1991; Littlewood, 1997).

The study of Borg and Al- Busaidi (2012) recorded some ways to promote learner autonomy. And these ways are listed as (1) talking to students about autonomy and its value (2) encouraging learners to engage in autonomous behaviors (3) getting learners to reflect on their learning (4) using activities in class which promote autonomy (5) setting activities out of class which promote autonomy. Discussing how to promote autonomy, the study of Borg and Al- Busaidi is very rich in learner autonomy in which proper directions are suggested to foster autonomy in learning and teaching practices.

The reviewed literature on learner autonomy shows that it should be encouraged and promoted in teaching and learning practices. This way, autonomy can be incorporated in curricula from primary to higher education level in Pakistan. There may be a question why autonomy? This may be answered in different ways, but learning is lifelong process, it doesn't stop with 16 or 18 years education. This process should be continued with choice of learners who make in their learning.

As research suggests that developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process.

Autonomous learning environment should be created inside and outside classroom. This environment builds confidence in the learner. Then she/he can enjoy that learning. It is very essential to motivate students to take charge of their learning because motivated learning makes all difference in the lifelong learning. By this, the learner becomes independent and shows willingness to learning. Further, observe them how they are involved in activities, how do they respond to teaching in classroom? This observation can help teachers and researchers to understand easily their learner activities. However, to make research on autonomy more effective then practitioner research is more reliable tool to employ in. it is also true that a lack of practitioner research is identified in the existing literature in Pakistan.

### **Conclusion**

Second language learning has been the main focus of ELT practitioners and professionals. Learner autonomy needs more empirical research in the Asian context. The theoretical perspective offers insight for future researchers.

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