

The Significance of Learner Autonomy in TESOL

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Learner Autonomy

- Bonnett & Cuypers (2003, p.326) make the point that:
- In the educational context, this was the sense of freedom celebrated in the early education of Rousseau's *Emile* and in Neill's *Summerhill*, both arguing that **the learner's own thinking has to be respected, that students must always see the point of what they are learning and be free to pursue their own their own conceptions of this in their own ways.**

How is learner autonomy defined?

- Little (2007, p.15) states “the essence of learner autonomy is **the ability to take charge of one’s own learning.**”
- Vanijdee (2003, p.76) wrote “the definition of learner autonomy is one which views autonomy as a **capacity—a construct of attitudes and abilities**—which allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning.”

Food for Thought

- How can we help students to take charge of their learning?
- What attitudes and abilities are necessary prerequisites for learner autonomy?

Who can benefit?

- Zhe (2009, p. 11) provides the insight that learner autonomy “was originated in adult education, but its recent development has confirmed that it could also be used with young learners with guided and gradual introduction. This position has been quite accepted by Europe language teachers.”
- So, learner autonomy may be useful for students of all ages although its application may be tempered by their **age** and **experience**.

Why is it significant?

- Jiao (2005, p.28) gives four substantial reasons in support of learner autonomy for English learning:
 - 1) It enhances the learner's motivation and leads to more effective learning.
 - 2) It provides learners with more opportunities for English communication in a non-native environment.
 - 3) It caters to the individual needs of learners at all levels.
 - 4) It has a lasting influence.

Who are autonomous learners?

Omaggio, (1978) cited in Wenden (1998, p. 41-42) provides seven main attributes of autonomous learners:

- Autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
- take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
- are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;
- are good guessers;

Who are autonomous learners?

- attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
- develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
- have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

What is their responsibility?

Chan (2001, p. 506) states that the following areas should be their responsibility of the autonomous learner:

- setting learning goals;
- identifying and developing learning strategies to achieve such goals;
- developing study plans;

What is their responsibility?

- reflecting on learning (which includes identifying problem areas and means of addressing these problems);
- identifying and selecting relevant resources and support;
- assessing one's own progress (which includes defining criteria for evaluating performance and learning).

Discussion of a learning environment

- Teachers should seek to provide a **safe environment where students feel free to try out their English skills (take risks)** without being criticized or ridiculed.
- The teacher should set the tone for this type of environment by explaining it and modeling it.
- Students should be encouraged for effort as well as proficiency.

Discussion of a learning environment

- Teachers should also ask the students questions such as: What activities do they like to do? What difficulties are they having in learning English?
- The teachers should listen carefully and use the information to adjust their teaching.
- Teachers can seek to draw out their students using active activities that are fun and non-threatening.

Discussion of a learning environment

- Teachers should give the student choices on a regular basis. For example, would you like to interview someone or act out a role play?
- It could be that different students could choose different activities rather than the whole class making the choice.
- This could be accomplished using small groups and each group could make some choices as to what activities they will participate in.

Learning styles

Reid (1987, p. 89) discusses the four learning styles found in American students:

1. Visual learning: reading, studying charts
2. Auditory learning: listening to lectures, audiotapes
3. Kinesthetic learning: experiential learning, that is, total physical involvement with a learning situation
4. Tactile learning: “hands-on” learning, such as building models or doing laboratory experiments

AWARENESS for Teachers and Students.

Appropriate Activities

- **Auditory Learners**
- interviewing
- debating
- participating on a panel discussion on a topic
- giving oral reports

Appropriate Activities

- **Visual Learners**
- computer games
- maps, graphs, charts
- cartoons
- posters
- videos

Appropriate Activities

- **Tactile Learners**
- drawing
- playing board games
- building models

- **Kinesthetic Learners**
- songs with hand motions
- role plays
- dramas

Goal setting and self evaluation

- In order for students to take charge of their learning, they need to see what the goal is they are striving for. Teachers should help their students to develop goals that are realistic, achievable, and measurable. Students may be motivated to work harder if they see that it will result in achieving the goals.
- If the students can evaluate themselves they will know how they are doing without a sense of embarrassment. Although tests may be used, looking at what progress the students have achieved is also important (from point a to b). The students may also have a chance to share their own progress from their perspective with the teacher.
- Reflection by the students should be encouraged. Diary?

Asian challenges to learner autonomy

- Although students in Asia have generally less exposure to learner autonomy (Zhe 2009), that does not mean that these students cannot benefit by learner autonomy. Chan (2001) studied a sample of 20 second-year university students in Hong Kong. She described “The class was aged between 19 and 24 years old, having studied English for about 14–18 years in local schools. Their native language was Cantonese (Chan, 2001, p. 508).”
- Chan (2001, p. 507) describes their backgrounds in the following way:

...the typical Hong Kong Chinese students see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by themselves. The most favoured learning model is simply one where the **teacher is in full control of the learning process, giving explicit directions for almost every learning activity**. Students are therefore left with very little or no choice, and control over the content and method of study.

Growth in learner autonomy

- Although these students had limited exposure to learner autonomy, the results showed a remarkable ability and interest in learner autonomy among the sample population (Chan, 2001, p. 510-511) as seen in the following:
- (65%) felt that they had ideas about learning which should be considered in developing learning programmes.
- (71%). said that they liked the teacher to give them problems to work on and let them find their own mistakes.

Growth in learner autonomy

- (76%) said that they had the right to be involved in selecting learning tasks and activities.
- (95%) admitted that they liked to be responsible for their own learning and assess their own progress (80%).
- (95%) acknowledged the important role that autonomous learning played in the learning process.

Further Research

- In this study Chan (2001) was successful in raising expectations for the students to take charge of their learning. She empowered the students by providing the tools to evaluate their own work and progress.
- Further research should be done on a larger sample and different populations among Asian students to see what results may occur.

Convincing students

Chan (2001, p.515) points out that “if the learner does not understand the reasons and benefits of autonomous learning, he/she may refuse the extra responsibility for and involvement in the learning process.”

So ,it is important for teachers to **convince** students of the benefits of learner autonomy right from the beginning.

Little (2007, p17) notes “the theory predicts that learners who are autonomous (volitional in their learning) will be fulfilled and thus motivated learners. It also predicts that their autonomy will be undermined if they do not feel that their learning effort is paying off.”

So, it is very significant for teachers to **encourage** their students’ progress. They should think of creative ways to acknowledge small and large accomplishments with some type of reward or ceremony.

Teacher Attitudes & Roles

Thanasoulas (2000) points out that:

- if learners labour under the **misconception** that learning is successful **only within the context of the "traditional classroom,"** where the teacher directs, instructs, and manages the learning activity, and students must follow in the teacher's footsteps, they are likely to be impervious or resistant to learner-centred strategies aiming at autonomy, and success is likely to be undermined.
- **APPLY:** The teacher may need to help the students to have a **new perspective** on learning. The teacher should access the learners' views on autonomy and begin to foster it beginning with small steps at first and then increasing it as the learning continues. They may also need to have **new roles that empower students.**

Challenges for Teachers

Austin (2006, p.1) stresses that :

There is no magic solution and encouraging learner autonomy takes time and a lot of patience on the part of the teacher as well as the learner. In some cases it seems almost impossible to achieve and can leave both parties confused and frustrated. However, as professionals it is our duty to remember that no matter how tempting it is to revert to spoon feeding our learners, it is our duty to begin from day one and to continue to the end of a course in a manner that gives our learners every opportunity of developing their independence to the greatest extent possible. Ultimately the teacher needs to believe in the learner and even more importantly, the learner must have faith in their own ability.

- **The teachers should lead the way!**

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Learning preferences—how do you like to learn?

- Indicate your attitude to the following language learning activities by circling the appropriate number:
- 1. This is never true of me
- 2. This is generally not true of me
- 3. This is generally true of me
- 4. This is always true of me

Learning preferences—how do you like to learn?

- 1. I like to learn by reading English newspapers. 1 2 3 4
- 2. I like to learn by listening and using audios. 1 2 3 4
- 3. I like to learn by language games. 1 2 3 4
- 4. I like to learn through role-plays. 1 2 3 4
- 5. I like to study by myself. 1 2 3 4
- 6. I like to work in pairs. 1 2 3 4