Which Dimension of Learner Autonomy Receives More Emphasis in the Chosen Recent Studies?- A Review

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Abstract : *The different dimensions of learner autonomy demand the attention of the researchers equally for managing the learning technically, psychologically and contextually. At the outset of the paper, the attempt is made to reason out the need for the review on the studies on learner autonomy and to define the various dimensions of autonomy in the context of language learning. The rest of the paper analyses the articles which are published in International journals for tracing the emphasis given to the aspects of autonomous learning in the study conducted by the researchers to identify the direction of the studies.*

Keywords- *dimensions of autonomous learning, direction of the studies, e Learning, learning strategy, self-regulated learning*

I. INTRODUCTION

The advancement of technology, the existing cut throat competition in job market, the increase in the number of learners and inadequacy or lack of availability of time for attending classes are a few reasons for the spurt in the online or e Learners. These kinds of learning offer many opportunities for the takers to utilize them irrespective of the location and time. In addition to the factors mentioned, these learning cater to the needs and interests of any type of reader with a variety of learning material.

But the buzzword in the field of online or e Learning is autonomy of learners, the ultimate goal of language learning. The responsibility of learners utilizing the material for their learning lies solely with them. They have to plan, choose the learning material, manage and evaluate their learning from time to time. The online or e Learning provides the platform for managing their learning on their own.

This exposure to online or e Learning material demands learners to develop self-directing, self-initiative, self-assessing and adaptability skills to become autonomous learners. It shifts the focus from teacher to learner in the context of language learning but at the same time, a majority of learners need a stimulus from the teachers. The teachers, through their insight into the learning styles and strategies, help them to become autonomous learners online or offline.

II. DIFFERENT DIMENSIONS OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

What autonomous learning means poses a question about its nature, since each definition of learner autonomy hardly covers different aspects of autonomous learning. Various definitions ensure its multi-faceted nature. For instance, Holec's definition of autonomy includes setting the objectives, deciding on how to progress in one's learning by the self-chosen contents and tracing the same, opting for the methods and techniques available to attain the self- made goals and assessing the acquisition of language. Thus it emphasizes the technical aspect of autonomous learning. The psychological dimension of autonomous learning finds expression in Little's definition which pinpoints the cognitive process, crucial to managing the learning on one's own. The third dimension of autonomous learning, political one is about taking control over the content of learning. These three dimensions of learning are clearly "interdependent" (61 Benson).

2.1 *Purpose of the paper*

The paper attempts to categorise the contributions made to the above- mentioned different dimensions of learner autonomy. This categorisation is imperative for exploring the avenues of researches on the various aspects of autonomous learning in future, since the deliberate encouragement and circumstances towards eLearning or virtual learning are on the increase. The analysis is tried to emphasize the rationale behind the studies made to group them under various possible headings, though the scope of each category overlaps with one another.

For the review, a few of the studies carried out in learner autonomy are taken into consideration to trace the direction of the researches in the chosen area.

2.1.1 *Studies on Technical Dimension of Autonomous Learning*

The first study taken up for review is on the examination of the portfolios employed to help Iranian students develop their autonomous learning. Electronic portfolios, as a learning tool stands for the autonomy granted to learners to create, collect and organise to display the progression in their learning any language. In addition to the learning materials collected by learners, their creations using the skill and knowledge of language they have developed in themselves, the portfolios need to report their reflection on the errors committed and corrections carried out later in the form of a narrative or description to keep track of the improvement in the language learning. Thus portfolios are meant for 'a complex and comprehensive view of student performance in context'(506 Khoosf).

In the article, 'Introducing Email Portfolio as a Means of Developing EFL Learner's Autonomy', the author defines portfolios and enumerates the steps in developing portfolios and the benefits of using them in the theoretical section. The null hypothesis was proposed and with the quantification of the data collected, the null hypothesis was rejected. The conduct of the experiment for twelve weeks and the data collected stand proof of the researcher's conviction on the influence of email portfolio on creating a more conducive atmosphere for the autonomous learning.

The article titled, 'Hybrid learning and Iranian EFL learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning', tries to convey the benefit of hybrid learning, the definition of which is in the words of Waddoups and Howell(2002) , 'a standard instructional setting(class meetings) as well as offline activities outside the classroom(tutorials, classes from other institutions on the campus, peer review workshops) and computer –mediated learning (online lessons)', for the advanced Iran EFL learners who were the informants. The qualitative as well as quantitative study using Observational Protocol, Weblog's Observational Protocol and autonomy questionnaire respectively confirms the improvement in the level of autonomy with the hybrid learning. The researcher pinpoints the creation of ambience needed for advancing autonomy, personal autonomy, by taking charge of the whole language learning bit or part of learning.

Yet another study on using language contracts as a strategy is for encouraging learners to be active learners by personalizing the training given to learners. Learning contract is a formal written agreement stating the portion of learning items and measurement of learning negotiated between the learner and lecturer. It provides opportunities, as Nunan points out, for structuring learner's potential, experience and prior knowledge in learning, as process takes precedence over content of learning (473 Ismail). The study is a mixed-method one wherein qualitative data were analysed using content analysis research method and the data from the questionnaire survey were transformed into percentages and frequencies. The results of the study show the 'perceived gains, sources of motivation, challenges and usefulness of these contracts through the learning experiences" (479).

Even though the advancements in technology enable educational practitioners to employ computer – based instruction (Artificial Intelligence) to adapt the learning activity to the needs and interests of learners and thus, pave way for self-regulated learning, there is lack of assurance for the sustained intrinsic motivation in learners. If the learning activity is too challenging or lack of being highly demanding even in game-based learning, it fails to be 'adaptive to determine what is best for each learner using their preferences, personality, learning styles'(6 Ryu), skills and level of knowledge . One of the research questions is as to how the computer-based learning can create autonomous learning situation by keeping their motivation sustained till the end of learning. In response to the need of engaging learners' intrinsic motivation, skill-challenge balanced CBI, which would assess learners' cognitive states throughout their learning and keep the level of knowledge of a learner balanced by the level of difficulty of the activity for the learner, was designed utilizing technically viable new AI algorithms such as Bayesian rule-based learning (BRL). The designed activity using BRL provides scaffolding to learners as they set the stage for the next higher level activity by making learners internalise the new information needed for the next activity. So, learners know their current level of knowledge and build upon the previous *knowledge* with the new activity. Thus individualised automatic scaffolds make learners intrinsically motivated. The design of the instruction method is in a such way that it could determine the learning path automatically and the learner could 'adjust the level of difficulty by themselves to a limited extent'(8). This is a combined instruction method since it combines skill-challenge balancing and self-selection. Since the study is an empirical one, different components of learning material, that is, the adaptive IT –Tutor with SCB and non-adaptive IT-Tutor were used for the study. The contents included in non-adaptive IT-Tutor followed the non-dynamic curriculum sequencing approach and so was unmindful of the current knowledge level of learners. The study results show the enhancement in the motivation of the entry and intermediate level learners and thus, the fluctuation in the effect of self-regulating learning which varies with the knowledge level of learners.

The researcher tries to replicate the study to ensure the applicability of the findings to other contexts and with the change of samples. In addition to different samples and contexts, he suggests further studies on how the motivational relatedness needs affect the learning experience in collaborative learning condition.

2.1.3 *Studies on Cognitive Dimension of Autonomous Learning*

Developing sense of responsibility for managing their learning cognitively is also a sign of autonomous learning and for that, teachers need to encourage their learners to adopt different learning as well as communication strategies and learners, in turn need a lot of practice in using these strategies within the class. The emphasis on these strategies calls for the appropriate teaching-learning activities in the class which will pave the way for autonomous learning. In lieu of creating situations to cram for learning a language with a load of words and sentence structures, designing the activities for the class to make them realise the importance of using these strategies and transferring the acquired skills in different situations will encourage them to take responsibility for their learning in the due course of time.

The language learning and communication strategies are consciously-made choices for making learning 'easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective, and more transferrable to new situations' (3490 Popescu and Vida). The article on 'Communication Strategies for developing the learner's autonomy' tries to bring home the need for making learners aware of these strategies to become self-directing. Popescu and Vida attempt to list the strategies in different categories put forward by the eminent advocates of learner autonomy and is certain about the push learners need in the direction of self- learning through these strategies.

The article entitiled, 'Learner autonomy and self-regulation in eLearning' reveals the imperativeness of metacognitive strategies in the self- regulation of learning. Metacognitive strategies facilitate their decision making in language learning and learners' self-control of these strategies, in particular, in online education system helps them to self-regulate their learning (1900-1 Goulao).

Learners are expected to possess self- management competencies to self-regulate their learning. These competencies include the ability to manage their learning and learning related activities in relation to the assessment of their learning states and for that, they need to review their learning ability in response to the learning task they set on their own. So, the dynamics between monitoring and control, one of the important cognitive processes of self- regulated learning receive the attention of learners to be autonomous learners.

These calibration dynamics are a "measure of the relationship between trust and performance'(1902). It shows the degree of deviation in the actual status of learners' performance from their perceived status of their own performance. So, it enables them to be aware of the accuracy of the perception of their own performance.

Learners may underestimate or overestimate their own performance and the difference in the evaluation and the assumptions is due to the level of confidence in them about their own performance. The degree of confidence may be low or high and so, actual performance may be more or less than their self-reported judgement of their own performance.

To find out the difference in the actual and perceived status of their performance, if any, the study was conducted with the undergraduate eLearning students through questionnaires immediately before the assessment, immediately after the assessment and after knowing the classification (face to face assessment). The results, after the application of Pearson correlation test, confirm more number of learners with underestimation of their performance than learners with overestimation of their performance.

The author underscores the need for the calibration of the perceived performance and actual performance in the present society. The present learning environment encourages self- regulated learning because of learners' preference of eLearning and virtual learning over traditional learning. These learning environments demand learners to play an active role in learning since learning is construction of knowledge by the learners. These autonomous learners will be in a position to take decision regarding the selection of forms, construction and employment of knowledge acquired in entirely new areas and above all, the self-assessment of the efficacy of their learning.

The role of metacognitive attributes in influencing the second-language learning led to the investigation of the existing relationship among these attributes and autonomy (AU), a psychological need for personal growth. To make learners develop the sense of autonomy, the insight into the direct and indirect influence of other psychological factors on the process of learning is essential. The article titled, 'Metacognitive Attributes and Liberated Progress: The Association Among Second-Language Learners' Critical Thinking Creativity and Autonomy' investigated on whether any relation the creativity (CR) and critical thinking (CT) bear on autonomy of EFL learners. The researcher employed the questionnaire of AU by Spratt, Humphreys and Chan(2002) to evaluate the level of autonomy in the chosen informants. Student's view of their and teachers' responsibility(13 items), the confidence in their ability to be autonomous in their learning(11 items), the level of motivation in learning English(1 item), the practice of autonomous learning both within the class and out of the classroom(27 items) are the areas of investigation included in the Likert- type validated questionnaire. A questionnaire of CR created by O'Neil, Abedi and Spielberger(1992) and a questionnaire of CT developed by Honey(2000) were used for assessing the ability of CT and the degree of CR in the 182 EFL undergraduates chosen on cluster sampling basis. The analysed data, using Pearson's product-moment correlation coefficient, show significant positive correlation between the variables AU and CR as well as the variables between AU and CT. The results confirm the significant interrelatedness of three variables. The vital contribution of the study lies in the necessity for creativity and critical thinking to become successful autonomous learners (Nosratinia).

The findings of experimental study on finding the effect of training the learners, Prep School students who were divided into B(beginner/elementary) and A(pre-intermediate / intermediate) proficiency level groups , on language learning strategies for two weeks fail to show the significant difference between the control and experimental groups. However, the article, 'Fostering learner autonomy' confirms the benefit which the beginner level learners attained with the strategy training.

2.1.4 *Studies on Situational Dimension of Autonomous Learning*

The kind of activities as well as the learning material which the teacher encourages in the class plays an important role in sustaining the interest of learners and keeping the right attitude in them to learn actively. The article titled, 'New Approaches on Learner Autonomy in Language Learning' attempts to show that if learners are allowed to use any tool (pictures, photos, quotes, songs and the like) at their disposal, how it will motivate them to learn on their own.

By allowing them to use the learning material of their choice, that is to say ,to have control over their learning material, the motivation of learners gets sustained and this, in turn establishes the inter relatedness of autonomy and responsibility for the sustenance of learners' involvement. Learners' ability to make right decisions in choosing the learning material and the consequent responsibility for attaining the learning objectives set on their own or by the teacher.

The contribution of this research to the field of research on learner autonomy lies in the application of two new approaches. They are the wonder approach and Happy learning approach. The wonder approach by L'Ecuyer lays stress on the need for developing a sense of wonder instead of deadening their sensitivity to things all around them. The volitional approach cultivates the 'trusting predisposition'(431 Yagcioglu) in learners to make learning meaningful. To Yagcioglu, this way of learning is in the true sense of learning since it integrates 'wonder, beauty, sensitivity and secure attachment' (431) considering human being as a whole.

The second approach, known as Happy learning approach by Veenhoven and Seligman is concerned about the states of the mind of learners when they are learning. The leaning should gratify learners to make learning interesting. So, the material as well as the group of their liking can make them enjoy their learning.

The emphasis laid on the active role of learners in language acquisition made the researcher, Amiri interested in knowing about the effect of different types of feedback, recast and prompt, on the spoken or written text of learners on EFL learners' autonomy in the quasi- experimental research conducted in Tehran. The informants were homogenized through PET test and Zhang and Li's (2004) questionnaire and then assigned to two experimental groups, one group received recast and the other prompt. The results of the study showed an increase in the research informants' autonomy and this increase was due to the consciousness raising which, in turn could lead them to be responsible learners.

III.   CONCLUSION

Though the review of the chosen studies shows the course of the studies in the direction of embracing all the three dimensions of autonomous learning, the contributions of a majority of these studies are in allowing learners to develop meta cognitive and cognitive strategies. However, the number of articles chosen for study is inconsiderable for making such a generalization of the direction of the studies. The attempt on autonomous learning may be highly fruitful with teacher's encouragement on using the text material and topic of learners' choice and providing the opportunity for their autonomous learning from the stage of planning to evaluation on a few occasions and for learners who have already initiation into autonomous learning. So, contributions made through researches on technical as well as political aspects of learner autonomy may be beneficial to those who are initiated into autonomous learning. To encourage learners who have allowed other regulation in language learning, teachers can guide them on various learning styles and strategies at their disposal. Hence, researches can also be on similar line utilizing different eLearning tools such as e Forums, e Portfolio and the like for identifying the suitability of electronic media both in and out-of- classroom context to ascertain the impact of these tools on autonomous leaning of different types of learners.

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