



Towards Developing Learner Autonomy in Teaching English as a Second Language in Nigeria: Shifting the Focus from Teaching to Learning

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ABSTRACT

The paper takes a cursory look at the phenomenon of autonomy as it relates to second language learning. The concept of autonomy and that of an autonomous learner were both carefully examined. This allows for an in-depth discussion on the characteristics of an autonomous learner who are seen to take responsibility for their learning. The rationale behind promoting learner autonomy amongst L2 learners most especially in Nigeria where the language of instruction remains the second language was highlighted. Going by the many advantages of learner autonomy in second language learning, the paper explored the different roles expected of an effective English language teacher and those of the learner alike to ensure an enhanced and smooth training of the later towards gaining independence in L2 learning. Several factors that could thwart the effort at promoting learner autonomy amongst students in Nigeria were unveiled. The linguistic situation, the nature of learning in general in the country coupled with the attendant challenges peculiar to the teacher and other related factors could mar success in fostering learner independence. Since autonomy requires and ensures full differentiation, all hands must be on deck by all stake holders to promote it among second language learners. Therefore, the paper among other things suggests the use of certain frameworks in order to harness the many benefits of learner autonomy by appropriately placing the learner in the centre of attention.

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INTRODUCTION

The shift from the “teacher centered” to the “learner centered” approach in the educational circle has been a growing discourse among stakeholders in the educational process. This influences not only theory but also practice further leading to a paradigm shift and a promotion of and developments of trends most especially in second language learning. In Nigeria, English language is often learned mainly within the four walls of a classroom in a formal school setting with limited reinforcement from outside of the classroom. In such a scenario, the teacher and the textbooks remained the main

sources of and agents of exposure to the language. This limits the learners’ contact with the target language and restricts the natural form of language learning with the entire social environment as the re-inforcer. Ultimately learners most often than not, do not use the English language as much as they should outside of the classroom. This hinders them to a certain point the ability to record significant levels of proficiency in the second language. This portrays second language learners who are more or less exposed to learner autonomy (where learners take responsibility for their learning) and lacked the enthusiasm to engage in other English



language learning activities outside the classroom. This is more so because learners often depend heavily on teachers in learning the second language. Most students do not actively seek other resources for language as they are attached to traditional learning practices such as rote learning and memorization, etc, instead of resources such as books, media, audio, videos, etc, and autonomous learning programs to support them. Instead they continue to rely solely on their teachers who they view as the main source and providers of the target language. The situation has to change to allow for a more active involvement of the learners at almost every level of the learning process from an understanding of raising awareness of the learner choices, learner style in learning, learning processes, to self-assessment of the progress made if learners are to assimilate and internalize the target language appropriately.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CLARIFICATION

Autonomy is derived from two Greek words auto (auto) which means self and (nomo) which means rule or laws. The term is as well derived from the field of politics and moral philosophy. It literally connotes 'self-rule' by implication autonomy simply refers to self-governance, self-determination or a capacity of one to make decisions. Wende (2011) describes autonomy as the capacity to think, decide and act freely and independently on the basis of such thoughts and decisions. Human beings are blessed with the intellect to distinguish between good and bad and right from wrong. Learner autonomy is hinged on self-determination theory which as reported by Deci & Ryan cited in Hu & Zhang (2017) is viewed as a macro-theory of motivation explaining the relation of human needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to self-determined motivation and self-regulated behaviour. The scholars also claimed that social context supportive of the basic needs maintained or enhanced intrinsic motivation and facilitated the internalization of extrinsic motivation, resulting in more autonomous motivational or regulatory orientations. Individuals have the capacity to pursue what is good and to avoid the opposing

divide. The assumption of autonomy is that each human being has the right to make his or her own decision and participate in decision making. Two types of autonomy however emerged; autonomy of thought which embraces the wide range of human intellectual activities called "thinking for oneself" and autonomy of will, which means the capacity to decide to do things on the basis of deliberations.

Learner autonomy was first developed at the centre de recherches et d'Applications Pedagogues en Langue's (CRAPEL), university of Nancy, France, in the early 1970s. Holec (1981) believes that the need for a term to describe people's ability to take charge of their own learning arose for practical, though idealistic reasons. It becomes fundamental to give learners the responsibility of making decisions that affects their learning needs, styles and interests. It is worthy to note that the individual learners' acceptance of responsibility for his or her learning goes a long way in promoting ones learning capacity. Thus, learner autonomy is a matter of conscious effort and deliberate attempt and intentions to accept responsibility for ones learning. According to Thonassolas (2000) learner autonomy mainly consists in becoming aware of and identifying ones strategies, needs and goals as a learner and having the opportunity to reconsider and refashion approaches and procedures for optimal learning. Learning with a high metacognitive awareness, which is a must in fostering learner autonomy, have the ability to make learners address their weakness easily and also take precautions accordingly in a most successful way. Furthermore, Kayode (2013) opines that students should have control over the goals and content of the learning they are involved in. Similarly Trebbi (2006) argues that taking charge of one's own learning is a pre-requisite of learning and learning itself is impossible without the learner actually taking charge.

Therefore, in learner autonomy, the learner is seen to have taken care of his or her learning. Rather than simply being dependent waiting, for one of the outside forces to learn, the learner is internally motivated to critically reflect to generate ideas and continuously take charge of his learning process. Holec in Adianingrum



(2017) holds that learner autonomy was the ability of the learner to take charge of one's own learning by being able to have and to hold the responsibility for these decisions

1. Determining the objective.
2. Defining the contents.
3. Selecting methods and techniques.
4. Mentioning the procedures of acquisitions.
5. Evaluating what has been acquired.

The central position of an autonomous learner in the learning process is being at the epic center of why, what, how, and when he learns. The learner as an individual should be actively involved in decision making regarding the reasons, the contents he learns, the process through which he learns and of course the analysis of the progress made. Littlewood (1999) classified autonomous learners into two categories 'proactive' and 'reactive' autonomy. The proactive autonomy has to do with learners who are able to plan, access, and monitor their learning. They are able to establish their own learning agenda and their learning directives. This level of autonomy is often seen in western cultures, such as Austrian students (Adianingrum, 2017). On the other hand, reactive autonomy can be regarded as a situation where learners do not create their own learning nor direct it, but once it has been integrated, the learners are able to learn and organize their resources independently to reach their goals. When a task is given, the learners quickly respond to it exploring independently all avenues to accomplish the task. This typically depicts a trait of a reactive learner. This feature is most likely a trait observable in most African cultures going by the nature of religiously following the dictates of a fixed curriculum.

Characteristics of an Autonomous Learner

Autonomous learners possess certain features that distinguishes them from others learners they tend to exhibit traits that suggest critical reflection and the conscious intention to learn exploring various means with or without the institutional or teacher directions. Sinclair (2000) points out some common characteristics of learner autonomy thus;

Autonomy is a construct of capacity which is not inborn.

Autonomy consists of learners' willingness to be responsible for their own learning.

There are degrees of autonomy which are unstable and unchangeable.

Autonomy can occur both inside and outside the classroom.

Autonomy has a social as well as individual dimension.

Autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process.

For learners to become more autonomous, conscious and strategic efforts must be taken by individual learners towards accepting responsibility for learning and working closely to attain that goal. According to Moore (2015) learner autonomy starts with the premise that autonomous learner's takes responsibility for his or her own learning. In doing this, they can identify:

1. Their learning goals (what they need to learn).
2. Their learning process (how they will learn it).
3. How they will evaluate and use their learning.
4. They have well founded conceptions of learning.
5. They have a range of learning approaches and skills.
6. They have good information processing skill.
7. They are well motivated to learn.

The above features are among the qualities every language learner should aspire for in that they aid and ensure success in the learning process. The essence is to have learners who are able to identify and manage their own language learning goals thus, develop their knowledge of learning strategies. It is pertinent to note that autonomous language learners are fond of assessing their effectiveness and can reflect upon as well as evaluate their performances. Suffice it to state that they are self-directed and self-motivated to explore various avenues leading to successful learning. Conscious of this fact, an autonomous learner takes concrete steps towards not only



understanding the learning process and classroom activities but also becoming responsible to successfully accomplish tasks. In the words of Khaerudi & Chik (2021) a fully autonomous language learner can manage their learning in the absence of classroom, teacher, or textbooks. However, it is worthy of note that this does not in any way connote the total absence of language teachers in the learning process. Learner autonomy, to the scholars, is not synonymous with learning without teachers.

Rationale for Promoting Learner Autonomy in L2 Teaching

Success in second language learning depends as much on the students as on the teachers i.e. they share responsibility for the outcome. The educational process is fast moving away from the teachers to the learner centred approach, where the learner becomes central and plays an active role in it. For learners to be actively involved in the learning process, they first need to realize, accept and develop positive and responsible attitudes towards learning. Though language teachers can provide and create the right atmosphere and avenues for learners to learn, it becomes the sole responsibility of the learners to display and show the willingness to learn. It will be a futile effort if learners remain passive and/or indifferent in what goes on most especially in learning an L2 that requires not only participation but active involvement in the learning process. To ensure these positive traits in students becomes the rationale for promoting learner autonomy in language learners. In this vein, learner autonomy can enhance success and independence among learners. It can make learners to take charge and become self-aware and boast their confidence. Learners can become more free and creative in shaping their potential giftedness when they become autonomous. Benson (2012) believes that if educational systems are viewed as organized systems for the socialization of autonomous individuals, inculcation of respect and support for personal autonomy will play a central role in their educational functions. Learner autonomy can positively improve the quality of learning as learners can make the best use of learning opportunities both within and outside of

classroom. When such is achieved individual learners are prepared for lifelong learning. This can extend to the larger society where learners will portray and promote democratic decisions and outlook in life.

Roles of the Teacher and the Learners in Autonomy in Language Learning

In order to foster learner autonomy, both the language teachers as well as the learners themselves have crucial roles to play for efficiency. Second language teachers have distinct roles to play to motivate students, build their confidence, knowledge and skills necessary for effective communication and independent learning. Hedge (2000) stated that language teachers' aim is to develop students' ability to operate independently with the language and use of language to communicate in real life situations. Their role is to help the learners develop their abilities towards taking responsibilities for their own learning and to be personally active to their work both inside and outside the classroom. Second language teachers need to prepare learners for their new roles by developing learners' self-awareness as language learners and their awareness of learning goals and options of language learning itself. Being aware of their roles not as teachers but facilitators, consultants, guides and supporters of learning processes can enhance their practices towards achieving the goal of autonomy in learners. Thus, teachers of English language can promote learners autonomy in the way they handle such important aspects as

1. Use of good lesson plans.
2. Instructional materials.
3. A variety of approaches.
4. Promoting active participation.
5. Active involvement of learners.
6. Shifting roles.
7. Assigning responsibilities.
8. Facilitating rather than teaching and more.

However, the learners have distinct roles to play owing to their central position in autonomous learning process. It becomes pertinent to at this juncture review what scholars postulated in the levels of involvement of the



learners in this wise. Littlewood (1997) for instance, gave a three stage model that involved, dimension of language acquisition, learning approach and personal development. Nunan's (1997) attempt focused on a model of five levels as 'learner action' 'awareness' 'involvement' 'intervention' 'creation' and 'transcendence'. Moreover, Scharle & Szabo's (2000) resource book for the development of autonomy was informed by a three stage phase model consisting of 'raising awareness' 'changing attitudes' and 'transferring roles.' Benson (2001) views the concept with learning management, cognitive processes and the content of learning. These boil down to the integral responsibility expected of learners to ensure autonomy. Taking into account Nunan's model, 'learner action' for instance would entail imploring them to play active rather than passive roles in and outside the classroom for optimum success; at 'awareness' level, learners would be made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the materials, the task involved and the suitable learning styles/strategies for an accomplishment of the task; 'involvement' may construe participation not only in the learning process but also in decisions making relevant thereof; 'creation' can be what the learners are able to construct after exploring various avenues in the learning process; while at the transcendence level, learners would make links between the content of the classroom learning and the world beyond and become teachers and researchers'.

Therefore, learners have to learn to set their own learning targets and choose appropriate activities towards achieving them. Though learners can work alone or independently, it is of paramount importance to collaborate especially in small groups. This, however, does not mean students are to rely heavily on others for development otherwise the aim of autonomy in language learning would be defeated. From the foregoing, it could be seen that, the bulk of the seriousness lie on the shoulders of the learners once the teacher's roles remains at the facilitating level.

Challenges in Promoting L2 Learner Autonomy in Nigeria

There are quite a number of issues that could thwart the efforts of teachers in promoting autonomous learning in second language learners most especially in Nigerian. The factors could be many and varied in relation to the inherent nature of learning English language in the country which is believed among scholars to be bedeviled with problems. The situation becomes compounded when the need arises to not only facilitate the learning of the language but also to promote autonomy amongst them. However, below are some of the challenges that could hinder effective and independent learning among learners;

1. Teachers are already constrained with predetermined goals, content and procedure for learning the second language. Any attempt to change the curriculum could be greeted with stiff restrictions to allow for learners to dictate what, why, how and when they want to learn the target language.
2. The teachers' roles and responsibilities become dual. They need to teach the target language and then train the learners towards becoming autonomous learners.
3. Some teachers may find the idea of learner autonomy conflicting with their own autonomy as teachers and the autonomy of the school in relation to wider systems.
4. Teachers may lack the knowledge, preparation and readiness or willingness to adjust to new changes and become familiar with the principle of learner autonomy in learning.
5. There could be too many students hoping to utilize the already limited resources and facilities available for autonomous learning.
6. Different individuals learning the same thing against the value in individual unique to themselves. This may not cater for individual differences in a way that befits the system.
7. It may require radical restructuring of second language pedagogy.



Towards Promoting Autonomy in L2 Learning in Nigeria

In spite of the attendant teething issues identified above and going by the importance of learner autonomy, it becomes imperative to make concerted efforts for improving the autonomous level of students in learning English as a second language in Nigeria. These can occur by individual learner i.e alone or in collaboration with other learners in a formal or an informal situation. To ensure that the language of instruction in Nigeria is learnt without overdependence on or with limited involvement of the teacher, the following can be closely utilized or adopted for optimal benefit.

- a. **Self- Access – Language - Learning – Centres:** These are organized centres where learners learn independently of the teacher. The learner works alone seeking for knowledge, constructing and making meaning without the involvement of the teacher. One of such centres is the 'American Spaces' located in various Universities in Nigeria. Such centres are equipped with language learning gadgets, devices and equipment needed for effective learning of English as a second language. However, the learners require support of the teachers to maximize and facilitate the effective utilization of the centres for independent learning.
- b. **CALL – Computer Assisted Language Learning:** Technology has played a pervasive role in both institutionalized and non-institutionalized language learning which was made possible by the advent of the internet system. Several recent contributions to the vast literature in this area have emphasized opportunities for learner autonomy within CALL and the importance of attention to autonomy in the development and use of CALL technologies (Benson 2007).
- c. **Distance Learning:** This is a process where second language learners can receive instruction through online classes, video recording, video conferencing, or any other audio and or visual technology. It is closely related to CALL and has begun to merge with it through such concepts as online

learning, cyber schools, asynchronous learning networks and telematics. Through these means, students can work hard and focus seriously on their studies as they engage in cutting edge digital content to enhance their language development.

- d. **Study Abroad:** Language learning programmes frequently incorporate periods in which students spend time in target language communities. These include 'study abroad' visits in North American modern language education, 'immersion' visits in many Asian ELT courses and longer periods of 'residence abroad', more characteristic of UK and European university settings (see Benson 2007). Although many of these overseas programmes involve classroom instruction, their main purpose is usually for the students to learn independently through interaction with native speakers. Autonomy is clearly relevant to such programmes. In Africa, language centres have been established for instance to provide avenue for exclusive use of the target language to enhance proficiency. In Nigeria for instance the Nigerian French Language Village and the Nigerian Arabic Language Village have been established in Badagry, Lagos and Ngala, Borno respectively to provide a domestic alternative to the mandatory one year study abroad language immersion program for undergraduates students of French and Arabic studies (as the case may be) in the country.
- e. **Out-of-Class Learning:** In the recent literature on autonomy, the term 'out-of-class learning' has been used, somewhat narrowly, to refer to the efforts of learners taking classroom-based language courses to find opportunities for language learning and use outside class (Pearson 2004). Surprisingly, this is a relatively new area in the literature on autonomy. Recent studies suggest that students tend to engage in out-of-class learning activities more frequently than their teachers know, often showing considerable creativity in situations where opportunities for out-of-class learning appear to be limited.



- f. **Self-Instruction:** This refers to the use of printed or broadcast self-study materials for language learning. In other words, a situation in which learners undertake language study largely or entirely without the aid of teachers is regarded as self-instruction. This plays significant role in promoting autonomy in the sense that students can look for other alternatives and avenues to enrich their proficiency in the target language. Benson (2001) recognizes this as a particularly 'other-directed' mode of learning. Self-instruction is an evidence of taking responsibility and being committed to learning and is sensitive to the importance of the development of autonomy for learners who persist in their efforts.
- g. **Good - Study – Habits - Within - the - Class:** Learners can take advantage of the opportunity within the classroom by engaging in active participation in discourses with the teacher and among peers. Autonomy makes demands on the learner to take full responsibility of his language learning. Thus, when a task is given, for instance a learner can fish out new words in a given comprehension lesson, look up the meanings in the English dictionary, relate the meaning to other contexts or make similar constructions etc. A grammar book and other resources could be effectively utilized by the learners within the classroom to accomplish certain tasks. This is because it is much beneficial to learn a language by being exposed to it rather than learning the rules and or patterns of different tenses.

CONCLUSION

Learner autonomy has been a recurring concept in language education in relation to lifelong learning skills. The term has transformed traditional practices in the language classroom both in theory and in practice by shifting the focus from teaching to learning. Developing learner autonomy is paramount in the educational process and it becomes even more pronounced when the subject in question is the language with which other subjects on the school curriculum are taught. Learners of English as a

second language in Nigeria need to be trained towards becoming more competent and take charge of their learning because language learning is a lifelong endeavour that extends beyond the four walls of a classroom. It is important that students discover the language by themselves with only a little or less guidance from the teacher. Thus, it is imperative to make English language learners less dependent on teachers through involvement in self-instruction, utilizing self-access language learning centres and transferring skills beyond the classroom thereby becoming more resourceful and autonomous.

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