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A qualitative study on the role of autonomy among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners

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Abstract

Autonomy seems to be a real challenge for the English learners in an EFL situation such as Iran. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the role of autonomy among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners. It also attempted to reveal the problems and the reasons these EFL learners faced with in being not autonomous. The participants of this study were twenty-six Iranian male and female learners who were studying English as a foreign language in an Institute. The data were collected by means of an open ended questionnaire (Appendix I) designed by the researchers. The results showed that the participants were aware of learner autonomy, but did not have the characteristics of autonomous learners mostly because their teachers were not open to learners' criticism. More findings were discussed in the context of ELT and some pedagogical implications were also proposed.

Keywords: Autonomy, Learner Autonomy, Intermediate EFL Learners

INTRODUCTION

Classroom-based, teacher-centered learning condition has been prevailing in education and learning for quite a long time. However, the notion of autonomous and independent learners is not very new for language teachers and decision makers. Both methods of dialect learning appear to have grown freely and no serious attempt had been made until the late 1980s to enter self-access and learners' independence in language learning to the learning

modules (Hall and Kenny, 1988; Dam and Gabrielsen, 1988; Karlsson, Kjisik and Nordlund, 1997). Most of the researches in the field of language learning have been concentrating to a great extent on teaching methodologies or course effectiveness; however, little have been done to take a gander at what makes learners become self-determined enough to take control of their own learning, and the factors that differentiate successful and less successful self-access, independent and autonomous learners. The developing enthusiasm for focusing on the sociocultural factors of language learning has made the EFL experts turn their attitudes toward learners' autonomy and motivation in classroom settings.

In the 21st Century, the focus of teaching and learning is on helping the learners to become independent in their own learning process. The autonomous learner is responsible for all of the decisions concerned with learning and implementation of those decisions. He also takes an active, independent attitude to learning and undertakes a learning task separately. Individual involvement in decision making in one's own learning enhances motivation to learn (Dickinson, 1987).

In language learning process, learners are the main part of language teaching and learning. As mentioned earlier, the history of self-access and learner autonomy goes back to about thirty years ago. However, interest in autonomy and self-access turns back to Aristotle, when a learner was autonomous and responsible enough for his own learning (Lamb & Reinders, 2005).

Student's autonomy is produced if strong supportive and helpful conditions are given to them (Esch, 1996). Also, Breen (1984) states that this support must be delivered based on the students' needs, interests and level of awareness. Additionally, Holec's (1979) characterized autonomy as the capacity to assume responsibility of one's own learning. The idea of autonomy is associated with communicative approach presented by Nunan (1991). He likewise included language learning can be full of feeling if students are permitted to create and practice their self-governance and autonomy.

Littlewood (1993) views learner autonomy as a process whereby learners exercise control and assume responsibility of their learning by making decisions, or choices touching all of its aspects, from goal setting to self-assessment. The challenge for educators, of course, is to create a learning structure which enables them to do this. Identifying principles of learner autonomy which might guide the development of such a structure is not always easy (Fox, 1993). Yet, a review of the literature suggests that these programs should provide learners with direct contact with the target language through a sufficiently wide range of authentic materials so as to enable them to choose those which correspond to both their personal interests and level of language proficiency (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Forsyth, 1990, 1993, 1994; Littlewood, 1993, 1996).

Recently, one of the most important issues in any educational program is to empower learners to utilize whatever they learn in their own life. On the off chance that they utilized whatever they learn in genuine circumstance, they would participate effectively during the learning time.

Then again, as Kennedy (2002) believes, teachers' autonomy is significant in light of the fact that the connection amongst teachers and students is basic in language learning and both teachers and students need to know about teachers' autonomy and students' autonomy so as to adjust classroom learning self-efficacy.

This qualitative study will focus on the role of autonomy among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners with the hope to reveal the problems and the reasons the EFL learners faced with in being not autonomous.

There is wide agreement that students' autonomy becomes out of the individual student's acknowledgment of responsibility regarding his or her own learning (Dickinson, 1995; Little, 1991; Benson and Voller, 1997). This means that independence and autonomy requires students to make control over their own learning and their part in the procedure of learning. This control may take different structures and forms for different people and even

extraordinary structures for a similar individual relying upon the unique circumstances or times (Benson, 2001).

There are lots of different definitions offered by the scholars for Autonomy. Little (1995) first characterizes teacher autonomy as the "teachers" ability to take part in self-directed teaching." Then, analysts have been trying to characterize teacher self-rule from different viewpoints. Aoki (2000) offers an express meaning of teacher independence and autonomy, proposing that this includes the capacity, flexibility, and duty to make decisions concerning one's own particular teaching". As indicated by Smith (2000), teacher autonomy alludes to "the capacity to create fitting aptitudes, learning and dispositions for oneself as a teacher, in participation with others." Benson (2000) contends that teacher autonomy can be viewed as "a privilege to flexibility and freedom from control (or a capacity to practice this privilege) as well as real freedom from control". Also, Autonomous students are the ones who take dynamic parts in the learning process, by discovering learning chances for themselves, instead of being the entire follower of their teacher. A number of studies have been done on the role of autonomy among language learners in different parts of the world. (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1995; Littlewood, 1996 Oxford, 1989; Richards & Rogers, 2001).

The related literature review shows that autonomous learning is essential for effective learning because it will enable them to increase their own learning responsibilities. Moreover, most of the related studies show the importance of promoting learners' autonomy during the learning process. The primary purpose of this study was to consider the role of autonomy among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners and the secondary purpose was revealing the problems and the reasons Iranian EFL learners faced with in being not autonomous. To this end, twenty-six Iranian male and female learners studying English as a foreign language in an Institute were chosen to participate in the current study. They were asked to fill out the related questionnaire. Then, the results of questionnaire were compared in order to find out whether the learners are aware of learner autonomy or not.

METHOD

Participants

The participants of the present study were twenty-six Iranian male and female learners studying English as a foreign language in an Institute. All of the participants were given a related questionnaire to fill out in order to provide the researchers with information about learners' perception and awareness from autonomy.

Design of the study

This qualitative study investigated the role of autonomy among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners. It also attempted to reveal the problems and the reasons these EFL learners faced with in being not autonomous. A research-made questionnaire to examine students' actual level of autonomy and to find out the problems and the reasons that the learners are not autonomous was used to collect data. On the other hand, the present study can be considered as descriptive because of making descriptive statement about particular group. In this study quantitative data were collected. Also, the first part of the questionnaire focused on the demographic information of the students.

Instrument

An open ended questionnaire designed by the researchers was used as the instrument for this study. This questionnaire was assigned to the EFL learners to reveal whether they are aware of learner autonomy or not and then to find out the problems and obstacles faced with them in not being autonomous. This open ended questionnaire was prepared by the researchers and the following questions were asked from the learners in order to reach to the specified purposes of the study:

- Describe your relationship with your English language teacher in the following areas:

1. Asking and answering question between you and the teacher.
2. Activities that the teacher will ask you to do.
3. Extra activities outside of the language course book associated with you.
4. Your role in the learning and teaching process.

5. Using your comments by the teacher in the classroom.
6. How often does your teacher tell you what to do or what not to do?
7. How much does your teacher check your home works and assignments?
8. How much do you criticize your teacher in the classroom? What is his/her reaction?
9. How much do you feel independent in doing language-related tasks inside or outside of the classroom?

Procedure

To conduct the present study several steps were taken. 26 male and female EFL learners studying English as a foreign language in an Institute were randomly selected to participate in this study. After selecting the participants of the study, an open-ended questionnaire was distributed among the participants. The participants were assured that their responses would be kept secret in order to express their ideas freely. After completing the questionnaires, the results of the questionnaires were analyzed and compare in order to reach to the specified purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The primary purpose of this study was to consider the role of autonomy among Iranian Intermediate EFL Learners and the secondary purpose was revealing the problems and the reasons Iranian EFL learners faced with in being not autonomous. This section offers an explanation and discussion of the following categories in terms of the focus questions which guided the study.

1. Asking and answering question between you and the teacher

One of the participants of the study said: “My teacher is very nice because he answers my endless questions with patience and he gives me lots of constructive suggestions.”

Effective interactions between teachers and students are essential for promoting long-term learning (Little, 1995). To do so, most of the learners worked with the program over the course and they worked in pairs or groups. Based on the gathered data, most of the participants believed that their teacher is always open to their questions and they are free

to ask whenever they need. So, they thought that their teacher was performing well in answering their questions. The participants also believed that the teacher help them to make up their own mind by letting them pose their questions. According to Cotton (1998), a positive relationship between the amount of instructional content students achieved and the amount of questions raised by the learners and answered by the teachers, the attitude of the teachers in this study was align with autonomous learning.

2. Activities that the teacher will ask you to do

“Our teacher is very creative because she delivers and practices many interesting activities related to our lessons’ topics”. Instructional activities include a wide range of activities that share the common element of involving students in doing things and thinking about the things they are doing (Bonwell & Eison 1991). Also, such activities can be completed by students either in-class or out-of-class, or can be done by students working either as individuals or in group. Based on the data gathered by the questionnaire, most of the learners believed that the instructional activities used in their classes are mostly related to the learning process and are among the instructional activities. They also said that such activities are based on their needs and interests and their teachers ask their ideas before running them in the classroom. So, it shows that the participants were active learners. So, taking students outside of the traditional classroom and using the instructional activities on a carefully designed educational field plan can achieve a wide range of powerful learning outcomes (DeWitt & Storksdieck, 2008).

3. Extra activities outside of the language course book associated with you

Extracurricular activities (ECA) are usually defined as learners’ activities that fall outside the normal curriculum of educational institution, they supplement the regular course of classroom instruction and are sometimes organized or conducted with some participation of instructors (Campbell, 1973). Such activities are as necessary for building academic and social skills as the regular classes (Druzhinina, 2000; Eccles, 2003; Marsh and Kleitman, 2002; Tenhouse, 2003; Rombokas, 1995; Astin, 1993; Darling, Caldwell, and Smith, 2005;

Nebllette, 1940; Mahoney and Cairns, 2003). So, these extracurricular activities have become an inseparable part of the context of second language teaching and learning (Campbell, 1973; Housen and Beardsmore, 1987). The participants of this study also believed that deep learning occurs when they put into practice “in the real world” what they have theorized about from behind a desk. It shows that they were aware of the important role of extracurricular activities. They said that their teachers told them that there are many different activities that a person can do to improve his/her knowledge of language. So, the extra activities outside of the language course book were enjoyable and interesting for the participants of this study.

4. Your role in the learning and teaching process

5. Using your comments by the teacher in the classroom.

Student-centered classrooms include students in planning, implementation, and assessments. Involving the learners in these decisions will place more work on them, which can be a good thing (Cristopher, 2015). According to Davidson (2014), placing students at the center of their own learning requires their collaboration. They need a voice in why, what, and how learning experiences take shape.

“My classmate and I always present our ideas and comments about different topics in our classroom and the teacher listen to us carefully but he just listen to us and there is no change in his lesson plan”. The results show that the participants of this study were considered important in learning process. So, they were one of the most important factor influencing learning and they were rather satisfied with their learning because their teachers paid attention to their needs and interests during the learning sessions and they experienced cooperative learning in their English classrooms. But unfortunately, their teachers follow their prescribed session plans and when the classes became boring they never change their plans even if the learners put some comments to their teachers.

6. How often does your teacher tell you what to do or what not to do?

Whereas a traditional pedagogical teaching approach emphasizes the role of the teacher as the holder of the wisdom, facilitation puts the onus on the participants to become involved in their own learning. The facilitator's role is to introduce subjects of discussion, encourage sharing of perspectives, and integrate students' shared experiences (Sunnarburg, 2008). According to the gathered data, most of the participants of this study believed that their teacher always show them the way and help them do better and attain their full potential and to overcome the learning barriers. It shows that their teachers were acted like facilitators. In the case of autonomy, learners need to be independent during the learning process and the have to become responsible for their own learning, so helping them is a hidden problem the learners faced in being not autonomous.

7. How much does your teacher check your home works and assignments?

Getting students to engage with the material is an important process in the learning experience (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). It was clear that the assignment was successful in getting students to reflect on and talk about their future selves; helping them to connect with the material on a personal level. As already noted, this connection has been shown to be important in the learning process (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Reason (2011) also suggests that it is critical for students to learn from perspectives different from their own. Most of the participants said that their teachers always check their assignments and home works at the first part of the class. They believed checking the home works are align closely with what they learn in the course and it helps them improve their learning. But autonomous learning believes heavy burden of homework does more harm than good and learners do not become independent while learning. Instead, peer checking or students check homework among themselves would be a better option.

8. How much do you criticize your teacher in the classroom? What is his/her reaction?

Students should be allowed to evaluate and criticize their teachers to improve the quality of education (Umbach & Wawrzynski, 2005). Furthermore, evaluating teachers is one of the most effective ways of improving the quality of education because teachers have a

better understanding about the capacity of each student (Cristopher, 2015). All of the participants said their teacher is expecting them to proceed based on her/his standards. They also knew that constructive criticism is necessary for development and this is an art to be generous and open to critics. But, they all said that their teachers become harsh when they face with criticism by their learners. Some of the participants believed that they should be encourage to evaluate or criticize their teachers and they need to feel more freedom in making comments on their teachers' behaviors. The results clearly showed that in those classes students were not allowed to criticize their teachers and as it was mentioned there were not much attention to the learners.

9. How much do you feel independent in doing language-related tasks inside or outside of the classroom?

Students pressed for time forego classroom preparation in the hopes that sitting through the class lecture will give them the information they need to succeed resulting in a culture of "spoon fed" academicians. "Independent Learning is that learning in which the learner, in conjunction with relevant others, can make the decisions necessary to meet the learner's own learning needs." (Kesten, 2001). In this study, most of the participants' answers make the word "teacher" feel like a central part of the environment and as the classes were traditional, the participants were relying on their teachers to feed them the proper instruction, principles, and training. Autonomous learning needs facilitators who set up a learning environment and largely give the students the ability to learn on their own. The results showed that the participants knew the principles of independent learning but they could not readily handle independent learning.

CONCLUSION

A researcher-made questionnaire was used as the instrument for the purpose of data collection. Twenty-six Iranian male and female learners who were studying English as a foreign language in an Institute served as the participants of this study. After data collection, analysis was done.

The results showed that the participants were aware of learner autonomy, but did not have the characteristics of autonomous learners mostly because their teachers were not open to learners' criticism. Also, because of the attitude of the teachers, the participants were not independent inside and outside of the classroom and it proved that the teaching style was traditional and the learners were relying on their teachers to just feed them and there was no place for leading, showing and throwing. There were also some few chances for students to give them opportunity to make decision about their content of material, the activities, teaching plan, the kind of evaluation, and so on. Also, it was found out that students like to be provided with opportunity to learn from each other and have cooperative learning in order to develop their autonomy. This study had both pedagogical and theoretical implications for teachers and learners. It is essential for teachers to be aware and to promote their knowledge about how to train autonomous and independent learners. Moreover, teachers should act as a supporter or facilitator and avoid teacher-centered classroom and guide learners toward being more autonomous by giving them some opportunities for pair-works, group discussion, making choices about material, activities, evaluation method, etc.

This study was done with only 26 EFL learners. Any possible study can be conducted in a larger scale in order to enhance the generalizability of the results. Moreover, any future study can take individual difference variables such as age, major, personality type, and so on into account to investigate the issue under investigation better.

(APPENDIX I)
Questionnaire

Dear language learner;

Thanks for sharing your time with us. Please answer the following questions with accuracy, patience and honesty.

Your name (optional):

Gender: Male ☐ Female ☐

Age:

Your Language Level: Elementary ☐ Intermediate ☐ Advanced ☐

- Describe your relationship with your English language teacher in the following areas:

1. Asking and answering question between you and the teacher.
2. Activities that the teacher will ask you to do.
3. Extra activities outside of the language course book associated with you.
4. Your role in the learning and teaching process.
5. Using your comments by the teacher in the classroom.
6. How often does your teacher tell you what to do or what not to do?
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8. How much do you criticize your teacher in the classroom? What is his/her reaction?
9. How much do you feel independent in doing language-related tasks inside or outside of the classroom?

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