

Foreign Language Autonomous Learning: A Theoretical Account

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Recent trends in teaching and/or learning foreign languages assert the learners' role in managing and carrying out the learning tasks assigned to them. Such trends further emphasise that foreign language teachers' role should be limited to that of a facilitator, a guide, and a friend rather than a lecturer who takes much of the class time by interacting orally with the learners who are just passive listeners of no noticeable role in the ongoing activities. The current research focuses on "autonomous learning", i.e. learners' taking over the responsibility of their learning. It has theoretically tackled the topic in the first place in terms of its definition, nature, and principles. This research paper then moves to the role of autonomous learning in foreign language learning with a focus on the techniques and activities that teachers can adopt and implement in developing their students' autonomous learning. The autonomous learner model is a further point of departure that the current research focuses on. The research ends with a conclusion that highlights the main points that have been so far probed and highlighted.

Keywords: *Autonomy, Autonomous Learning, Autonomous Learner Model.*

Introduction

Promoting learners' autonomy plays a crucial role in the process of teaching and/or learning a foreign language (FL), both theoretically and practically. As such, a classroom is no longer viewed as the sole setting where such a process takes place. Learners, in their attempt to develop the various linguistic skills and to take over the responsibility for their learning, should work extensively both inside and outside the classroom setting. Such an orientation is asserted and recommended by the recent trends in education at large and in teaching and/or learning FLs in particular. In other words, classrooms are no longer viewed as the sole learning environments where teachers take much of the class time with

the assumed aim to provide learners with the bulk of the knowledge and/or information they are supposed to acquire. Additionally, such trends also assert the fact that although working together has its own merits in terms of empowering learners and stimulating them to collaborate and exchange ideas, learners' working on their own remains a fundamental source of learning. This is because they are engaged in the learning tasks on their own, i.e. autonomous learning (AL).

AL, within the domain of FL learning, has been heavily heeded as an interesting and appealing field of research, discussion, and publication over the last three decades. It has further been noticeably advocated by the concerned people who think that learners can benefit more from the learning that takes place outside the formal classroom setting. This is because they will enjoy more room of freedom, initiative, self-management, and self-control compared to the formal classroom setting where teachers occupy much of the class time and play a quite authoritative role.

The present research aims at shedding light on AL as a recent trend in FL teaching and learning. It further aims at clarifying the concept of AL by addressing several subtopics that are closely related to it, namely, definition, nature and principles, merits and techniques used by EFL teachers to develop their learners' AL.

Historical Background

The claims that AL is a recent phenomenon in the domain of education have grounds despite the meager counterclaims that refute them. For instance, exploration in ancient times highlights Socrates' Questioning Method that was aimed at provoking learners' critical thinking and duly their autonomy albeit the number of learners then, i.e. in Middle Ages or in Ancient Greece was quite small compared to those studying at universities today" Added to that, "a look into the history of tertiary education with focus on Bologna, Sorbonne, Oxford, Cambridge, etc. as examples of the first European universities outlines the crucial role played by AL in students' lives then".

According to Najeeb (2012), the idea of AL is thought to be first developed at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications with Henri Holec as its former Director. Najeeb states that "there had been a need for a term to describe people's ability to take charge of their own learning". This viewpoint is supported by Chiu (2012) who points out that AL has been popular and gained most of its momentum quite recently as it was coined firstly in 1981 by Holec, who is regarded as the 'father' of AL. Chiu (2012) adds that AL has been in vogue throughout the past few decades as a factor of impact on learners taking over the responsibility of their learning.

Nowadays, the term is used interchangeably with the terms "independent learning", "autonomous learning", and "self-access learning", all of which mean freedom from dependence on others. This is because AL implies a more intricate relationship between

the learners and the learning processes rather than the mere access to and provision of resources. This is reflected in Benson and Voller (1997) who state that AL refers to learners' ability to make personal decisions about what to do away from influence or instruction by teachers. Specifically, this can be seen as freedom from external control despite the difficulty of bringing that about in current educational settings where, as Chiu (2012) maintains, priority is given to the institutional authority rather than to individual learning preferences.

Autonomous Learning: Definition

AL is assumed to be a thorny term due to its noticeable confusion with self-instruction. It is further "a slippery concept because it is notoriously difficult to define precisely" (Little, 2003). According to Wikipedia, the problematic point in defining AL is to decide upon the issue of whether AL is a means to an end, i.e. learning an FL or as an end in itself by making people autonomous learners. The two preceding options are not mutually exclusive. For example, the existence of one does not refute that of the other as they both can be parts of the view towards language learning or learning in general. On the other hand, a clear, understandable, and workable definition of autonomous learning cannot be arrived at unless we observe, in the first place, to the concept of autonomy.

There have been a plethora of definitions of the term autonomy, almost all of which are based on three main elements which are: the writer, the context, and the level of debate educators have come to. On this basis, autonomy with its synonyms, namely "self-direction" and "independence" has been hotly debated by the scholars and linguists in particular as they could not have a consensus as to what autonomy is, though some compromise has been arrived at by Holec (1981, cited in Benson and Voller, 1997) who broadly views autonomy as the ability to take charge of engaged-in tasks including that of learning.

Based on this statement, in his attempt to put forward an all-embracing definition of AL, Holec identified four ways, namely **1)** the situations where learners study is entirely autonomous **2)** the set of skills that can be learned and applied in AL, directed learning **3)** learners' innate capacity which is negatively impacted by institutional education, and **4)** the exercise of learners' responsibility for their learning. In the following paragraph, a set of definitions of autonomy by some well-known scholars will be put forward.

According to Benn (1976), AL stands for any educational process, method, or philosophy that enables a learner to acquire knowledge by utilizing personal efforts and develop inquiry and critical evaluation abilities. In other words, AL is a process that enables learners to recognize and assess their own needs to choose and apply their own learning strategies or styles in such a way that leads to effective learning. Holec (1981) defines AL as the ability to take charge of one's learning. On his part, Dickinson (1994)

adds that AL is a situation wherein learners are wholly in charge of all the decisions pertaining to their learning and the implementation of those decisions. Likewise, an autonomous learner is defined by Benson and Voller (1997) as “an active agent in his own learning process who by his/her own volition causes things to happen rather than the mere happening of things and views learning as the outcome of personal self-initiated interaction with the world”. Finally, Sanchez (n. d., 3) points out that AL is the process in which learners take the lead, with or without others’ assistance in the diagnosis of their learning needs, the formulation of their objectives, the identification of resources needed to learn, the choice and implementation of appropriate strategies, and the evaluation of the results of learning.

It can be concluded that the core of AL as a learning approach is that learners become responsible for their learning in terms of identifying needs, setting goals, choosing learning activities and doing self-assessment, all under teachers’ guidance and supervision.

Autonomous Learning: Nature and Principles

The bulk of literature on AL raises much controversy on its being a capacity or a behaviour and a learner’s responsibility or control (Benson, 2001; Omotayo, 2019). According to Thanasoulas (2000) cited in Najeeb (2012), the main tenets of AL are learners having insights into their learning styles and strategies, getting actively involved in the learning task at hand, being ready to take risks. For example, communicating in the FL at all costs, doing assignments, and assessing their linguistic product. Chiu (2012) points out that AL, within the educational context, enables a learners’ ability to take charge of their learning, access information, and keep a good balance of subjection, independence, and autonomy. As such, a prime principle of AL is shifting the focus from teaching to learning. Specifically, learners’ deciding the content of what they are learning and how that content is to be learned. The teacher remains a source for providing support, encouragement, advice, and knowledge when asked and helping learners in their endeavor to bring about their learning objectives. On this basis, the second principle of AL stems, namely, the relationship between teachers and learners. Teachers play a cooperative role and represent a useful source of aid rather than an authoritative role by lecturing, judging, and testing learners.

Holec (1981) and Najeeb (2012) state that the three basic pedagogical principles that underlie autonomy in language learning are **1)** learners’ involvement to share responsibility for their learning, **2)** learners’ reflection to think critically on planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning, and **3)** appropriate use of target language as the main medium of language learning.

In an attempt to put forward further principles of AL, Sinclair (1997) argues that:

- Since autonomy outlines having capacity, learners should decide and be responsible for their learning.
- Since autonomy is of varying degrees, its development should be based on a set of affective, physiological, psychological or environmental factors.
- As autonomy does not confine itself to learners' placement in situations where they have to be independent, psychological, and methodological preparation can be the main source of autonomy enhancement.
- Developing autonomy requires being conscious of the learning process, therefore learners should be familiar with and knowledgeable about the use of the metacognitive strategies that help learners reflect on their learning in terms of setting goals, evaluating learning activities and using learning resources
- Since autonomy is not limited to the classroom setting only, learners have to be aware of the possibility of home study and computers and books use. Wenden (1998) identifies more principles of AL by stating that 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, to communicate in the new language at all costs, are good guessers, attend to form as well as to content. Therefore, importance must be placed on both accuracy and appropriateness, developing the new 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 new language.

According to Reinders (2010), shifting the focus from teaching to learning, grants learners a distinguished influential role, advocating peer support and cooperation and recognizing its importance, making use of both self and/or peer assessment, empowering learners, taking learners outside of the structures of the classroom, and enabling learners to take the outside world into the classroom form further basic principles of AL.

Allwright (1990) and Little (1991) maintain that the main principles of AL are represented by learners' capacity of reflecting on their own learning, the knowledge about learning and willingness to learn collaboratively, understanding the objectives of the learning program, acceptance of responsibility for their learning, participation in setting the learning goals, taking initiatives in planning and carrying out learning activities, and regularly review of learning and evaluation of its effectiveness. To conclude, the practice of AL requires insight, a positive attitude, capacity for reflection, and readiness to be proactive in self-management and interaction with others.

Autonomous Learning: Benefits

All scholars unanimously agree that the main and prime benefit of AL is helping learners develop their self-consciousness, vision, practicality, and freedom of discussion. They



further argue that both teachers and learners alike realize the fact that familiarity with the principles of AL enables them to avoid the routine procedures of the classroom instruction as teachers will feel relaxed because learners are expected to take over much of their learning at a time when the teachers' role will be limited to that of guiding and assisting.

Little (2003) states that learners' reflective engagement makes learning more efficient and effective. Meanwhile, their proactive commitment to learning will bring about the motivation required. He adds that, in the FL learning context, effective communication stems from the asset of procedural skills that develop only through use which enables learners to enjoy maximum social autonomy in their learning environment. Hence, it will be easier for the learners a wide range of discourse roles which form the basis for effective spontaneous communication.

Finally, Dam (1995) argues that AL extends learners' choice and attends focally to an individual learner's needs, not the interests of a teacher or an institution, and his/her choice of decision-making. It further views learners as individuals with needs and rights, who can develop and exercise responsibility for their learning, develop the ability to engage with, interact with, and derive benefit from learning environments that are not directly mediated by a teacher.

Autonomy in Foreign Language Education

According to the neo-Vygotskian psychology, the main advocate of the idea of AL, the development of learning skills and the content of learning are never separable. Learning a new language is viewed as quite different from that of any other subject as learners are supposed to discover the language for themselves with little guidance from their teacher, so that they can fully understand it.

Based on the preceding statement and since AL supports learners independence and responsibility for their learning process, it plays an increasingly crucial role in language education at large and in FL learning in particular. Due to this status, it enjoys a noticeably stronger approach in the domain of FL language teaching and learning. AL advocates learners' right to determine the direction of their own learning and choose the skills that can be learned and applied in self-directed learning. Hurd (2008) posits that independence, autonomy, and ability to control learning experiences have come to play an increasingly important role in language education.

Holec (1981) believes that autonomous language learners take responsibility for the totality of their learning situation. They do so by determining their objectives, defining the contents to be learned and the progression of the course, and evaluating what they have acquired. Little (1991) adds that at university, college students who specialised in English as a foreign language are expected to learn independently without constant support from



lecturers and tutors. As a consequence, they develop the attitude, knowledge, and important skills required to make right and critical decisions and take necessary actions to deal with their self-initiated language learning.

It can be deduced from what has been so far stated that throughout FL study, it is quite demanding and simultaneously beneficial for learners to be engaged in autonomous language learning. This is because such a practice is proved to make learners aware of the purpose behind the learning program, take over the responsibility for learning, identify their language learning goals, plan and carry out varied learning activities, and assess their progress on a regular basis.

Autonomous Language Learning: Strategies and Procedures

Teachers of FLs and English as a foreign language (EFL) in particular are aware of the fact that despite the noticeable efforts they exert to prepare contexts conducive to learning, design and/or select beneficial teaching materials, and carry out interesting and enjoyable learning activities, learners are often passive and rely on teachers to a large extent. Learners are reluctant to use the new language in pair/small group work, do not reflect on their mistakes and consequently do not learn from them. For this reason, these learners do not always attain their potential especially those motivated learners that do not have a sense of responsibility for the outcomes of their learning (Kavaliauskienė, 2002).

Likewise, teachers can foster learners' AL by the following activities:

- Presenting meaningful learning activities
- extending the reading activities beyond the classroom textbooks
- developing learners' predictive and analytical skills by telling their own stories
- holding small group discussion among learners
- asking learners to create a working diary to jot down their ideas in
- asking learners to do homework on their own
- asking learners to probe questions about different topics are all strategies and procedures

Based on the preceding facts, there EFL teachers should endeavor to tend to learners' learning styles and strategies and aim to change their passive attitude to learning to a more active attitude, i.e. to become less dependent on the teacher and take charge of their own learning (Rivers, 1992). Teachers are further supposed to make learners work autonomously in searching for interesting materials, taking part in competitions, reading English books, newspapers, magazines, gaining experience in 'swapping places' with a teacher, developing the art of negotiation, and emphasizing the importance of self-assessment, etc. (Grudzinska, 2000). Such a diversity of tasks, according to Kavaliauskienė (2002), may cover grammar, games, written work, audio- and video- recordings, news items, translation, and anything that interests learners and will make them take benefit from.

Since autonomous learners, according to Candy (1991), are supposed to be intelligent, self-confident, analytical, reflective, motivated, flexible, interdependent, responsible, creative, self-sufficient, skilled in seeking and retrieving information, knowledgeable about learning, and able to develop and use evaluation criteria. Holec (1981) and Little (1991) outline that autonomous learners can understand the purpose of their learning program, explicitly accept responsibility for their learning. They can also share in the setting of learning goals, take initiatives in planning and carrying out learning activities, and regularly review their learning and evaluate its effectiveness. All efforts should be directed towards the instilment, creation, and existence of the preceding characteristics via the strategies, methods, and procedures that have been proved to be reasonably effective and efficient as far as AL is concerned. In the following lines, light will be shed on a set of strategies and procedures whose effectiveness has been proved in terms of bringing about AL.

At the outset, FL learners, to be autonomous and independent in their learning, may use **a) Repetition**: on imitating others' speech, **b) Resources**: dictionaries and other materials, **c) Translation**: the mother tongue as a basis to understand and/or produce the FL, **d) Note-taking**, deduction or conscious application of the FL rules, **e) Contextualization**: embedding a word or a phrase in a meaningful sequence, **f) Transfer**: using knowledge acquired in the native language to understand facts and sequences in the FL, **g) Inference**: matching an unfamiliar word against valuable information (a new word, etc.), and **h) Questions for clarification**: asking the teacher to explain, etc. (Cook, 1993).

Dam (1995) adds that the use of the FL as the preferred medium of instruction from the very start allows for learners' gradual development of useful learning activities. This includes ongoing evaluation of the learning process by a combination of teacher, peer and self-, use of posters and logbooks play a central role in helping learners capture much of the content of learning, support the development of speaking, and provide a focus for assessment.

Kavaliauskiene (2002) specifies **a)** checking and correcting homework to support language learners' cooperation, interaction, assessment and review of earlier taught materials, **b)** alternatives, i.e. exchanging worksheets, correcting peers' work and grading it, discussing performance and giving advice if necessary, and **c)** learners-product tests by reflecting on the items chosen for testing, handing out worksheets to their peers, setting a time limit and providing assistance if needed as effective activities for the practice of AL.

Shaaban (n. d.) adds that **a) Learner Logs**, i.e. records of learners' experiences using the FL outside the classroom, including the setting of such use and the reasons behind the success or failure of certain experiences, **b) Think-Pair-Share**, i.e. learners' thinking about a problem, question, idea, issue, or notion, and sharing their ideas with peers before discussion them in a small group, **c) K-W-L chart**, individual learners provision of



examples on what they know, what they wonder or want to know, and what they learned, **d) Application Cards:** learners writing of one real-world application for what they learned, **e) Admit and Exit Slips,** i.e. learners' entry ticket into class: provision of feedback about the teaching including a summary of ideas and skills learned, or a demonstration of comprehension. Learners fill in the card before or during the first few minutes of the class. On submitting the exit, learners are allowed to exit the classroom.

Laz (2013) states that for learners to use the FL competently during the lesson and outside it, teachers have to provide real-life learning environments. All language learners should follow Dam's (1995) advice that "You are entering a foreign language classroom, forget that you are normal". That is to say, there should be authentic communication between teachers and learners and between the learners themselves with everyone in the classroom playing his/her role in the learning process. In addition, assessment and/or evaluation, both individual and in group or pairs, plays a salient role in developing AL as it creates learners' awareness of their progress and provides information on decision-making in terms of what they have to do next in the learning process.

To conclude, it is worthy to note that learners' learning can be evaluated by teachers depending on the logbooks, written in the FL, that learners keep. Additionally, the logbook serves as a medium of direct and authentic communication between teachers and learners, and as a tool of organisation and reflection for both parties. For instance, teachers can feasibly monitor the learning process and provide feedback. They help in thinking about learning in general instead of focusing on a task at a time as constant writing of such logbooks helps learners know about what they do, how they do it, and why they choose a specific strategy. They further enable teachers to follow up on the progress of individual learners by spotting their location in the FL learning process Laz (2013).

An Autonomous Learning Model

In the light of the theoretical information that has been presented in the preceding section, this last section gears issues towards a bit of practicality and implementation by putting forward a model designed to help language learners work towards the goal of AL. According to the resource of the model, it was originally set for the sake of meeting the diversified cognitive, emotional and social needs of good language learners. But no harm seems to be there if teachers of FLs can adapt and apply it to the teaching/learning settings with learners of varied linguistic backgrounds and competences. The model subsumes four major dimensions, namely **a) Orientation:** Understanding group building activities, self/personal development; **b) Individual Development:** Inter/intra personal understanding, learning skills, use of technology, organisational and productivity skills; **c) Enrichment:** Courses, explorations, investigations, cultural activities and community; and **d) Seminars:** Small group presentations of problematic, controversial, and generally interesting topics (**via the net, 3**).



Conclusion

The concept of AL has been widely attended to in the domain of FL learning. It refers to learners' ability to take responsibility for their own learning and allows them to be more active and effective language learners.

FL learners' AL has become an appealing topic for research due to the recent trend in education. This is because it has shifted the responsibility and the learning tasks from the teacher to the learners. The role of the learner involves joining the learning situations with the knowledge and skills to plan, monitoring and evaluating their learning, making decisions on the contents of courses and their objectives, evaluating every single situation they find themselves in, becoming aware of, and identifying strategies, needs and goals as learners and have opportunities to reconsider and refashion approaches and procedures for optimal learning.

Based on that, teachers should realise their focal role in guiding, monitoring and assisting FL learners towards efficient and effective AL. They have to facilitate learners' acquisition of good linguistic background and communicative proficiency by developing learners' awareness of the importance of working on their own and probing and solving the problematic issues inside and outside the classroom setting. In other words, teachers should realise that AL is not "something that they do to learners, but something they do together with learners". This can be brought about by adapting materials, resources, and methods to learners' needs, reconsidering the approaches and procedures for optimal learning, refashioning the teaching process, forgetting about old habits or old ways of thinking, setting contextual and clear goals, helping learners evaluate their clear contextual goals with guidelines for goal evaluation. This allows learners to identify and maximise their preferred learning strategies, boosting learners' motivation intrinsically and extrinsically, and adopting technology in learning and teaching.



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