



LEARNER AUTONOMY AND COMPUTER TECHNOLOGY AS A FACILITATOR OF AUTONOMOUS LANGUAGE LEARNING

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Abstract

Autonomous learning, though not a new phenomenon, has gained great popularity in the field of SLA with the shift from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction. With the advent of technology, a vast amount of sources have been introduced to improve learner autonomy. The purpose of the present study was to investigate autonomous language learning activities performed by EFL students, and their awareness in using these activities. It also examined the use of computer technology in their self-regulated language learning process. A total of 75 undergraduate students took part in the study. A questionnaire was administered to the participants in order to find out their competence level in autonomous learning, and their awareness in learning English. Results showed that students made use of a good amount of autonomous learning activities, and they benefited from technology in their language learning process to a certain extent. Lastly, it was found that their awareness in learning English was at a satisfactory level.

Keywords: Autonomous Learning, Learning Awareness, Computer Technology.

INTRODUCTION

The role of autonomy in language learning has long been discussed in the fields of ESL and EFL, and there has been a growing tendency among researchers to explore autonomous learning with the shift from teacher-centered instruction to learner-centered instruction (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991; Gremmo & Riley, 1995; Benson, 2007; Lamb & Reinders, 2007; Godwin-Jones, 2011). According to Little (1991: 4) autonomy is "capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action". A more concise definition of autonomy provided by Holec (1981:3) is "ability to take charge of one's own learning". Before passing to the second part in which characteristics and principles of autonomous learning are mentioned, some basic concepts related with the topic will be explained:

Self-access: It is related with the learning process in which students have access to a wide range of tools for self-studying usually in self-access centers (Joshi, 2011).

Self-instruction: Self-instruction consists of both exploiting learning tools designed for self-studying and conducting learning activities independently from the instructor (Benson, 2007).

Self-regulation: Self-regulation is a broad term which refers to directing and controlling someone's own learning process (Dörnyei, 2005).

CALL: Computers and the Internet are important vehicles for developing learner autonomy through activities which enable students to study without getting help from teachers (Joshi, 2011).

Considering both 'goals' and 'content', Nunan (1995: 138) proposes several stages for students to develop autonomy: 'awareness', 'involvement', 'intervention', 'creation', and 'transcendence'. He defines awareness as 'making students aware of pedagogical goals and content of materials and identify their learning styles and strategies. Transcendence, the last stage, refers to 'making links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond finally becoming teachers and researchers'. Moreover, Little (2006) suggests several tenets which are fundamental for improving autonomy in language learners: *learner involvement*, *learner*



reflection, and appropriate target language use. The first principle learner involvement refers to affective and metacognitive aspects of language learning, encouraging learners to be involved actively in their learning process. Learner reflection, another principle, is associated with metacognitive aspect of language learning: learners should be encouraged to become critical thinkers to develop awareness about learning process and learning content. Lastly, appropriate language use is related with the communicative and the metacognitive aspects, proposing that students should use the target language both for communicative purposes and metacognitive activities such as planning, monitoring, evaluating etc. According to Louis (2006), teachers should encourage learners to work independently helping them how to make decisions about their learning process because directing and participating their learning process actively can help students develop awareness of the responsibilities that they should fulfil during the process. In this way, students may work confidentially outside of the classroom without getting help from the teacher. Namely, teachers should not transfer knowledge to students; instead they should teach them 'learning to learn' (Godwin-Jones, 2011:1; Holec, 1981; Hoven, 1992). Thus, students can actively be involved in identifying following elements of language learning process: goal setting, choice of language learning strategies, evaluation process and so on (Cotteral, 2000).

Achieving the conditions of autonomous learning partially relies on the following factors: self-esteem and motivation (Joshi, 2011). While the first term refers to "the evaluation the learner makes of herself with regard to the target language or learning in general", second term is defined as "the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning plus favourable attitudes towards learning" in relevant literature (Thanasoulas, 2000:8; Gardner, 1985:10). Lastly, Dickinson (1993) attributes some characteristics to autonomous learners:

- being able to recognize and maintain interest in the topic taught in the class
- being able to set their learning goals in cooperation with their teachers
- being able to choose and use learning strategies that appeal to learning goals
- being able to regulate their learning in terms of using learning strategies and revise when necessary.

Computer Technology has contributed much to the concept of Autonomous Learning in terms of facilitating learner autonomy through enabling a vast amount of materials for self-learning (Godwin-Jones, 2011). According to Schemenk (2005:107): "The popularity of learner autonomy may be at least partially related to the rise of computer technology and the growing importance of computers in language learning environments worldwide". Therefore, Godwin-Jones (2011) emphasizes that students should be encouraged to develop and use meta-cognitive strategies which help to improve learner autonomy through the use of computer technology. On the other hand, Gremmo&Riley (1995) claim that software and materials designed for the purpose of teaching and learning do not always correspond with the curriculum goals. At this point, according to Godwin-Jones (2011) teachers may provide guidance for students in terms of using web based materials effectively so as to stimulate learners to use those materials critically knowing both their benefits and limitations. Cord-Mounoury (1999 cited in Kartal, 2005) classifies functions of web based materials in the following way: firstly, they facilitate and encourage communication through searching for a topic, chatting etc. Secondly, he asserts that these kinds of tools contribute to both cooperative and independent learning, and finally internet provides a wealth amount of sources both for teachers and students such as online books, journals, dictionaries, exercises etc.

The aim of this study was to explore autonomous learning activities performed by students both with and without using computer technology together with their awareness level in learning English. To clarify these issues quantitative method was used focusing on descriptive statistics. In this respect, following research questions were posed to address issues mentioned above:

- 1- What is the awareness level of students in learning English?
- 2- To what extent do students perform autonomous language learning activities?
- 3-How efficiently do they use computer technology for autonomous learning activities?

METHOD

The research design employed in this study is quantitative descriptive including a questionnaire which consists of 18 items.

Participants

A total of 75 undergraduate students from the Department of English Language Teaching at a state university took part in the present study. After explaining the purpose of the study and asking students whether they want to participate in the study or not, volunteer students were chosen and given a questionnaire to complete. While the majority of the population was 1st grade students, the others were either 2nd or 3rd grade students.

Data Collection Tools

A questionnaire was administered to students and it was followed by an open-ended question which asked students how they benefit from computer technology in performing autonomous learning activities. The questionnaire was a 5-point autonomous language learning likert scale (A=Never, B=Rarely, C=Sometimes, D=Often, and E=Always) used by Joshi (2011, inspired by Zhang& Li, 2004; Lamb&Reinders, 2008). The questionnaire mainly consists of three parts. First part addresses to students' awareness of autonomous language learning while second part is related with autonomous language learning activities conducted by students in general. The last part deals with use of computer technology in autonomous language learning. The collected data was analyzed thorough SPSS. Mean scores of all items were found.

RESULTS

The questionnaire mainly consists of three parts: learners' awareness level, autonomous learning activities performed by students, and technology use in autonomous learning activities.

Students' Awareness Level: It is obvious from the total mean score (3, 9563) that students have a relatively high level of awareness in language learning (Table 1). The highest mean score (4, 3467) in this part belongs to item A1 (I think I have the ability to learn English well). It is followed by A2 and A3 respectively which are related with planning one's own learning and allowing time for practicing English.

Table 1: Students' Awareness in Language Learning

Items	Mean	Std.Deviation
A1-I think I have the ability to learn English well.	4,3467	,89281
A2-I make decisions and set goals of my learning.	4,1622	,90701
A3-I make good use of my free time in studying English.	3,3600	,89503
Total mean score	3,9563	

Autonomous Learning Activities: Table 2 shows autonomous learning activities performed by students. The item A7 with the highest mean score (3, 6575) indicated that majority of the students made notes and summaries of their lessons frequently. The generality of the students stated that they often read extra materials for the course in advance (A16:3, 4667). The items A5, A14, A15, A4, and A6 with mean scores above average revealed that students made good use of the following activities: taking part in activities in English, knowing their strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improving them, revising lessons and seeking the reference books, previewing before the class, and finally speaking confidently in front of the people.

On the other hand, the item A-12 with the lowest mean score (M=2, 0541) in this category showed that students rarely attended different seminars, training courses, conferences to improve their English. Besides, the item A-17(M=2, 36) exhibited that students seldom rewarded themselves by the activities such as buying new things, celebrating parties etc. when they made progress. The other items (A-10, A-8, A-9, and A-13) with the mean scores below average were claimed to be performed rarely by the students. From the overall mean score of 2, 9789 which is slightly below the average, it can be concluded that students conduct autonomous learning activities to a certain extent.

Table 2: Autonomous Learning Activities

Items	Mean	Std.Deviation
A4-I preview before the class (i.e. see summary, lessons etc.)	3,1333	1,17787
A5-In the class, I try to use every opportunity to take part in the activities where and when I can speak in English.	3,3867	1,11371
A6-I speak confidently in front of the people.	3,0541	1,21511
A7-I make notes and summaries of my lessons.	3,6575	1,09569
A8-I talk to the teachers and friends outside the class in English.	2,7067	1,17143
A9-I practice English outside the class also such as: record my own voice, speak to the other people in English.	2,8243	1,19769
A10-I use library to improve my English.	2,5733	1,14104
A12-I attend different seminars, training courses, conferences to improve my English.	2,0541	1,01889
A13-I take risk in learning the English language.	2,9315	1,25087
A14-I note my strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improve them.	3,3514	1,20992
A15-I revise lessons and seek the reference books.	3,2267	1,02104
A16-Besides the contents prescribed in the course, I read extra materials In advance.	3,4667	,96329
A17-When I make progress in learning, I reward myself such as: buy new things, celebrate parties etc.	2,3600	1,32175
Total mean score	2,9789	

Technology Use in Autonomous Learning Activities: When it comes to technology use in autonomous learning activities (M=3, 8867), Table 3 shows that majority of the students use audio-visual materials to develop their speech (M=3, 6667), and they use internet and computers to study and improve English to a great extent (M=4, 1067).

Table 3: Technology Use in Autonomous Learning Activities

Items	Mean	Std.Deviation
A11-I use audio-visual materials to develop my speech such as: Listen to BBC, watch English movies, read English newspapers etc.	3, 6667	1,10690
A18-I use internet and computers to study and improve English.	4,1067	,98053
Total mean score	3,8867	

Analysis of Question 19: Students were asked to answer the following question: Do you benefit from computer technology to learn English? And How? 38 volunteer students answered this question. Among these students, 4 of them stated that they did not use technology for learning English. The others claimed that they made use of technology for several reasons:

A large majority of the students (82, 35%) use computer technology to improve their listening skills through the activities such as watching videos, listening English songs and news etc. 35, 29% of the students take advantage of technology to embellish their writings with different expressions and appropriate vocabulary usage through searching on the internet. 26, 47% of the students use online dictionaries while only 5, 88% of them utilize the internet for translation. Lastly, 23, 52% frequently read online English newspapers and magazines.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

According to Nunan (1995:138), 'awareness of the pedagogical goals and content of the programme' is the first step to autonomous language learning process. In this study, it was found that students' awareness level was high in terms of making decisions and setting goals of their learning (M=4, 1622). However, their performance



level in autonomous learning activities (M=2, 9789) was not so satisfactory when compared to their awareness level (M=3, 9563). Although they indicated that they often took notes and made summaries of the lessons, read extra materials in advance, and tried to use every opportunity to take part in the activities where and when they could speak in English, they rarely attended different seminars, training courses, conferences to improve their English. Moreover, they were not eager to improve their English outside of the class through recording their voice or talking to other people in English. Interestingly, majority of the students claimed that they noted their strengths and weaknesses in learning English and improved them, but they were far from being self-motivated, as only a small number of students acknowledged that they rewarded themselves when they made progress in learning. There is a contradiction in terms of the relationship between self-esteem and motivation since motivation is considered as a pre-condition for developing awareness and building self-esteem, and it can be fostered through the internet providing a vast amount of materials, activities and subjects which can meet different learner needs and expectations (Louis, 2006).

On the other hand, it was found that students were enthusiastic about using internet and computers to study and improve English, and they used audio-visual materials to improve their speech (M=3, 8867). Additionally, students' answers to the question 19 which is related with autonomous learning activities through using technology showed that a vast majority of the students exploited computers and the internet for different purposes. While they benefited from them to improve their listening skills via watching movies, videos, and listening songs, news etc. to a great extent, and reading-writing skills via searching for different expressions, vocabulary, and reading online English magazines and newspapers to some extent, they did not tend to use computer technology to improve their speaking skills.

It is clear that students' use of technology is limited to a small range of activities; however, "flexible, autonomous, lifelong learning is essential to success in the age of information" (Warschauer&Shetzer, 2003:176), and the role of technology in achieving this kind of learning cannot be underestimated. As Louis (2006) claims, both teachers and students can make use of technology in various ways; teachers may prepare learning tools and activities using sites which are available through internet for 24 hours of a day for self-studying. Besides, students have numerous opportunities such as reflecting on what they have learnt via blogs, communicating with their companions from all over the world via chat programs which may be text-based or video-based, and studying through authentic materials (Godwin-Jones, 2011). At this point, students need to receive training in using technology efficiently as several researches about the issue revealed that trained students in using technology got the maximum benefit from their learning (Hoven, 2006; Winke & Goertler, 2008; O'Bryan, 2008).

To wrap up, this study examined students' awareness level in learning English and autonomous learning activities conducted by students both with and without using computers and the internet. It was found that students were aware of their learning process to some extent, and eager to exploit computer technology. They partially conducted autonomous learning activities in general. It is obvious that the emergence and evolution of networked technology have changed and broadened the concept of autonomous learning in a favourable way ascribing the great value to the students' responsibilities since students are required not only making decisions about their learning but also they take the accountability of constructing their own self-access. Thus, they can utilize their digital sources effectively in order to attain their learning goals.

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