

A Psycholinguistic Sight on Autonomous Learners in Language Learning: Cihan University-Erbil as a Case Study

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Abstract—In the past two decades, autonomous learning has received an obvious concern from specialists in the field of education, particularly in higher education in the Western universities. Autonomous learners have been characterized as those learners who adopt certain strategies to help them get their own learning. In Europe, an autonomous learner has formally become part of language education and language assessment domain. In this sense, and as a lecturer at Cihan University-Erbil, it has been noticed by the researcher that some students learn dependently whereas others are autonomous, self-dependent on their efforts to achieve a better learning outcome by the motivation; they have to be positive participants with their English Language instructor through language learning classes. The purpose of this research is to investigate and develop learners' autonomy under the willingness and ability for the second language learning in higher education context. This is achieved to know to what extent students are aware of autonomous learning and what should they do to become successful autonomous learners. In this small-scale research, both qualitative and quantitative methods have been utilized to investigate and consider this phenomenon thoroughly from a psycholinguistic point of view. The results show that the majority of students are not autonomous learners as most of them depend on their instructors for learning English as a second language. This research comprises four sections. Section one is the introduction. Section two reviews some historical backgrounds and definitions. The third one illustrates the research methodology, questions, participants, and data collection. The fourth section accounts for discussion of the findings of the study in addition to the conclusion at the end of the study.

Keywords—Autonomy, Learner, English language, Education, Psycholinguistic analysis.

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the past two decades, learner autonomy constituted to be as a key aim in the educational field, particularly in the higher education in western higher education context. In Europe for instance, learner autonomy has become part of the mainstream prevailing in language education and assessment (Sinclair, 2000a).

Autonomous learner has been defined by a number of researchers in which it is a way, that one can take responsibility for their own learning (Lakoff, 1990; Holec, 1981; McNaji, 1997). Although there have been many studies applied on learner autonomy, few of them have been carried out to discover the importance of autonomous learner in English language learning in the Kurdistan region, in particular when novices arrive at the university. The problem has been noticed that students in higher education are still dependent on their learning and this results in a slow development of their 2nd language learning.

This study aims at developing the idea of how students become autonomous learner in higher education context and what they have experienced in learning independence previously. In addition, to know what challenges student face while they want to be autonomous.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A. A Brief Historical Background of Autonomy

Historically speaking, the origin of “autonomy” idea is from Greek term *autonomia*, which is derived from “*autonomos*” (of a state, having its specific laws) (Concise Oxford English Dictionary, 2011 cited in Le, 2013). Lawson (1998) states that autonomy's basic home is in the political field. This means that every home has naturally autonomy. In terms of politics, the concept of autonomy, first emerged in the ancient Greeks, along with the early democracy expression (Le, 2013; Lakoff, 1990). In the political realm, the concept “autonomy” could

be used to identify the relationship among political parties or states and between individuals (Lawson, 1998). In general, it can be said that autonomy represents “self-determination and independence of a community for both internal and external relations” (Lakoff, 1990: 388). In this respect, autonomy indicates the self-determination by an individual (Le, 2013). To put it differently, autonomy means independence to have their one’s own actions, behavior, and responsibility. Being autonomous learners is a necessary for learners because of the speed of the development of technology.

In the higher education field, the concept of autonomy has been defined by a number of researchers. The term of autonomy, first has been used by Holec, he defined autonomy as a purely the learner’s ability to take responsibility for their own learning in higher education context (Holec, 1981). The word “autonomy” is given as the opportunity or ability to make your own decisions without being controlled by anyone else (Le, 2013). McNeil (1997) highlights that when individuals enter higher education, they have diverse levels of personal autonomy which they have experienced in the past. With respect to this definition, every individual seems aware about autonomy. The idea what McNaji (1997) elaborated earlier, however, has not been backed up by research evidence. For example, many students in high school are depended on their teachers and syllabus. A research has been conducted by Xhaferi and Xhaferi (2011) showed that learner autonomy is a new trend in education when the focus on the student’s engagement in their own. Gibbs terms autonomous learner as a kind of “extensive independent library use and other sources for information rather than formal teaching-much less support from teachers” (Gibbs, 1992: 41).

Learner autonomy seems to be a new perspective in higher education and it has some capacity of detachment, critical reflection, and greater take charge for their own (Little, 1991). For instance, Borg (2012) in his recent work argues that the autonomy in the higher education learning is not about the methods of learning but it is about the capacity and capability in learners to enable them become autonomous learners. Borg claims that order one to be good learner autonomy should have some essential skills for instance; the learner should first have the ability of information technology of using computer to find information and second using dictionary and asking teachers’ questions critically. Although the former makes sense, the later applies for many learners whether dependent or independent learning.

Indeed, one way of seeking knowledge is being autonomous learner (Ellis and Sinclair1989). Learner autonomy has been considered as one of the important topics among western academic communities (Tschfen and Mackness, 2012). For example, in the United Kingdom and the United States of America, when 1st-year students enter university, the first concept they may hear is about autonomy. The word of autonomy is in relation to self-managed in educational philosophy. Nunan (1996: 195) proposed a model five-level learner action, consisting of awareness, intervention, involvement, transcendence, and creation. This division, which includes dimensions of process and content, has actual implications on the learners’ development materials. Research

conducted by Forster (1972) (cited in higher education academic, 2014, p. 4) stated Healey (2014) added that independent and learning autonomy creates an environment of group learning where activity is done independently.

Learner autonomy for the second language learning means discovering their own strategy and learning resources and formulating strategy and action process. Having provided a safe zone and building learning communities through structured room for studying are vital for interaction between students. The students may also do collaboration and group working and learning from each other. This could be done by the absence of the instructors. Dornyei (2001) argues that learning autonomous can be enhanced by resources-based approach which emphasizes independent interaction with learning theories. Autonomous learner is often confused with independent learner. Ryan and Deci (2002) made distinction between the two terms; they state that “autonomy is often confused with, or integrated with the quite different concept of independence, which means no depending on external sources (2002 p. 8).” Learner’s voice and strategy should be heard because there are factors that make hindrance for becoming autonomy, as such, lack of successful plan, experience and lack of motivation, university library, and limited independent study. From a seminal definition by Holec’s (1981), learners’ ability or capacity for making informed decisions about their own learning has become a central point of subsequent definitions of learner autonomy in learning language. Apparently, strategy is important for students to know how to learn autonomously.

III. METHODOLOGY

Both qualitative and quantitative methods have been conducted to obtain a clear view of the case.

It is hypnotized that there is a considerable number of autonomous students in Business Administration Department, Cihan University-Erbil.

A. The Research Questions

The researcher aims to answer the following questions:

1. To what extent are students autonomous?
2. What autonomous techniques do students manipulate in English language learning?
3. To what extent are they motivated to be autonomous?
4. Are there factors that affect this notion?

B. The Hypotheses

It is hypnotized that:

There is a number of students at Cihan University who are autonomous in language learning using certain strategies in language learning. Those students are highly motivated in this sense. There are factors that affect this notion.

C. The Purpose

The purpose of this study is to cultivate learner autonomy under the willingness and ability of the second

language learning in Kurdistan higher education context by investigating the extent of student's awareness of being autonomous and what they should do to become a successful autonomous learner at the scope of Cihan University-Erbil in Business Administration Department. Learner autonomy has a positive implication on students of higher education because it helps them become independent for life-long learning and solves problems they face through learning process. Autonomous learning seems to increase students' knowledge and motivation when they adopt independence for their own learning, also to commit themselves to develop their reflective skills and self-management in learning.

D. Participants

In this study, participants selected are all university students. Their ages ranged from 20 to 22 years old. They are all 2nd-year students, both males and females who study English language as a non-specialized subject as their major in Business Administration at Cihan University. The sample is randomly chosen by a range of 10 students from each of the three morning classes, so the total would be 30 students.

E. Data Collection Procedures

The ten items questionnaire has been distributed to students in the 2nd-year level. The questions varied from general backgrounds to the more specific one (from 5 to 1; always-never). In addition to three open-ended questions were asked to let students express their own free answers. The data were collected within 1 week. The qualitative and quantitative methods have been used to help the researcher understand the issue in depth.

IV. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSIONS

The method used in the analysis is to find the percentages of each item of the questionnaire. The findings show that majority students state that the learner autonomy is significant for students of the second language learning (L2) in higher education. For example, in statement (5), about 63% students believe that autonomous learning is necessary and important for them. With respect to the statements (1), (2) the results are almost similar. About 27% of them are never or occasionally aware of learner autonomy and teachers never or rarely help learners to be so. Regarding using the strategy while learning, the results of statement (3) show that only 45% of them always use note-taking, but only 1% of them (never) use note-taking and e-portfolio in their own learning. Note-making and taking notes for learner autonomy are important needs as it helps them increase their knowledge. Regarding statement (4) as to whether students rely on their teachers for their own learning, the data show that 63% of them (always) rely on their teachers in learning 27% of them state as (usually) and 10% they state (never) or (occasionally) depend on their teachers; the reason could be that they may watch movies, listen, and read song lyrics or read books all in English. As for statements (6) and (7), results are almost similar; they are about 63%, and they do not feel that they

are responsible for their own learning but they will be autonomous if they are given freedom to choose the topics. Statements (8), (9), and (10) indicate that the majority of L2 learners believe that they are not autonomous learners. About 63% (sometimes) and 39% feel that they (usually) over-independence but only 36% of them have limited experience or lack of experience to become autonomous learners.

With respect to the open-ended questions, the majority of participant's state that they are hardly autonomous learners. The reason is that they depend on their instructor's lecture for learning because they feel worried about the examinations which may mostly depend on what have been taught by their instructors. Most of them have the feeling that the university does not provide any facility for being independent learners, for example, there is no silent zone for studying and they see that the major challenge is that they do not have internet connections provided by the university. In addition, they state that many teachers are not seen to encourage autonomous learning.

This goes in line with what Dornyei (2001) has mentioned earlier. Indeed, having resources will enhance autonomous learner because if there are reasonable resource, students will be regarded dependent learners. From the results above, it is clear that the students feel positive toward or prefer to take responsibility for independent learning but the opportunities have not been given. However, the students are less sure about whether to make learning decisions by themselves, such as decisions how and where to learn their own materials.

It seems that learners in higher education still have a passive role and much more dependent rather than independent learners. However, in higher education, learners are expected to be proactive and independent. Hence, it could be teachers' responsibility to explain the concept of autonomous learners for university students of the 1st year to help them improve their study skills, and precisely how they are responsible for their learning in their new setting. It can be argued that learners' autonomy can be conceptualized of having two core components, namely the willingness and capacity which can then be extended and elaborated to include other constructs, such as decision-making, responsibility, readiness, control, beliefs attitudes, and motivation. Having stated that learner autonomy is a complex structure which is shaped and influenced by the wider sociocultural context in which it is being promoted. It is obvious that autonomous learning is not only a process of learning but also a method and philosophy whereby learners design their own strategies to develop their own abilities. It can be said that the autonomous learner is about one own taking charge of their own responsibility of learning with much less support from teachers. Moreover, this responsibility of learning and making –decision should match with learners' plan, intrinsic motivation, and feeling in control. Being autonomous learner is not an easy task, it rather needs comfortable environments with availability of different facilities; for instance, constructions, learning resources including electronic library, silent zones, and support and guidance from their tutors (Xhaferi and Xhaferi, 2011). However, teachers are reasons for providing students' strategy in the sense that they should first rise student's

awareness and increase their motivation. Research showed that using portfolio and diary are considered the most used strategy among autonomous learners. The research has found that the most common strategy for being autonomous includes:

1. Plan, monitor with the learner's own learning.
2. Critical note-taking and critical reading.
3. Ask questions to get more knowledge.
4. Read books by using library and Labs.
5. Question of clarification, when asking the teacher to explain.
6. Time management and getting organized.
7. Well examination preparation.

In fact, having a safe learning is fundamentally vital because students would feel self-directed and feel much more responsible for their own learning and development. If things are available, students may not have justifiable reasons for their life-long learning.

V. CONCLUSION

Being autonomous learner in higher education is somewhat challenging as university context requires students to follow their own instructions. The major conclusions drawn to be autonomous learner needs one to be more self-directed decisions-making about what they will focus on and how much time spent on learning both inside and outside classrooms. The findings show that many students are not aware of autonomous learning but they have willingness to become autonomous learners at university level. Therefore, they seek for enhancement in learning strategies which should be taken into consideration in language teaching techniques.

VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Taking into account what has been resulted from the discussion above, this study recommends teachers in high education to teach students different techniques of being autonomous in the classroom. This could be achieved by giving assignments based on their interest and freedoms for their study. This research paper is conducted for the investigation of how learner autonomy was perceived in language learning in higher education context at Cihan University-Erbil. However, there are a number of limitations of this study, which has been noticed, such as limited participants and limited time. Further research should be conducted to understand the role of autonomous learners

under the view of teachers. This research would suggest investigating the role of motivation in language learning.

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