

independence

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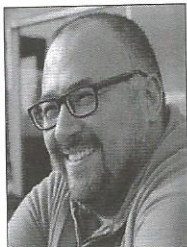
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Learner autonomy and thinking

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“Teaching is impossible.” In plain truth, as I understand it, that is what learner autonomy claims. As the concept of learner autonomy grew out of constructivist approaches to learning, it can be claimed that with the insistence on self-directed learning rather than (imposed) teaching, constructivist approaches as well as the concept of learner autonomy signal an end to teaching, or in more remorseful words, the death of teaching. As Candy (1991: p. 270) argues, constructivism proposes “knowledge cannot be taught but only learned” and according to the supporters of learner autonomy, autonomous learners take an active approach to learning (Wenden, 1998). These two attributes show common ground on which constructivism and learner autonomy stand side by side: the focus is on the learner and no one but the learner. Today, as constructivism and the concept of learner autonomy gain momentum and affect our classroom practices, what lies at the centre of this common ground is the learner who should become a teacher to herself.

The aim of this paper is not to lay out the principles of constructivism or the concepts of learner autonomy. Instead, starting from these philosophical stand points, I aim to discuss the importance of “thinking” in developing learners as autonomous agents. To do that, I first touch upon some basic concepts related to learner autonomy, and then, I explain the importance of

“thinking as a process” that is fundamental to developing learners as autonomous learners.

In much of the bulk of research on or related to learner autonomy, learner autonomy is defined, or what a learner does as an autonomous entity is described, through new roles of learners. However, little is mentioned about the most fundamental process that is supposed to take part in all of the tasks and functions expected from an autonomous learner. There is a general suggestion that an autonomous learner is expected to be a hero who is capable of having, doing, processing, and completing many tasks. Surely, this brief repertoire of abilities does not seem to be attained by students who are often late in submitting their papers, who have many reasons for not being able to catch up with the class readings, and who are almost always busy with some other course assignments when they are asked about their poor work in our classes.

I came across a quote online, by Christopher Hitchens (n.d.) who is credited with, saying “The essence of the independent mind lies not in what it thinks, but in how it thinks.” Similarly, it was Gandhi (n.d.) who said “Those who know how to think need no teachers.” Hitchens and Gandhi’s quotes underline the importance of the way we think, without which we cannot change our own learning strategies, unless we are aware of our present condition.

As Chamot and others claim, research with both first and second language learners shows some

of the ways of thinking that guide and assist an individual's attempts to learn more effectively (Paris & Winograd, 1990). Fahim and Behdani's (2011) study with 181 university-level foreign language learners found that there is a positive correlation between learner autonomy and critical thinking ability. Such studies show that as students' thinking skills develop, so do their development as autonomous learners. As more studies on the relationship between learner autonomy and various thinking skills come out, we will come to learn more about this relationship along with the processes that foreign language learners undertake as they learn a language. Such research, I believe, should also look deeper into what happens in learners' minds as they grow as autonomous learners and how their thinking processes change or evolve in their path to greater learner autonomy.

What exactly is the relationship between thinking as a process and being an autonomous learner? Chamot and others (n.d.) explain the importance of "thinking" in developing learner autonomy. As they suggest, to be successful with learning tasks, students' strategic awareness is needed while "awareness" refers to one's own "thinking":

Awareness of one's own thinking processes is generally referred to as metacognition or metacognitive awareness (Pressley & Afflerbach, 1995; Rivers, 2001). The value of this type of self-knowledge is that it leads to reflection, to planning how to proceed with a learning task, to monitoring one's own performance on an ongoing basis, and to self-evaluation upon task completion. In other words, it leads to self-regulation of one's learning. Students with greater metacognitive awareness understand the similarity between the current learning task and previous ones, know the strategies required for successful learning, and anticipate success as a result of knowing "how to learn." (p. 1)

This explanation and similar ones regarding learners' thinking processes do not explain what actually is demanded from learners when their thinking is considered. Metacognition and metacognitive awareness refer to the awareness of our own thinking processes in categorical terms such as metacognitive skills like planning and organizing information as rudimentary (or what is worse, mechanical) skills. However, the content and dimensions of learners' thinking processes remain unanswered in research just as we still have little information about how the human mind works during learning.

To be more exact, we need to have a sound understanding of 'what there is to think about' i.e. content plus background knowledge, how to think and deduce meaning (ways of thinking), and exactly what knowledge we expect learners to develop (i.e. what knowledge of the strategies that make up what we call an autonomous learner are required). Hence, apart from the knowledge of the strategies we aim to deliver, we must also consider enriching learners' schemata so that they find both the knowledge and inspiration to grow up? as autonomous learners.

So far, I believe, research on learner autonomy has focused on how to develop learners' strategies so as to develop them as autonomous learners. What I believe we have to do now is to enrich the knowledge base of these autonomous or future-autonomous learners who, with their world, experiential, or academic knowledge, will show that learner autonomy is not only about having learned a number of strategies that will make them "autonomous learners". These learners, as well as autonomous teachers, should go ahead and posit that autonomous learning is also unique not only with how learners come to know (strategies) but also with what they know (knowledge of the content).

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