

Practical Tips on How to Promote Learner Autonomy In Foreign Language Classrooms

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Abstract: Autonomy is basically described as an individual's taking responsibility for his/her own learning and seen as one of the most significant features of life-long learning process today. Therefore modern language teaching approaches and innovations in this area have made language practitioners focus largely on the concept "autonomy" in educational setting in recent years. Main stream of the learner autonomy in the class mostly emanates from teacher and teacher behaviours. Therefore the role of autonomy-supportive teachers on mastering students' language learning is increasing in education day by day. As a result there is a great amount of interest and studies on learner and teacher autonomy in literature. This study is a literature review on autonomy-supportive language environments and teachers. By considering the related studies and comparing the features of autonomy-supportive and controlling language teaching atmospheres, and looking from the perspective of Self-Determination Theory, a modern motivation theory, the review aims to give some practical tips on how to promote learner autonomy and overcome learner reticence in foreign language classroom.

Key words: Autonomy, Autonomy-Supportive Teacher, Learner Autonomy, Self-Determination Theory.

Introduction

Self-Determination Theory (SDT), an organismic meta-theory about human motivation and personality, aims at bringing up self-determined individuals in daily life and focuses on the importance of human's evolved inner resources for personality and development, and behavioural self regulation (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan

& Deci, 2000; Ryan, Kulh, & Deci, 1997). The theory mostly emphasizes the main role of self-determined motivation and the concept “autonomy” in education and learning, and focuses on the positive effects of autonomy support on academic motivation and healthy development of youths (Chirkov, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2006). According to the theory, each individual has basic innate psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness; and in order to master his/her attempts and integrate his/her experiences into coherent sense of self and reach a high level of intrinsic motivation for an activity, the individual should live in the social contexts which can support these needs. As these needs are considered crucial for his/her personal growth and well-being (Liu, Wang, Tan, Koh, & Ee, 2009), the individual should experience satisfaction in his/her daily life (Deci & Ryan, 2004; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001).

In language teaching environment, teachers try to fulfil this aim and support students so that they experience psychological need satisfaction. To help students satisfy the needs, a teacher should create an origin climate in the classroom. The most noticeable characteristic of this climate is autonomy-supportive language teaching environment. Then, before forming an autonomy-supportive environment, the teacher should know what autonomy is, how autonomy is promoted and which behaviours support or undermine student autonomy in language teaching classrooms.

The present study will give practical tips on how to promote autonomy in language classrooms through a literature review on the concept “autonomy” within the framework of SDT. To fulfil this aim, firstly the definitions and origin of “autonomy” are reviewed, and then the features of an autonomy-supportive language environment are described by examining studies on general education settings. Lastly, autonomy-supportive language teachers and their behaviours are examined in the paper. In conclusion, interpreting relevant literature, practical suggestions are given on how to create autonomy based language classes and autonomous language learners.

An Overview on the Definitions of Autonomy

Autonomy is simply defined as an individual’s taking responsibility in his/her own learning process. But it is not as easy and simple as its definition. The concept has a long history going back some centuries before and many great thinkers such as Galileo, Rousseau, Dewey, Kilpatrick, Marcel, Jacotot, Payne and Quick have contributed and developed the

concept by explaining their thoughts on autonomy (Balçıklı, 2008). But all these thinkers' insights were on education and learning environment. The term autonomy was first introduced to foreign language education by Yves Chalon who founded "*Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues (CRAPEL)*" in 1971 and is considered to be the father of autonomy in language learning, and after his death the application of autonomy in language setting was made by Henri Holec, another eminent figure in the field of autonomy (Balçıklı, 2008; Egel, 2009). After these forerunners, autonomy in language learning and teaching was investigated by many experts. Experts made new attempts to define the concept and many different definitions giving insights into "autonomy" exist from the literature. Some of them collected from various sources are listed below;

- "Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Holec, 1981; p.3, as cited in Yan, 2010).
- Autonomy is a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (Little, 1991, p. 4).
- "Autonomy is recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems" (Benson, 1997, p.29).
- "Autonomy is the capacity to take control of one's own learning" (Benson 2001, p.47).
- Autonomy refers to self-governance or self-regulation and differs from independence (Ryan & Deci, 2006).

As seen above, there are innumerable definitions of autonomy in literature (see also Benson & Valler, 1997; Dam, 1995; Dickinson 1987; Littlewood, 2001; etc.) and while many of them point out similar features while describing autonomy, others draw different kinds of features. Therefore, readers are given many different definitions of autonomy, because of lack of a real consensus on what autonomy really is (Thanasoulas, 2000; Hořinek, 2007). Some synonyms of "autonomy" mentioned in relevant studies are collected in Thanasoulas' study as follows: "self-direction", "language awareness", "andragogy", "independence" (Candy, 1991; James & Garrett, 1991; Knowles, 1980; 1983; Lier, 1996; Sheerin, 1991; as cited in Thanasoulas, 2000). In addition to these, Edward Deci and Richard Ryan (2006) emphasize that autonomy differs from independence and use the synonym "self-regulation" for autonomy.

When describing the concept “autonomy”, many studies only look through the noticeable parts of autonomy and autonomous learner instead of SDT which aims at investigating psychological sides of learner and motivation. According to these studies, as a general concept “autonomy” refers the learner autonomy or the autonomous learner. These studies describe the learner mostly by focusing on the synonym “independence”, which means an individual who choose his/her aims and purposes independently, and is always free to choose his /her own materials, methods in lesson and carries out the chosen tasks according to his/her own rules.

In addition, many studies (e.g. Rees-Miller, 1993; Riley, 1988; Pennycook, 1997) assume that autonomy and autonomous motivation are mostly related with Western societies thought as the roots of individualism and independence, and there is a cultural appropriateness in the application of autonomy. Therefore, it is believed as a universalist view that the concept of autonomy would not be beneficial and “useful to understanding and predicting Eastern students’ learning, motivation, and thriving” (e.g. Cross & Gore, 2003; Iyengar & Lepper, 1999; Oishio, 2000, as cited in Vansteenkiste, Zhou, Lens, & Soenens, 2005).

Unlike these studies, neglecting learner psychology, intrinsic motivation and highlighting independence referring interpersonal issue, accepting the Western-based autonomy concept which cannot be applied in Eastern cultures, SDT closely connects learner psychology with intrinsic motivation, and assumes that autonomy is an innate basic psychological need (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2000) which has a universal role in learning. SDT’s cross cultural studies about the positive role of autonomy (Chirkov, 2009; Chirkov & Ryan, 2001; Chirkov, Ryan, Kim & Kaplan, 2003; Muller & Louw, 2004; Vansteenkiste, et al., 2005) undermine the pseudo-universalist view of autonomy drawn by other studies (Chirkov, 2009).

Autonomy-Supportive Language Teaching Environment

One of the main concerns of SDT is the social context in which language learning exists and the theory proposes that social contexts influence the degree of being autonomous or controlled (Black & Deci, 2000). This degree is determined by motivational continuum of SDT. The continuum has three main types of motivation (amotivation, extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation). It also shows the regularity styles of autonomous motivation

ranging from the highest external one to highest internal one (Deci & Ryan, 2004; Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

According to Deci, “autonomy-support” means “being able to take the other person’s perspective and work from there” (Deci & Flaste, 1995, p. 42). The opposite of autonomy-support is being controlling, and in language classrooms being controlling is always seen easier than being autonomy supportive. Because autonomy-support requires some characteristics such as encouraging self-initiation, and responsibility. In addition, it is supported and nurtured with encouragement, not pressure (Deci & Flaste, 1995, p. 43).

The term “autonomy-supportive context” means an environment that decreases the salience of external incentives and threats, avoids controlling language, and recognizes the learners’ frame of reference (Black & Deci, 2000; Chua, 2009). In other words, autonomy-supportive environment can be described as mostly connected with intrinsic motivation and promoting self-identification (Black & Deci, 2000). Studies on autonomy-supportive contexts show that this type of environment is connected with better conceptual learning, more creativity, and more positive effects on regular education and special education settings (Black & Deci, 2000).

As seen above, autonomy-supportive classroom environments have many positive influences on general education context. During language teaching instruction in classes, students’ engagement in activities, in groups and pairs, overcoming reticence of speaking and mastering in all four language skills are closely connected with the classroom conditions’ being autonomy-supportive or -controlling. When teachers understand the importance of autonomy-supportive environments’ positive effects on student engagement (a predictor of academic achievement in language classes), coping with problems deriving from language the learner will be much easier. In addition, teachers should ask themselves how they can create the conditions within which people will motivate themselves (Deci & Flaste, 1995, pp. 141-158).

Autonomy-Supportive Teachers and Their Behaviours

In the school setting, autonomy support is mostly related to teacher and especially teacher behaviours. When the teachers behave in an autonomy-supportive way in classrooms, they influence student behaviours and achievements positively. Some of these autonomy-

supportive behaviours' outcomes on student behaviours and achievements are listed in the study of Reeve, Bolt and Cai (1999) as follows:

- greater perceived competence
- higher mastery motivation
- enhanced creativity
- preference for optimal challenge over easy success
- increased conceptual understanding
- active and deeper information processing
- greater engagement
- enhanced well-being
- better academic performance such as academic persistence, rather than dropping out of school, etc.

By considering these positive effects of autonomy, teachers' main concern in language classroom should be on which behaviours and attitudes in the classroom help intrinsic regularity styles and intrinsic motivation of students. To understand the students, firstly teachers should look at themselves and try to understand their behaviours. In the study of Reeve (2006), some of the basic fundamental behaviours and autonomy-supportive characteristics are summarized in a detailed way. These characteristic behaviours are as follows:

- ***Nurturing inner motivational resources.*** When the teachers avoid external regulators such as incentives, rewards, directives, deadlines, assignments, and compliance requests, and they focus on intrinsic regulators dealt with students' preferences, interests, sense of enjoyment, competencies, and choice making, the teachers might help students' being self-determined individuals and autonomous in their own learning processes.
- ***Relying on informational, noncontrolling language.*** Instead of using controlling language which pays attention to only the activity (e.g. 'Study hard, Do your best, Excellent!, etc.) in language classrooms, an autonomy-supportive teacher might use noncontrolling language or informational language (e.g. 'Today your performance was very good, by trying to speak a bit slower and using some conjunctions, your fluency can be more promising').
- ***Communicating value and providing rationales.*** Language teaching environments are full of extrinsically interested activities such as listening tape-records, filling in

worksheets, learning new grammatical rules, etc. Therefore, to enhance the participation of students, autonomy-supportive teachers give the reasons of the activity and explain its use, value and importance. This kind of behaviour helps students internalize the subject or activity. As a result the learner says him/herself, “Yes, I will do it, because I want to be happy by learning this activity.”

- ***Acknowledging and accepting students’ expressions of negative affect.*** Classrooms have rules, requests, and instructional agendas which sometimes do not match with student preferences. In such conflictive cases, instead of opposing student opinions, the autonomy-supportive teacher recognizes and accepts student’s expressions of negative affect. Because, forcing students to participate in an activity or to do their tasks makes everything worse. An autonomy teacher should aim to look from student perspectives in some cases.

In addition to these characteristics, there are some studies which try to define autonomy-supportive behaviours. These behaviours can be thought as practical tips for foreign language teachers who aim to promote inner motivation styles of their students. Some of these behaviours are listed in related studies (Reeve, 2006; Reeve & Jang, 2006; Chua, 2010).

- Listen carefully
- Create opportunities for students to work in their own way
- Provide opportunities for students to talk
- Praise signs of improvement and mastery
- Encourage students’ effort and persistence
- Offer progress-enabling hints when students seem stuck
- Respond to students’ questions and comments
- Arrange learning materials and seating patterns so students manipulate objects and conversations rather than passively watch and listen
- Communicate a clear acknowledgement of students’ perspectives

All these behaviours are positively correlated with classroom engagement and academic achievement, and help students behave in an autonomous way. These kinds of behaviours, and autonomy-supportive teaching practices and classroom climates increase students’ motivation, especially intrinsic motivation and their perceived autonomy levels.

Conclusion

This paper aims to give fundamental knowledge on the concepts “autonomy”, “autonomy-supportive environment” and “autonomy-supportive teachers.” In educational settings, autonomy-supportive behaviours reach positive outcomes (e.g. greater engagement, enhanced well-being, etc.) and these behaviours should be transformed into language learning settings in order to achieve in language teaching. This is because, especially in Eastern countries’ language classrooms, students have to overcome many problems such as insufficient language equipment, low student motivation and low interest in foreign language, artificial language environment, and little exposure to target language. In this context “autonomy” gains a more crucial role in coping with problems stemming from learner, in other words self. Therefore, one of the important and best ways of decreasing problems is enhancing learner autonomy by creating autonomy-supportive language environments. When teachers get contact with learner’s parents and peers, and acknowledge students’ social context, teachers might help students’ perceive themselves as competent and autonomous learners in their own learning. As a result, the level of autonomy in individuals can be increased and a desired level can be reached in language teaching.

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