

On Fostering Learner Autonomy in Learning English*

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Abstract—With the teaching of English being more and more communicative, the tradition teacher-centered approach is facing a big challenge and is being replaced by the learner-centered one. It means that learners will assume greater responsibility for their own English learning. Therefore, fostering learner autonomy is of the utmost importance in the teaching of English. Over the last ten years, fostering learner autonomy has become the chief concern in the field of English language teaching. As a result, many records have been obtained in different studies of learner autonomy. This paper aims at an exploration of fostering learner autonomy in the teaching of English and learners' attitudes, motivation and strategies. Because, serve as three important conditions for learner autonomy in the teaching of English. These conditions will largely influence the learning of learner autonomy. On the basis of the above exploration learner training for fostering learner autonomy, must entail two aspects. Firstly, setting up self-access centers can provide learners with an autonomy-supportive learning environment, which will contribute to enhancing learners' motivation and can strengthen their confidence in their English learning. Secondly, teachers themselves should reconsider their roles in fostering learner autonomy. They should act as facilitators, counselors and resource rather than classroom controllers. In this way, learners can feel more willing to accept responsibility for their own learning and strengthen their ability to do so.

Index Terms—learner autonomy (LA), autonomous English learning (AEL), attitudes, motivation, strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *The Background of the Traditional Teacher-centered Approach in English Teaching*

The field of language learning has been in a constant change in the past ten years. Among all the changes, the main one is a shift of focus from teachers to learners. The traditional teacher-centered idea controls learners' potentials for their English learning. Teachers take control over contents, knowledge to be used and outcomes which are also related to both learning and teaching. As a result, Learners largely depend on teachers for their learning, becoming passive receiver of materials. So, they have little motivation to accept responsibility for their own learning both inside and outside the classroom. Many learners are convinced what they have to do is to sit in the classroom to learn English, write down what the teacher says, memorize the usage of some new English words or phrases and so on.

Language learning is a life-long work. Teachers should realize that their responsibilities of "passing on the truth, imparting knowledge and solving problems" are far from enough. What teachers should do is to teach students to deal with problems by themselves. Therefore, it is very important to help learners become aware of the value of autonomous learning both inside and outside the classroom, so that they can acquire how to learn more efficiently, and maintain it in daily life. But in the teacher-led classrooms, learners do not have much opportunity to take responsibility for their own English learning, and learners' dependence on the teacher gradually will make them unaware of the importance of autonomy in their English learning.

B. *The Aim of This Paper*

How to balance the relationships between learner and teacher in the learning process? How to develop the learner autonomy in ELT? After getting known to the teacher-centered phenomenon of English teaching, we should carry out great innovations to take into full consideration learners' real learning goals, attitudes, motivation and use of strategies. Learner autonomy is one of the primary goals of modern education.

This paper aims at an exploration of fostering learner autonomy in the teaching of English in terms of three conditions for autonomy: learners' attitudes, motivation and strategies. It will first introduce the concept of autonomy. Based on the concept of autonomy and the details of the three conditions for autonomy, the paper will discuss how to foster learner autonomy in English teaching.

II. THE CONCEPT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY

Nowadays, the concept of learner autonomy has been widely accepted in many countries. It may be said that the development of learner autonomy, to some degree, appears to be universally regarded as an important and general

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educational goal.

A. *Definition of Learner Autonomy*

Learner autonomy is a problematic term because it is widely confused with self-instruction. It is very difficult to define precisely. Many scholars in this field has debated, for example, whether it is characterized by learner's responsibility or learner's control; whether it is a psychological phenomenon or psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on a complementary teacher autonomy.

1. Different Definitions

Educators in our country have been advocating the development of learner autonomy as an educational goal since the early 1960's. The concept of learner autonomy has evolved over time. And the argument of learner autonomy is that a learner develops the ability to take charge of his or her own learning. Since the 1980s, learner autonomy has been a universal focus in the western context and more and more studies have been undertaken from the student's perspective. Thus the concern with English teaching and learning has shifted from teachers' teaching to students' learning. North American researchers have taken up the idea and integrated it into the tradition of research about the good language learner. Some west researchers even consider promoting learner autonomy as the ultimate goal of education.

Holec, the major influence in discussions about autonomy in language learning, defines autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" (Gardner & Miller, 2002, P. 6). Cotterall (1995, P. 195) claims that autonomy is that "the extent to which learners demonstrate the ability to use a set of tactics of taking control of their learning". As a matter of fact, these definitions share the same features.

2. Same Features of Different Definitions

Although the term of autonomy is defined differently, it embodies two central features:

First, learners should take responsibility for their own learning because all learning can only be carried out by themselves, and they need foster the ability to continue learning after ending their formal education.

Second, "taking responsibility" means that learners need take over many processes, which are traditionally manipulated by the teachers, such as the decision on learning objectives, selecting learning methods and evaluating progress.

Learner autonomy theories aim at transferring responsibilities for some aspects of the language learning process (such as setting goals, selecting learning strategies, and even evaluating progress) from the teacher to the learner. Learners need help to develop their autonomy learning skills. However, for kinds of reasons, the need for teachers will not decrease, but their roles, including the role of teaching process, will change. Just as some famous foreign writers pointed out, teachers should not be viewed as instructors anymore, but as helps /facilitators, counselors, and learning resources.

B. *Summary*

In the course of its development, autonomy has become a part of the mainstream of research and practice in terms of language education. As more and more emphases have been laid on the value of personal experience and personal freedom in language teaching, many scholars advocate that, instead of the teacher, the learners should stand in the center of the teaching and learning process. Learners' willingness and ability to transfer their own roles will enable learners to master easily the learning method and obtain more knowledge. In formal educational contexts, teachers must not only help these learners who do not automatically accept responsibility for their learning, but also first provide them with appropriate tools and with opportunities to train them. But before the training, we should pay special attention to the conditions for learner autonomy, for they will largely influence the degree of learners' willingness and ability to take responsibility for their own learning.

III. CONDITIONS OF FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ELT

A. *Attitudes*

One necessary part in learner training for fostering learner autonomy is to need autonomy in psychology, which is related to their attitudes towards autonomy. That is to say the core of learner autonomy depends on the attitudes of the individual.

1. what's attitude

A majority of people are aware that language learning is not merely a cognitive task. So learners can't have the thought that they learn only in order to achieve the goals on learning. Instead, the successful attitude of a learner is their desire to learn. In other words, language learning, in general, has also an affective component, i.e. the self-esteem and desire to learn are deemed to be the most crucial factors in the learner's ability, and to overcome setbacks or mistakes in the process of learning a second language. Therefore, we can draw a conclusion that in learning it is necessary and important to depend on learner attitudes and motivation.

Freeman defines attitude as "the stance one adopts towards oneself, the activity of teaching and learners." (Clemente, 2001, P. 48) Jonas holds that "attitude may be defined as a psychological tendency to evaluate a particular entity with some degree of favor or disfavor."(1995, P. 2) Wenden summarizes that attitudes have been defined in different ways, such as "learned motivation", "valued beliefs", "evaluation", "what one believes is acceptable" or "responses oriented

towards approaching or avoiding”(1991, P. 52). In my paper, attitudes refer to the positive or negative feelings about someone such as the teacher or something such as learner independence driven by one’s beliefs. So, willingness and ability are two primary components of autonomy. If learners have these two qualities, they will have great confidence and motivation to learn by themselves.

In a word, positive attitudes are an active part of one’s perception of self. However, negative attitudes may be represented as learners’ dependence on the teacher for their learning and their reluctance to take on more responsibility for their learning.

2. Different Attitudes between learners and teachers

According to above statements, we know that learner’s positive attitudes may contribute to the development of their potential for autonomy while their negative attitudes may impede their efforts in working towards autonomy. But in the English learning and teaching, teachers need have positive attitudes as the same as learners.

All behavior is controlled by attitudes and experience. Learners’ attitudes may either contribute to or hold back the development of their potential for learner autonomy. Dickinson (1995, P. 165) suggests that “taking an active, independent attitude to learning and independently undertaking a learning task, is beneficial to learning: that somehow, personal involvement in decision making leads to more effective learning.” Therefore, learners need to know what it means to learn a language and determine whether they should take on responsibility for their learning and whether they are capable of doing so. If a language learner regards learning as his own business and owes his success or failure to himself, he will be more willing to take on responsibility for his own learning. However, if a learner is accustomed to depending on the teacher for his learning, he will be reluctant to take on greater learner responsibility. Autonomous learners are the ones who believe in their ability to learn by themselves or manage their learning. They know where and how to start their learning, monitor their learning process and evaluate their learning outcomes, and adjust their learning strategies to exert their potential for the purpose of achieving success in their learning. But most importantly, they must believe that they play a crucial role in their learning and that they have great confidence in their capability.

Many of Chinese EFL teachers are still bound by some old and conservative concepts, thus it is quite important for them to change their attitudes. Teachers should realize the horse will just fly if you loosen the belt around his neck, which means that they should require their students to take greater responsibility for their own learning. Before doing this, it is useful for teachers to think over their existing attitudes. They should try to transfer the core role to learners. If teachers allow more room for learner involvement, learner autonomy can get rapid development. However, the change of teacher’s roles perhaps should be gradual, rather than abrupt and dramatic. Besides, teachers also should seek and grasp every opportunity to improve their professional knowledge and skills in every aspect of learning. By doing this, they can make themselves more competent for the new roles as a person who provides support for learning, an instructor whose job is to give advice to people who need it and an literate who is knowledgeable.

B. Motivation

Motivation belongs to an individual’s desire and thought. It is believed that people’s action is governed by their own needs and interests. Motivation is, for learners, one of the important elements to learn effectively. Once learners take responsibility for their own learning, understand and accept that their learning success is a result of effort, and that failure can be improved with greater effort and better learning strategies. So, motivation provides the primary impetus to initiate learning English, the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process.

In English learning, to different degree, the intensity of learners’ motivation is different accordingly. Learners who have a strong desire to learn and who believe that success or failure in English learning results from their own efforts tend to take responsibility for their own learning and go on persisting after failure. These kinds of learners are more confident in their English learning. Although the term “motivation” is frequently used in educational contexts, there is little agreement among experts as for its exact meaning.

As for the definition of motivation, there are many different opinions. Some people think that motivation is composed of goals. Wen qiu fang(1996. P. 74) claims that “motivation in English learning can be simply interpreted as ‘the cause and purpose’ of learning English.” Ellis contends that ‘in general terms, motivation refers to the effort which learners put into learning a second language as a result of their need or desire to learn it.’ Brown believes that “motivation is the extent to which you make choices about goals to pursue and the effort you will devote to that pursuit.” Some people maintain that motivation is the degree of effort while others combine two factors “goal” and “effort” to define motivation. Therefore, we can believe that motivation in English learning is commonly composed of three components: the goal of learning English; the efforts learners make in the process of achieving this goal, and the combination of the goal and the effort.

C. Learning Strategies

In the field of language learning, what kinds of strategies the learners should adopt to understand, learn or remember the information has been the primary concern of the researchers who deal with the area of foreign language learning. It was found that different learners carry out their learning in different ways. And good language learners seem to use a variety of language learning strategies appropriately.

As we know, learning strategies means the practical activities and skills which contribute to learning. Any learners can employ the learning strategies which they like. So, learning strategies is also one of the crucial factors of fostering

learner autonomy. The more strategies the learners possess, the more confident they will feel when they act independently. Thereby, learners can use more efficient learning strategies through their experience in learning. However, if teachers also master good learning strategies, it will help them be more competent for encouraging their students to improve in this aspect; and it is also helpful for themselves as learners. Thus, teachers should apply more flexible teaching means to provide students more freedom and choices, such as materials, assistant facility, time schedule and so on. According to the above statements, we can know it is very important for both students and teachers to be aware of learning strategies.

D. Fostering Learner Autonomy in ELT

1. Setting up Self-access Centers

Traditional teacher-centered English teaching approach takes less notice of learners' attitudes towards English learning, their motivation and their strategies. In such environment, learner doesn't have their real desire for learning, but is just forced to learn because they want to pass the exams or to find a good job in the future. Consequently, many learners lack appropriable motivation and enough confidence in their English learning. What's more, learners can't get their own learning needs and can't choose their own styles and materials as they like in the teacher-dependent learning environments. Therefore, it is urgent to call for improving the learning environment.

Self-access centers (SACs) for language learning have become more popular in recent years. In some universities, many self-access centers have been built up., The functions of self-access centers are, on the one hand, to provide various language learning materials to meet independent language learners' needs, such as newspapers, magazines, dictionaries, encyclopedia kinds of books of various kinds, audio tapes, audio-recorders, video players, headphones, computers, TV sets, photocopy machines, separate small rooms, counselors being available at any time; on the other hand, to nurture learners' ability of independent learning by encouraging them to develop their learning strategies, to reflect on their learning processes and to take on more responsibility. (Huaweifen, 2001, P.41) In this way, learners can have more freedom and choice to learn what they like, at the same time, they can enhance their motivation and confidence, which will be conducive to work towards autonomy in English learning.

Since self-access centers can encourage learners as they like so to improve their language skills, learners may take part in some activities to improve their language ability.

a. Individual Activities

Many activities aim at encouraging learners to become actively involved in learning tasks. Learners may use every facility in SACs according to their personal needs. For example, for beginners, instructors at the centers may offer them some pieces of advices about how to choose learning materials, how to make full use of the facilities at the centers. The aim will be to create an open environment, within which learners can find kinds of things which they like and they don't know. Thereby, they can find their varied learning methods through them. For intermediate learners, instructors may allocate duty hours to them and give them manageable tasks to be finished during their duty hours. For example, learners may tidy up book shelves, answer questions from other users about materials, decorate walls, and write down the notice. For advanced learners, instructors may provide information for learners and explain that they can easily find pathways and methods in English learning through difference sources of English materials in a SAC. All these activities are beneficial for learners to develop autonomy in their English learning.

b. Group Activities

Individual activities have specific tasks and focuses in terms of language skills and levels, while group activities aim at encouraging learners to jointly participate in a group. This kind of activities can propel learners to communicate with confidence and deal with the relationship with others. Group work can thus enable learners to learn from each other, give each other advice on their learning methods and encourage them to take responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, in order to finish a certain task, group members should have strong responsibility and develop independence for the final success, whether of the individual or of the whole group. Therefore, group work provides learners with an environment in which learners feel equal to each other, thus "strengthening their confidence and helping them take on more responsibility for their learning" (Yuan xiao hua, 2001, P.51). Group activities in SACs include lots of forms, such as English clubs, workshops and so on. Here is an example of group activity named as English club.

The majority of colleges or universities establish an English club as a way of encouraging students to communicate with each other in English in a non-classroom setting. This club creates a free, easy exotic environment and caters for lots of learners' needs to learn English. It may carry out different activities for learners, such as English party, free talks, debates, dramas, etc. All these activities can encourage learners to learn from each other and to exert their work team spirit and work together for completing each task and more importantly, to train their sense of responsibility for these activities.

Self-access centers will provide learners a new learning environment. Learners can choose whatever they like, and participate in kinds of activities. At the same time, teachers also can join in them and instruct them to use these facilities in SACs. Most importantly, all these activities are designed to motivate learners and to develop autonomy in their English learning. In doing these activities, learners need to be familiar with the facilities available, adjust their own learning strategies and take on more responsibility for their English learning. All in all, learners need to have basic conditions to foster their autonomy in English learning, i.e. attitudes, motivations and strategies.

2. The Change of Teachers' Roles in Fostering Learner Autonomy

Teachers play a crucial role in supporting learners' work towards autonomy. They should reconsider their own roles in English teaching and guide learners to be accustomed to the shift from teacher-dependence to teacher-independence. However, many learners are still used to teachers' authoritative roles in their English teaching. In order to encourage learners to accept responsibility for their own learning, teachers "play various roles and multiple responsibilities in fostering learner autonomy in English language classroom" (Weiyuyan, 2002, P. 11). They act as facilitators, instructors and resource.

In recent years the language learners' autonomy has drawn more and more attention. And accordingly there is much change in the role of teachers. The teachers are to guide learners, not to explicitly pass on knowledge to learners. So they are recognized as facilitators. Benson and Voller (1997, P. 101) point out "the ideal of the teacher as a facilitator of learning, as a helper whose role is to facilitate learning, is perhaps the most commonly used term in discussions of autonomous learning." As we know, learners used to sit in the classroom, and wait to be taught, so it is not easy for teachers to direct them to autonomous learning. The facilitators should be careful, supportive, approving and patient, empathic when they try to direct learners towards autonomy. So, the teachers as facilitators should help learners overcome difficulties with encouragement and patience, provide learner training to help learners find learning styles and proper learning strategies, communicate efficiently with learners and more importantly, avoid manipulating and controlling learners.

When the learners become more independent in learning, teachers' roles have been shifted from facilitators to instructors. Instructors need to offer suggestions, answer questions, supply information on a variety of levels from different learners either when they are in classroom settings or in self-access centers. Similar to the function of facilitators, teachers as instructors also may encourage learners to carry out various activities in order to stir up their motivation of learning.

Resource is the third role of the teacher plays in fostering learner autonomy. The word "resource" means something or someone that you can use or refer to. If someone has source he or she can take advantage of the ability to solve problems and difficulties quickly and efficiently. Then, self-access facilities we discussed above also belong to resource center containing kinds of materials which may help learners learn English. So, there comes one problem: if learners can completely learn English with autonomy, then they may not need teachers longer. Now teachers have to be warned that they need constantly enrich themselves in knowledge and become more knowledgeable about English and the materials available. Therefore, teachers themselves should also improve their own expertise, promote their abilities of English teaching, and strengthen their sense of responsibility. If teachers consider their new role, they are capable of direct properly learners towards autonomy.

Therefore, teachers' roles as facilitators, counselors and resource may be seen as the necessary stages to lead learners to autonomy in their English learning. These roles of teachers will provide learners a more conducive learning environment. Then teachers will considerate sufficiently the learners' attitudes, motivation, and their learning strategies, help them solve problems in a more efficient way and more importantly, give them more freedom and opportunities to deal with their own learning.

E. Summary

On the whole, based on what we have discussed above, we know that "attitudes, motivation, and learning strategies" are three main conditions for learner autonomy in English language learning. Only under the conditions that learners have a positive attitude towards English learning, a real desire to learn and proper learning strategies, can they study toward autonomy in their English learning process. So, learner training for fostering learner autonomy should take these conditions into full consideration. Besides, teachers also need assume their responsibility, access to the facilities in SCAs to help and encourage learners, and provide valuable support for fostering learning autonomy in the teaching of English. Meanwhile, in order to guide learners towards autonomy, teachers themselves should also improve their own expertise and teaching skills and strengthen their own sense of responsibility.

IV. CONCLUSION

Autonomy in language learning is a desirable goal for educational reasons. It advocates that learners should assume more responsibility for their own language learning instead of following teachers' ideas. If learners feel that they can make decisions about their English learning and learn in their own ways, they are more likely to develop a heart need for learning English rather than being forced to learn.

It should also be recognized that learner autonomy takes a long time to develop, for it is a long process rather than a short state. Therefore, directing learners towards autonomy may be a rather complicated process. Many learners, even many teachers, are still under the strong influence of the teacher-centered approach, which will make them find it rather difficult to change their roles respectively. At the same time, there are also some difficulties in the autonomous learning way. In some ways, learners may be more aware of themselves and their language study, and further develop language ability. In this way, some need, such as the need of learners' attitudes, motivation and strategies. Besides these, teacher autonomy is necessary in the success of fostering learner autonomy. Promoting learner autonomy is all about changes and choices. Teachers need to give up the idea of complete independence as the alternative to complete dependence.

Some universities and colleges may have many difficulties to set up self-access centers to support learners. In this

case, learners cannot be provided by convenient facilities and enough resources to support their learning. However, as someone proclaims, modern society has recognized that teaming not only takes place on the college, but more importantly, it occurs outside the college and learning has become a life-long task. Therefore, no matter how long the road towards autonomy may take, how difficult the complete of autonomous learning mode will be and how challenging the roles of both teachers and learners will be, teachers and learners should spend more time and effort fostering learner autonomy in English teaching and learning, working together to create a more autonomy-supportive and learning environment in which learners can assume more responsibility for their own English learning. Only so doing learners acquire skills for life-long learning and make us become skilled English learners.

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