



## LEARNING AUTONOMY: CRUX OF LEARNING

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**ABSTRACT**

Learning autonomy and autonomous learning a practice are one response to the challenges of the 21st century educational milieu in relation to teaching and learning theories, learning styles, and strategies and approaches that can meet the needs of the modern technology revolution and job opportunities. Learner autonomy focuses first and primarily on a learner-centred approach to learning. In learning autonomy, learners are encouraged to mirror their learning processes and develop a meaningful relation to it. There are three basic pedagogical principles in learning autonomy, viz., learner involvement, learner reflection, and appropriate target and use of language. Learners should develop a capacity for reflection and recognize strategies that help them succeed and develop learner autonomy. Psychological research indicates that autonomous learners have characteristics such as high motivation, self-efficacy, positive attitude, a nature of personality development, curiosity, need for success, and a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Vygotsky's theory is the more capable other's often a teacher or parent, wants the learner to develop self-regulatory abilities that allow him or her to act intentionally and independently. The more capable other provides the learner with scaffolding consisting of various types of assistance, which can be removed as the learner becomes more self-regulated. It is in this context the present study has been undertaken, keeping the following research questions in mind: Does our education help to develop independent learners and thinkers for the future? Do we find any theoretical base regarding learning autonomy? and How can we achieve learner autonomy?

**KEYWORDS :** Learning autonomy, Characteristics of autonomous learners, Autonomous learning activities, Psychological perspectives on learner autonomy.

**INTRODUCTION**

The concept of "autonomous learning" came from debates about the development of lifelong learning skills and the development of independent thinkers. It is a kind of individual thinking and way of learning. Holec had defined autonomy as the capacity to take charge of one's learning. Learner autonomy is a vital theme of the learner's psychological relation to the progression and content of learning. Kenny states that autonomy is not only the freedom to learn, but also the opportunity to become a person. Learning autonomy helps to develop individual freedom, and creates innovation and novelty in the respective disciplines of knowledge.

Learning autonomy and autonomous learning practices have emerged as responses to the challenges of the 21st century educational environment in relation to teaching and learning theories, learning styles, and strategies and approach that can meet the needs of the contemporary technology revolution and job market. Learning autonomy is a pedagogical concept that a teacher should see as an ability of the learner, a goal wherein learners make his/her own decision, and also assumes accountability for them. However, in the present scenario, learners may have lost some of their autonomy due to "spoon feeding" tendencies or parents eager to send their children for tuition classes of formal education. It is in this context that the present article has been undertaken, keeping following research questions in mind: Does our education help to develop independent learners and thinkers for the future? Is there any theoretical base regarding learning autonomy? How can we achieve learner autonomy?

Learner autonomy focuses first and primarily on a learner-centred approach to learning. Learners are encouraged to decisively mirror their learning processes and develop a meaningful relation to it. Learner autonomy is based on a variety of philosophical, political, pedagogical, and psychological ideas. It emerged in 1979 with Henri Holec's Concept of Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning.

**Definitions of Autonomous Learners**

Holec (1981) defines autonomous learners as "Being capable of taking charge of his own learning and making all the dimensions concerning the learning with which he is or wishes to be involved".

According to Dickinson, "Having total responsibility for making and implementing all of the decisions concerned with Learners own learning" is called an autonomous learner. He also says willingness to by taking responsibility for their own learning process, autonomous learners can identify goals, formulate their own goals, and can change the goals to suit their own learning needs and interest.

Damm opined that Learning Autonomy is taking active part in the social process of learning (1995).

According to Breen and Mann, an autonomous learner shows a desire to learn, has a robust sense of self, metacognitive capacity, and a capacity to negotiate.

By analyzing all the above definitions, it can be concluded that, "Learning autonomy is a kind of independent learning, and with respect to all the domains of human activity like physical, moral, social, cognitive, emotional, psychomotor activity of learning, and contributing for the development of individual according to once own ability".

**Characteristics of Autonomous Learner's**

1. Learners use and construct learning opportunities to study exclusively on their own,
2. Learners develop acquisition and implication of self- directed learning skills,
3. Learners develop inborn capacity, which had been subjugated by institutional education,
4. Learners exercise accountability for their own learning, and
5. Learners determine the direction of their own learning.

Weden (1998) presents a summative list of characteristics that autonomous learners need to develop:

1. Insight into learning styles and strategies,
2. An active approach to the learning task at hand,
3. Willingness to take risks,
4. Guessing abilities,
5. Accuracy and appropriateness,
6. The ability to process language into a separate reference system, and
7. The willingness to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply.

**Autonomous Learning Strategies**

Here are a few strategies that can help build an autonomous learning environment:

- Cooperative learning in pairs or small groups,
- Problem-based learning situations that require students to use their knowledge to create solutions for specific situations,
- Writing in journals and reflecting on what, why, and how they

learn,

- Assembling portfolios that document their learning process over a period of time,
- Using rubrics with the intention of include the learner's individual expectations and a self-assessment component, and
- Peer appraisal that allows students to evaluate each other using rubrics and clearly stated objectives.

### Autonomous Learning Activities

There are several activities one can use in his/her classroom as he/she builds learning autonomy and some of these are explained below:

- Learner chart,
- Think-Pair-Share,
- K-W-L chart,
- Application cards, and
- Admit and exit slips.

### Learner Chart

A learning chart is a record of a student's experiences using their language outside the classroom, including "the when and the where" of language use and why certain experiences are successful and others are not. Students may also use charts to comment on what they have studied in the class and to record what they have understood and what they have not. An advantage of a learning chart is that they can contribute to the teacher's understanding of the students' use of metacognitive learning strategies. It is a kind of self- reflection and greater independent thinking essential for a student.

### Think-Pair-Share

Think-Pair-Share is a cooperative learning strategy, which allows students to think about a question, idea, issue, or notion, and share their thoughts with partners before discussion in a small group. It is a simple strategy, effective from early childhood through all subsequent phases of education. It helps to develop skills of sharing information, listening, asking questions, summarizing others' ideas, and paraphrasing a communication. The procedure for a Think-Pair-Share is follows.

1. Teacher poses a problem or asks an open-ended question to which there may be a variety of answers.
2. Teacher gives the students "think time", directing them to think about the question.
3. Following "think time", students face their learning partner and work together by sharing ideas, discussing, clarifying, and/or challenging each other's answers.
4. The pair then shares their ideas with another pair or with the whole class. It is important for students to share their partner's ideas as well as their own.

### KWLchart

With this type of chart, individual students provide examples of what they know, what they wonder or want to know, and what they learned. KWL charts are especially effective when used at the beginning and at the end of a period of study. At the start of a lesson or a unit, the completed charts can help the teacher learn about the student's background knowledge and interests. At the end of a lesson or unit, the charts can help the students reflect on what they have learned as well as gain awareness of their improvements. They may also be evidence to show what they have learned.

#### • K stands for Know

What do I already know about this topic?

#### • W stands for Will or Want

What do I think I will learn about this topic?

What do I want to know about this topic?

What I want to Become?

#### • L stands for Learned

What have I learned about this topic?

What strategy I can use for Learning?

#### • E (optional) stands for Evidence

How can I show what I have learned about this topic?

### How can I demonstrate this?

#### Application cards

These cards help students understand how to apply a concept in the real world. After teaching a lesson, the students should be asked to write down at least one real-world application for what they just learned. This helps the students to connect new knowledge to its application. The cards should be gathered from the students and reviewed. These cards provide a sense for how well the students have understood a concept.

#### Admit and exit slips

An admit slip is a student's entry ticket into class. It is filled out before the class begins or during the first few minutes of class. Students are allowed to exit the classroom when they submit an exit slip to the teacher. The exit slip is completed during the last few minutes of the class. This enables students to provide the teacher with feedback about the teaching, a summary of ideas and skills learned, or a demonstration of their comprehension.

Admit and exit slips are an effective way to informally assess students understanding of new or old concepts and determine where the students need additional clarification or assistance. These slips also stimulate critical thinking and act as a springboard to link new learning with existing knowledge.

#### Learner Autonomy

Lerner autonomy refers to a student's ability to set appropriate learning goals and take charge of his or her own learning. However, autonomous learners are dependent upon teachers to create and maintain learning environments that support the development of learner autonomy. Since then, depending on the views of writers, the context and the level of debate educators have come to, many definitions have emerged. It has been considered as a personal human trait, as a political measure, or as an educational move. This is because autonomy is seen either as a means or as an end (or both) in education. Some of the most well-known definitions are:

- In the words of Holmes and Ramos, Learner Autonomy is In order to help learners to assume greater control over their own learning it is important to help them to become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use.
- According to Leslie Dickinson, "Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his/her learning and the implementation of those decisions".
- Phil Benson said "Autonomy is recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems".

#### Learner Autonomy and Responsibility of the Teacher

There are three basic pedagogical principles: learner involvement, learner reflection, and appropriate target use of language for the development of learner autonomy. These principles identify the roles and responsibilities of a teacher in such a situation. Accordingly, the teacher can:

- Involve her learners on a non-stop search for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analyzed, and evaluated with the whole class in the target language,
- Help learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities subjecting them to discussion, analysis, and evaluation again on the target language;
- Require the learners to identify individual learning goals, but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups;
- Require learners to keep written records or their learning plans of lessons and projects, and lists of useful terms whatever texts they themselves produce; and
- Engage the learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class in the target language. This shows that a teacher is not free in an autonomous class, rather he or she has more responsibilities.

#### Creating Learner Autonomy

A teacher should try regularly to motivate learners to think about why

they are learning certain things, exactly what they are learning, and how they learn most effectively. Learners should develop a capacity for reflection and recognize strategies that help them to succeed.

It is important that both the teacher and the learner use the target language as much as possible in all difficulty circumstances. Language learners should be given numerous opportunities to use the target language in meaningful contexts with their peers. These activities create an environment that will reinforce each learner's goals, celebrate small success, and gradually build awareness of the learning process.

### Psychological Perspectives on Learner Autonomy

The psychological perspective examines the intellectual and emotional characteristics of learners, who are viewed either as individuals or as members of a rather universal social or cultural group. Psychological research indicates that autonomous learners have characteristics such as high motivation, self-efficacy, positive attitudes, a sort of personality development, inquisitiveness, need for achievement, and a combination of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation. Students are "extrinsically" motivated when learning is done for the sake of reward, such as grades and praise, in the beginning and novelty and innovation in the later stages, that are not inherently associated with the learning itself. In contrast, students are "intrinsically" motivated when the reward for learning is enjoyment of the activity itself or a feeling of competence in doing the task. In intrinsically motivating tasks, student may experience flow in the moment, and optimal sensation of enjoyment and competence. Motivation is the key factor in learning autonomy.

### Socio-Cultural Perspective on Learner Autonomy

Unlike the psychological perspective, the socio-cultural perspective accentuates social interaction as a major part of cognitive development of human capacity via interaction. In the socio-cultural perspective, learning is situated in a particular context, i.e., social and cultural setting populated by specific individuals at a given historical time. Second, context also consists of a particular kind of relationship, which is mediated learning. Mediation involves dynamic interaction between the "learner and a more capable other". For Vygotsky, cognitive development consists of the conversion of social relations into mental functions through mediated learning. Mediation helps the learner move through the zone of proximal development (ZPD). The ZPD represents the difference between (a) the learner's performance without assistance, and (b) the learner's performance with assistance.

In the Vygotsky theory, the more capable others, often a teacher or parent, wants the learner to develop self-regulatory abilities that allow him or her to act intentionally and independently. The more capable other provides the learner with scaffolding consisting of various types of assistance, which can be removed as the learner becomes more self-regulated. Through the use of appropriate scaffolding at just the right times, the more capable other helps the learner move through the ZPD. Scaffolding is not a one-time thing and neither is its removal. It is a spiralling cyclical movement that involves both social engagement and separation.

The socio-cultural view entails that the learner is motivated to become a self-regulated learner. The more capable other must start by accepting learners where they are and must also motivate and guide them to greater competence. In Vygotsky's theory, self-regulation is the process of setting-up direct and observes one's own attention and behaviour.

### Approaches to Encouraging Autonomy

Approaches which assist the learners to move from teacher reliance towards autonomy are described in various terms. The most common are person directed learning, identity instruction, self-regulating learning, and self-access learning. Holec states that learner's responsibility is an "attitude to the learning tasks" within which learners must accept responsibility for decision making, but do not necessarily implement the decision. Traditionally, the student is highly dependent on the teacher.

Having assessed the student's autonomous learning abilities, the next step is to consider ways of helping them to acquire new skills or develop their feeble learning areas. An interesting insight into these two aspects of autonomous learning is provided by the work of Abercrombie, who used small group discussion approach to enable students to explore topic areas and helped each participant to understand his own behaviour and acquire better control over it.

The nature of the discussion is "free" or "associative", i.e., members are free to participate as they wish and to follow-up their own and others associations with the topic. Each participant can see how his past experiences and habitual ways of reacting to the content influences his own process of insight and interpretation of existing events. He can analyze his own reactions in evaluation and contrast to the variety displayed by other members, and change if he wishes to.

The improvement of school pedagogy has been a constant concern receiving special attention in educational research and developments. However, there appears to be a big gap between current educational research and classroom practice.

Autonomy is also considered a value for those who share Carl Rogers' assumptions of humanistic psychology, where analyzing advantages and disadvantages of particular actions and taking responsibility for the consequence of one's own decisions follow from the choices of life goals. Autonomy is part of social and interpersonal growth of the learner as a future citizen. It is a part of the natural learning process, where the learner assimilates new knowledge and integrates it with the knowledge already acquired. Autonomy helps cater for individual learning style and strategies and differences, and promotes individual learning strategies.

### Conclusion

Since learner autonomy promotes lifelong learning, the broader aim of education, can be achieved. Promoting learner autonomy is essential nowadays because the society is in flux, and things and scenarios are changing every day, every pupil getting education for the purpose of human resource development, i.e, after certain years of formal education pupil can stand in his/her own feet. But unfortunately today, spoon feeding education system is more, and most of the students' projects are done by their parents, while students attend extra hours of classes in the tuition or under the heading of coaching leading to more and more cognitive load on the children. More and more study, or rote Learning, more and more drilling leads to degenerate an individual's autonomy of learning. A true independent learner only contributes in future days for the development of nation. Innovation and research and development are important for a developing country, further, learner autonomy works in any culture and individualistic cultures is more supportive among this. It should start from the perspective that all the learners have the power and right to learn autonomously. What should be borne in mind is that successful learners tend to be autonomous. It should also be remembered that total autonomy is neither possible nor desirable, for no one is totally free from external limitations and restrictions. Teachers are always in constraints. To provide autonomy to the learners, teachers should themselves be provided with the opportunity for firsthand experience of .autonomy in their own training and professional development. The learner autonomy concept is less highlighted in the field of instructional psychology or other allied disciplines of education and psychology, further by keeping learner autonomy one can do further empirical studies. Teacher educators, teachers, and social thinkers can think on these aspects of education.

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