Autonomy and self-regulation in language learning

Autonomy is a long-term aim of education and one of the most important factors in successful language learning (Candy, 1988; Pennycook, 1997). Autonomy is defined as “the ability to take responsibility for one’s learning” as used by Benson (2001), Dickinson (1987), and Holec (1981). These authors argue that autonomy is not innate but develops through learner training, i.e., learners need to be taught learning strategies and how to use them.

The concept of learner autonomy has been central when discussing language teaching and learning since 1979, when Henri Holec wrote Autonomy and Foreign Language. Holec defined learner autonomy as the “ability to take charge of one’s own learning”, noting that this ability “is not inborn but must be acquired either by ‘natural’ means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, i.e. in a systematic, deliberate way”, and pointed out that “To take charge of one’s learning is to have ... the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning” (Holec 1981, p. 3).

Students take their first step towards developing the ability to take charge of their own learning when they accept full responsibility for the learning process, acknowledging that success in learning depends crucially on themselves rather than on other people. What is more, Holec’s definition entails that autonomous learners can freely apply their knowledge and skills outside the immediate context of learning.

According to a large body of research in social psychology, autonomy – “feeling free and volitional in one’s actions” (Deci 1995, p.2) – is a basic human need. It is promoted by, and in turn promotes, our intrinsic motivation and interest in the world around us. This explains how learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation: autonomous learners draw on
their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning; success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation. Because autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient. The efficiency of the autonomous learner means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom.

In formal educational contexts, learner autonomy entails reflective involvement in planning, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating learning. It is important to remember that language learning depends crucially on language use: we can learn to speak only by speaking, to read only by reading, etc. Thus, in formal language learning, the scope of **learner autonomy is always constrained by what the learner can do in the target language.**

The development of autonomy in language learning is governed by three basic pedagogical principles:

- **learner involvement** – engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process;
- **learner reflection** – helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning;
- **appropriate target language use** – using the target language as the principal medium of language learning.

The teacher plays a crucial role in developing learners' autonomy. It is recommended the teacher:

- use the target language as the preferred medium of classroom communication and require the same of the learners;
- involve the learners in a non-stop quest for good learning activities, which are shared, discussed, analyzed and evaluated with the whole class – in the target language, to begin with in very simple terms;
- help the learners to set their own learning targets and choose their own learning activities, subjecting them to discussion, analysis and evaluation – again, in the target language;
- require the learners to identify individual goals but pursue them through collaborative work in small groups;
- require the learners to keep a written record of their learning – plans of lessons and projects, lists of useful vocabulary, whatever texts they themselves produce;
- engage the learners in regular evaluation of their progress as individual learners and as a class – in the target language.
Autonomy in language learning is also discussed under the label of "self-regulation". Self-regulation emerged in the literature of health psychology, educational psychology, and organizational psychology. Self-regulation is defined by Pintrich (1995) as "an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features in the environment" (Boekaerts, Pintrich, and Zeidner, 2000, p. 453).

Teachers question whether or not to teach self-regulation skills in addition to the content of their subjects. It is obvious that students need self-regulation skills together with the content knowledge because such skills benefit the students in their ability to regulate their learning in and outside the classroom. The development of such skills supports the achievement of personal goals in changing learning environments. Learners with high levels of self-regulation have good control over the attainment of their goals.

Students can be taught to become more self-regulated learners by acquiring specific strategies that are both successful for them and that enable them to increase their control over their own behavior and environment. Most researchers agree that the best learning occurs when someone carefully observes and considers his/her own behavior. Students who are self-regulated must learn to ask themselves "Does this strategy work for me in this situation?" According to Zimmerman (1989), self-regulation is "self-generated thoughts, feelings, and actions used to attain goals. " Zimmerman suggests that self-regulated learning involves the regulation of three general aspects of academic learning:
First, self-regulation of behavior involves the active control of the various resources that students have available to them, such as their time, their study environment (e.g., the place in which they study), and their use of others such as peers and faculty members to help them (Zimmerman, 1989).

Second, self-regulation of motivation involves controlling and changing motivational beliefs such as self-efficacy and goal orientation, so that students can adapt to the demands of a course. In addition, students can learn how to control their emotions and affect (such as anxiety) in ways that improve their learning (Zimmerman, 1989).

Third, self-regulation of cognition involves the control of various cognitive strategies for learning, such as the use of deep processing strategies that result in better learning and performance than students showed previously (Zimmerman, 1989).

Many researchers have noted the importance of self-regulated learning for students at all academic levels, and for a teacher it is important to remember that self-regulation can be taught, learned and controlled. Zimmerman (1989) reported that successful students use of self-regulated learning strategies resulted in success in school.

One of the teacher's responsibilities is to develop self-regulation skills in students. This development usually involves the following:

- Self-observation—systematically monitoring of the performance;
- Self-judgment—systematically comparing performance with a set goal
- Self-reaction—engaging in personal processes (i.e., goal-setting).

In addition, it is important to introduce self-regulation strategies. Self-regulation strategies used by successful students can fall into three categories: personal, behavioral, and environmental.

1. Personal. These strategies usually involve how a student organizes and interprets information and can include:
   - Organizing and transforming information (summarizing, rearrangement of materials, flashcards, diagrams, charts).
   - Goal setting and planning/standard setting (sequencing, timing, completing, time management).
   - Keeping records and monitoring (note-taking, lists of errors made, record of marks, portfolio, keeping all drafts of assignments).
   - Rehearsing and memorizing (teaching someone else the material, making sample questions, using repetition).

2. Behavioral: These strategies involve actions that the student takes.
   - Self-evaluating, i.e. checking quality or progress (task analysis, self-instructions, enactive feedback, attentiveness)
   - Self-consequating (self-motivation; self-reinforcement).
3. Environmental: These strategies involve seeking assistance and structuring of the physical study environment.
   - Seeking information (library, Internet)
   - Environmental structuring (selecting or arranging the physical setting, isolating/eliminating or minimizing distractions, break up study periods and spread them over time)
   - Seeking social assistance (from peers, from teachers or other adults).

When providing self-regulation strategies to students, a teacher should be aware that it is a challenging process and a first attempt may not be successful because it takes time and practice to gain effective habits. Five common instructional practices that are effective in helping students learn self-regulation include:

1. Guide learners’ self-beliefs, goal setting, and expectations (help students frame new information or feedback in a positive rather than a negative manner, provide specific cues for using self-regulatory strategies);
2. Promote reflective dialogue (group discussions to think through problems, collaborative learning);
3. Provide corrective feedback (performance standards must be clear and perceived as attainable);
4. Help learners make connections between abstract concepts (use examples that students come up with themselves, help students learn to separate relevant from irrelevant information);
5. Help learners link new experiences to prior learning (focus on application of knowledge in broader contexts; integrate real-life examples with classroom information).

The Learning Academy Model (Zimmerman, Bonner, and Kovach, 1996) helps students focus on behavior and emphasizes expert and peer modeling, direct social feedback for performance efforts, and practice routines that involve goal-setting and self-monitoring.

Students are taught to control their learning processes with self-monitoring and self-regulation so they can learn more with less effort by using the following steps:

- Evaluate current level of mastery;
- Analyze the learning task;
- Set learning goals;
- Choose appropriate strategies to master material;
- Monitor own performance.

The following teaching strategies are recommended (Zimmerman, Bonner, and Kovach, 1996):

- break tasks into components;
- use direct assistance and explicit training;
- anticipate students’ questions; have clear policy;
- incorporate symbolic forms of information (pictures, diagrams, formulas);
- link strategy use with improved performance, i.e., maintain portfolios.

Self-regulation skills are not in-born characteristics; the teacher plays a great role in helping students self-regulate. Teachers can help students acquire self-regulation skills by a) structuring their courses and instructional methods that aid students in becoming self-regulators (Pintrich, 1995) b) offering challenging tasks that stimulate student engagement. The teacher should a) begin with tasks that students can accomplish to provide optimal opportunities of success b) identify methods that the students can use when solving a problem c) keep records of students' progress. Teachers need to help students to see their overall performance; they should establish the level of proficiency to be reached and explain how to reach the goals.