APPROACHES TO FOSTER LEARNER AUTONOMY IN EFL LEARNING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

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A B S T R A C T

Learner autonomy has been a major topic of research in foreign language education for a long time. Despite the prevalent consensus that learner autonomy is concerned with a learner's capacity to take control or take charge of his/her own learning (Benson, 2013), this does not mean that the teacher's role is unnecessary. In recent years, many approaches to promoting learner autonomy have been suggested and many empirical studies have been carried out to examine the effectiveness of the approaches. This paper aimed at reviewing approaches to promoting learner autonomy. First, the definitions of learner autonomy are presented, followed by a discussion of the teacher's roles in promoting learner autonomy. Next, six approaches to fostering learner autonomy as proposed by Benson (2001) are reviewed with references to both theories and results of empirical research. Based on the review, it can be concluded that teachers play an important role in the development of learner autonomy, and although the six approaches have different emphases, they seem to have more similarities than differences, particularly in encouraging learners to plan and follow their language learning paths to attain their goals. Implications for future research are put forward.

Introduction

Learner autonomy has been a central focus of research and practice in language education for some thirty years. The obvious escalating trend of learner-centered pedagogy and technology-based learning approach makes the point clear that learner autonomy is an important component in language education. Although there has long been ubiquitous consensus that learner autonomy is concerned with a learner's capacity to take control of their own learning (Benson, 2013), teachers' roles in the development of learner autonomy are important. According to La Ganza (2008), learner autonomy is an 'achievement' which is attained reciprocally between the learner and the teacher. It is dependent on "the capacity of the teacher and learner to develop and maintain an interrelational climate characterized by the teacher's holding back from influencing the learner, and the learner's holding back from seeking the teacher's influence" (p. 66). Even in more independent modes of learning, the teacher may be regarded as a form of support to the learner who progressively becomes more autonomous (Lamb, 2008, p. 272).

Although LA has been an area of interest in the field of language education for some thirty years, many definitions have been given to the term. Holec (1981) defined LA as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p. 3). Little (1991) defined the concept as "a capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action" (p. 4). He further explains that the capacity for autonomy is manifested in how learners go about their learning and how they transfer what they have learned to wider contexts. Whereas, Dickinson (1987) regarded LA as a situation rather than an attribute of the learner. In his view, LA is "the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the

implementation of those decisions" (p. 11). Autonomy is seen as supreme responsibility for one's learning so it is performed without the investment of a teacher, institution, or specifically prepared materials. Pennycook (1997) defined LA as "the struggle to become the author of one's own world, to be able to create own meanings, to pursue cultural alternatives amid the cultural politics of everyday life" (p. 39). On consideration of the above definitions, it is clear that the LA has been described in many ways and used very broadly. However, there is a general consensus that the term is best used to refer to the capacity to take control or take charge of one's own learning (Benson, 2013).

Many researchers (e.g. Benson, 2013; Little, 1991; Wright, 1987), however, have drawn attention to how the teacher in an autonomous classroom performs differently from the teacher in a traditional classroom. Unlike in a traditional classroom where the teacher usually acts as a transmitter of knowledge, the teacher in an autonomous learning situation plays multiple roles (Wright, 1987). There is a consensus among researchers that the teacher in autonomous learning classrooms acts as a counselor, facilitator, advisor, manager, and/or guide (e.g. Benson, 2013; Camilleri, 1999; Gardner & Miller, 1999; Voller, 1997). According to Camilleri (1999), the major role of teachers where there is learner autonomy is 'awareness' of self. The teachers must be cognizant of their influence on the learning process, should also understand pedagogy, and possess management skills. Such a teacher, according to Camilleri, takes up the roles of manager, resource person, and counselor. As a manager, they possess the capacity to plan the most potential directions available for their students and the consequences of following any particular direction. As a resource person, a teacher enhances the conditions of learning by providing help to learners to make them aware of an entire range of possible choices and strategies. As a counselor, a teacher has the capacity to accompany the learners in their learning process and to respond to anticipated learning problems.

According to Little (2009), since the goal of language learning is to develop learner proficiency in the target language, and if language learning is dependent primarily on language use, then the teacher's role is to set up classroom communication in a way that provides learners with "access to a full range of discourse roles, initiating as well as responding" (p. 153). In addition, teachers must help their learners "to identify their individual and collective learning needs and find ways of meeting them; and they must initiate, model and support the various forms of discourse required for learner involvement, learner reflection and appropriate target language use" (p. 155).

While teachers play an important role in promoting learner autonomy, very little literature on the approaches that they can use to promote learner autonomy has been published. Thus, this paper is of importance as it outlined six approaches proposed by Benson (2001) and reviewed them based on related theories and results of empirical inquiries on the implementations of methods or techniques of promoting learner autonomy that belong to each approach.

Research Method

The type of this research is a literature review with a document analysis method. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are reviewed and evaluated to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge (Bowen, 2009; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The literature used includes books on related topics, proceedings, and articles or empirical research results, which were mostly published in accredited international journals. The documents were first searched and collected from various sources such as books, journals, and electronic databases. Then,

six different approaches to promote learner autonomy proposed by Benson (2001) were reviewed and discussed with references to theories and results from previous research.

Results and Discussion

Resource-based approaches

Resource-based approaches to learner autonomy place emphasis on the provision of opportunities for learners to direct their own learning in self-study, self-access, and distance learning. The main instruments for the operation of these approaches are materials and counseling. With the provision of opportunities that involve self-access or self-regulation and resources and counseling for learning, learners can direct their learning (Benson, 2001). Self-access centers have recently become popular as venues where learner autonomy is promoted since they typically provide opportunities for self-access language learning "which may be linked to taught courses but also available to independent users" (Gardner & Miller, 2014, p. 3). A self-access center is seen as a "way of encouraging learners to move from teacher dependence towards autonomy" (Gardner & Miller, 1999, p. 8). To promote learner independence through self-access centers, teachers should provide students with training on how to raise their awareness and how to control their own learning. In order that this goal can be attained, the teacher must provide support for the learners in setting their objectives, taking into account the needs of the learners, and evaluating their progress, and the materials should be easily accessible and learners' feedback should be encouraged (Sheerin, 1997). Studies have shown that the learning structure developed in a self-access center leads to student willingness to take responsibility for their learning (e.g. Murray, 2009). However, the use of self-access centers for promoting learner autonomy is not without criticism, particularly in terms of their organization and activities. Littlejohn (1997), for example, condemned self-access centers for hindering learners' creativity. He explained that the types of tasks and activities learners performed in self-access centers engaged them more in reproductive language use that was limited to the tasks rather than in creative language use. He recommended that there be a reorientation in the types of tasks and activities in order to provide more opportunities for learner autonomy, language use, and learning. In addition, the learners should be encouraged to carry out more active and creative roles rather than responsive and reproductive ones.

Technology-based approaches

Developments in technology have enabled learners to learn a language in a variety of ways either with or without the assistance of a teacher. Reinders and White (2011) argue that "[t]echnology has the potential to not only provide access to resources for learning in a superficial sense, but also to offer increased affordances for autonomous learning" (p. 1). Learner autonomy using technology-based approaches emphasizes variation in learning opportunities through the use of various forms of technology such as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), e-Tandem learning, and Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC).

CALL is increasingly recognized as a powerful means of developing learner autonomy (e.g. Benson, 2004). According to Beatty (2010, pp. 11-12), CALL can foster autonomy by presenting "opportunities for learners to study on their own, independent of a teacher… most CALL materials, regardless of their design, allow for endless revisiting that can help learners review those parts for which they want or require more practice." Besides CALL, e-Tandem is another way of making use of technology for developing

learner autonomy (Brammerts, 2003). According to Lewis and O'Dowd (2016), Tandem learning occurs when "two people with different mother tongues work together to learn from each other" (Brammerts, 2003, translated by Sabine Gläsmann). E-tandem, therefore, "involves two native speakers of different languages communicating together and providing feedback to each other through online communication tools with the aim of learning the other's language" (Lewis & O'Dowd, 2016, p. 11). According to Little (2003), in an e-Tandem, learner autonomy is built into the learning process right from the early phase as learners have to exercise autonomous practice by making important decisions for their learning. During this process, learners' metacognitive consciousness starts evolving as they have to reflect, to consider their mother tongue and the target language to discover the best way to correct their partners' errors.

Studies on the use of technology to foster learner autonomy have shown positive findings (e.g. Intratat, 2004; Lee, 2011; Wang-Szilas et al., 2013; Sari & Sulistyo, 2022). Intratat (2004) conducted a case study in eight universities in Thailand to investigate the problems and hindrances university teachers and students have in using CALL materials in promoting learner autonomy. The results revealed that both teachers and learners acknowledged the benefits of CALL in learning and teaching. Wang-Szilas et al. (2013) conducted a three-year project on an e-Tandem exchange course between distant languages – Chinese and French at the institutional level – between the Unit of Chinese Studies of the University of Geneva, Switzerland and the French Department of Hubei University, China showed that the benefits of e-tandem exchange claimed by the participants included improved speaking skills, better understanding the cultures, and increased self-confidence in using the target language. The statistics indicated students' active participation in the online course, especially through the posts in the forums that were open for each session. Lee (2011) looked at how using combined modalities of asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) via blogs and face-to-face interaction through ethnographic interviews with native speakers supported autonomous learning as the result of reflective and social processes. The results showed that blogs provided students with the opportunity to work independently and reflect upon cross-cultural issues. It was also indicated that different types of tasks fostered autonomy in different ways. While free topics gave students more control of their own learning, teacher-assigned topics required them to think critically about the readings. A more recent study was conducted by Sari and Sulistyo (2022) to investigate the perspectives of 95 EFL teachers on the development of Mobile-Assisted Language Learning (MALL) resources in vocational schools in the Indonesian context. The results showed that the majority of the respondents agreed that MALL resources were more accessible, easier to generate, and more effective at improving learner autonomy compared to conventional resources.

Curriculum-based approaches

Curriculum-based approaches emphasize the negotiation between teachers and learners. These approaches "extend the principles of learning control over the management of learning to the curriculum as a whole" (Benson, 2001, p. 163). In these approaches, learners are encouraged to make decisions about their own language learning process (Cotterall, 2000). The learners are expected "to make the major decisions concerning the content and procedures of learning in collaboration with their teachers" (Benson, 2001, p. 163). The idea of learner control over the curriculum is manifested through the creation of a process syllabus. In a process syllabus, "the learner participates

in the decision-making process and works with other learners and the teacher to decide what will be done in the language class and how it will be done" (Skehan, 1998, p. 262). The fundamental feature of a process syllabus is that teachers and learners can negotiate together and work through the actual curriculum in the classroom.

Besides the process syllabus, project work is another way for promoting learner autonomy. Project work is defined as "student-centred and driven by the need to create an end-product" (Fried-Booth, 2002, p. 6). According to Fried-Booth, project work is very valuable because students collaborate on a task that they have defined and created for themselves and in doing so develop independence and grow in confidence. The major aim of project-based learning is "to provide opportunities for language learners to receive comprehensible input and produce comprehensible output" (Beckett & Miller, 2006, p. 4). Project work in ESL or EFL learning is believed to be one of the best ways of developing learner autonomy, firstly because this approach encourages learners to "approach learning in their own way, appropriate to their own abilities, styles and preferences" (Skehan, 1998, p. 23), and secondly, "this approach can be adapted to almost all levels, ages and abilities and is therefore very suited to large classes with students of mixed abilities. ... Project work is a good way of helping students develop good study skills and to integrate their reading, writing, speaking and listening" (Baker & Westrup, 2000, p. 94).

Many studies have been done on the issue of project work in promoting learner autonomy (e.g. Ramírez, 2014; Nix, 2003; Stephenson & Kohyama, 2003). Ramírez (2014) conducted an action research study on promoting learner autonomy through project work in an English for Specific Purposes class at a Colombian regional and public university. Data were gathered using field notes, semi-structured interviews, questionnaires, students' artifacts, and video recordings. The results suggested that projects can make students aware of their learning skills by allowing them to work on cooperative and individual tasks. The results also indicated that most learners were aware of self-monitoring and self-evaluation strategies such as evaluating their progress and attempting to understand the reasons behind their mistakes. Stephenson and Kohyama (2003) designed a project to help students exercise more control of their learning of listening by focusing on out-of-class learning. The project involved 50 freshmen from two listening classes who met twice a week. The results showed that the students produced a variety of learning goals, interests, and activities which could be attributed to the language learning project. The results also indicated that the project led to improved students' English language proficiency. Curriculum-based approaches, including project-based learning, could be a great resource in the resource-poor Indonesian context.

Teacher-based approaches

The teacher-based approaches to autonomy place an emphasis on teacher professional development and teacher education. It has been suggested in the literature that the development of learner autonomy is dependent upon the development of teacher autonomy (Benson, 2001; Little, 1995; Thavenius, 1999). In other words, teachers should be autonomous themselves if they want to develop autonomy in their students. As Little (1995) argues, "since learning arises from interaction, and interaction is characterized by interdependence between the teacher and learners, the development of autonomy in learners presupposes the development of autonomy in teachers" (p.175). Furthermore, Thavenius (1999) argues that the development of learner autonomy involves a lot more for the role of the teacher than most teachers are aware of. For her, developing learner

autonomy is not just concerned with changing teaching techniques, it is concerned with changing the teacher's personality (p. 159).

The term teacher autonomy can be used to refer to "the teacher's ability and willingness to help learners take responsibility for their own learning" (Thavenius, 1999, p. 160). Thavenius further states that awareness is a fundamental concept in both teacher autonomy and learner autonomy. Teachers should not only be cognizant of their students' learning process but also the importance of their own role. She then argues that providing teachers with awareness training is one of the ways how teacher autonomy can be developed. According to Little (1995), it is realistic to expect that teacher education provides prospective teachers with knowledge such as research on second language learning, learning strategies, and classroom discourse. This may equip the teachers with knowledge of the importance of learner autonomy. However, according to Little, language teachers would succeed in fostering learner autonomy if they have been encouraged to be autonomous by their own education. Hence, teacher education should also equip their students with knowledge of practices that are intended to promote learner autonomy.

Vieira (1999) developed a project for training that focused on autonomy. The aims of the project were: 1) to promote the professional development of EFL teachers within a reflective approach by employing a schema of psychological and methodological preparation for the implementation of a pedagogy for autonomy in the classroom and, 2) to promote the development of learner autonomy in EFL learning by using action-research projects that focused on intrapersonal, interpersonal and process components of language learning. The project involved three university teachers/researchers and a group of school teachers who voluntarily joined the project. The project contained three stages: preparing for innovation, preparing for action research, and doing action research/implementing innovation. The results of the project demonstrated that an explicit focus on student learning competence led to students' better understanding of foreign language learning and more diverse and effective use of learning strategies. On the teachers' side, the results showed that teachers became more and more self-confident, more able to plan and appraise their projects, and more flexible in their teaching approach.

Classroom-based approaches

Classroom-based approaches to autonomy emphasized the negotiation between teachers and students over the control and responsibility in the planning and evaluation of classroom learning. The most popular forms of these approaches include portfolios, cooperative learning, and self-and peer assessment. A portfolio is 'a purposeful collection of student work that exhibits the student's efforts, progress, and achievements in one or more areas' (Paulson et al., 1991, p.60). Studies on the use of portfolios as an approach to promoting learner autonomy have mostly shown positive results (e.g. Chauhan, 2013; Nunes, 2004).

Chauhan (2013) set up a project with a group of 40 first-year students at H M Patel Institute of English Training and Research in the MA (ELT) Programme. As a part of their curriculum, the students were assigned the task of creating their own 'language portfolio'. Before the commencement of the project, the students were provided with an orientation workshop in which they were involved to determine the type of framework they would like to have for their portfolio. An analysis of the reflective reports suggested that the portfolios helped the students become autonomous in their learning, raised students' consciousness of learning styles and interests, and increased interaction within

the classroom as they shared their work. Rao (2005) carried out a six-month portfolio project with his English class. In the last month of the term, the students were asked to present their portfolios and to do peer- and self-evaluation of their work. The results of the project suggested that portfolios were useful in fostering learner autonomy in that students had opportunities to take active control of their learning process by way of planning, monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting on their English learning. Besides, the use of portfolios enhanced interaction among the students and between the students and their teachers.

In cooperative learning, "students work in groups toward a common goal or outcome, or share a common problem or task in such a way that they can only succeed in completing the work through behaviour that demonstrates interdependence while holding individual contributions and efforts accountable" (Brody & Albany, 1998, p. 8). While autonomy and cooperative learning might be a contradictory idea in which cooperation implies total interdependency (Tagaki, 2003), cooperative learning provides a valuable experience for fostering autonomous learning: students could get complementary skills in autonomy and cooperation through their interaction (Thomson, 1998). Moreover, the skills required in cooperative learning, such as problem-solving and negotiating, are also appropriate for autonomous learning. Likewise, the skills required for autonomous learning are needed to get students actively involved in cooperative learning (Thomson, 1998).

Other forms used to promote learner autonomy are self- and peer assessment. Self-assessment refers to "the involvement of learners in making judgments about their own learning, particularly about their achievements and the outcomes of their learning" (Boud & Falchicov, 1989, p. 529). Dickinson (1987) affirmed that self-assessment is an imperative skill for all language learners, particularly autonomous language learners. Self-assessment enhances a practical understanding of assessment criteria, reflective practice, and integrated learning. Hence, students' reliance on their lecturers for feedback can be minimized (Freeman & Lewis, 1998). According to Gardner (2000, p. 7), self-assessment assists learners to monitor their degree of success in specific learning tasks. It also provides learners with "personalised feedback on the effectiveness of their learning strategies, specific learning methods and learning materials." Besides, through self-assessment, learners can discover specific domains in which they need more support and can ask for help from teachers or language counselors. In addition, if it is managed correctly, self-assessment can support formal assessment requirements although its reliability is questioned.

Peer assessment, on the other hand, refers to a process that involves students to "provide either feedback or grades (or both) to their peers on a product, process, or performance, based on the criteria of excellence for that product or event which students may have been involved in determining" (Falchikov, 2007, p. 132). Engaging students in the process of peer assessment provides students with several benefits. For example, Searby and Ewers (1997) suggest that peer assessment seems to provide a more important motivator to the students to generate high-quality work compared to the assessment done by the teacher her/himself. Besides, according to Searby and Ewers, peer assessment provides students with the opportunity to take more control over their learning through the development of critical analysis of the work of their peers. Moreover, peer assessment "helps to lessen the power imbalance between teachers and students and can enhance the students' status in the learning process" (Spiller, 2012, p. 11).

Empirical research also suggests that self- and peer assessment are very important in promoting learner autonomy. For example, Thomson (1996) conducted a study with 98 students at the University of New South Wales, Australia. The study investigated the impact of learners' diversity on the self-assessment process of their Japanese language learning. During the project of self-assessment, the students were involved in three different stages: planning, monitoring, and review. At the end of the course, a feedback survey was given to the students, and the project was evaluated using the student assessment measures and student feedback, as well as the teacher's observation. The results showed that, in general, students had a positive attitude toward self-assessment. The self-assessment was successful in introducing the students to self-directed learning, and in making the course more learner-centered. The self-assessment project provided the students with an opportunity to learn what they felt they needed to learn. Tamjid and Birjandi's (2011) study with 59 intermediate TEFL students at the Islamic Azad University of Tabriz revealed that the incorporation of self- and peer assessment had a role in promoting learner autonomy. From this study, it may be deduced that the use of self- and peer assessment in EFL teaching in Indonesia can help students develop their metacognition, which in turn, could lead to independent thinking and learning.

Learner-based approaches

Learner-based approaches to learner autonomy focus on changing learners' learning behaviors by providing them with training in the important skills required to improve their autonomy and their language learning. Learner strategy training, such as learners' metacognitive knowledge and skills, is one area that many researchers have focused on (e.g. Benson, 2001, 2013; Miceli & Visocnik-Murray, 2005; Nguyen & Gu, 2013). MacLeod et al. (1996) state that learner strategy training is designed to provide support for learners' active management of task engagement and their regulation of cognitive activities fundamental for strategic learning and to build a range of knowledge and beliefs that promote further self-regulation.

Providing learners with metacognitive knowledge and skills for self-regulation of learning is important in the effort to promote learner autonomy. This is because the manifestation of learner autonomy, to some extent, depends on learners' ability to self-regulate their learning (Wenden, 2001). Cohen (1998) points out that providing learners with strategy training can improve their effort to attain their language learning objectives because it encourages them to discover their own directions to success, which in turn promotes learner autonomy and self-direction. Empirical research has also indicated the importance of learner strategy training in promoting learner autonomy. Nguyen and Gu (2013), for example, conducted an intervention study involving 37 students in an experimental group, and 54 students in two control groups at a Vietnamese university. The study explored the effects of strategy-based instruction on the promotion of learner autonomy. The results showed that, with intensive instruction, learners were able to improve their ability to self-regulate for a writing task, and that the self-regulation element of learner autonomy can be taught to students. Strategy-based instruction training yielded obvious benefits including better engagement in writing, increased strategy use, and better learning outcomes. Miceli and Visocnik-Murray (2005) carried out a project on language learning strategy training with first-year students of Italian at Griffith University, Australia. Throughout the training phase, student responses were observed in order to find out students' perceptions of the impact of the training on their language learning, and whether learners felt they had enlarged their strategy use repertoire by being

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given the training. One of the results of the observations was evidence of students' greater willingness to take control of their learning by tackling problems and viewing themselves as the core agent in the learning process. The students also perceived that the training had provided them with opportunities to reflect on themselves as learners, and had enlarged their strategy repertoire. Besides, the students felt that they had expanded their variety of techniques to cope with their language learning.

In brief, this review has shed light on approaches to promote learner autonomy along with several methods or techniques that can be implemented by EFL teachers. So far, many empirical studies have been done on the implementation of the methods or techniques that belong to each of the six approaches, which showed positive results in the effort of developing learner autonomy.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to review six approaches to promoting learner autonomy in learning second/foreign languages. In the first part of the paper, definitions of learner autonomy have been presented, followed by a discussion of teachers' roles in the promotion of learner autonomy. Then Benson's (2001) six approaches to promoting learner autonomy have been reviewed with references to related theories and the results of empirical inquiries. Based on the review, it appears that although the six approaches have different foci, they have more similarities than differences, particularly in encouraging learners to plan and follow their language learning paths to achieve their goals. In addition, although there are various approaches that can be used by teachers to promote learner autonomy, there seems to be no sole approach that can be considered the most effective. It appears likely that the most effective way is by using a combination of approaches.

As for any research, the present study has some limitations. First, this study was only a literature review using document analysis. Future studies should be more empirical-based by examining the effectiveness of methods or techniques that have been discussed in this paper. Second, some theories or empirical studies used in reviewing each of the approaches in the present study may be outdated and limited. Future studies should search for more recent literature and other methods or techniques of promoting learner autonomy.

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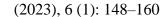
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