

Received 15/03/2012

Published 30/06/2012

Interdisciplinarity and learning autonomy

Naziha BENOSMANE¹

¹ Université d'Alger2, Algérie

1. Introduction

Interdisciplinarity involves researchers, students and teachers whose aim is to achieve the goals established by an educational context namely the university. The reforms in our universities have brought in new perspectives to teaching as well as learning. These reforms are aimed to assist students to become autonomous as much as possible. The present paper sheds light on learners' autonomy and related variables. Students' outcomes are not simply associated with their mental and cognitive ability or disability, but they are also related to personal characteristics such as motivation, self-esteem and risk-taking.

2. What Is Autonomy?

In the field of Psychology, autonomy refers to our individual freedom and ability to **“shape our own lives”** (Young, 1986). This means that through autonomy the individual becomes responsible and ready for making decisions. On the other hand, autonomy in learning has a larger meaning: it is to allow the students to **“shape their own learning”**.

The idea of autonomy first emerged in the language teaching context in the late 1960s with the Adult Education movement in Europe and North America. In the 1970s, a great number of studies were carried out within the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project. Henri Holec played an important role in the project as the director of the *Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues* (CRAPEL). This centre continues to focus on autonomy research and practice up to the present day.

The question of learner autonomy has long been discussed. Holec (1981) defines it as “the ability to take charge of one's own learning.” Autonomous learning is also defined as having the “capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (Little, 1991: 4). Benson et al (1997) define it as “the capacity to control one's own learning.” Thus, the idea of autonomy includes the students' involvement in their learning activities, in their personal progress and in the evaluation of their outcomes. That is, autonomous learners have a great responsibility for their own learning.

Autonomy has degrees, and according to Nunan (1999) it must be fostered but not taught. We also need to understand, as teachers, which variables are related to autonomy.

3. Related variables

The last few decades have witnessed an important pedagogic shift from teacher-centred approaches to learners' active role in language learning. Such focus has led to a significant

amount of research on second and foreign language learning strategies. Various studies have supported the considerable role of language learning strategies for effective and successful language learning. When dealing with language learning strategies use, many factors are involved, namely motivation, anxiety, self-esteem and risk taking. Students' success or failure is not only due to their cognitive ability or inability, but also to personal affective factors. These should be given equal consideration with cognitive ones.

Motivated learners study because they want to study. They are interested in classroom learning activities because they want to reach personal and intellectual goals. In general, motivation creates and/ or maintains curiosity.

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. It helps the student to deal with a new situation. It plays an important role in language learning, but when it becomes excessive, it can affect the student's behaviour and obstruct his learning process. Negative feelings will appear such as uneasiness, frustration, self-doubt and tension. Then, the student will wonder: "Can I do what I have learnt? Can I do what I have been asked to do? Will I be able?"

Although it is a major obstacle to language learning and autonomy, anxiety can be reduced. But if care is not taken to provide an emotionally safe atmosphere, the chances for the development of anxiety can increase greatly.

Self-esteem has an important influence on the students' behaviour. Like anxiety, it is necessary for any cognitive and affective activity. But if it is low it can obstruct learning. Canfield and Wells (1994) suggest: The most important thing a teacher can do to help students emotionally and intellectually is to create an environment of mutual support and care. The crucial thing is the safety and encouragement students sense in the classroom...Further, they must recognize that they are valued and will receive affection and support"

Risk-Taking has been defined as "a situation where an individual has to make a decision involving choice between alternatives of different desirability; when the outcome of the choice is uncertain, there is a possibility of failure" (Beebe et al 2003). Risk taking behaviour is an active involvement of the students and may be a gain since it could provide them with opportunities to say what they want to say, to raise questions, and to make comments during the classroom activities. This can reduce anxiety and enhance self-confidence. Therefore, teachers should allow this opportunity to learners in order to foster their autonomy, which can be the reward for their risk-taking.

4. Conclusion

It goes without saying that students' success or failure relies to a large extent on personal characteristics that may lead to an effective autonomy. Autonomous learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for their own learning. But the shift of responsibility from teachers to learners should be understood adequately: learner autonomy does not mean that teachers become redundant. Besides, they should not simply fill the learners' minds but have to assist them in the new kind of learning, and make them aware of the strategies they use or could use. Belief in learning differences can also become a rationale for many educational decisions. It is important for teachers to develop an understanding of learners' strategies and their individual characteristics to be able to help them to become autonomous.

References

1. Beebe, S. A and Beebe, J. (2003, 5th ed.). *Public Speaking: An Audience-Centred Approach*. London: Allyn and Bacon.
2. Benson, P and Voller, P. (1997). *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London: Longman.
3. Canfield, J and Wells, H. C. (1994). *100 Ways to Enhance Self-Concept in the Classroom: a Handbook for Teachers, Counsellors and Group Leaders*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
4. Holec, H. (1981). *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*. Oxford: Pergamon.
5. Little, D. (1991). *Learner Autonomy. 1. Definitions, Issues and Problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
6. Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Acquisition*. Boston: Heinle and Heinle.
7. Young, R. (1986). *Personal Autonomy: beyond Negative and Positive Liberty*. London: Croom Helm Ltd.