Self –directed Learning and Learner Autonomy in English Language Teacher Education: Emerging Trends

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ABSTRACT

The mammoth task of meeting the needs of teachers of English and help them upgrade their qualifications without disturbing their work in schools can be achieved through open/distance mode where self –directed learning paves the way by encouraging learner autonomy using self-instructional materials. Constructivist approach supports this concept. This paper focuses on the recent developments in the field of English language teacher education in the light of self-directed learning, the design and role of self- instructional materials. Different techniques for promoting learner autonomy like learner contracts, learner profiles, self-reports, dairies and evaluation data sheets are presented here.

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Introduction

Education is a lifelong process. Lifelong learning should be the motto of every teacher. It has been widely recognized that self-directed learning is essential in order to compensate for the shortcomings in or lack of training of those teachers who are in the field, along with keeping them refreshed about recent pedagogical developments. This emphasizes the need for continuous training programmes or special courses which can help the teachers to upgrade their knowledge and skills on their own and at their own convenience.

The traditional teacher education curricula are considered inflexible because they are tutor centered and the learners have very little choice. So the current interest in curriculum change for teacher education is in response to the demand for the development of personal qualities and skills related to the world of work and the learner autonomy. So the need for restructuring courses into modules is rapidly growing. This helps the learners to balance active learning with reflective practice which is an essential feature of any language teacher education course. Teachers need more opportunities than ever before to continue learning throughout their careers. One of the ways of strengthening the teaching profession is to use distance education or open and distance learning.

The movement for learner independence springs from the powerful yet common-sense perception that it is learners who do the learning. Teachers however good cannot do it for them. It is strengthened by the observation that every learner is different from every other learner. Development of communicative teaching philosophy which shifted focus from teachers to learners gave impetus to this movement. Many educators argue that some people need to retrain several times during their working life to keep abreast of developments in their occupation or to change a redundant occupation for a new one or to continue their education and improve their qualifications. This establishes the need for self-directed learning.

Theoretical background

Cognitive psychology proposes that brain is a meaning making machine that thrives in rich environments, seeks out patterns, builds on previous experiences and functions best in non-threatening situations. Not only is the brain dynamic, self-directing instrument of learning, it is highly individualized as well. Recent studies on intelligence and learning styles affirm that there is great diversity in the ways people learn. Self-directed learning prepares learners for day to day challenges and learning situations.

Jean Piaget’s Constructivist theory of learning maintains that learning is an active process in which the learner constructs meaning. Constructivism is basically a theory based on observation and scientific study about how people learn. It says that people construct their own understanding and knowledge of the world, through experiencing things and reflecting on those experiences. When we encounter something new, we have to reconcile it with our previous ideas and experience, maybe changing what we believe, or maybe discarding the new information as irrelevant. In any case, we are active creators of our own knowledge. To do this, we must ask questions, explore, and assess what we know, which is the basis for self-directed learning.
Self-directed learning

Self-directed learning can be defined as any increase in knowledge, skills, accomplishments or personal development that an individual selects and brings about by his/her efforts using various methods throughout their lives. Self-directed learning occurs when learners control both the learning objectives and the means of learning. That is, learners engage in self-directed learning by making their own decisions about what and how they are going to teach (Lowry, 1989). It emphasizes the importance of allowing learners to pursue their own interests so that learning becomes more meaningful. There is also a challenge to excel and go beyond the easy and the familiar.

Central tenets of self-directed learning include the following:

- Learners are responsible for their own learning process.
- Learners self-manage and self-monitor.
- Learners collaborate with teachers and peers.
- Learners develop specific knowledge and the ability to transfer that knowledge to new situations.
- Motivation and volition are crucial in initiating and maintaining the learner’s efforts.

Dimensions of Self-directed learning

Philip Candy (1991) concludes that SDL teachers the students to make their own meaning, to think for themselves, think systematically and to draw their own conclusions to create their own perspectives. Now this brings us to the importance and role of learner autonomy in self-directed learning.

Learner Autonomy

The basic tenet of learner autonomy is that learners are different and they learn in different ways. Autonomy involves encouraging responsibility among learners by giving choice and developing intrinsic motivation, accepting and providing for learner differentiation, encouraging action-oriented learning and by promoting reflective enquiry.

There are several reasons for advocating self-instruction for adult learners. The most obvious justification is that the learner may not be in a position to spare time for regular mode of learning. He/she may be busy with their job. The learner may be living at a considerable distance from an appropriate institution. The learner’s language learning needs may not fit the available courses; the learner may require a particular competence in a relatively
short time etc. These are some of the practical reasons which influence the learner to opt for courses with self-instructional material and mode of learning.

The second reason is the problem of individual differences in learners. This should be handled in a proper way to help learners with different abilities and drawbacks to cope with language learning. Some people, for whatever reason, learn quickly than others. Each individual has in him a special ability or aptitude in a particular area of learning. Due to this the pace of learning is affected. This is a clear justification for self-instruction which can cater to the individual differences. Cognitive styles, learning strategies like generalizations, simplifications and the distinction between the syllabuses bound and syllabus free learners also influence learning to a large extent. This argues for a flexible approach to the provision courses and materials for self-instruction.

Third aspect in this regard is to improve the learning efficiency of individual learners and lead them to autonomy and continuing education. This is a part of the wider educational goals. The learners should understand their language needs and have a positive attitude towards the target language. Sometimes the major sources of inhibition for a language learner can be the other learners in the class or the teacher or the material. A self-instructional learning mode should help to control factors like culture shock, language shock, language stress and anxiety. An increase in individualization and self-access can work to reduce inhibitions. This assures access to multiplicity of resources. Language learning should facilitate autonomy in learning other subjects. The demands of continuing education can be met only when we make provision for self-instruction.

The fourth aspect is the concept of motivation with regard to learner’s attitude towards learning situation. This involves the learner’s attitude towards the community of speakers of the target language. The desire to learn a target language can have two motives. The first one is the desire to be accepted by the community and the second is the need to get a job. Self-instruction will create intrinsic motivation in learners.

Language learning is an interpretative process. Autonomy in language learning requires a transfer of control on learning to the learner. Teaching practices should be based on a process of negotiation with the learners. Dickinson (1987:11) defined autonomy as the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his learning and implementation of those decisions. Autonomy is a capacity for critical reflection, decision making and independent action. Little (1990:11) argues that autonomy is not a single and easily describable behavior. It is not a synonym for self-instruction or learning without a teacher. But autonomy means the capacity to take charge of one’s own learning.

What exactly do we mean by ‘taking control’ in learning? It is a capacity to make decisions at successive stages of learning process. It entails that the learners will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. It is a control over cognitive processes and self-management of learning. There are three levels of control in learner autonomy.
The idea of autonomy in language learning originated in the 1960s. It corresponds to an emphasis on the meaning and value of personal experience, quality of life and personal freedom. It questions the culture of ‘authority’ and represents an ideological shift away from materialism and consumerism. Major innovations in the field of language learning like audio lingualism, language laboratory and functional approach to grammar have supported the shift towards more communicative approaches to language learning. The idea of learner centeredness in language learning with a focus on learning to communicate made learner stand at the center of the process of teaching learning (Nunan, 1988, Taron and Yule, 1989).

The information explosion, growing student population, commercialization of education and education technology influenced the modes of instruction that can reduce teacher contact time and alternative means of attending the diverse needs and preferences of learners. Technological developments in educational publishing lead to the production of self-instructional materials and multimedia packages. The economic imperative is to meet the educational needs of people at low cost. In the light of these changes a successful learner is increasingly seen as the one who constructs knowledge from the experience of the world than the one who responds well to instruction.

Candy (1991-459-66) has listed a few characteristics of autonomous learners. They are supposed possess these qualities.

- Methodical and disciplined in their learning
- Logical and analytical in thinking
- Reflective and aware of self and self-concept
- Demonstrate openness curiosity, motivation and flexibility
- Competent in interpersonal and interdependent areas
- Persistent and responsible
- Venturesome, Responsible and creative
- Independent and self-sufficient
- Has developed information seeking and retrieval skills
- Has knowledge and skills of learning processes
- Able to use criteria for self-evaluation

Different techniques for promoting learner autonomy are discussed here.
Learner profiles
In any educational context it is important to know the learner comprehensively and identify their needs, wants, and abilities. All this information about learners helps in enhancing learning in self-instructional mode. These profiles are developed for and by individual learners and stored in a database. The analysis of this profile is invaluable to develop self-instructional materials and activities. Learner profile provides a picture of the learners’ current development and future potential in terms of self-learning or learner autonomy. It records learner needs and wants, abilities, learners’ goals, and study plans, learning achievement, and learning outcomes.

Learner Contracts
One of the main differences between language in an autonomous mode and in a trained class is the means through which language is structured. Language learner needs to be purposeful and successful. For this, the learner should have a definite idea about their progress and whether they are able to achieve the aims and objectives of the course. One way of providing structure in a self-instructional language mode is the “Learner Contract.” A contract provides a learner with a framework for his planning and a brief check list of things he has to take into account. It includes more details than just what work to be done and over what period. It should also talk about what activities the learner is going to engage in, resources to be used, and ways of demonstrating achievement and how it can be measured.

A Learner contract Adopted from Knowles (1975)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill area</th>
<th>Proposed activities</th>
<th>Resources</th>
<th>Target date</th>
<th>Ways Demonstration of achievement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading speed</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 words per minute</td>
<td>Timed reading of prepared passages</td>
<td>Reading cards and other materials</td>
<td>Date completed</td>
<td>Get 80% in test items reach 120 words per minute in 5 consecutive reading cards.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>120 words per minute</td>
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<tr>
<td>without reducing comprehension</td>
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It helps a learner to develop autonomy from the tutor and the control of a single text book. Learners can also be part of a peer group with similar needs which helps in maintaining morale and in motivation.

Learner Portfolios
Learner portfolios are a collection of proof of achievements, products or representations of them and test scores from other activities. They include a working journal and a transcript. The portfolios in English might include for e.g.: an original short story, photographs of costumes designed for a play or a test taken on a novel. The journal is a working journal that is the students own record of ideas and plans and their implementation. A transcript is a more formal description by learners of what they attempted, received and learned in the course / programme.
Self-reports

According to Wenden (1998: 79-95), a good way of collecting information on how students go about a learning task and helping them become aware of their own strategies is to assign a task and have them report what they are thinking while they are performing it. This self-report is called introspective, as learners are asked to introspect on their learning. In this case, 'the [introspective] self-report is a verbalization of one's stream of consciousness' (Wenden, 1998: 81). Introspective reports are assumed to provide information on the strategies learners are using at the time of the report. However, this method suffers from one limitation: '[t]he concentration put on thinking aloud might detract from [learners'] ability to do the task efficiently' (ibid. 83), thus rendering the outcome of the report spurious and tentative.

Diaries and Evaluation Sheets

Perhaps one of the principal goals of education is to alter learners' beliefs about themselves by showing them that their putative failures or shortcomings can be ascribed to a lack of effective strategies rather than to a lack of potential. After all, according to Vygotsky (1978), learning is an internalized form of a formerly social activity, and 'a learner can realize [his] potential interactively--through the guidance of supportive other persons such as parents, teachers, and peers' (Wenden, 1998: 107). Herein lies the role of diaries and evaluation sheets, which offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, identifying any problems they run into and suggesting solutions.

Self-instructional Materials

Any approach to self-directed learning involving learner autonomy requires the development of new instructional materials. In the open and distance learning contexts the materials developed for learners are designed to help them learn by themselves. The texts have frequent questions which are reflective in nature and activities and exercises in course of learning with examples which enable the learner apply the ideas and knowledge acquired in course of learning. Learners relate this learning to their own experiences in life. The immediate feedback helps the learners monitor their progress. Such materials are called self-learning or self-instructional materials.

All self-instructional materials have a common characteristic--the use of activities to encourage and reaffirm learning and make the learner respond to the text rather than remain passive. In this active mode effective learning takes place. There are three sources of materials for self-instruction, authentic materials, commercially available materials and materials written specially by the staff of an Institution.

Authentic materials are textual materials which are not obviously prepared with the intention for teaching language. But by using such materials it is sometimes possible to meet the needs of the learners accurately and economically as the documents used are the ones encountered by the learner in his professional area. This helps the learner concentrate on the lexical, grammatical and functional aspects of the language used in these documents. Teachers of English can be given training by reinforcing the skills and proficiency that they have to pass on to the learners. One major advantage about the use of commercially available materials is their convenience and variety. Though these are not designed for self-instruction they may be adopted by making them
More suitable for self-instruction. The learners should be given all the necessary help, advice and encouragement as given by a teacher using the same material in a classroom.

Conclusion

In recent years there is a growing concern for learner autonomy and self-directed learning. Web based learning often called as online learning or e-learning is one of the recent options available in language teacher education in addition to open and distance learning. The traditional curricula may not support these formats. So there is a need to redesign the language teacher education programmes to promote learner autonomy. There is an increasing focus on designing ‘Modular’ curricula which facilitate all the characteristics of self-directed learning and learner autonomy as Individual learner differences are considered. Use of credits for assessment and credit transfer system are the strengths of modular system which help in enhancing student capability as they learn at their own pace by adopting a method of their choice and a course to suit their goals. It allows the students to identify their strengths and weaknesses and reduces the fear of failure and competition. It also improves the mastery in the subject. A modular approach to the development of language teacher education curriculum along with a focus on independent study and self–instructional provision is useful to cater to the needs of growing number of language teachers and to make sure that teacher education reaches the unreached.

References


