Implementing Learner Autonomy in Indian Language Classroom
Devi Archana Mohanty, Research Scholar

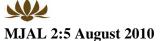Department of HSS, IIT Kharagpur

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Bio Data

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Abstract

The need of the hour is the implementation of learner autonomy in language classroom to have an effective and successful language learning situation. With this belief, the present paper seeks to throw light on the importance of learner autonomy, learner centered classroom and teacher as a facilitator in language learning environment. This paper is divided into three different sections for a fruitful discussion. The first section discusses the importance of learner autonomy within the context of language learning. The second section aims to focus on some crucial issues related to class rooms in Indian language learning context and their effect on language learners. This section also addresses some of the relevant issues which hamper an effective progress of language learning in India. They are: scanty classroom size, meager classroom infrastructure, learners with mixed ability, emphasis not on skills but grades (examination), not ability but availability (attendance). In the final section I intend to recommend learner autonomy as a panacea for bringing desirable result in language learning. This recommendation, I believe, will help in sorting out the language learning problems in India.

Keywords: Autonomy; Learner Autonomy; Language Learning; Indian Language Classroom

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Introduction

For many recent years now the concept of 'learner autonomy' has been a popular focus for discussion in language teaching (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987). Coterall (2000) observes that last 25 years have seen an increasing amount of attention to learner autonomy, self-directed learning, self-access systems, and individualized/independent learning in language learning. Over the last two decades the concepts of learner autonomy and independence have gained momentum, almost becoming a 'buzz word' within the context of language learning (Little, 1991). Boud (1988) reveals that a fundamental purpose to education is assumed to be to develop in individuals the ability to make their own decisions about what they think and do. It is also supported from outside language teaching by a general educational concern to help students become more independent in how they think, learn and behave (Hammond and Collins, 1991).

What is learner autonomy?

In basic terms 'learner autonomy' can be defined as 'one's taking his own learning responsibility'. According to a large body of empirical research in social psychology, "autonomy – feeling free and volitional in one's actions" (Deci, 1995)- is a basic human need. An autonomous person is one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out choices which govern his or her actions. For a definition of 'autonomy' in learning situation, we might quote Holec (1981) who describes it as 'the ability to take charge of one's learning'. In David Little's terms, learner autonomy is 'essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning-- a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991). Within such a conception, learning is not simply a matter of rote memorization; 'it is a constructive process that involves actively seeking meaning from events' (Candy, 1991). Leni Dam (1995) defines autonomy in terms of the learner's willingness and capacity to control or oversee her own learning. She holds that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice

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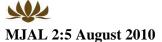### Devi Archana Mohanty, Research Scholar

and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation. Autonomous learners draw their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning; and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation.

Why learner autonomy is important?

When the learners set the agenda, learning is more focused and purposeful, and thus more effective both immediately and in the longer term (Little, 1991; Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987). Precisely because autonomous learners are self-motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective. Learners who are involved in making choices and decisions about the aspects of the learning programs are also likely to feel more secure in their learning (Joiner, cited in Mc Cafferty, 1981). Moreover learners become more active and efficient in their language learning if they don't have to spend time waiting for the teacher to provide them with the resources or solve their problems. A very obvious reason for promoting learner autonomy is that teacher may not always be available to guide or instruct. Hence learners need to be both self-motivated and self-independent.

Role of a Teacher

It is generally agreed that teachers play a key role in helping learners for being independent in learning language. The ever increasing necessity for teaching students of how to become self-sufficient and independent learner has brought new perspectives to the teaching profession and changed traditional ideas about language teacher's role. In the present language learning situation teachers are changing their roles and moving to new ones. Teachers are becoming active participants, monitors, consultants and guides when they are working closely with their students' language learning and help students to develop better techniques for learning. Wenden states that teachers transform themselves to helpers and facilitators when they offer suggestions and guidance in the use of learning strategies (1998). Reid specifically points out that "language teachers should provide a wealth of information to students

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in order to raise their awareness about learning style and strategies, and finally, to work with students' learning strengths" (1996).

Role of a Learner

The Chinese saying goes like this: you can bring the horse to water, but you can't make him drink. Similarly in language teaching, teacher can provide all the necessary circumstances and input, but learning can only happen if learners are willing to contribute. Their passive presence will not suffice, just as the horse would remain thirsty, if he stood still by the river waiting patiently for his thirst to go away. And in order for learners to be actively involved in the learning process they first need to realize the importance of autonomy. A fully autonomous learner is totally responsible for making the decision, implementing them and assessing the outcomes without any teacher involvement. The development of such independence is a question of enabling learners to manage their own learning. They need to gain an understanding of language learning in order to be able to develop their skills consciously and to organize their tasks.

Importance of English in Present Scenario

As the links between people across the world grow, there is an increasing need for us to learn to communicate in multilingual and multicultural situations. Knowing one of the world languages, such as English, becomes an increasingly important skill for an individual who wants to do well in today's global market. English has become the '*Lingua Franca*' of the world. With the IT Revolution and most of software and operating system being in English Language, a new utility for written and oral communication in English Language has emerged. English is said to be the world's most important language having communicative and educative value. It is used all over the world not out of any imposition but because of the realization that it has certain advantages. A very important reason for regarding English as a world language is that the world's knowledge is enshrined in English. It is a progressive language. Over and above English is universally renowned for its power of expression and its rich literature. English language has encircled the globe. It has captured the lead in the knowledge of explosion. In terms of marked potential the teaching of

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English, the market, the book trader, the market created by computer and media have made English the international medium of communication today. The market forces and present global scenario have made it necessary to survive and sustain in the present competitive global village. Today English holds the unique and distinct position of being the most important world language.

Importance of Teaching English in India

Officially English has the status of associate language in India, but arguably it is the most important language today. It is the most commonly spoken and understood language in India. The mother tongue is used only when speaking and interacting with family and friends. From office to parties and picnics people prefer English as a mode of conversation. It has become a compulsory language of our day to day life. English has become useful for Indians in several counts in the information era of the global village today. Hence the goals and purposes of learning English in the post-independent era in India is different from the aims and objectives of Maculay who wanted to train a few to interpret British colonial and cultural hegemony to Indian masses.

Teaching English in India is both challenging and rewarding. In the fast changing situation, our students must be prepared to confront the challenges of the language learning. Though the importance of learning English as a language is well understood, the teaching and learning environment are yet to change. This paper attempts to highlight and focus some of the important issues related to teaching English in Indian class rooms.

Issues Related to Indian Language Learning Scenario

In this section I intend to address some of the stumbling blocks in the teaching of English language in India. To learn a language is to learn all the four skills of a language which has been identified as reading, writing, speaking, listening. In Indian set up when reading and writing are given much importance, speaking and listening are grossly neglected. The major issues affecting and not creating a desirable situation in language learning are: scanty classroom size, meager classroom infrastructure, learners with mixed ability, emphasis on not skill but grade

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(examination), not ability but availability (attendance). While discussing these problems, I will also discuss some actual difficulties faced by students and teachers.

Classroom size:

Most teachers in India complain that the strength of students is more compared to a classroom size. Most of the times it is more than 70.

No personal attention:

One of the most difficult things to do in a large classroom is trying to get the attention of every single student. It lacks an intimacy in student-teachers level. Teachers don't find time to interact personally with students and weaker students don't get personal attention. Nervous students hesitate to ask their doubts in front of such a large number of students.

Distractions:

There are more distractions for teachers in these large classes. Sometimes teachers have to allow latecomers inside the classroom during the class hour which creates unnecessary disturbance in the teaching process. Even students are found chatting/gossiping during an active classroom session.

Lack of communicative activities:

Inadequate spaces, lack of language learning equipments in the classrooms do not encourage any fruitful communicative activities like role plays, group discussions, oral presentations etc. Unless there is a proper and systematic plan, it is going to create havoc in the classroom.

Noise level:

Large classes become unmanageable when students start working in pair or group. Sometimes students become indiscipline, unruly which ends up in several disciplinarian committees to punish, rusticate students.

Meager Classroom infrastructure:

A classroom needs a teacher cum instructor, a guide cum facilitator, cooperative learners and necessary equipments for an effective learning atmosphere which our Indian classrooms need in a true sense.

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Ill equipped classrooms:

Most Indian classrooms are ill equipped though a lot of implementations have been made by the Government. They don't accommodate up-to-date requirements like projectors, white boards, over head projectors (O.H.P), LCDs for an effective and successful learning environment. Implementation of a well-equipped language laboratory is far from question.

Teaching Resources:

Using handouts, writing assignments, photocopy materials for reading assignments have become very necessary in today's classroom environment which serve as a connection between teacher and students. Sometimes teachers have to manage without a chalk and blackboard. There are numerous examples of teaching students without a roof, under the trees.

Learners with mixed ability:

Many teachers in India complain that they have problems dealing with classes that are of mixed ability. The characteristics of mixed ability classes are: While some students follow the lessons and are able to answer questions and do well in tests, others fall behind, don't seem to understand and do badly in tests. While some are outspoken, some others are too nervous to open their mouth. Some are very active, energetic while others lack confidence. While some students pay attention and are cooperative, some seem disinterested. Sometimes teachers find it difficult to handle such kind of situations as they lack adequate training and experience. Teachers may agree that some students are cleverer or simply better, but practically observed; the situation is more complex than that. Our students are indeed mixed in many ways. They are different in terms of their levels of: attention, interest, learning styles, types of intelligences, knowledge of and about English.

In a situation where everyday our teachers have to meet a class of 70-90 students in a one hour teaching lesson and pressure is always on completing the syllabus and preparing students for variety of result less examinations, there is little room for learners to be independent. Learners cram for examinations and focus on the marks

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and percentages. They lack motivation, effective learning atmosphere, learning strategies and proper guidance.

Skills/ grades (examination):

Indian classrooms are exam based where written examinations are given more importance. There are various class tests, trimester exams, mid-semester exams, end-semester exams. Learners always busy in submitting assignments, project reports, in preparing and writing these exams do not find adequate time to learn other skills like speaking, listening and reading which are also of same importance in day to day life. There is always a pressure on teachers to complete syllabus before exams and evaluating answer sheets. Being involved in syllabus, answer sheets, large classes, mixed ability students they sometimes fail to put their best in the entire learning process. Even if sometimes teachers plan for an effective learning session, they are unable to do it in the absence of support from authorities, parents, colleagues.

Ability/ availability (attendance):

The conventional wisdom is that student's college and grades are related to class attendance: students who attend classes more frequently obtain better grades. Several studies of large, lecture based courses have examined the relationship between class attendance and final course grades. In this process we forget to give attention to student's learning ability. Our focus become quantity oriented rather than quality oriented.

How can Learner Autonomy be Promoted

 At the beginning of this article I discussed the importance of the notion of learner autonomy which encourages learner to be independent and self-sufficient and thereby makes language learning more effective and promising. In becoming actively involved in the process of learning the learner may set his or her own objectives of learning a language. By working independently of the teacher both inside and outside the classroom, and in selecting and using the strategies best suited to the occasion, he or she may realize a sense of autonomy. 'Autonomous learning' is seen by Holec as a double process. On the one hand, it entails learning the foreign language; on the other,

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learning how to learn (Holec 1981). The paper intends to suggest here some ways which would help in fostering learner autonomy in Indian language classrooms and ultimately creating an effective language learning environment.

- It is generally agreed that teachers play a key role in helping learners to learn autonomously (Benson 2001, Gardner and Miller 1999). The relationship between the learner and class teacher is central to the fostering of autonomy. Therefore training of teachers in how to implement learner training in their classrooms is important. There should be proper trainings, workshops, conferences for teachers which will create a platform to share their experiences, gain new knowledge and broaden their experiences.

- While managing a large class, teachers can adopt different strategies that foster learner autonomy:
  - ➢ They can encourage competitions among students, by dividing class into different teams which establish a fun and competitive atmosphere within students
  - ➢ Active students can be given more responsibilities, such as encouraging and motivating their slow group members
  - ➢ They can encourage the learners to identify their individual goals but pursue them through collaborative works in small groups
  - ➢ They can also encourage learners to keep a written record of their learning- plans of lessons, projects, lists of useful vocabulary

- Student self-monitoring is a valuable way of increasing the element of autonomy in the learning of a language. According to Wenden (1998), 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). It could be argued that self-reports

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can be a means of raising awareness of learners' strategies and the need for constant evaluation of techniques, goals, and outcomes. As Wenden (1998) observes, 'without awareness [learners] will remain trapped in their old patterns of beliefs and behaviors and never be fully autonomous'.

- 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. As according to Wenden a learner can realize [his] potential interactively--through the guidance of supportive other persons such as parents, teachers, and peers' (Wenden, 1998). Herein lays the role of diaries and evaluation sheets, which offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning, identifying any problems they run into and suggesting solutions. I have taken some examples from Wenden to make my point clear:

The following diary is based on authentic student accounts of their language learning:

A.

Dear Diary,

These first few days have been terrible. I studied English for eight years, just think, eight years, but I only learned a lot of grammar. I can't speak a word. I don't dare. I can't express myself in the right way, so I am afraid to speak.

The other day I started watching TV, so I could get accustomed to the sound. I don't understand TV news very well only a few words. I can't get the main point. In school it's easy to understand, but I can't understand the people in the stores.

What can I do?

Yours Truly,

Impatient

(from Wenden, 1998)

Alongside diaries, students can also benefit from putting pen to paper and writing on their expectations of a course at the beginning of the semester, and then filling in

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evaluation sheets, or reporting on the outcomes of a course, at the end of the semester. These activities are bound to help learners put things into perspective and manage their learning more effectively.

- There is also need to improve the classroom infrastructure and make the teaching more effective. For this, teachers can be encouraged to use OHPs, LCDs which help teachers to feel more confident in handling a class. Using peer evaluation system, sharing own e-mail address, empowering students with choices are some other ways to help teachers to contain the learners' enthusiasm and being responsible.

Conclusion

Finally, I would like to say that language learning in India can be more effective and successful by encouraging learner autonomy in classrooms, giving learners more space which would help them to realize their weaknesses in language learning.

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