RESEARCH ARTICLE

VIRTUALIZATION OF THE LEARNERS' AUTONOMY THROUGH THE ICT/WEB 2.0 APPLICATIONS IN THE CONTEXT OF TEACHING ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL)

Dr. Vijay Kumar Neerudu,

Mentor in English at RGUKT-IIIT Basar, Telangana,India

Abstract

The petrifying and devastating impact of covid-19, 2020 has convulsed the world to its core in every field. All the governments around the world have fleetingly closed educational institutions in an attempt to contain the spread of the pandemic. As part of it, India also closed all educational institutions and has come up with e-learning programs in support of academic continuation. Many ed-tech firms in the market have tried to leverage the occasion by offering free online classes or attractive discounts on e-learning platforms/modules for example: Zoom, Google meet, Office-365, Google class, Udemy, Coursera, Byjus, and MOOC etc... A complete revolution in the way students learn today has been brought about by technology. Technology has made each student to get in contact with a world-class education pursuing different courses being offered through their universities on paid subscription basis. Many students of RGUKT-Basar have enrolled courses offered by different top-most universities in India (IITs, IIMs, NITs IISC etc…) as well abroad. The students in this pandemic crisis are encouraged to pursue academics self-directed and self-guided. This situation bought a huge change in the students' learning strategies and methods into an autonomous learner. Learner autonomy which requires a transition from teacher-control to learner-control is viewed as a prerequisite for success in learning. The shift of locus of control to learners reflects changes in education towards a more learner-centred teaching and learning where learners are expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning. With the advent of ICT/web 2.o applications, learners are faced with unprecedented opportunities to conduct independent learning. Educational technologies have extended learners access to learning into their own times and space. This provides the basis for an experimental study, which investigates the impact of an autonomous learning platform (ALP) in which both self-directed learning and socially-mediated learning are incorporated into this platform. This paper focuses on how learners became autonomous with the aid of online/virtual and e-learning trends, what kind of problems learners have been encountering in learner-autonomy and different solutions to make learners an

---

RESEARCH ARTICLE

autonomous learners in this 21st century. This paper also focuses on how technology is aiding the learner to gain personalized learning experiences and becoming autonomous learners.

Introduction

In this pandemic situation out in the world in 2020, it's high time to rethink on the notion learners' sincerity and commitment in learning virtually taught concepts. I personally as a teacher-researcher had experienced the same doubt while teaching English through Office 365 or Google class in this covid-19 situation. I was not sure how many of my physical class students were actually listening my synchronous/asynchronous lecture on Google meet/Zoom/office 365 etc... It left me with thousand questions in my mind. I gave it a thought for several days and came up with a notion that it would work out if I could work on the stream lines of learner autonomy rather than teacher-centered instructional lectures. With this idea in mind, I developed a set of questionnaire and planned for mock interview with the students to know what they would want at these circumstances to continue their learning.

It is significant time for the 21st century knowledge society that the educational institutes should cultivate autonomous life-long learners capable of independently constructing knowledge and developing skills to effectively adapt to changing markets and compete in a challenging global market. Learning to become an independent learner and personalization of learning has to be embrace everywhere in the world of Teaching and Learning. Virtual/online world is one such resource and very good platform in which the autonomy of the learner is emphasized and given lot of priority. Self-directed learning always makes the student to be proponent individual. Sheffield Hallam (2011) defines that learner autonomy starts with the premise that "an autonomous learner takes responsibility for his/her own learning in doing the following:

- ✓ Their learning goals (what they need to learn)
- ✓ Their learning processes (how they will learn it)
- ✓ How they will evaluate and use their learning
- ✓ They have well-founded conceptions of learning
- ✓ They have a range of learning approaches and skills
- ✓ They can organize their learning
- ✓ They have good information processing skills
- ✓ They are well motivated to learn.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

The use of online/virtual learning platforms with the e-learning trends in the development of learner autonomy is a critical issue in the context of teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) (Guo & Yan, 2007; Hu, 2005; Wang, 2007), especially the use of multimedia and web 2.o applications for the provision of personalized and collaborative learning in an EFL context (Shao & Wu, 2007; You, 2004). The current study is situated at Rajiv Gandhi University of Knowledge Technologies (RGUKT-IIIT Basar,). As the lockdown forced to shut down the institutes, we have begun teaching through virtual/online platforms. Initial stages, it was found to be categorically difficult to work along with line of technology aid but in due course of three or four months it has become practical way to see its utilities.

Historically, research focused primarily on the association between cognitive skills and academic outcomes such as grades and test scores. This construct has been considered a central factor to student achievement, and defined as something that is largely inheritable and unchangeable. But the recent contributions of the researchers expanded upon the viewpoint to include non-cognitive factors and their role in the learning process. More specifically research has started to investigate the relationship between non-cognitive attributes and academic outcomes in young people, and how this may contribute to continued success through life. These attributes begin to develop throughout childhood and adolescence, and are described as being the skills and characteristics that reflect an individual's described as being the skills and characteristics that reflect and individual's personality, motivational habits, and attitudes

Review of Literature on Learner Autonomy:

The term "learner autonomy" was for the first time coined in 1981 by Henri Holec also called as the father of learner autonomy. One of the key aspects to consider in defining learner autonomy is whether we view it as a means to an end or as an end in itself. These two options do not exclude each other, both of them can be part of everybody's views towards language learning or learning in general. In the view of cultural historical psychology the development of students learning skills is never entirely separable from the content of their learning. To make learner an autonomous learner, one has to work on the functions of cognitive and non-cognitive developments of the each learner. The following are the theories that support self-directed, self-guided, learner centered and learner autonomy etc…

Researchers and Practioners proposed a range of models which account for the development of learner autonomy (Bernson, 1997; Blin, 2005; Nunan, 1997; and Macaro, 1997). Nunan (1997) and Blin

---

RESEARCH ARTICLE

(2005) have concentrated on independent interaction with learning materials and educational technologies, while Benson (1997, 2001) emphasized learner control and Macaro (1997) the developmental process of learner autonomy.

Reviewing the literature indicates that scholars such as Cotterall (1995), White and Littlewood (1999) have enriched our understanding the concept of autonomy. They postulate promoting learner autonomy is a matter of helping learners to; develop a capacity for critical thinking, decision making and independent action, take responsibility for learning and for using appropriate strategies, face heavy psychological demands to confront learners' weaknesses and failures, discover their learning potential and give up total dependence on the teacher.

David Nunan's Five-Level Model

Nunan (1997) proposed five level models. In his scheme, five levels are outlined for developing learner autonomy: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence. Of all these five levels, learner's awareness is viewed as the first step towards learn autonomy because it helps learn understand the learning goal and context. Learners are encouraged to intervene in the learning process by modifying learning goals or choosing learning content, moving on to creation that embraces learners setting their own goals, updating learning content and creating learning tasks.

Macaro's three-stage Model

Macaro advocates a three stage model for the development of L2 leaner autonomy. Autonomy is conceptualized in terms of language competence, language learning competence, and choice and action. Autonomy of language competence means the development of communicative competence, including linguistic, strategic, and sociolinguistic competence.

Benson's Three Level Control Model

In Benson's (2001) model, autonomy is viewed as the capacity to take control of one's learning. Control is at the heart of this model, and is exercised at three levels; learning, management, cognitive process, and learning context. The model covers the major aspects of learner autonomy integrating self-management, psychological readiness and political control in the language learning process, prompting language learner to exercise more control in the learning process.

This paper attempts to answer the following set of questions:

➢ How do RGUKT-IIIT integrated Engineering students perceive themselves as autonomous learners in virtual/digital class rooms?

RESEARCH ARTICLE

> ➢ What is the reliability of online resources as a learning aid for the autonomous language learning?
> ➢ What are the inherent features in online resources that empower the autonomous language learner?

What is Learner autonomy?

Autonomy, defined broadly as "the capacity to take charge of one's own learning (Holce, 1981) involves several components and capacities on the part of learners. One of them is the skill of self-directed learning in which "the objectives, progress and evaluation of learning are determined by learner themselves (Benson, 2001). Further, he explains that taking responsibility for one's learning involves planning abilities, the ability and readiness to select appropriate learning materials, constant monitoring of one's learning progress, and the ability to evaluate the outcomes of learning. Little (200) lists critical reflection, decision making and independent action as basic components of autonomous learning, through which learner become managers of their own learning according to their needs and available learning options.

Components and Domains of Autonomy

According to Littlwood (1996) an autonomous person is one who has an independent capacity to make and carry out the choices which govern his/her actions. The capacity depends on two main components: ability and willingness. Ability depends on possessing both knowledge about the alternatives from which choices have to be made and necessary skills for carrying out whatever choices seem most appropriate. Willingness depends on having both the motivation and confidence to take responsibility for their choices required. Littlewood (1999) proposes a distinction between two levels of self-regulation which he calls "proactive" and "reactive" autonomy. Proactive autonomy: learners are able to take charge of their own learning, determine their objectives, select methods and techniques and evaluate what has been acquired. Reactive autonomy: enables learners to organize their resources autonomously in order to reach their goal.

Kumaravadivelu (2003) thinks these are two complementary in nature – 'narrow' and 'broad' – views on learner autonomy. The former involves, simply, enabling learners to learn how to learn which includes equipping them with the tools necessary to learn on their own, and training them to use appropriate strategies for realizing their learning objective. The latter treats learning to learn a language as a means to an end. Then Kumaravadivelu (2003, p.141) took a step further by naming the narrow view as "academic autonomy" which enables learners to be strategic

RESEARCH ARTICLE

practitioners in order to realize their learning potential, and broad view as "liberatory autonomy" which empowers learners to be critical thinkers in order to realize their human potential.

Degrees of Autonomy

David Nunan (2000, and 2010) contends that autonomy is not an all-or-nothing concept, that all learners could be trained to develop a degree of autonomy. He summarizes five levels of autonomy as follows:

1) Level 1: *awareness*: learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the program and encouraged to indentify the learning strategies implicit in the tasks making up the methodological component of the curriculum
2) Level 2: *involvement*: learners become involved in modifying materials. Learners will be involved in making choices from a range of goals, a selection of content and variety of tasks.
3) Level 3: *intervention*: learners are involved in modifying and adapting goals, content and learning tasks.
4) Level 4: *creation*: learners create their own goals, content learning tasks.
5) Level 5: *transcendence*: learners transcend the classroom, making links between the content of the classroom and the world beyond the classroom. At this level, learners begin to become truly autonomous by utilizing in everyday life what they have learned in formal learning contexts.

How Learner Autonomy is promoted

There are three identified ways by which learners' autonomy could be promoted according to the study. 1) self-report-is 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. 2) Diaries and evaluation sheets offer students the possibility to plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning, identifying any problems they run into and suggesting solutions.

According to Littlewood (2004) the development of autonomy in language learning is governed by three basic pedagogical principles as follows:

-learner involvement: engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process (affective and metacognitive domain/dimensions)

-learner reflection: helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning (metacognitive dimension)

RESEARCH ARTICLE

-appropriate target language use: using the target language as the principal medium of language learning (communicative and metacognitive dimension)

How a Learner becomes autonomous through virtual world?

Virtual/online learning, web 2.o applications and ICT appear to be particularly conducive to fostering autonomous learning as they naturally incorporate many elements of autonomy that gives learners control over and responsibility for their own learning, such as choosing the materials, managing their contact with various genres and types of interactions etc… Digital classrooms are established with full digital equipments in South Asian countries like India more particularly in United Andhrapradesh in terms of; a Laptop for each student with internet connection in a regular class, digitalized/soft copy/ modules and classroom turned out as a laboratory.

As the learner in RGUKT classes is provided e-sources on second language in its cultural exposure, socio and economic conditions of people, word pronunciation and casual conversations of ESL assist tremendously in making integrated-engineering graduates independent learners. Despite the students come from different background knowledge in the target language, these students start acquiring the target language very fast through the virtual

world. Firsthand experience says "when the students joined in PUC for the academic year of 2014 to 15 they have inadequate knowledge on word pronunciation, poor grammar, reading comprehension, listening and speaking skills caused really difficult in comprehending content taught by the regular course instructors." But after a course of instructions and period of time of first semester (4-months times) nearly 75 % of the students were able to decipher course content accurately. It all happened because of various ICT, web 2.o applications & software pre-installed in their computers which they use for regularly. Digital classrooms in RGUKT establishes very good platform for any kind of learner to become independent learner through the virtual world.

By the time these first semester students promoted to second semester, they have become well aware of course content, teaching style of instructors, tools used, different strategies followed fellow school toppers, different soft-ware or web 2.o applications installed in their laptops have become very familiar to use them for their own accumulation of knowledge in the process of becoming autonomous learners.

Socially Mediated learning contributes to autonomy

Lee (2011) adds that "through social interactions, learner develop a capacity to analyze, reflect up on and synthesize

information to create new perspectives." There are several social networking sites mostly used and available on online are; Face book, Twitter, IP Talks, Gmail etc… through which people get connected to one another across the Globe. Students of RGUKT got succeeded in establishing good contacts with some of the foreigners through IP Talks. Miss Hyema one of the PUC students regularly manages a conversation with one of the ELTi UK online tutor. Virtual world allows the learners of any socio and geographical background gets connected and creates a room for communication across the globe. Conversations on various topics happen regularly among the students of RGUKT through IP Talks and Gimra Mail. As L1 learner exposed to all sorts of social communications in his own natural world, so is the case with the L2 learners' through the virtual world.

Learners' autonomy at RGUKT

Just as most of the universities outside in the world has begun teaching, so we teachers of language at RGUKT-Basar, have started taking virtual classes through different mediums like; zoom app, googlmeet, office 365 etc… nearly 75% students could attend online classes without any problem. But later on, we also found sharing the video lectures materials to the remaining 25% students unreachable for the virtual class live lectures.

1) Become the guide: We teachers have to be ready to relinquish control and give students responsibility is the key to the process. In this way we could be moving away from deductive to a more inductive approach. Ask the students to do the presentation on the given module and come prepared with suitable exemplary tasks. Students have come up with beautiful, variety and different dimensions of the topics. Their presentations were so intriguing and thought provoking. Each student has his/her contribution through the module.

2) Flip the Classroom: the added advantage in doing flipping the classroom is student's creativity is encouraged and allow individual participation on the provided module. I as a teacher gave the module in text format and asked the students explain me according to their perception. Surprisingly each student has come up with his/her own style of narration, explanation and interpretation of the given module.   Quite   interestingly, students have dealt with module its tasks easily and meaningfully. I never knew that my students are so creative and good at doing such

RESEARCH ARTICLE

great things in their process of learning language.

3) Give them choice: I request every teacher to think about a time when you gave your students choice to do something on the given content/module? I always believe on learning a language happens in academic platforms by allowing or by giving students countless choices so that they would explore their potential and weakness and improve themselves. If we teachers end up doing all explanation or theoretical part students only end up just listening and get motivated but no action

4) Use Projects: As teacher-researcher I feel it would be an excellent path taking the students through project based learning. When I encountered these school toppers, I had very good experience of students' collaboration and team work. I used to give them small or mini projects on their regular life events and ask them to do the presentation. This act of making students involve in project based learning; it did bring good results improving learners' competence.

5) Reflect on their learning: I used to develop worksheets on the learning abilities learning scale points of the learners and use them at the end of the class/module/semester. Students' answers would tell us and the students where exactly they are in this course from beginning to end.

6) Objectives of the concepts: I would like to make sure the objectives of the course or modules understood by the students before I begin to teach them. I feel personally very serious about this act because, at the end of the module or semester, I test them what they have learned through the lecture series and know them better what and how they could learn even better. Objectives give the students clarity on their requirement of learning any concepts in the academics.

Inherent Features on Online Resources that Empower the Language Learner Autonomy

As the proverb says rightly "We should not catch a fish and give it students; rather we should teach them how to catch a fish on their own". Exactly, it happens through the virtual world of communication. In this virtual/online class, pupils are exposed to various online reliable authenticated and paid E-sources which provide extensive assistance to the pupils needs beyond the academics.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Unaccountable and crucial sites for permanent learners' learning knowledge on various fields are provided. For instance: **tolearnenglish.com, time4education.com, tutorvista.com, virtual-labs.ac.in, videolectres.net** etc. A survey conducted by me on first outgoing batch 2008, this statistical data provides the evidence that the Engineering passed out students who are placed in various MNC's are buttressing in every language need while they are in training sessions and doing jobs. Learning should not be limited to classrooms alone. Pupils should be communicating beyond the provided academic environment.

Conclusion

Since the learner autonomy promotes lifelong learning the core objective of any course should be promoting it. We should start rethinking from the perspective that all the learners have the power and right to learn any given concepts autonomously. What should be in teachers mind is that successful learners tend to be autonomous most of the times. It should also be remembered that total autonomy is neither possible nor desirable, for no one totally free from their external limitations and restrictions. To provide autonomy to the learners teachers should themselves be provided with a certain level of autonomy in the selection of methodology and content teach to the learners.

References

- Benson, P. (2008). Teachers' and learners' perspectives on autonomy. In T. Lamb & H. Reinders (Eds.), *Learner and teacher autonomy: Concepts, realities, and responses* (pp. 15-32). Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company.

- Cotterall, S. (1995). Developing a course strategy for learner autonomy. *ELT Journal, 49*(3), 219-227.

- Dam, L. (2011). Developing learner autonomy with school kids: Principles, practices, results. In D. Gardner (Ed.), *Fostering autonomy in language learning* (pp. 126-136). Gaziantep: Zirve University

- Dickinson, L. (1995). Autonomy and motivation: A literature review. *System*, *23* (2), 165-174

- Kumaravadivelu, B. (2003). *Beyond methods: Macrostrategies for language teaching*. New Haven, NH: Yale University Press.

- Little, D. (1995). Learning as dialogue: The dependence of learner autonomy on teacher autonomy. *System*, *23*(2), 175-182.

- Little, D. (1997). Language awareness and the autonomous language learner. *Language Awareness*, 6(2), 93-104.

- Little, D. (2004). Constructing a theory of learner autonomy: Some steps along the way. Retrieved from

RESEARCH ARTICLE

archive.ecml.at/.../David_Little_Constructing_Theory_of_Learn

- Littlewood, W. (1996). Autonomy: An anatomy and a framework. *System*, *24*(4), 427-435.

- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, *20*(1), 71-94.