

Exploring Learner Autonomy in Language Classrooms: A Quasi-Experimental Approach

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is a western concept that came in language education via main stream psychology and theories of education. The main aim of this research is to measure the impact of learner autonomy on language proficiency of BS English learners of Southern Punjab. The researcher followed the quasi-experimental research design following pre-test and posttest methodology. To conduct this test the researcher devised a Language Proficiency Test that includes all the four language skills i.e. reading, writing. Listening and speaking. Two classes of BS English 8th semester were selected as control group and experimental group. The students belonging to control group were taught a module in traditional teacher-controlled method while the experimental group was taught following Nunan's five stages model of learner autonomy. Language proficiency Test was conducted for both the classes as pre-test and the same test was conducted after the completion of one semester. Results obtained in this way indicate that the principles of learner

autonomy, if followed properly, can enhance language proficiency of our learners. Learner autonomy and teacher autonomy should be incorporated in teacher training programs.

Keywords: D

Introduction

Second language learning always poses problems for learners and it needs certain strategies and classroom practices to gain proficiency in target language. Learner autonomy is one such strategy that helps learners become proficient in target language. It also makes learners critical thinkers and lends them creativity. Incorporation of this strategy in classroom practices makes learners responsible and generates in them the habit of self-regulation. It is also a tool of learner empowerment.

Statement of the Problem

In Pakistan English enjoys the status of second language. It is also official language of Pakistan. Proficiency and command of English language plays a pivotal role in attaining good jobs inside and outside the country. Previous researches (Akram & Ghani, 2012) clearly indicate that Pakistan learners are motivated to learn English language for extrinsic reasons like getting jobs, higher education or going to foreign countries for better prospects. But the problem that the Pakistani learner faces is the low level of language proficiency (Mansoor,2005). They are unable to compete in international job market. Majority of Pakistani learners join state-owned educational institutions where language is taught as a subject and not as a language. Mostly the classrooms are dominated by teachers where learners remain passive listeners and consumers of knowledge. In such classrooms, level of their involvement is very low. They are dependent on their teachers for the entire teaching learning process. Practices and principles of learner autonomy have the potential to involve the learner in the learning process by making him/her responsible of his/her learning. This responsible behavior on the part of learner will result in increased proficiency. This research project is an attempt to explore the relationship between learner autonomy and language proficiency of our learners.

Research Questions

Q1. Is it feasible to practice learner autonomy in language classrooms of Southern Punjab?

Q2. Can learner autonomy enhance language proficiency of BS English learners?

Research Objective

- To explore the feasibility of practice learner autonomy in language classrooms in Southern Punjab
- To investigate that learner autonomy can enhance language proficiency of BS English learners

Literature Review

Learner autonomy is a western concept that came in language education via main stream psychology and theories of education. Initially it was a political concept used in Greece where it meant the freedom available to conquered states to manage their internal affairs. It came in language education via modern language project of Council of Europe at CRAPEL. Henry Holec (1981) gave his famous definition of learner autonomy in his report to Council of Europe. He defined learner autonomy as “ability to take charge of one’s learning”. This concept also echoed in early papers of Cambridge University in 1976. Basically, it was a western concept best suited for the learners of western democratic countries. From United Kingdom it came into Hong Kong and from here it crept into Asian countries like China, Vietnam, Turkey, Iran, Japan, KSA and Pakistan. Working models of this concept emerged in the form of self-directed learning, self-instruction, distance learning and establishment of self-access centers. Holec (1981) treated this concept as an attribute of learners while latter scholars took it as learning situation (Benson, 2007). Dickenson (1987) described learner autonomy as *“The situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions”*. (pp.11)

This was first phase of learner autonomy that characterized radical restructuring of language teaching with rejection of traditional classroom

learning. Second wave of this concept envisaged in the insights of Allwright (1988), Dickinson (1992) and Dam (1995) who argued in their relative works that concept of learner autonomy can be integrated in classroom practices by re-conceptualizing language learning classrooms. Little (1995) explains this re-conceptualization as a “pedagogical dialogue” between teachers and learners. Benson (2009) uses the term “deconstruction” of traditional language classrooms for this computer based radical changes. These changes, according to him, have blurred the distinction between classroom learning and out-of-class learning. Benson (1997) discussed different versions of autonomy. It was just a way of representing autonomy with its prominent aspects. We can understand these versions of autonomy by following the definition of autonomy given by Benson. This definition is “capacity to control one’s own learning. Benson (2001) further explains this control as control over learning management, control over cognitive process and control over content of learning. So, he discusses three versions of autonomy. These versions are; Technical, Psychological and Political. Technical version lays more stress on learning management such as learning environment, seating management and learning aids. Henry Holec supports this version of learner autonomy. On the other hand, psychological version is more concerned about psychological issues like meta-cognition, learning strategies and learning attitudes like motivation. Little favors psychological version of learner autonomy (Oxford,2003). Benson (2009) on the other hand, lays more emphasis on political version of learner autonomy. He is more concerned about the rights of learners. Ribe (2003) concludes this discussion of perspectives by saying that amalgamation of these three versions help in creating optimal learning environment.

Methodology

This study was conducted at Govt. Willayat Hussain Islamia Graduate College Multan where the researcher is posted as assistant professor of English. The researcher decided to conduct quasi-experimental research using pre-test and post-test technique. For this purpose, the researcher needed two senior classes of BS English, one as control group and the other as

experimental group. One class (BS 8th) was available in my own college (WHIGCM) that researcher decided to deal as experimental group while for control group; the researcher went to neighboring college. For one semester the researcher taught both these classes. The class taken as control group was taught in traditional teacher-centered way. The researcher taught BS English learners of eighth semester (experimental group) following the principles of learner autonomy. Pre-test was conducted at the start of semester whereas post-test was conducted at the end of semester. The same Language Proficiency Test was used for both pre-test and post-test. During this semester the researcher tried to administer maximum treatment of learner autonomy following Nunan's five stages model of learner autonomy. This model is supplemented by nine steps that lead the learner from total dependence to autonomous learning. These steps are as follows:

Step 1: Making instruction goals clear to learner

According to Nunan (2003) very first step towards the journey of learner autonomy is to make learning instructions and goals clear to the students themselves. Usually, this necessary step is neglected and overlooked by teachers. Very few teachers are conscious and aware of significance in classroom practices. He gives examples from a study that he himself conducted. That study showed that among many teachers engaged in teaching activity, only a single teacher among many explicitly pronounced instruction goals clear to learners. So, the researcher of this study kept this caution of Nunan in mind and made instructional goals clear to the participants of study. The researcher told his learners the importance of following principles of learner autonomy and briefed them about the procedure and strategies involved in this process. The learners took great interest in this concept as they found it learner friendly way of teaching and a means of their own empowerment.

Step 2: Allowing learners to create their own goals

Second step that Nunan suggests for making learners autonomous is to allow, rather encourage learners to map out their own goals and set up their own learning agenda. Parkinson and O'Sullivan (1990) have suggested an

interesting way of involving learners in this process of goal setting. Their strategy was holding 'action meeting' in which they encouraged learners to play their role in making modifications in learning content. The researcher followed this strategy and involved learners in planning their learning plan. The researcher gave them the task of planning a schedule for their presentations. As Pakistani learners are more concerned about their exams, the researcher asked them to select the course content for their mid-term examination themselves. The researcher also held a group discussion on this topic. All the learners readily gave their feedback on the topic. Similarly, the researcher involved them in the process of evaluation. He made them assess their class tests and compared them with teacher assessment. It was a new experience for the learners. The learners were asked to search learning material from different sources and share the results of their search with other members of the class. In this way they possessed plenty of learning material from different sources. In this process they learnt how to locate relevant learning material from different sites and how to sort out relevant content from junk available on net

Step 3: Encourage learners to use their second language outside the classroom

Use of target language inside and outside the classroom is an important step towards learner autonomy. This technique enhances their speaking skill and also lends them confidence needed for gaining proficiency in target language. Unfortunately, Pakistani learners in general and learners of Southern Punjab in particular resist the use of target language in their classrooms. They are not proficient so far as spoken language is concerned. They even expect from teachers to explain certain concepts in Urdu, their national language. The researcher encouraged them to use target language in classroom activities. The researcher convinced them to listen to the lectures of their relevant topics on u-tube and study their novels in the form of audio-books available on u-tube. The researcher fixed one day in a week for group discussion on any social or political topic. It was decided that this discussion would be held in Target/English language. At first the learners felt shy of participating in group

discussion. They had apprehensions that they would make mistakes of grammar and pronunciation and may face embarrassing situation in front of other fellows. The researcher helped them to overcome these fears and succeeded in getting their cooperation in this context. The researcher also encouraged them to subscribe different English-speaking applications and practice speaking on daily basis. A logical result of this idea was to get learners activate their language skills outside the classroom itself.

Step 4: Raise awareness of learning processes

Nunan suggests that learners should also have a voice in deciding about selection of learning process. In simple words they must have a say in deciding learning strategies. The researcher also involved the learners in the choice of learning methods and strategies. For this step, first the learner introduced certain workable strategies for learning second language and then he asked their opinion in selecting among them. In this way the strategies selected by the learners were used to conduct the business of classroom. The researcher discussed six strategies for learning second language mentioned by Oxford (1999). She asserts that use of these strategies can enhance language proficiency of the learners by making their task easy. These strategies are 6 in number. These are strategies related to cognition, strategies related to meta-cognition, strategies that deal with memory, compensatory strategies, strategies related to affect, and strategies that deal with social situations. Among these strategies, the students preferred first four strategies namely cognitive strategies, meta-cognitive strategies, memory related strategies and compensatory strategies.

Step 5: Help learners identify their own preferred styles and strategies

The next step in the development of a learner-centered classroom would be to train learners to identify their own preferred learning styles and strategies. Nunan suggests that the teacher should give her learners choices regarding selecting of strategies. He refutes the objection that giving choice to learners is a western concept and would not work in Eastern countries. He gives examples of Hong Kong and Thailand where it worked successfully. As a result of their study, they found that students were able to make choices. The

researcher gave the learners choice of adopting learning strategies that best suited their taste and needs.

Step 6: Encourage learner choice

As the sixth step, Nunan recommends that teachers should foster an environment in which students feel comfortable in expressing their preferences for their own education. These options could pertain to the management of the classroom, or they could concern the various approaches to learning that are available. In a similar vein, learners ought to be encouraged to make choices on the substance of their educational experiences. In certain settings, involving the study of a foreign language, the concept of student choice may seem strange or even exotic to those involved. If this is the case, it is best to involve the students in making decisions that are on the lower end of the spectrum in the beginning stages of the process. If the materials for a lesson include both a reading passage and an audio text, for instance, students could be asked to choose which component of the lesson they would like to complete first: the reading or the listening. It is possible to hold a vote on the matter in the classroom if the possibility of pupils engaging in other activities at the same time makes the instructors uneasy. After then, they could gradually become involved in choosing choices such as the ones that are listed below, in which the activity type and task are comparable. The purpose of this exercise is not to expose the students to a variety of activities that are strikingly unlike to one another, but rather to familiarize them with the concept of exercising agency and making decisions. The researcher familiarized the learners belonging to experimental group about the importance of making choices regarding their learning and encouraged them to exercise these choices. For instance, the researcher urged them locate learning material from different sources instead of relying on the content provided by the teachers. The researcher also sought their opinion in planning classroom activities. The researcher gave them the idea of devoting one class per week as Target Language Speaking Day (TLSD). The learners readily accepted this idea and decided to conduct discussion on any given social or political topic in target language.

Step 7: Allow learners to generate their own tasks

After letting students know they can make choices, the next step is to give them chances to change and adapt classroom tasks. This step is called intervention stage in Nunan's five stage model. This could be the first step in showing students how to make their own assignments. This do not have to involve highly technical skills in designing materials, which would be impossible. In a reading comprehension task, you may give learners the text and ask them to design their own questions related to the task. This may help them to learn how to make choices and design their own tasks. Following this instruction of Nunan, the researcher encouraged the BS English learners of experimental group to create new learning tasks for them. The researcher asked the learners to assess each other's presentations and suggest changes for betterment. They were also asked to chalk out a program for group discussion.

Step 8: Encourage learners to become teachers

According to Nunan, a more difficult level would involve putting students in the position of a teacher. Although it initially appears fairly unrealistic, earlier studies have documented similar situations. Nunan provides us the example of Assinder, a teacher who allowed her students to create video-based lessons that they then employed to instruct other students in the class. The option for the learner to become the instructor was crucial to the success of the innovation, according to Assinder. The idea of "teaching each other" was extremely important to her. When asked to present anything to another group, one has a clear motive to work harder, is held more accountable to their own group, and their accuracy improves significantly. In Pakistani classrooms, presentation method has some features of teaching. The researcher urged the learners to present their learning material in an effective way. For each presentation, the researcher would appoint three students as judges who had to assess the presentation and assign them marks. This practice helped the learners to improve the standard of their presentation and at the same time gave the learners a critical awareness about teaching methods and strategies.

Step 9: Encourage learners to become researchers

As a ninth and final step, Nunan discusses the possibility of encouraging your learners to become researchers. He believes that it is possible to do so and as an example he quotes the experience of Heath (1992) who was working with educationally disadvantaged children in America. She asked her students to collect information about the language of the community in which they lived. They (students) successfully accomplished this task. In Pakistani educational scenario this seems impossible. In Pakistani context neither the teacher nor the taught has the required training and orientation. However, learners can be asked to search relevant learning material, compile it in the form of learning notes and present them before the class. The BS English learners of Southern Punjab have no such capability to become researchers at this stage. One contribution that the researcher of this study made was to share the soft copies of some research papers and PhD dissertations as learning material. Though very few students utilized them for their learning and presentations. Researcher also employed some other strategies learnt during literature review such as group work, task based learning and interactive learning. For pre-test and posttest, the researcher devised a 'Language Proficiency Test' following the pattern of PET (Preliminary English Test). It has a multiple-choice format and Bailey (1998) says that multiple choice tests are easy and economical to score this test consisted of four parts covering all the four language skills i.e. reading, writing listening and speaking. For reading comprehension, the researcher gave the learners a paragraph from a novel 'God of Small Things' wrote by Arun Dhatti Roy. The learners were to read the given paragraph and answer the questions given at the end. For writing skills, the researcher added correction and vocabulary tests as Hughes (2003) lays stress on including grammatical component in proficiency test. For evaluation of listening skill, the learners were made to listen three pages from audio-book of the popular novel 'The Alchemist' by Polo Coelho. After that they had to answer the questions related to that text. Evaluation of speaking skill was the most time-consuming process. For this I took the help of one of my colleagues to conduct a speaking test. Researcher called individual

students and one of us would start a conversation with a learner in target language and the other person evaluated it in the form of marks from I to IO. Researcher judged them if they could start a conversation, end a conversation and if they could describe certain situation. This process was conducted at the start of semester as pre-test. After the completion of semester, the evaluation process was repeated to see the impact of learner autonomy on language proficiency.

Results

Table I Independent Sample t-test to Compare the means of Pre-Tests in Experimental and Control group

Variable	Mean experimental group	Mean control group	Mean difference	T	Sig.
Pre- test reading	8.1481	8.0000	.1481	.353	.725
Pre-test Writing	11.8148	12.2963	-.4814	-1.147	.257
Pre-test Listening	6.8889	7.1852	-.2963	-.782	.438
Pre-test Speaking	4.0741	4.7407	-.6666	-2.190	.033
Pre-test Cumulative	30.8889	32.2963	-1.4074	-1.691	.097

In this table, the researcher compared the means of control group and experimental group in pre-test using independent sample. Results of data analysis showed that there is no significant difference between the means of two groups in pre-test. This indicates that both the groups are homogeneous.

Table 2 Paired Sample t-test to compare the Results of Pre and Post-Tests in Experimental Group

Variable	Mean post-test	Mean pre-test	Mean difference	T	Sig.
Reading experimental group	9.3333	8.1481	1.1819	-3.346	.003

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Writing experimental group	15.0370	12.5185	2.5185	-4.806	.000
Listening experimental group	9.4815	6.8889	2.5925	-8.180	.000
Speaking experimental group	5.1852	4.7407	0.4445	-2.280	.031
Cumulative experimental group	38.9630	32.4074	6.5556	-9.275	.000

In this table the researcher compared the means of pre-test and post-test in experimental group. This analysis was done with the help of paired sample t-test. Results showed a significant difference between the mean scores of pre-test and post-test indicating the effect of treatment given to experimental group in the form of practicing principles of learner autonomy.

Table 3 Paired Sample t-test to compare the Results of Pre and Post-Tests in Control Group

Variable	Mean post-test	Mean pre-test	Mean difference	t	Sig.
Reading control group	9.1481	8.0741	1.0740	4.411	.000
Writing control group	15.2037	12.0556	3.1481	13.364	.000
Listening control group	8.9815	7.0370	1.9444	8.414	.000
Speaking control group	6.3704	4.4074	1.9629	9.285	.000
Cumulative control group	39.7037	31.5926	8.1111	14.486	.000

This table compared the means of control group in pre-test and post-test with the help of paired sample t-test. The results of this test indicated a slight difference between mean score of pre-test and post-test. This slight difference is because same language proficiency test has been used both in pre-test and post-test.

Table 4. Independent Sample t-test to compare the Results of Post-Tests in Experimental and Control group

Variable	Mean experimental group	Mean control group	Mean difference	t	Sig.
Post-test reading	9.3333	8.9630	.3703	.915	.364
Post-test writing	15.8148	14.5926	1.2222	2.479	.016
Post-test listening	9.4815	8.4815	1.0000	2.9000	.005
Post-test speaking	7.0000	5.7407	1.2592	3.848	.000
Post-test cumulative	41.6296	37.7778	3.8518	4.463	.000

This independent sample t-test compares the means of control group and experimental group in post-test. Results indicate that though increase in mean scores of both the control and experimental group has occurred but the mean score of experimental groups is high as compared to the mean score of control group. This indicates the effect of treatment on experimental group.

Table 5. Independent Sample t-test comparing Means of Growth and Percentage Between Experimental Group and Control Group

Variable name	Mean experimental group	Mean control group	Mean difference	T	Sig.
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Growth	10.7778	5.4815	5.2963	6.009	.000
Percentage	35.0611	16.9600	18.1011	5.708	.000

This table compares means of growth and percentage in control and experimental group. It indicates that growth and percentage of experimental group is better as compared to that of control group.

Conclusion

The results shows that learner autonomy can be practiced in the language learning classrooms of Southern Punjab and it renders a positive impact on proficiency and learnability of our learners. It does need certain pre-conditions such as teacher training, teacher autonomy and active involvement of teachers in the process of making their learners autonomous. In Asian countries like Pakistan, it is not easy to practice this concept in our classrooms yet its benefits are great. Learner autonomy increases learners' motivation, involvement and capacity. An autonomous learner develops critical thinking and creativity and confidence. He becomes a lifelong learner and goes on improving his skills throughout his life. In this way he is better able to compete in the job market inside and outside the countries.

Recommendations

Learner autonomy and teacher autonomy should be incorporated in teacher training programs. Need based and process syllabus should be introduced and teachers and learners should have their say in syllabus designing. Self-assessment should be practiced and encouraged in the classroom practices. Instead of marks and grades, project-based evaluation should be introduced. To sum up a restructuring of language classroom is needed for better proficiency of our language learners.

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