

Self-Reliant and Auto-Directed Learning: Modes, Elements, Fields and Scopes

H. Mashhady, B. Lotfi, M. Doosti, M. Fatollahi

Abstract—An exploration of the related literature reveals that all instruction methods aim at training autonomous learners. After the turn of second language pedagogy toward learner-oriented strategies, learners' needs were more focused. Yet; the historical, social and political aspects of learning were still neglected. The present study investigates the notion of autonomous learning and explains its various facets from a pedagogical point of view. Furthermore; different elements, fields and scopes of autonomous learning will be explored. After exploring different aspects of autonomy, it is postulated that liberatory autonomy is highlighted since it not only covers social autonomy but also reveals learners' capabilities and human potentials. It is also recommended that learners consider different elements of autonomy such as motivation, knowledge, confidence, and skills.

Keywords—Critical pedagogy, social autonomy, academic learning, cultural notions.

I. INTRODUCTION

ONE of the crucial missions of all educational systems is to train autonomous and self-reliant learners ([4]-[6], [8], [16], [21], [23], [24], [27], [30]. Littlewood mentions in [11] that training autonomous individuals (graduates who are emotionally and mentally independent) has been the main mission of all educational processes.

When teaching and learning processes changed and the humanistic approach came into existence in language learning [32], [9], [10], learners became the main focus of pedagogy. As a result, the personality of learners was taken into account. In fact, the affective and cognitive aspects of learners were considered crucial. Despite the fact that individuals' needs were highly regarded, but instructors were still reliant on the other disciplines and students were reliant on the tasks and activities stipulated by instructors and reflected in textbooks. Despite these developments; the social, historical, and political components of learning are still neglected and students are still regarded as knowledge consumers.

When critical pedagogy and the attitudes of Freire [14], [15] came to fore, learning was considered as a cultural and political process occurring in different cultural contexts. As a result, instructors and students ask different questions and

came up with different tentative answers. Pedagogy of education is a practice which forces and challenges the learners to think creatively and critically, and to adopt a critical attitude toward the world [18]. As [18] puts it, "pedagogy of question" mainly focuses on the real life of learners and turns their life situations into problem-solving situations. It gives learners the right to raise their questions and strengthen their critical thinking. Learners are obliged to come up with their own specific reasons and imagine themselves in real situations.

According to [14] instructors cannot improve the process of true learning if they inject knowledge in the minds of learners without stimulating their critical thinking abilities. Students and instructors should work together to create knowledge and explore their own ideas and experiences. Freire believes that learners should apply their critical thinking to analyze surface forms and uncover implicit meanings. He recommends critical studying which involves "reinventing, recreating, and rewriting" [15]. According to Freire, learners should take a critical attitude toward learning materials and world affairs. During this process, they question the world concepts and find the reasons behind realities. He considers experience as "thinking about experience" which is the most accurate thinking method. Thus, learners must have active participation in their own process of learning and solve their learning problems by applying their background knowledge.

The other crucial concept of critical pedagogy is that learners should be critical thinkers in order to overcome the unequal power relations dominating educational sphere [3], [17], [19], [20], [22], [29]. By considering critical thinking as a mode of social practice, we may clearly understand the relationship between learning process and social realities [7], [17], [22]. Using critical thinking, students relate their experiences to cultural, political and historical realities [2].

To understand the genre-based instruction fully necessitates a thorough understanding of the term genre itself. Genre, according to Hammond & Derewianka, can be traced back to "ancient Greeks and their study of rhetorical structure in different categories of the epic, lyric and dramatic"[9]. In line with this current definition, Johns characterizes genre studies as being traditionally concentrated on determining and categorizing the features of literary works such as form, style and plot [13]. Modern readings, however, assume new different functions for the term and relate it to every day forms of language use. Explaining the same view, Swales defines genre as referring to "a distinguishable category of discourse of any type, spoken or written, with or without literary aspirations"[22].

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Adhering to the same social-oriented perspective, Hyland defines genre as "abstract, socially recognized ways of using language" [11]. Therefore, language use is not considered as arranging chunks of linguistic elements to convey a message, but rather as a social communication that possess its own unique features which are not necessarily linguistic. To emphasize social concept of the term, Bhatia considers genre as communicatively purposeful events. This very characteristic of genre differentiates it from its classic interpretations in a revolutionary way, and accordingly characterizes genre-based approaches to teaching writing [3]. In fact, writing is seen as a social process and a response to recurring social situations. Based on this perspective, pedagogy gives priority to how learners write not what they write [12].

Bhatia considers genre analysis to be a subdivision of the umbrella-term discourse analysis. In his words, discourse analysis is "study of language use beyond the sentence boundaries" and is divided into four categories namely register analysis, grammatical-rhetorical analysis, interactional analysis, and genre analysis [2]. Discourse analysis in the first three approaches, i.e., register, grammatical and interactional analyses, has steadily moved from surface-level analysis to deep description of language use. However, there feels a need for a model which is rich in socio-cultural and organizational explanation rather than grammatical elements. Bhatia claimed that genre analysis appears to be a thick description of language in use which combines socio-cultural and psycholinguistic aspects of text construction and interpretation with linguistic insights in order to answer the question why specific discourse-genres are written and used by the specialists the way they are [2].

Swales categorized written article introductions at the discourse level in terms of "moves" and "steps". A move is thought of as part of a written or spoken text, which serves a particular purpose in the text and includes smaller units called steps. The move contributes in some ways to fulfilling the overall purpose of the genre and can be a paragraph or some long paragraphs. In fact, the move allows for a specific function within a text to be met and always signals the content of a particular discourse within a genre. Therefore, each genre is founded on the base of moves, where each move serves the overall generic purpose of the text. On the other hand, steps, which may be consisted of one or more sentences, are smaller units of discourse that are the building blocks of moves. Each step, just like each move, has a genre purpose in line with the generic purpose of the move and overall purpose of the genre [22].

In this regard, the present article investigates various senses of autonomous learning and explores different perspectives to the subject, especially the role of critical pedagogy in L2 education.

II. AUTONOMY

The notion of autonomy in the process of language learning refers to the idea that learners should be maximally responsible in determining their learning process and its extent

and essence. Learners are involved in their own needs analysis, material selection, and instruction methods selection [33]. In other words, learners are considered responsible in their learning process [12]. In fulfilling this, instructors do not teach directly, rather, they assist learners in selecting their own learning methods and materials [25], [26], [28], [31], [35]. Regarding the importance of leaning processes, [26] and [27] believe that leaning strategies should help learners obtain more autonomy and consciously control their learning process.

This type of autonomy which is also called "academic autonomy" [21] recommends that learners control their own learning methods and strategies. Being academically autonomous, learners can evaluate their needs and use appropriate learning methods and styles to effectively control their learning process [28]. In autonomous learning, learners are not the mere consumers of knowledge; rather, they produce knowledge and language structures [12]. Cook believes that learners are changing their role and are becoming their own instructor. They assess their own learning process and program [12].

As a result, students will be able to act autonomously and behave in their own manner [36]. Considering the fundamentality and effect of learners' autonomy in second language learning; various modes, elements, fields and scopes of autonomous learning will be explored and discussed in this article.

A. Modes of Autonomous Learning

So far, different concepts, modes and methods of autonomy implementation have been discussed [5]. Freire [14] believes that autonomous learners can apply new instruments and strategies to promote their involvement in social activities. Reference [16] has strived to free learners from limitations of the traditional learning strategies [5]. Some new trends emerged in second language learning which focused on the needs of individual learners, and applied critical pedagogy to train autonomous second language learners (ibid). Some educational approaches such as self-learning [34], [23] and self-instruction [5] also emerged to complement autonomous L2 learning strategies. To understand the genre-based instruction fully necessitates a thorough understanding of the term genre itself. Genre, according to Hammond & Derewianka, can be traced back to "ancient Greeks and their study of rhetorical structure in different categories of the epic, lyric and dramatic" [9]. In line with this current definition, Johns characterizes genre studies as being traditionally concentrated on determining and categorizing the features of literary works such as form, style and plot [13]. Modern readings, however, assume new different functions for the term and relate it to every day forms of language use. Explaining the same view, Swales defines genre as referring to "a distinguishable category of discourse of any type, spoken or written, with or without literary aspirations" [22].

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Reference [5] has recognized three different modes of autonomy: technical, psychological, and political. Technical autonomy refers to learning independent of instructors. In other words, learners are responsible for their own learning process. Technical autonomy is often regarded as a strategic way of language learning [24]. Psychological autonomy refers to the capacity of learners to recognize their abilities and form their own attitudes toward the learning process, and consider themselves as responsible learners [5]. Finally, political autonomy refers to the ability of learners to control their own learning process and content (ibid). So, autonomous learning is not restricted to controlling the learning process. Autonomous learning guides learners to achieve conditions in which they can control both their learning process and its context (ibid). In other words, autonomous learning refers to the learners' awareness of learning process and its accompanying social changes.

B. Elements and Fields of Autonomous Learning

Reference [23] has recognized four main elements of autonomy as motivation, confidence, knowledge, and skills; and three main fields of autonomy as communication, learning, and general life. Recognizing these various modes and fields, he maintains that instructors should help learners build their motivation, confidence, knowledge, and skills in order to communicate more autonomously, learn more independently, and form more autonomous personalities in general.

Despite the common misconceptions, autonomy does not mean doing something at one's own will. Autonomy refers to learning "learning strategies", "self-controlling", and "self-evaluation". Students should negotiate with their instructors to learn autonomous learning. The main feature of autonomous learning is that learners cooperate with their instructors and peers to learn independent of the context.

C. Scopes of Autonomy

As explained earlier, critical pedagogy changed the dominant perspective to learning in which learners were limited within classroom learning. Based on critical pedagogy, education is a non-neutral political activity [1] aiming at training successful learners and individuals who can withstand and change social biases. In this section, different scopes of autonomous learning especially the scope recommended by critical pedagogy will be discussed. Following Freire's perspective, [22] has recognized three different scopes of

autonomous learning as academic, social, and liberatory; the third of which is based on post method learning.

As [22] puts it, academic autonomy is associated with the learning process, aiming at encouraging learners to be responsibly involved in their learning process and to apply useful methods of language learning and using. It is assumed that learners improve their autonomy by taking control of their learning process. Controlling one's own learning refers to the act of learning different learning methods, and using affective, cognitive and meta-cognitive methods in learning. Learners are obliged to find their own learning styles to increase their participation in classroom activities. On the other hand, academic autonomy refers to the individual intrapersonal autonomy developed by individuals, and their specific selections. A glance at the related literature reveals that [26] and [27] have comprehensively discussed the essence, modes, and importance of learning strategies.

The second scope of autonomy, social autonomy, is interpersonal [21] and refers to the ability and decision to act effectively as members of a classroom (ibid). Socially autonomous learners build their own learning capabilities and contribute to others'. Furthermore, they are socially responsible toward other learners. Assuming the fact that learning is independent of the environment in which it takes place, learners should cooperate with their peers to improve their learning process [13]. As [8] puts it, learners are not just individuals. They cooperate with teachers and peers to fulfill social learning. Thus, learners are supposed to fulfill their own needs and be sensitive to needs of their peers.

Social autonomy refers to the negotiated interaction based on which learners should confirm, clarify, request, react, and repair [21], [13]. Social autonomy is a crucial element of language learning which increases input amount and stimulates second language development processes [21], [22].

The third and the most fundamental type of autonomy is "liberatory autonomy" which is a key concept of post method and critical language instruction [21], [22]. Liberatory autonomy is based on thinking. It is the capability of learners to review the use and effect of thinking. Liberatory autonomy complements the effects of the two former types. Academic and social autonomies create effective and collaborative learners, respectively. But, liberatory autonomy gives learners critical thinking abilities [21], It leads to realization of not only learning capabilities but also human capabilities.

Liberatory autonomy is based on the philosophical perspective that learners should learn how to deal with different cultural perspectives, besides learning methods, in order to make autonomous language learners [30]. According to Pennycook, culture refers to the ways we realize our lives (ibid). Following [30], he believes that "voice" is the discourse instrument we apply to express our senses and define our beings as active participants in the process of learning. In this regard, voice has led to conflict among discourse, language, and subjectivity. Students use their learning outcomes to improve their own lives and the others'.

There exist some sociopolitical obstacles such as discriminations based on gender, creed, race, and social class.

Based on liberatory autonomy, learners use their critical instruments to overcome obstacles. Learners can know their identities and can recognize their social relationships. Liberatory autonomy helps learners to work in teams and assist each other. So, it has many common features with the two other modes of autonomy but it is not limited to them. Breen and Mann have favored autonomous learning mainly due to the fact that it does not merely lead to successful language learning [8].

III. PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Learners can improve language learning by tackling real problems through critical thinking and innovation. The present study has several implications as follows:

- 1) Instructors should consider learners as individuals and attempt to make them involved in communicative learning. In this regard, instructors should consider and appreciate learners' ideas, experiences and viewpoints. This policy promotes students' participation in classroom and improves their creativity. Learners can reveal their needs, desires and weaknesses through performing critical thinking tasks.
- 2) Language textbooks should be designed so as to focus on integrated language skills rather than disintegrated ones.
- 3) Textbook writers and developers should attempt to incorporate appropriate tasks in the textbooks in order to strengthen learners' critical thinking and language learning abilities. Textbook tasks should be designed so that learners become cognitively and emotionally involved in classroom activities. Exercises such as literary portfolios with no one pre-determined answer stimulate the background knowledge of learners and encourage them to come up with their own answers and solutions.

IV. CONCLUSION

An autonomous learner is a learner who has obtained the three modes of autonomy and has stepped toward realization of learners' full human capabilities. To improve their level of autonomy, learners should cooperate with their peers and instructors. An autonomous learner not only assists other learners in their learning process but also engages in an attempt to change the cultural definition of his life.

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