Documentary Method on Evaluating the Importance and Approaches of Undergraduates' Autonomy

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Abstract: The first year of undergraduate EAP learners are challenging, they need to change the passive learning style in high schools into a more autonomous way when entered into university. So, why this learning ability is so important and how to help students to foster this kind of learning capacity will be discussed from the literature level in this essay.

Keywords: Undergraduate EAP learners; Autonomy; Teacher's role

1. Introduction

The first year undergraduates have to face some challenging situations when they step into the new environment, like: they have to become adept at finding and using sources of information by themselves, this situation may not familiar to them as in high school where teachers selected and processed information to them. To college students, work hard is not enough, they need to know how to work 'smart', an autonomous learner may easier to work 'smart'. Autonomy is important not just for university degree subjects, but also an initial skills for their further study or work.

2. The Literature Definitions of Autonomy

Autonomy is usually defined as 'the capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for one's own learning.' Moving this to language learning in more detail, 'take charge' and 'taking responsible' means in the context of learning. Benson (2001: 110) defined autonomy as the capacity to take control of one's own learning, it was seen as a natural product of the practice of self-directed learning, or learning in which the objectives, progress and evaluation of learning are determined by the learners themselves. Alexander (2008: 271) shows: autonomy has been defined as a process that enables learners to recognize and address their own needs, to choose and apply their own learning strategies or styles eventually leading to effective management of learning. What's more, Borg (2012) addresses that autonomy is seen to offer learners an enhanced ability to make independent decisions about their learning. To me, learner's autonomy is that learners have the freedom and ability to make decisions about what they want to learn and how to learn it both in class and out class. Including the rights to choose learning activities, speaking topics, even the materials which will be used in class and the assessment and feedback types. It does not mean work isolated from teachers and other learners. It means the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning.

3. Reasons of Developing Autonomy in College

Moving to the reasons for developing learner's autonomy, it is generally justified by a combination of three arguments: the ideological, the psychological and economic (Crabbe, 1993). To explain these in a easy understanding way, that is, firstly, students in college are already adults, they have the right and need have the ability to exercise his or her own choices instead of passively following what the teacher steps. It also can preparing learners for future study or work, in which independence is vital in society. In addition, helping learners become more independent in their learning is one way of maximizing their life choices (Cotterall, 1995). Through the psychological aspect, learners will learn better and learning will become more meaningful and permanent when they are in charge. Being in charge also can increase motivation, and, a motivated learner is often a successful learner (Crabbe, 1993). The economic arguments shows that the society cannot provide that much resources to meet any levels of learning for every people in every area, so, individuals must be responsible for their own learning need, either individually or cooperatively. Promoting learner autonomy can also be justified on pedagogical grounds.Cotterall (1995) emphasize that reflectively study and self-awareness in educational contexts produce better learning. And, leaner autonomy also defined as a means by which to enhance efficiency in language learning. What's more, when learners are involved in making choices and decisions about aspects of the lesson, they are likely to feel

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more secure in their learning. Finally, learners become more efficient in their language learning if they do not have to spent time waiting for the teacher to provide them with resources or solve their problems.

4. Approaches to Foster College Students' Autonomy

Holec (1981:3) summarizes the possible approaches to develop learner's autonomy. For example: let them determine the objectives; define the content and progressions; select methods and techniques to be used; etc. The autonomous learner is himself capable of making all these decisions concerning the learning with which he is or wishes to be involved. While according to Alexander(2008: 280), she defines that autonomous EAP learners should be: active in taking responsibility for their learning, comfortable in taking risks in order to exploit their learning potential fully and able to reflect deeply on their learning.

There are also lots of approaches which have been designed to develop EAP learners' autonomy, like Borg (2012), he mentions four approaches: talking to students about autonomy and its value, encouraging learners to engage in autonomous behaviour, getting learners to reflect on their learning, using activities out of class which promote autonomy. For instance, going to the library, and using the sources in it, doing tasks on Moodle are both part of ways to develop autonomy. What's more, co-operative and peer learning, encouraging students to go the extra mile and not be afraid to make mistakes, making them confident to work by themselves can also foster autonomy.

While Benson(2001) developed six approaches which can promote autonomy, the 'learner-based approach, classroom-based approach and teacher-based approach' are more practical in the following lessons. There are also some ways to foster learner autonomy through teacher's aspect: asking students for opinions, listening to their answers, allowing others to talk, encouraging student's effort and praising progress. Another effect way to develop autonomy is self-assessment and peer-assessment. The advantages are as follow: they can give students a sense of autonomy and ownership of the assessment process and improving motivation, encourage students to take responsibility for their own learning and development, when they treat assessment as part of learning so that mistakes are seen as opportunities rather than failures.

5. Teacher's Role in Fostering Learner Autonomy

There may seem to be a paradox in the idea of teaching independence, autonomy is not an 'all-or-nothing con-

cept' but a matter of degree, and throughout the literature on autonomy we find writers referring to learners' acquiring autonomy' or 'becoming more autonomous'(Benson, 2000: 53). So student autonomy is not something that can be taught in a specific lesson. It comes through changing the roles of the teacher as responsibility for learning is gradually handed over to students.

According to Benson(2001: 172), the teacher's roles are reduced to three in fostering learner's autonomy: facilitator, in which the teacher is seen as provide support for learning; counselor, where the emphasis is placed on one-to one interaction; and resource, in which the teacher is seen as a source of knowledge and expertise. Alexander (2008: 283) drew a five-dimension diagram called 'the teacher's cline of control', they are: "teacher control, teacher supervises, teacher facilitates, teacher advises and student controls'. In 'teacher control', teacher act as expert and decision maker, while, in student control, teacher moving away from controlling towards handing over responsibility to students. Although they may be ambitious and even eager to start helping their students developing autonomy and awareness of the language learning processes, they may still be ignorant of what this means for the teacher role. It is not just a matter of changing teaching techniques, it is matter of changing teacher beliefs. Teachers' beliefs can powerfully shape both what teachers do and, consequently, the learning opportunities learners receive. Therefore the extent to and manner in which learner autonomy is promoted in language learning classrooms will be influenced by teachers' beliefs about what autonomy actually is, its desirability and feasibility. Second, teacher education is more likely to have an impact on teachers' practices when it is based on an understanding of the beliefs teachers hold understanding teachers' beliefs about autonomy is thus an essential element in the design of promoting learner autonomy.

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