Increasing Learners' Autonomy in EFL Classrooms.

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ABSTRACT: Autonomy in learning has always been related to the concepts of independence and self-direction in learning. Actually, autonomous learning has not been given clear guidelines and objectives in most educational programmes. Most of teachers are not really equipped with the theories and the strategies that help them foster the autonomous learning. Most of the time, teachers themselves do not know much about the concept of autonomy, much less about how to practice it in the teaching-learning process. This paper identifies and describes the nature of autonomous learning and its advantages in EFL classrooms. It tackles the different concepts of autonomous learning and attempts to offer guidelines and recommendations for EFL teachers to encourage and enhance their learners' autonomy in the most effective ways.

Keywords: Autonomous learning, EFL classrooms, EFL teachers, guidelines, recommendations.

1. **Introduction :**
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   Researchers and educationalists have accorded a significant importance to the practice of autonomy in learning because of its essential roles in the educational contexts. Indeed, encouraging students to be more autonomous in their learning has become a great challenge and concern for many researchers, educationalists, and teachers in recent times.

   Autonomous learning is confronted with many constraints such as inexperienced learners and teachers, time limitations, exam obligations, and curriculum requirements. To overcome these obstacles, Researchers and academics are seeking the most effective methods and strategies that can actually lead to enhance autonomous learning.

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2. Autonomous Learning Defined

According to Oxford (1990),   the term autonomy refers to the learner's attitudes. Learners who can play active and positive roles in their own learning can be described as autonomous learners. According to Benson and Voller (1997),   autonomous learning refers to students' abilities to assume their responsibilities for their own learning. Other researchers have viewed that autonomy involves various kinds of abilities that make learners plan their learning, assess their weakness and strengths, and monitor their progress. According to Benson:

> *Autonomy is perhaps best described as a capacity ... because various kinds of abilities can be involved in control over learning. Researchers generally agree that the most important abilities are those that allow learners to plan their own learning activities, monitor their progress and evaluate their outcomes.*

(Benson, 2003: 290)

In other words, learners autonomy is strongly related learner's ability to make effective contribution to his/her own learning by planning, controlling, and evaluating. Benson and Voller (1997) argue that the term autonomy can be used in the following contexts:

➢ For contexts where students learn totally on their own.
➢ For a variety of skills which can be learnt and applied in self-directed learning.
➢ For an instinctive ability which is not scaffolded by the school.
➢ For the right of learners to decide the progression of their own learning.

Autonomous learning includes learners' abilities to select and discuss the learning material, to reflect on their own learning, to make self-assessment, and to make decisions about learning. Further, they should be able to take their

responsibilities to set the   learning goals and to decide about the appropriate methods and techniques. In other words, autonomy can be viewed as the ability for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action.

Benson (2001) defines language learning autonomy as the role of the students' approach in their own learning. He views that autonomy in language learning is not intrinsic but can be seen as a natural tendency as it takes different forms and characteristics. According to Holec (1981),   autonomy in language learning refers to students' abilities to assume their responsibilities   in   learning and their ability to do   the following points:

> ➢ Setting objectives and goals.

> ➢ Selecting the contents.

> ➢ Deciding about the methods and techniques.

> ➢ Monitoring learning.

> ➢ Assessing and evaluating.

According to Carr (1999) and Derrick (2001) autonomous learning occurs through the following stream:

> ➢ *Desire*; which refers to learners' preparedness to be autonomous.

> ➢ *Resourcefulness*; which refers to learners' ability to search for the appropriate resources such as the learning materials, staff, and environment that help them improve their learning.

> ➢ *Initiative*; which refers to students' ability to take   initiatives in their learning.

In addition, according to Dornyei (2011),   autonomy in the learning contexts refers to learner's self-regulation in learning. In this sense, Wenden (1991: 15)   argues:

> *Autonomous learners are learners who learn how to learn to acquire the learning strategies, the knowledge about learning, and the attitudes to use these skills and knowledge confidently, flexibly, appropriately, and independently of a teacher.*

(Wenden, 1991: 15).

Researchers identify autonomy as an essential aim for learning. It could take different forms according to the learning contexts, the contents to be taught, and learners' styles and characteristics. Still, Dickinson (1987:11) identifies 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*". In other words, autonomy involves learners' abilities to take and implement decisions about learning.

Further, Cotterall (1995) provides pedagogical, philosophical, and practical assumptions for language learning autonomy. As for the pedagogical view, learners should feel safe in their learning by giving them the opportunity to make contributions in selecting the learning contents and the strategies. The philosophical assumption views that learners should make choices in their learning. The practical argument says that teachers are not always available to help students learn on their own. According to Little (1991), autonomy:

➢ Is not a teaching approach, but a teaching strategy that teachers can apply.

➢ Is not a synonym for self-instruction.

➢ Does not mean learning without a teacher.

➢ Does not mean letting students learn alone and do things as they want.

➢ Is not about teachers' resignation from their teaching and educational responsibilities.

3. Increasing Learners' Autonomy

Undoubtedly, there are numerous factors that can enhance or impair the learning autonomy such as motivation, learners' gender, learners' age, learners' attitudes, and learners' level. One of the challenges that weaken the increase of students' autonomy is learners' unwillingness to take responsibility in learning. In fact, they have had the tendency to depend greatly on their teachers. Therefore, teachers who want to enhance their students' autonomy must motivate them to take part in their learning and stop spoon-feeding them.

In the field of the English Language Teaching, EFL teachers are much more required to seek and implement plans and use the useful techniques that could develop learners' abilities to be autonomous. One of these strategies is helping learners acquire the skills that make them set clear goals for their learning. Nunan (2003) provides the following suggestions to enhance learners' autonomy:

- ➢ Raising awareness of the learning process.
- ➢ Making the learning objectives clear to students.
- ➢ Providing learners with the opportunities to set their learning objectives.
- ➢ Encouraging students to reveal their preferences and their learning styles.
- ➢ Encouraging students to make their own decisions and make their choices about their own learning.
- ➢ Involving students in setting the classroom activities.
- ➢ Encouraging students to be researchers.

Clearly, both EFL teachers and learners need to know that autonomy is the ability that can be prompted and developed through appropriate preparation. Teachers need to share their decisions with their students and set a clear framework to enhance this autonomy. They must assure that students are playing

important roles in their learning and have the tendency to learn beyond the classroom contexts.

Furthermore, EFL teachers need to restrict their roles in spoon-feeding language skills. They should try to deal with students as social individuals. Certainly, they should take into consideration their age, their abilities and skills, the instructional objectives, and the curriculum requirements. For example, adult students are more likely able to assume responsibilities in their learning, yet helping the teachers to increase autonomous learning.

As teachers should act sociologically, they should help learners build their personalities as free social individuals who are able to take decisions in their lives. In fact, personal autonomy and learning autonomy are strongly related. Since, autonomy is something that can be acquired, EFL teachers should play significant roles in building in parallel their learners' both personal and learning autonomy.

Certainly, EFL teachers should take into consideration learners' personal autonomy because it is the key to learning autonomy. According to Crabbe (1993), the ideological argument for autonomous learning refers to the learners' right to be free to make their own choices and preferences in learning and in other settings. In other words, learning autonomy is part of personal autonomy.

Learners can assume their responsibility for their learning if they are efficiently trained about how they learn independently. For example, in planning instruction, teachers need to include tasks and strategies that push students to make efforts autonomously and which assure the continuous non-classroom learning. Indeed, they should make a shift from giving information to requiring and encouraging learners to seek and find information by themselves. Actually, if learners are effectively trained to learn independently, they will be accustomed to be autonomous learners.

Harmer (2007) and Benson (2001) state the following techniques to enhance learners' autonomy:

- ➤ Displaying positive attitudes towards students.
- ➤ Enhancing student's personal autonomy before focusing on the learning autonomy.
- ➤ Asking learners to identify their learning goals.
- ➤ Asking learners to make research and select the materials to be taught.
- ➤ Increasing the degree of freedom in the classroom.
- ➤ Demanding students to conduct projects.
- ➤ Requiring students to make free readings.
- ➤ Asking students to prepare and make plans and to give suggestions and recommendations for forthcoming lessons.
- ➤ Asking learners to give their opinions and views about the teaching material.
- ➤ Encouraging self-assessment and self-reflection.
- ➤ Appreciating and rewarding students' initiatives and contributions in learning.
- ➤ Involving students in classroom decisions.
- ➤ Pushing learners to reveal their needs and interests.
- ➤ Motivating students.

In addition, some educationalists view that for learning autonomy to take place; autonomous teaching should be enhanced and practiced. Autonomous teaching refers to teachers' abilities to use new strategies to achieve the instructional goals. Certainly, when teachers enjoy a high degree of freedom in setting their instructional goals and implementing their own methods, they are more likely able to increase learners' autonomy. Of course, if teachers themselves are not autonomous, they can never develop autonomous

learning. In short, the autonomous learner is the product of the autonomous teacher.

4. Conclusion

Autonomy is a continuous process where both teachers and learners shouldn't cease to learn to be autonomous. The rationale behind the increasing interest about learning autonomy is the emergence of critical views and studies about the importance of autonomy and its roles in improving the leaning process.

Many scholars have argued that giving a certain degree of freedom to learners is necessary for better learning to occur. Researchers have attempted to clarify and refine the concept and the effects of autonomy in order to make a balance between the teacher-centred and the learner-centred approaches to education.

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