



The Impacts of Students' Occupational Status and Place of Birth on their Predisposition towards Learner Autonomy

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Abstract

In order to develop autonomy for the language learners, it can be rewarding to investigate those beliefs which demonstrate students' predisposition towards learner autonomy. In doing so, a questionnaire was prepared and 168 male and female BA students majoring in English translation of one of the Islamic Azad Universities in Iran were involved in the study. They came from different occupational status and place of birth. The questionnaire was implemented to the participants. The responses of students to research questionnaire were analyzed. Based on t-test for independent samples and Analysis of Variance, it came to light that occupational status influences students' autonomy in that those students who had occupations obtained a higher index of autonomy. In other words, the indexes of autonomy such as learner independence, learner confidence, predisposition, and positive attitude towards language learning in the employed participants were higher than the unemployed participants. The findings of the present study confirmed the ideas of Holec (1979) in which the autonomous learner, e.g., an employed learner is the governor of his learning. Moreover, autonomous learner moves away on the teacher.

Key Words: Teacher Autonomy, Learner autonomy, Predisposition, Insightful beliefs, Detrimental beliefs

Introduction

Throughout a person's life learning occurs and should be extended. In our time, learning how to learn helps students overcome many of the problems which they may encounter in the process of learning and would result in efficient learning in different contexts. One of the goals of education is empowerment and one of the consequences of autonomous learning is empowering students with the ability to learn for life. As Little (1995) maintained autonomous learners had the means to remove the barriers between learning and living.

Many terms have been coined to refer to a concept to which we referred to as learner autonomy. Practically, all these synonymous terms such as learner independence, self-access learning, self-paced learning and distant learning emphasize a shift of attention to learner-oriented approach to language learning. In this approach, learners take the responsibility of their own learning, learn at their own pace and use their own strategies. According to the (CIEL Handbook, 2000, p. 5): “Learner autonomy indicates a number of dimensions in which learners move away from dependence on the teacher and:

- Take responsibility for their own learning and learn to learn;
- Develop key transferable skills (e.g., study, time-management, IT, interpersonal skills etc.);
- Actively manage their learning; seeking out learning opportunities and using appropriate learning strategies;
- Involve themselves in an interactive process in which they set short and long term learning objectives, reflect on and evaluate progress.”

The father of learner autonomy, Holec (1979), believes that the autonomous language learner takes responsibility for the totality of his learning situation. He does this by determining his own objectives, defining the contents to be learned and the progression of the course, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring this procedure, and evaluating what he has acquired. In other words, he is the governor of his learning.

The Objectives of the Study

Among many factors involved in language learning, empowering the learners can play a significant role. Autonomous learners have the ability to self-determine the overall direction of their learning. They can become actively involved in the management of the learning process and exercise freedom of choice in relation to learning resources and activities (Nunan, 2000).

In order to investigate the factors affecting the level of autonomy by the learners the present study attempted:

- To focus on the role of learner’s occupation position in the autonomy of the learners;
- To find out any relationship between the degree of being autonomous and the place of birth.

The Research Questions

This study investigated some of the aspects of learner autonomy and focused on those learners’ beliefs which demonstrated their predisposition towards autonomy.

This study was an attempt to find answers to the following questions:

1. Does an occupation play any significant role in the degree to which students show autonomy?
2. Does birth place (geographical locations like cities, towns, or villages) play any significant role in the degree to which students show autonomy?

The variables of the present study are of two kinds: dependent and independent. The study considered the level of autonomy for language learning showed by the learning as the dependent variable and the place of birth and the occupation as the independent variables.

Review of Research Work

Learner Autonomy and Learner Beliefs

Cotterall (1995) in one of her studies acknowledged that the beliefs learners held might either contribute to or obstruct the development of their potential for self-sufficiency or autonomy. She administered a questionnaire to 139 adult ESL learners who enrolled in intensive

English for Academic Purposes course who came from 32 different countries. Most were intending to enroll at tertiary institutions in New Zealand on completion of language course. She intended to determine if subjects' responses revealed any particular clusters of beliefs.

In the study of Cotterall (1995) there were 26 items in the questionnaire to a group of learners. Factor analysis of the responses to the questionnaire showed the existence of six dimensions underlying the responses. These factors were "role of the teacher", "role of feedback", "learner independence", "learner confidence in study ability", "experience of language learning", and "approach to studying".

The experts recently have considered the role of a teacher as a facilitator. Teachers should no longer direct nor control the language behavior of their students nor are they responsible for providing their students with models for imitation. They should be well aware of the dedicated efforts that learning a foreign language demands and of the psychological barriers that learners would encounter.

Students may form some misconceptions regarding their abilities and these false impressions may impede their learning drastically. Teachers can be one of the most reliable sources to help their students eradicate these negative and detrimental impressions.

Yang (1998, p. 128) assured that new roles for teachers include "helpers, facilitators, advisors and guides." Murry and Kouritzin (1997) also suggested that teachers act as collaborators, supporting learners in their attempts instead of delivering lessons and Grasha (1994) suggested five teaching styles one of which was teachers as delegators in which teachers tried to develop students' capacity to function autonomously.

A question may be raised at this point. Are teacher's role and student's role mutually exclusive and would the role of a teacher become superfluous in autonomous language learning?

Noteably, in autonomous learning the role of a teacher changes to some extent but as Nakhoul (1995) maintained, teacher's role may not become superfluous when learners become autonomous for the teacher is needed as councilor, advisor and expert and these roles are more open-ended and demanding and as Shield, Markus, and Lawrence (2000) argued, autonomous language learning should not be equated with teacher less learning.

What would be the possible image of college classrooms of the future? As the greatest tendency is towards empowering students, it can be predicted that more active roles will be specified to learners and learners may hopefully develop more positive beliefs. McDaniel (1994) pictures college classrooms of the future where many teachers include suitable learning experiences that are enjoyable and cater for an atmosphere which enhances mastery and student power in the classroom. Teachers will develop professional personal relationships with their students and encourage them to take risks and rely on their own judgments.

Simon (1987: 375) in his article, declared that in order to be able to change the grounds upon which life is lived, teaching and learning must be connected with the goal of teaching students to take risks, "to struggle with ongoing relations of power, to critically appropriate forms of knowledge that exist outside of their immediate experience, and to envisage versions of a world which is not yet."

Intuitive and Harmful Thinking

While insightful or intuitive beliefs would inspire students with positive attitudes and facilitate their development of autonomy, detrimental or harmful beliefs may develop the development of autonomy to the hilt. Victori and Lockhart (1995, cited in Cotterall, 1999) discussed differences between insightful beliefs and negative beliefs and concluded that if students developed misconceptions about their learning, they were not likely to adopt a

responsible and active attitude in their learning and could never become autonomous. In *Recognizing and changing students' misconceptions*, Meyer (1993) mentioned students' beliefs about learning as one of the sources of misunderstanding.

In her study Cotterall (1999) stated that the data revealed evidence of autonomy-favoring behavior in relation to subjects' beliefs as subjects indicated their willingness to accept responsibility for analyzing needs, setting goals and planning their learning, even when they lacked knowledge of these strategies. Moreover, Wenden (1986) recommended that teachers discover their students' beliefs.

The Concepts of Teacher Autonomy and Learner Autonomy

An interesting and complex issue with regard to autonomy is how can teacher autonomy be defined and would it have any impacts on learner autonomy. Aoki (2000) stated that researchers and practitioners have claimed that learner autonomy and teacher autonomy are two sides of the same coin. If learner autonomy is viewed as the capacity and responsibility to make choices regarding one's learning, teacher autonomy may be defined as the capacity to make choices regarding one's teaching. Teacher autonomy can be a necessary but not sufficient condition for the development of learner autonomy. Generally speaking, learner autonomy indicates a number of dimensions in which learners move away from dependence on the teacher.

The following question may sometimes be raised: Are autonomous teachers those persons who have been autonomous as learners? Savage (2000) poses the hypothesis those teachers who had experienced autonomous learning and had the opportunities to reflect on their experience as learners would be better positioned to consider implementing pro-autonomy approaches.

It seems that those learners who have experienced autonomy in learning would make more autonomous teachers in comparison with those who have never been autonomous with regard to learning.

Little (1995: 179) considers teacher autonomy as a prerequisite for learner autonomy and as genuinely successful learners have always been autonomous, genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous. He also noted that "actual successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of affective and cognitive control of the teaching process and exploiting the freedom that this confers."

The participants for this study were all male and female B.A. students majoring in English translation in Islamic Azad University, Kazerun Branch. Generally, 168 students (53 males and 115 females) participated in the study. The study used randomization procedure for selecting the participants. They differed with regard to their age and marital status.

Methodology of the Study

Instruments and Results

The data for the study were collected through a questionnaire in which the forty five items were taken from two other questionnaires by Cotterall (1995) and Cotterall (1999) with some modifications proper to the study. The items of the questionnaire in this study were obtained from the questionnaires which showed students' beliefs regarding autonomous language learning. The popular four-point psychometric scale, Likert, was administered to the participants and score average responses. In order to confirm the validity of the questionnaire, a number of professors and specialists in the field studied it and they made some modifications. Therefore, the appropriate items which provided indexes of students' predispositions towards autonomy were selected for the study. Moreover, in order to compare the means of students with different places of birth (cities, small towns or villages) with their autonomy, one-way ANOVA was used.

The data obtained from the participants were analyzed using the statistical program SPSS (statistical package for social sciences) for windows. The obtained scores on the tests were subjected to the following statistical operation: one way ANOVA (analysis of variance).

After carrying out the t-test, it was revealed that those students who had occupations had higher means in autonomy (142.29) in comparison with others. The difference in means was highly significant at .008 level (.See Appendix for the comparison of means of students with different professional status considering learner autonomy).

Table No.1 Comparison of Employed and Unemployed Students

| Occupational Status | Mean | SD | df | t-value | Level of Significance |
|---------------------|--------|-------|-----|---------|-----------------------|
| Employed | 142.29 | 14.81 | 168 | 2.70 | .008 |
| Unemployed | 136.31 | 13.30 | | | |

As mentioned before to compare the means of students with different places of birth (cities, small towns or villages) with their autonomy, one-way ANOVA was run. The results showed that the differences in means were not significant for autonomy (See Appendix for self-assessment by birth place).

Table No.2 One-way ANOVA for Learner Self-assessment by Birth place

| Source of Variance | df | Sum of Squares | Mean Square | F | P< |
|--------------------|-----|----------------|-------------|---|-------|
| Between Group | 2 | 11.80 | 5.90 | 1 | .0496 |
| Within Group | 164 | 922.63 | 5.62 | | |
| Total | 168 | 934.44 | | | |

The Scheffe test revealed that the mean of those who were borne in villages was significantly different from that of students who were borne in small towns and they were significantly different at .05 level (Table 3)

Table No. 2 Results of the Scheffe Test for Self-assessment by Birth place

| Mean | Group | 1 | 2 | 3 |
|-------|-------|---|---|---|
| 18.48 | 1 | - | - | - |
| 17.93 | 2 | - | - | * |
| 18.68 | 3 | - | - | - |

Summary and Concluding Remarks

The basic concern of the present study was to investigate those learners' beliefs which showed their predisposition towards learner autonomy. In doing so, a questionnaire was prepared and administered to 168 students. With regard to occupational status, the results of the t-test showed that those students who had occupations displayed greater predispositions towards autonomy in learning and this can be explained by the fact that those people who have jobs are usually suitable to make decisions regarding their own affairs and this power may be transferred to their learning. That is, they would feel that they are completely free to make decisions about their learning and this may lead to their greater autonomy in learning. Based on the one-way ANOVA, the means of students with different places of birth (cities, towns or villages) were compared considering self-assessment and it was found that the differences in means were significant at .0496 level and those students who were born in villages had the highest mean (16.68). It can be discussed that place of birth would influence students' self-assessment. That they revealed more indexes of self-assessment can be due to the fact that those who were born in

villages have experienced two qualitatively different environments and that may have prepared the ground for their better assessment of experiences in general and language learning experiences in particular. The findings of the present study confirmed the ideas of Holec (1979) in which the autonomous learner, e.g., an employed learner is the governor of his learning. Moreover, autonomous learner moves away on the teacher. In this regard, Cotterall (1999) in her study declared that the data revealed evidence of autonomy-favoring behavior in relation to subjects' beliefs as subjects indicated their willingness to accept responsibility for analyzing needs, setting goals and planning their learning, even when they lacked knowledge of these strategies. Moreover, Wenden (1986) recommended that teachers discover their students' beliefs. Hence, it is hoped that students will manifest more learner-control and the results of the study would serve to encourage both learners to display increasing initiative and responsibility for their learning and teachers to help their students to advance autonomy.

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