

Literature as an act of Engagement and Participation: Encouraging Autonomy in the Classroom

Zobeid kobra

English teacher, Technical and Vocational girls Ahvaz faculty, Technical and Vocational University, Khozestan, Itran

Abstract

This study reports on the effect of literary texts on learner autonomy. The study was conducted on a group of senior students majoring in TEFL at university. To this end, it purported to investigate students' views of their responsibilities and decision-making abilities, as two major phenomena in the learner's autonomy, in learning English. Further, their motivation level and the actual language learning activities they undertook inside and outside classroom with a view to gauging their readiness for autonomous learning were also measured. Sixty participants with similar knowledge in English were selected through a proficiency test to make sure the groups were nearly homogeneous. These subjects formed our experimental and control groups. Then, the experimental group was given some literary texts (short stories) to read and analyze the elements of the story during one academic semester. In order to assess all the subjects' opinions about autonomous learning especially in second language learning, a questionnaire was used to collect the relevant data at the end of the semester. The results indicated that the literary texts could boost the experimental subjects' motivation but could not achieve autonomous behavior at a satisfactory level in second language learning.

Keywords: Autonomy, Learner autonomy, literary oriented class, literary texts

1. INTRODUCTION

Language learning is a long, complex and multifaceted process [1, 2]. For a long time, language scholars, researchers and professional instructors have attempted to approach this process through different perspectives [3, 4]. One of these perspectives is the use of 'literature or literary text' as an instructional material during language learning course. 'Literary text' reading programs include a series of instructional procedures that encourage the reading of a wide variety of texts from a 'range of genres' in the target language.

Over the last 20 years, autonomy in language learning has been a topic of widespread discussion in Western countries. Learner autonomy is defined in many different ways by many different researchers and theorists. Holec (1981:47), one of the earliest advocates of autonomy concept of language learning has defined it as the "the ability to take care of one's own learning [5]." Also, Sinclair (1996:138) points out that learner autonomy is unpredictable and may be seen as disruptive to learning in the classroom [6]. However, she argues, the use of representational materials such as literary texts demands individual responses, with some guidance from the teacher in the development of learners' capacity to discover strategies for their own learning.

This study attempts to explore the notion of learner autonomy and then considers its relevance for literature teaching. It will then provide a broad overview of techniques that may be used to promote learner autonomy with regard to reading literature.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Autonomy

Dickinson (1987:9) states that "autonomous learner is one who totally responsible for making and implementing all of decisions concerned with his own learning" [7]. Little (1991:4) defines autonomy as a capacity for self-

direction [8]. This capacity is exercised in ‘the planning, monitoring and evaluation of learning activities, and the process of learning’. His concept includes some metacognitive strategies that deal with different phases of the learning process—planning, monitoring and evaluation – which are central aspects in an autonomous learning process.

However, for Candy (1989:101) “autonomy is an innate capacity of the individual which may be suppressed or distorted by institutional education” [9]. Young (1986) and Pennycook (1997) follow similar line of thought, although they do not mention formal education [10]. For Young as cited in Pennycook (1997:35), autonomy means, “authoring one’s own world without being subject to the will of others”. For Pennycook (1997:36) it is “the struggle to become the author of one’s own world, to be able to create one’s own meaning, to pursue cultural alternatives amid the cultural politics of every life.”

2.2. Learner autonomy and literature teaching

How is learner autonomy relevant to literature teaching? Maccabee (1985:47) claims that literature is a part of language, you do not really know the language if you do not something of the literature of the language [11]. Also, literature teaching offers an ideal context for educational goals. Sinclair (1996:141) maintains that when teaching literature, the teachers’ ultimate aim is to develop the students’ ability to read and understand the meanings embedded in the language and contexts of a wide number of text types [6]. Moreover, their purpose is to arouse the students’ interest in reading English which will motivate them to choose and read texts independently. This finally leads to learner’s autonomy. However, Cope and Kalantzis (2000:32) suggest that many learners require more explicit guidance and instruction to develop more conscious control and awareness of one’s own learning [12].

2.3. Learner training

The teacher’s role is not to impose total autonomy on the learners, but to help them gradually develop the capacity for selecting English texts according to their own preferences and interests, as well as dealing with and understanding the language, discourse, style, form and contexts of these texts. According to Sinclair (1996:42), ‘Learner training aims to help learners consider the factors which affect their learning and to discover personally suitable learning strategies so that they may become more effective learners and take on more responsibility for their own learning [6].

2.4. Methodological preparation and explicit training

Methodological preparation would include making sure that learners are familiar with metalanguage used in reading literature, which is appropriate to their level. Learners need to understand *what* they doing, *why* and *how* this can be transferred to their tests they are studying. Once learners are aware of the importance of certain techniques and strategies, they can develop the capacity to apply them to different contexts and, thus, take more responsibility for their learning. The notion of explicit training is crucial in the promotion of learner autonomy. Furthermore, Sinclair (1996:43) maintains that the teacher has to explain why the learners are doing a certain activity, to explain why it is useful and how they learn from it.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants in this study will be 60 male and female senior level of Teaching English as a foreign language chosen randomly from Learner Training Course mastered in English language as both experimental and control groups at Azad University in Duzful. The primary object of this research would be to investigate whether autonomy has validity for language learners in different educational contexts such as Iranian Universities. In addition, it attempts to investigate the effects of literary texts on learner engagement and autonomy in EFL classrooms as stated in Sinclair’s article (1996).

3.2. Procedure

The experimental group is given some short stories to read and choose which one they work on. Then, the participants of the experimental group are to reply some questions proposed by Ellis and Sinclair (1989). These questions about the learners' attitudes, knowledge, self-assessment, goals, strategies, and how do they organize their reading. These questions are presented during the learning period in the classroom after each session. They are applied to promote introspection and self-awareness, to encourage exploitation of reading resources, to promote greater language awareness, and to promote planning for individual reading.

3.3. Data analysis

In order to assess the opinions of the learners, a questionnaire is used to collect the data for the study. The questionnaire is given to both experimental and control groups as a posttest at the end of the term. The questionnaire consists of 52 questions, which requires the learners to report on their motivations, abilities and activities. In addition, learners' responses will be presented and discussed according to four main sections of questionnaire, which are:

- a) learners' perceptions of the English teacher's responsibilities and their own
- b) learners' perceptions of the decision-making abilities
- c) learners' motivation to study English
- d) how often they carried out different autonomous activities in and outside class.

Then, some statistical procedures such t-test will be conducted to find out whether or not the difference between two groups in the test of achieving autonomous language behavior is significant.

4. Results

4.1. Learners' perceptions of their English teacher's responsibilities and their own

The first section of the questionnaire asked learners' perceptions of their own responsibilities and how they perceived their teacher's role in the language learning process. As shown in Table 1, learners' responses are clustered in the 'mainly' categories of the scale. They perceived the teacher as being more responsible for the methodological areas that were primarily related to course planning and classroom management.

Table 4.1 Learners' perceptions of their English teachers' responsibilities (in percentage)

	Mainly/ complete	Some	Not at all/a little
1. Learning objectives			
Deciding the objectives of your English course	66.6	28.7	4.7
Deciding what you should learn next in your English lessons	79.9	13.5	6.6
2. Learning process in class			
Choose what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons	69.9	27.5	2.6
Choose what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons	73.3	17.5	9.2
Decide how long to spend on each activity	43.3	33.3	23.3
Stimulate your interest in learning English	46.6	40.1	13.3
Make sure you make progress during lessons	56.6	30.1	13.3
Make you work harder	40	53.4	6.6

3. Learning process outside class			
Deciding what you learn outside class	36.6	46.6	16.8
Identify your weakness in English	33.4	40	26.6
Make sure you make progress outside class	16.7	43	40.3
4. Outcome			
Evaluate your learning	80	3.3	16.7
Evaluate your course	73.3	13.4	13.3

Table 4.2 Learners' perceptions of their own responsibilities obtained in questionnaire (in percentage)

	Mainly/completely	Some	Not at all/ a little
1. Learning the objectives			
Deciding the objectives of your English course	46.6	13.4	40
Deciding what you should learn next in your English lessons	26.6	10.1	63
2. Learning process in class			
Choosing what materials to use to learn English in your English lessons	13.4	40	46.6
Choosing what activities to use to learn English in your English lessons	29.9	40.2	29.9
Deciding how long to spend on each activity	26.6	53.4	20
Stimulate your interest in learning English	43.3	50.1	6.6
Make sure you make progress during lessons	40.2	33.9	25.9
Make your work harder	63.3	23.4	13.3
3. Learning process outside class			
Deciding what you learn outside class	60.3	20.1	16.6
Identify your weakness in English	33.5	29.9	36.6
Make sure you make progress outside class	69.9	16.8	13.3
4. Outcome			
Evaluate your learning	40.1	46.6	13.3
Evaluate your course	26.8	56.6	16.6

4.2. Learners' perceptions of their decision-making abilities

The second section of the questionnaire required learners to evaluate their own decision-making abilities in a range of activities and processes that were included in the first section of the questionnaire. As shown in Table 2,

over 50% of the learners rated their decision –making abilities to ‘OK’ to mean ‘just about average’, ‘not bad’, ‘able to the job’ or ‘ can manage’.

Table 4.3. Learners’ perceptions of their decision-making abilities (in percentage)

Activities	Abilities		
	Good/very good	OK(somehow)	Poor/very poor
1. in class			
Choosing learning objectives in class	36.6	43.3	20.1
Choosing learning material in class	23.3	40	36.7
Choosing learning activities in class	36.7	43.3	20
Deciding how long to spend on each activity	33.3	40.1	26.6
Deciding what to learn next in your English lessons	30	53.4	16.6
2. Outside class			
Choosing learning objectives outside class	43.4	50	6.6
Choosing learning materials outside class	40.1	53.3	6.6
Choosing learning activities outside class	33.3	56.6	10.1
3. Evaluation			
Evaluating your learning	36.6	46.6	16.8
Evaluating your course	26.8	66.6	6.6
4. others			
Identify your weakness in English	26.8	46.6	26.6

4.3. Learners’ views of their motivation level

The third section of the questionnaire asked the learners to indicate their level of motivation as English language learners. Table 4 summarizes the findings relating to how motivated learners thought they were. As shown in Table 4, a large majority (96.6%) of learners considered themselves ‘motivated’, ‘well- motivated’. The rest (3.3%) felt that they were only ‘slightly-motivate’ whereas only (0.1%) was ‘not at all motivated’.

Table 4.4 Experimental learners’ views of their level of motivation

Motivated Level	%
Highly motivated	20
Well- motivated	23.3
Motivated	53.3
Slightly motivated	3.3
Not at all motivated	0.1

In addition to the experimental group, the questionnaire was given to the control group at the end of the term. When we compared the responses of the experimental group with the control group’s responses especially in the motivation section, the data revealed significant difference between the autonomous language behavior patterns

of the two groups. It is therefore reasonable to suggest that students in the control group were simply not sufficiently motivated to take on the autonomous learning conditions proactively.

Table 4.5 Control learners' views of their level of motivation

Motivation Level	%
Highly motivated	10
Well-motivated	12
Motivated	22
Slightly motivate	26
Not at all motivated	30

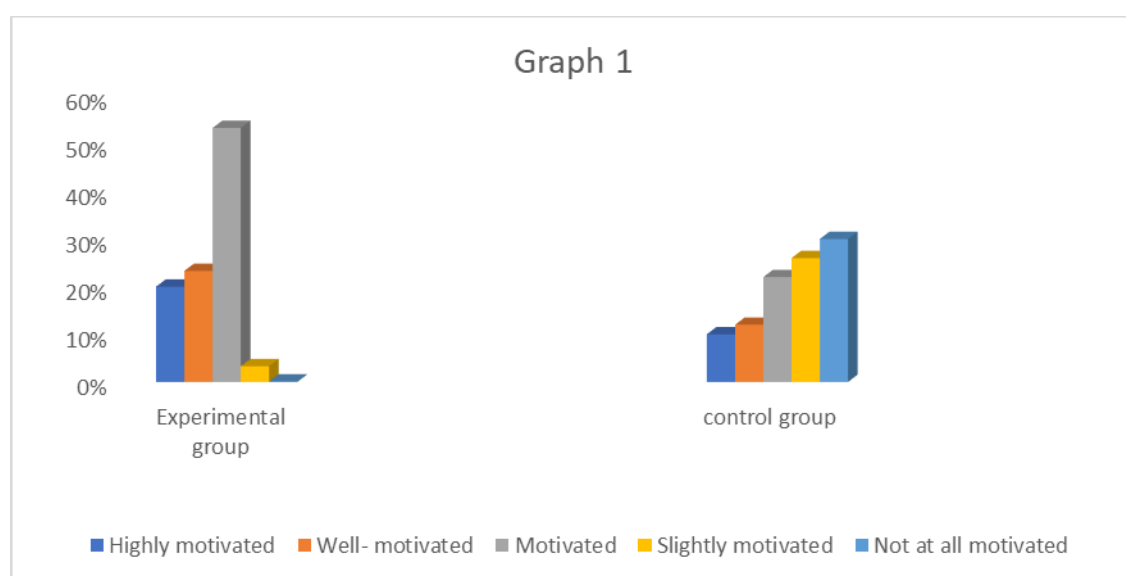


Fig. 1. The percentage of differences between experimental and control group's motivation

5. Discussion

It is reflected in the present study that the learners' attitudes do not operationalize into actual autonomous behavior. Lack of readiness for autonomous learning can be shown by the results obtained from the questionnaires. There were numerous indications in our study that although learners generally felt they were able to make certain language relate decision themselves; they held the teacher more responsible for most aspects of their learning. In addition, learners felt that it was difficult to determine what they needed to learn, how or in what order. Regarding the outside class activities, most learners rated themselves as 'good/very good' at managing the outside-class activities. Therefore, it is important that learners be helped to develop positive and favorable attitudes towards learner autonomy and to increase motivation to learn. Learning training, teacher counseling, and providing genuine choice can improve this positive attitude toward autonomous learning.

6. Conclusion

The results for both inside and outside class activities of the experimental group who read and discussed several short stories during a term suggest more reluctance to independent learning behavior. It was found that higher motivation did lead to higher frequency of engagement in the autonomous practices outside the classroom. However, literary texts alone cannot be useful in achieving an autonomous behavior. Literary texts together with training are what we assume should go hand in hand to promote autonomy. Training the learners in terms of strategy development and learning skills in a way that takes account of their own language needs and learning

style should be regarded as part of an educative curriculum. The teachers should inform the learners about how they can set achievable objectives. It should be noted that the teachers provide such information both throughout the learners' program of study, and during the orientation.

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