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**EMBRACING AUTONOMY STRATEGY IN
LEARNING SECOND LANGUAGE**



Dr. AFSHA JAMAL

Assistant Professor, English

Prince Sattam Bin Abdul Aziz University,

WadiAldwaser, Saudi Arabia

E-mail: quddus.afsha@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The present paper throws a light on the significance of Autonomy Strategy in learning a second language. It explains the characteristics of Learner Autonomy Strategy. It explains the role of both learners and teachers' role in Learner Autonomy Strategy. It further, discusses its features and Factors Influencing Strategies Choice.

KEYWORDS

Learner, Teacher, Learner Autonomy, E2l, Skills

RESEARCH PAPER

Autonomy is a capacity- for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action. It presupposes that the learner will develop a particular kind of psychological relation to the process and content of his learning. It is a relief for students in learning vocabulary because it provides the learner with many privileges as:

- Enhances the learners motivation and leads to more effective vocabulary learning
- Provides learners with more free opportunities for communication a non-native environment
- Caters to the individual needs of the learners at all levels
- Has a lasting influence
- Enhances learners' willingness towards active learning
- Enables the learners to master the basic skills that are required to learning

Thus, once learners become autonomous in learning vocabulary they tend to possess a lifelong skill and a habit of independent thinking and learning that fetches them in the long run.

Characteristics of Learner Autonomy Strategy:

The main attributes characterizing autonomous learners are that they

- Possess insights into their learning styles and strategies
- Take an active approach to the learning task at hand
- Would be willing to take risks akin to communicate in the target language at all costs
- Become good guessers
- Pay attention to both form and content

According to Sinclair (1996),

- ❖ Autonomy is a construct of capacity.
- ❖ Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning.
- ❖ The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate. Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal.
- ❖ There are degrees of autonomy.
- ❖ The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable.
- ❖ Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent.
- ❖ Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process.

- ❖ Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies.
- ❖ Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom.
- ❖ Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension.
- ❖ The promotions of learner autonomy have a political as well as psychological dimension.
- ❖ Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures.

Oxford (1990) insists that autonomy is not an ‘all-or-nothing’ concept. Nunan (1988) also says autonomy is not an absolute concept, and there are degrees of autonomy.

To conclude, whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behavior; whether it is characterized by learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is a psychological phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on a complementary teacher autonomy, it is clearly not something which learners achieve without having the opportunities to learn or be taught, neither is it an all or nothing concept. It is something which is achieved over time with practice, experience and support, and, possibly with some degree of maturity. Teachers should take into account of all these aspects in facilitating students to be autonomous.

Teacher’s role in Learner’s Autonomy Strategy:

The English teachers have to ensure that their students learn the basics of the target language encompassing its grammar, phonetics, spelling and above all vocabulary. Once this threshold is reached, learners turn out to be sufficiently autonomous and expand their vocabulary by extensive reading. In learner autonomous worlds of vocabulary learning the teacher’s role is reduced and they become facilitators. The roles of the teachers are:

- Teach vocabulary relevant to tasks at hand.
- Judge and give instruction in strategies to help retention.
- Enhance autonomous learning.
- Foster the students’ ability of autonomous learning by designing class activities and create positive atmosphere.
- Make students want to learn and know how to learn.

Thus, teachers should develop autonomy because vocabulary learning is unique to each student. Besides, the class time allotted for vocabulary learning is extremely limited compared with the immense number of vocabulary items that learners need to acquire. All these points demonstrate

that studying vocabulary on their own is a must for all learners and the best preparation the teacher can provide is to ‘ Help them become more autonomous’ (Scharle and Szabo:2000)

Learners’ Role:

According to Centre for Training and Learning in the University of Alabama the following guidelines definitely help the learners remember new words:

- Practice writing the word and its definition often.
- Practice saying the word.
- Try to learn the word and its meaning the first time they come across.
- Make up a sentence using the word.
- Vary the word: try to make it plural, to change the tense.
- Practice the word in conversation with accurate pronunciation.
- Repeat the words many times in his/her mind.
- Study a few words each day for several days to firmly learn them.
- Notice the words used by the teachers, public speakers, and people on T.V.
- Evaluate vocabulary learning.

Features of Language Learning Strategies:

The features of Language Learning Strategies according to Oxford are:

Problem Orientation

Language learning strategies are the tools used to solve a problem such as to- accomplish a task, meet an objective and attain a goal. Different strategies are applied for different purposes. For an instance, reasoning or guessing strategies are used to understand a passage. Memory strategies are used to remember the required information. Affective strategies are used to help the learner relax or gain greater confidence for profitable learning.

Action basis

Language learning strategies enhance learning through various actions akin to taking notes, setting up for a language task, self-evaluating and guessing logically. The actions performed by the learners are naturally influenced by the learners’ general traits such as learning style, motivation and aptitude

Involvement

Learning strategies promote Meta-cognitive functions like planning, evaluating, emotional, social and other functions as well. Thus, they are not restricted to cognitive functions. It involves

both cognitive and Meta-cognitive aspects. Therefore, the emphasis would eventually become more balanced, because language learning is indisputably an emotional and interpersonal process as well as a cognitive and meta-cognitive affair.

Degree of Observability

Language learning strategies are hard to observe. It is easy to observe several aspects of cooperating, a strategy in which a learner works with others to achieve a learning goal. But the act of making mental associations, an important, memory strategy is highly impossible to scrutinize. Thus, examining the strategies used by the learners is very difficult.

Level of Consciousness

Several researchers reveal that language learning strategies are always conscious actions. The modern uses of LLS reflect conscious efforts to take control of their learning. However, after a certain amount of practice and efforts, learning strategies can become automatic like any other skill or behaviour.

Flexibility

LLS are flexible as they not always found in predictable sequences or in precise patterns. Learners change the strategies depending upon the contexts (Oxford :11-13).

Factors Influencing Strategies Choice

Oxford opines that the factors such as Degree of awareness, Stage of learning, Task requirements, Teacher expectations, Age, Sex, Nationality, Learning style, Personality traits, Motivation level, Purpose of learning the language influence the choice of strategies ((13).

Generally, strategies are divided into two major classes—direct and indirect. These two are subdivided into a total of six groups--- memory, cognitive, and compensation under the direct group and Meta-cognitive, affective and social under the indirect group of strategy.

The language learning strategies can be classified into the following five categories:

- Those referring to the behaviours of successful language learners
- Those based on psychological functions (cognitive, meta-cognitive and affective)
- Those base on linguistic aspects (e.g. monitoring)
- Those based on language skills or knowledge (e.g. oral production, Vocabulary learning)
- Those based on different types (or styles) of learners.

Thus, the categorization of LLS into cognitive, meta-cognitive, social and affective seems to be the most widely accepted.

Rubin states that social and affective strategies are often classified into the same set of strategies thus, forming the socio-affective group of strategies. While Cognitive strategies concern mental steps or actions that are employed in learning or problem solving, and that require direct analysis, transformation or synthesis (i.e. direct manipulation) of learning material. They include processing language in the human mind and constitute mental processes directly concerned with obtaining, storage, retrieval and use of information in order to teach.

Meta-cognitive strategies involve planning of learning, setting of goals, thinking about the learning process, monitoring of performance and comprehension, as well as evaluation of results and the learning process. These strategies operate at a different level to cognitive strategies. Figuratively speaking, learners look at their learning from the 'outside'.

Meta-cognitive strategies also contain the aspect of learners' awareness of their own strategy use, i.e. conscious control and regulation of adequate strategy use in various learning situations, and enable learners to analyze their own learning. Meta-cognitive strategies are named in terms of their function and are applicable to various kinds of learning tasks. They are based on knowledge about language learning, i.e. meta-cognitive knowledge.

Wenden (1991) describes three kinds of meta-cognitive knowledge: person knowledge, task knowledge and strategic knowledge.

- i. Personal knowledge is general knowledge that learners have about learning or themselves as learners, which includes cognitive and affective factors facilitating or inhibiting learning.
- ii. Task knowledge refers to what learners need to know about procedures involved in the task in order to complete it successfully. The different aspects of task knowledge include knowledge of the purpose of the task, knowledge of the nature of the task, knowledge of when deliberate learning is required and knowledge of task demands.
- iii. Strategic knowledge is the knowledge that learners have about strategies, i.e. knowledge about which strategies work best and knowledge about general approaches to language learning that can guide learners' selection of strategies (15-20).

The role of meta-cognitive strategies in successful language learning, as Oxford (1990) emphasizes, is of great importance, for they help learners not to lose focus of their language learning, and to control their own learning process and progress. In addition, it is important to mention here that the concept of strategic competence, which originally involved only compensatory strategies, has been broadened to include meta-cognitive strategies. (135).

Bachman and Palmer define strategic competence as,

‘A set of meta-cognitive components, or strategies, which can be thought of as higher order executive processes that provide a cognitive management function in language use’ (70).

The meta-cognitive strategy use includes goal setting, assessment and planning, which are not compensatory strategies. On the other hand, Social strategies entail cooperation with other learners, the teacher or speakers of the L2. These strategies put learners in an environment where practicing is possible and they do not affect learning directly.

Besides, Affective strategies are learners’ attempts to understand and gain control over their feelings as Bimmel has pointed out is by using various relaxation techniques, self-encouragement, etc. Although affective strategies do not directly affect learning, their role in language learning is still seen as important. These last two sets of strategies are often taken together and form a category of socio-affective strategies.

Thus, the goal for the English teacher is to help junior high learners overcome the fear of getting mistakes corrected and to help them be more willing to share their opinions with peers while learning English. To help students tackle the problems, teachers can encourage or ask students who is good at English to help those who are not during the tedious learning process. In order to fully engage students in English classes and then raise their autonomy, English teachers can allow learners to choose appropriate learning activities they favor and to decide how long a task will be. Students could also be allowed to discuss learning goals and materials with the teacher. This method may consequently raise learners’ English learning motivation and arouse their interests. In short, English teachers should consider how to give learners some direction and freedom to inspire their creativity, motivation, and autonomy. For instance, implementing carefully-structured tasks (e.g. portfolios, designing exam for themselves) which require students to learn English in their own ways can enhance students’ motivation and facilitate learning as well.

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