PEDAGOGIC FRAMEWORK FOR AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Within recent teaching and learning approaches, active learning seems to have received a special care and concern as long as it seeks to promote communication and interaction among learners the matter which would enhance their written abilities through report writing after instruction sessions. Accordingly, learners are considered active since they participate in solving their learning problems relying on themselves and distant from a knowing-all teacher. Autonomous learning is an instruction model that puts the responsibility of learning at a high charge on learners. The chief aim of this article is to highlight the concept of autonomous learning and how it might be promoted, mainly, among university students.

Introduction

Within reading-response teaching model, autonomous learning is considered a pertinent method to produce active learners. It derives from theories of discovery learning. In this method, learning is considered as a learner-driven process, with only guidance on the part of the instructor. The instructor has to provide challenges, encourage risk taking, correct errors, and provide learners with reading contexts. Educationists, however, assume that autonomous learning must be held carefully and elaborated in well-prepared lesson plans. Also, activities to foster active learning must come after a formal lecture has been presented. Active learning strategies should be considered as follow-up activities to give learners more chance to reinforce and practise what they have already learnt in a basic instruction session, i.e., a lecture which is a teacher-centered model instruction.

Autonomous Learning

Nowadays in most EFL classes, learners are supposed to attend a class watching and listening to a talking teacher. They may take notes write lessons, ask question then take their answers from the teacher. The learner, thus, is a recipient to be filled with information and in his turn he can pour what he has taken from the teacher the day of the exam. Graman, 1997: 443) argues that "Students are taught to receive knowledge rather than to generate it". Here students are considered consumers and not producers. In literature and civilisation courses, for instance, learners receive most of the time fossilized idea then give them back in the day of the exam. Autonomous learning came as a reaction against these traditional practices in classes. It encourages independent thought and judgment and departs from consumer ideology which is based on ready-made products. Harmer (2001: 335) criticizes this situation and asserts that:

> To compensate for the limits of classroom time and
> to counter the passivity that is an enemy of true

learning, students need to develop their own learning strategies, so that as far as possible they become autonomous learners.

Harmer (ibid) here claims two important points. The first is that traditional classroom settings, teacher's and learner's roles as well as relationships create only passive learners. Thus they are the enemy of true learning. The second is that learners should develop strategies for coping with their classroom situation. This means that they should be encouraged to take responsibility to reflect on the content and way of the subject they are taking by being given a slight control on the what and, how and when by the teacher (Little, 1991). Psychologically speaking, Little (ibid) asserts that when learners are autonomous, they feel a certain sense of achievement throughout their learning. It is believed that traditional classroom learning like lecturing and teacher-centered practices suppress, in most of the cases, an inborn capacity within some learners considering them as having been born with inner power and inclination to learn by themselves, to do the initiative and learn more when they control their learning far away from the routine classes.

Characteristics of Autonomous Learning

Within the concept of autonomous learning, learning is seen as a process that involves learning actively seeking meaning from or even imposing meaning on what is being learnt (Candy,1991), and not simply a matter of fossilized knowledge and a mere memorization. More than this, Candy (ibid:102) regards the autonomous learner as someone who "is obedient to a law that he prescribes to himself". As far as the context of education is concerned, Omaggio (1989, cited in Wenden, 1998: 41-42) states the following characteristics for autonomous learning: 1) Autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies; 2) Take an active approach to the learning task; 3) They are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language; 4) They are good guessers; 5) They place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy; 6) They are willing to revise and reject rules and hypotheses that do not help to develop their learning; 7) They have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

From the characteristics above, one can easily deduce that autonomous learning marks a radical divorce with conventions and restrictions of traditional learning practices which consider teachers as purveyors of knowledge and learners as empty recipients to be filled with this ready-made knowledge. This knowledge is transmitted from one individual to another. Learner autonomy philosophy departs from this belief and assumes that knowledge should reflect objective reality i.e. teachers first have to take into consideration their learners' objectives for learning and negotiate with them the best ways and methods that can be adopted to fulfill those objectives Johnson & Paine (1990). Learners, here, are also supposed to be strategic in that they are allowed to use their own learning styles to get knowledge. And since knowledge is attained and discovered by the leaner himself, discovering in this model replaces teaching; thus, learning is the direct involvement of the learner in the whole process. He has to construct knowledge rather than to receive it. In his outstanding Autobiography, Franklin (1993: 56) says: "Tell me and I forget; Teach me and I remember; Involve me and I learn". Autonomous learning is based on the promotion of self-directed model which regards learners as objective-oriented, self-directed negotiators, and constructors of knowledge. Learners must be given the opportunity to use their

learning styles and get knowledge by themselves, in order to achieve their learning objectives set by themselves or even by teachers. Let's echo together the famous motto: Teachers stop teaching, let them learn.

Practical Ways to Promote Autonomous Learning

Attitudes towards autonomous learning differ from a class to another. This depends on learners' educational background and teaching tradition of the learners' educational milieu. It is believed that traditional classrooms are teacher-controlled, thus too much load is put on the teachers' shoulders. In order to move away from teacher-oriented passive classes to learner-controlled classes, learners need to develop their own learning strategies so that, as far as possible they become autonomous learners (Harmer, op. cit: 335). Teachers can promote autonomous learning in several ways.

Learner Training

In the classroom, learners can be taught how to reflect on the way they learn and how they possibly improve their ways of learning. This involves providing them with the methods and ways how subjects are taught and diagnosing their weaknesses about the subjects taught. This process named "Student's Self Analysis" by Harmer (ibid) includes why some skills or subjects are difficult compared with others. This can be enhanced by discussion about why they remember some issues, why they love or hate some topics or subjects, why they find parts of some lessons easier or difficult. They may also be encouraged to evaluate their own progress (Harmer, ibid). This implies answering questions about how well they have learnt the material in the last lessons.

In literature classes, for illustration, learners can be given a piece of literary text, it can be a short poem or an extract from a novel or play then asked to reflect upon it. This means asking the previous questions about the selected text after they finish reading it. This will help the teacher to seize the strengths and weaknesses of learners. This might help him develop effective strategies to help them become active and autonomous learners. This way is a considered as a measure against imposing a given standard method on learners which may result in resistant or passive learners; learners who will not interact with either the teacher or the material under study.

Homework and Assignments

Homework is another way of promoting autonomy as long as it is designed to be done out of the class. "Learner autonomy gets a powerful boost the first time that homework is set for studying to do out of class (Harmer, ibid). Though home work assignments are very important they may be also very boring and un-engaging since not all students like to work and study outside class. Here, the teacher has to know in advance then much homework has to be assigned taking into consideration the other homework set by other teachers in other subjects. He may even ask them about it. This can be done weekly or at the end of the session. The teacher has to consider homework a way of active studying and not punishment and time consuming activity.

Another problem hindering the effectiveness of homework is the learners' response to the activities set for the homework. Thus the teacher has to select activities carefully considering the needs and individual preferences of learners. The question asked here is, how to make homework more relevant to their personal and language learning needs.

A questionnaire administered oral or written with learners may solve partly the problem. The questionnaire may focus on the kinds of activities learners prefer doing at home or in their free time. The answers to this question enormously help teachers assign appropriate and relevant activities and make learners well-driven and more engaged. These activities are labeled by Harmer (ibid) student-driven.

Keeping Journals

Here teachers allot some minutes to let learners write journals or diaries about their learning experiences focusing on successes and difficulties during a given course or session. Harmer (ibid: 339) pinpoints that, " Students can be directed to either write about anything they want, to write about what they have learnt in their lessons and how they feel about it, or to write entries using recently studied language."

The purpose of writing journals is to make learners reflect on their learning, comment on their way of learning and assess it to decide whether it is effective or has to be changed. This may give them opportunity to open a dialogue about their learning and not about the content of learning (Long & Porter, 1985).

This technique can help learners discuss their learning strategies and improve them. Throughout discussing the journals, teachers should highlight successful learning strategies and pass them to the entire class. Learning difficulties and failures should also be discussed and noted so that learners can avoid them in future classroom practices.

On the whole learning journal are like diaries, but instead of reminding learners about their daily activities and appointment as habitual diaries do, they can remind them about their learning practices and experience during a course or a session .

Self Access Center Training

Self Access Centers (SAC) are circles where learners can work on their own, in pairs or in groups with a range of material from knowledge books, classics, reference books, tapes, CD's, dictionaries, and readers. These centers have to be equipped with computers connected with internet to allow learners access to all required sites and addresses. Harmer (op. cit: 340) describes them " SACs are rooms divided into sections for different kinds of material, though it is also possible to put large amounts of self-access materials on a trolley that can be wheeled from class to class." The idea of SACs is that learners can access to any material printed or online and then learn on their own. They can be helped by teachers or the SAC's assistants who must be highly knowledgeable and qualified, or even specialized. Learners have to access to these centers in their free time after class or during class accompanied by their teachers. Other learners from different disciplines can also access to foreign language centers for benefit. The SAC for foreign languages should be open to all students from all disciplines and faculties, as foreign languages are necessary and intersection point between all disciplines. Moreover, learners should practise there in the four skills: Listening, speaking, reading, and writing. They can hold small circles or panels to discuss some issues and write their notes or reports about them. As they can listen to debates, talks, interviews, songs, plays, movies, etc, to reinforce their listening and speaking skills (Long & Porter, 1985). Learners may sit together or separately working profitably and autonomously. They must be different from the habitual learning styles. Like a lecture course or a tutorial session, learners could sit in coffee-table places designed specifically to have groups working together. They should also tolerate noise, movement in the center, and even soft drinks can be available

(Penner, 1984). To keep interest in these centers, teachers can give their learners quizzes or feed-back sheets to be completed and handed in to be evaluated. Competition among learners may be arranged and then rewarded in order to motivate SAC's goers and increases their awareness about the important role of these centers.

Research and Projects

The project has become an essential and indispensable task within EFL classes. It helps immensely in developing learners own abilities and set them work on their own. This helps in creating autonomous learners. Hedge (2000:362) explains that "Projects are extended tasks which usually integrate language skills work by means of a number of activities". This means they are seen as a task to extend learners' knowledge by means of doing extra readings, investigation, and research outside the classroom. They should integrate the language skills through assigning different activities which can at the end enhance the learners' language potentialities and abilities. They can foster their listening, speaking, reading skill, and writing skills. The project should be an integrated piece of research. Hedge (ibid: 362) assumes that, "These activities combine in working towards an agreed goal and may include the following; planning; the gathering of information through reading, listening, interviewing, and observing; group discussing of the information, problem solving, oral and written reporting; and display." As seen from Hedge's viewpoint, project should have a plain aim, i.e. the teacher has to set a goal that should be attained by taking a project. Then, learners are implicated through planning and outlining the content of the project. Moreover, they gather information through different and various ways, through listening, reading, interviewing, and observing, etc. After that they display their outcomes in group discussion relying on oral or written reporting. The production could be a report, posters, slogans, schemes, diagrams, and texts. Learners must be encouraged to produce various reports and not texts only. This can make them be themselves and creative rather than taking verbatim extracts from some texts, the thing which will make them plagiarize only. So producing pictures, diagrams, and posters are anti-plagiarism procedures which may enhance autonomous learning and make learners more self-reliant and productive. The rationale from this is that learners do not receive transmitted facts, but need to explore new ideas through talk and writing (Hedge, ibid). Hedge also considers projects as purely learner-centered activities which, if done appropriately can reinforce independent learning and eventually produce active learners who would never rely on a knowing-all and a doing-all teacher.

Conclusion

Autonomous learning involves learners in independent self-learning and research. Learners, throughout, are recommended to resort to some extra resources such as libraries, media, and internet to foster their learning strategies. It also implicates learners in small group discussion, class discussion, asking question to class, pair-work activities, and some written work activities. These activities should be open-ended or controversial topics to foster learners' discussion in personal and active debate in which they can express themselves freely, and give their own interpretation, opinion and reaction towards a text or idea. Here, topics which revolve around political, social, and cultural issues enjoy great importance particularly literary texts. More than this literary text will

provide learners with opportunities to discuss other items which are not found in factual texts such as figurative language, poetic language, stylistics, and psychological growth of characters. Discussion and debate over a point must end in a short written exercise, it is a report-like activity in which learners are supposed to summarize briefly what they have understood or recapitulated from the whole class discussion. This will help them improve their writing skill and give them chance to review materials that have been read and discussed within class discussion.

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