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Learner Autonomy and its Existing Practices: A Comparison between EFL Students of Various Disciplines in the Context of Pakistan

Abstract

Learner autonomy refers to a state where a learner seeks the understanding of the concepts more independently, takes charge of his own learning and becomes more motivated and self-supportive towards the learning procedures. The present study explored the existing practices of EFL learners with reference to autonomy practices, in the context of Punjab, Pakistan. The autonomy of the learners was examined through their use of foreign language learning strategies. The sample of the study consisted of 104 university students from arts and science groups. The results indicated that the students of science group were using more autonomous learning strategies as compared to the arts group.

Key Words: Learner Autonomy, English as a Foreign Language, Foreign Language Learning, Language Learning Strategies

Introduction

Learner autonomy refers to the practical situations and interventions of learning, where individual independence of a learner is given more attention (Smith, 2008). In recent years the concept of learner autonomy has gained much attention in foreign language teaching, and learning and its importance cannot be denied (Benson, 2006, 2007; Blin, 2005; Jimenez Raya, 2011; Little, 2009). Learner autonomy (LA) can be promoted in foreign language classrooms by using foreign language learning strategies, and it can pave the way for successful learning outcomes (Kim, 2013). Language learning strategies (LLS) refer to behaviors, techniques and active engagement of learners (Ellis, 2008). These strategies are further classified into social- affective strategies, direct strategies, cognitive strategies, indirect strategies, compensation strategies and metacognitive strategies (Chamot & O' Malley, in Murry & Herrera, 2011).

Learning and teaching of a foreign language have been going through a lot of change during the period of the last three decades (Orellana et al., 2016). There has been a shift from the focus on foreign language teaching strategies to the foreign language learning strategies, and the foreign language classrooms are more student-oriented as compared to teacher-oriented (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). Successful learners use numerous strategies while learning the target language (Benson, 2011). A number of factors have been identified by the researchers, which affect foreign language learning, where the most important factor is language learning strategies (Kazi, 2010). These strategies help learners to become independent in language classrooms where the teacher is a facilitator and learners are more active and take responsibility for their own learning (Benson, 2010).

There has been a lot of investigation on whether autonomy is some method which leads to advance learning or it conveys various advanced strategies of language learning in an environment of foreign language, like independent learning strategies, cognitive and metacognitive strategies. A greater emphasis is given to autonomy by the foreign language educators as it increases the depth of learning, makes learners aware of their learning and is further considered as a social right and humanistic approach (Grima, 2007). It brings awareness among the students as to what strategy is

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more suitable for them to enhance learning and also gives them social awareness about the use of language in different contexts.

Learner autonomy (LA) has been a much-talked expression in the field of a foreign language, and its growth and development cannot be neglected (Little, 1991). The main objective of learning directly links with autonomy, but a question arises here as to how it can be brought into practice in language classrooms and how learners can be taking responsibility for their own learning. Learner autonomy is directly related to the learning strategies which teachers choose for a language classroom, and subsequently, they make learners active and responsible (Benson, 2010).

Language learning strategies are the patterns of behavior and thought process, which indulges learner in learning more actively, help them to understand and store new information (O'Malley and Chamot, 1994). They gave those patterns of autonomy development in cognitive strategies including repetition, summarizing, rephrasing, understanding, transferring, questioning, translating and production. Furthermore, metacognitive strategies like attention, monitoring, self-evaluation and self-monitoring also enhance learner autonomy. (Wendon, 1998).

Many critics define autonomy in language learning in different ways; thus, the definition is thoroughly subjective. Some of the major causes because of which, it is hard to define the theory of autonomy are given by Gardner and Miller (2002).

1. Firstly, this theory has been defined in numerous ways by numerous critics.
2. Secondly, the discussion on this theory is on its way to get mature and still the talk of the table. Thus, it's an ongoing topic which has still ample time to windup.
3. Lastly, the demographic area is a matter of fact, so is given different terminology.

A half-century ago, the perception of autonomy in the education sector emerged. According to (Zhuang, 2010) in 1970, the work on learner's autonomy was started, and many studies were done in this era with its implication in education. In foreign language teaching, Henry Holec was the first one who brought the perception of an autonomous learner. The concept gave the idea of student-centred learning (as stated in Zhuang, 2010, p. 593), who further elaborated that teacher's role is no more a transmitter of knowledge but just a supervisor and instructor in the process of learning. Little (2004) illustrates an autonomy be learning how to learn intentionally. To him, makes the learner more powerful in terms of taking decisions and learning more consciously. A learner, according to him, becomes self-conscious for his own path of success.

Little (1991) calls learners' autonomy as "learning without a teacher" or "learning without the direct control of a teacher". Similarly, materials for self-study, like in printed form or broadcast, is self- instruction (Dickinson, 1987). Benson (2006) takes self -direction to be a specific attitude towards some learning activities and about learning he has to be responsible to make decision whether that decision is applied or not whereas Holec (1981) gives it a name of process or technique which directs one's own learning. Self- access, according to Dickinson (1987), concerns with the help of self- instruction, the material or facilities are used by the learner himself, which are provided for learning. White (2003) as cited in Benson (2006), states that distance learning is a concept of "online learning, cyber-schools, asynchronous learning networks' and telematics".

Holec's starting point is explicitly political as he places learner autonomy among educational innovations that "emphasized on the requirement to construct and develop the individual learner's independence, which will happen only through the capabilities which make the possibility of acting responsibly in his society to move by confronting issues of it.

Defining autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning, Holec (1981) stresses three key components:

1. Stress should not only be on the capability of autonomous learning but on the structure of the learning which prospects the occurring of the ability of autonomous learning by learners.
2. Autonomy can only be developed through the practice of self-directed learning.

3. A belief of having full authority of decisions by a learner regarding learning and the teaching or counselling as support.

The attribute of the autonomous learner is well presented by [Holec \(1981\)](#) which was cited by Thansoulas (2000), as to him autonomous learner is the one who falls in the criteria where a learner himself independently chooses the resource, techniques, goals, tasks and activities and select and manage them according to their requirement, ultimately even for evaluation, they select the rubric of evaluation themselves. [Holec \(1981\)](#) stated the most influential definition of learners' autonomy, which according to him is the capability of taking an initiative of one's own learning and to own such responsibility as far as the decisions about learning are concerned and the specific decisions he listed were:

- The learners' have to shape the objectives of learning.
- The learners' have to classify the contents and the development regarding learning.
- Which technique and methodology are to be used is defined by the learner?
- The learners' have to screen the course of action of acquiring.
- Evaluation is the part of a learner to check the level of acquisition.

[Benson \(2006\)](#) elaborates this definition further by mentioning 'the word ability' sometimes replaced with 'capacity' (Little, 1991) 'take responsibility for' or 'take control of' substituting for 'take charge of'. To give stress on the concept of learners' Autonomy ([Dam, 1995](#)) talked about the belief of 'willingness'. Without having the willingness, a learner will not be able to accept the term and functions of autonomy. They are not open to take the responsibility of learning individually on their own.

Esch (1998), clears the concept further that it is not self-instruction without having a facilitator in the guise of a teacher. And according to him, this concept doesn't lead to making the teacher unworthy. It is a new pedagogical skill which teachers have to impart in students; how to be the initiator of learning on their own. He called it a behavior which has to be transferred but not in an easy way to adopt.

Some phases of learner autonomy are recommended by [Sinclair et al. \(2000\)](#). These aspects are highly appreciated by the language teachers and the people related to this profession. Some of the aspects are discussed below:

1. Construction of capacity is the second name of autonomy.
2. Willingness plays a vital role if talk about autonomy as it deals with the learning by the learner himself, thus is responsible thoroughly on his own.
3. It is not intrinsic quality to be willing for this kind of responsibility.
4. Thorough autonomy is not easy to attain.
5. There are degrees of autonomy.
6. It is nothing, but dealing with a condition to provide to the student, to perform independently.
7. If the learners are needed to adopt autonomy, the awareness is desired to impart: intentional reflection and decision making.
8. It is beyond teaching strategies to market autonomous learning.
9. It is experimental and informal kind of learning which can occur inside and outside the classroom.
10. The individual and social aspects come with autonomy
11. To promote a sense of autonomy, aspects like political and psychological are to be included.
12. In different cultures, the concept of autonomy is taken differently.

[\(Sinclair et al., 2000\)](#) shares the depth of autonomous learning more by dividing responsibility to academics and researchers whose connectivity is with the field of learners' autonomy. The misbelieve

of autonomy being taken as a self-instruction was negated by [Benson \(2011\)](#), as Little (1991) pointed out the intrusion of a teacher is fatal for autonomy.

Teachers' belief plays a vital role in autonomous learning ([Borg, 2006](#)). His study draws attention on language teacher's cognition, a study of what a teacher thinks, knows and believes as they have to impart the significance of autonomous learning in learners. In Borg's study, the focus was on the teachers' perception of autonomy; therefore, teachers' training is a question of need which, will ultimately lead to impart the worth of autonomous learning.

Learner Autonomy in Foreign Language Teaching

Learners should take responsibility for their own learning, where they are to design their own learning strategies with the help of teachers in a motivational classroom environment. This kind of classroom can enhance learner autonomy which gives the learner the charge of his own learning ([Benson, 2006](#)). Conventional teaching is all about teacher-centred classrooms, but autonomy has brought a paradigm shift in the teacher-centred environment by making learners autonomous enough to learn independently; thus, learners centred teaching mode is a gigantic change of this era ([Benson, 2011](#)). Autonomy initiates to make a learner responsible enough to learn independently but never favors the segregation of a learner and teacher relation. It creates the thought of one's own liability towards learning. Holec elaborated the term autonomy in 1981 and presented the view of autonomy as learners' accountability of learning himself. [Benson \(1997\)](#) exposed five methods a learner should concentrate on being an autonomous learner.

- Situations of a single focus.
- Plan of aptitudes that may be learned and associated with one's self coordination.
- Improvement of attributes covered by the directions given by institutions.
- Learners' initiation of creating new activities.
- Learner's role in designing of the course to be studied in future.
- Giving a chance to the student to perceive what ought to be the plan of the course, to be examined.

Learner Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning Strategies

[O'Malley and Chamot \(1990\)](#) studied foreign language learning strategies and proved them as "important assessment project". They stated that methods of learnings are "not so ordinary meditations and practices that people use to offer them some assistance with comprehending materials", ([O'Malley and Chamot, 1990](#), as cited in [Cook, 1993](#)). These strategies are supportive for the learners to learn a foreign language as they provide different learning techniques. Skehan (1998, p.237), noted that the methods or the styles used for learning "might halfway reflect individual inclination as opposed to inborn blessing".

Language Learning Strategies are divided by Oxford (2001) into two classes: one is direct, and other is indirect. To construct communicative competence, these strategies are aiding material stated Oxford (2001). To self-regulate and organize learning, metacognitive strategies are opted by learners. Two kinds of strategies were under discussion such as affective strategy's concern was emotional factors and to deal with the confidence of the learners, whereas the other strategy, the social strategy deals with the interaction in the classroom or outside the classroom in the target language.

Cognitive, Memory and Compensation Strategies have their own role in autonomous learning. Compensation Strategy deals with fulfilling the communication gaps by making the momentum in duration. Memory strategy is a mechanical insertion of keeping the storehouse full of information, whereas Cognitive strategy is prominent to enlighten learners of their own learning and activate their sense in this matter. These strategies widen the concept of learner autonomy. All the studies emphasized on teachers' strategies when it comes to learner autonomy. Scholars called the learners

as commandos, who are responsible for their own decisions, which can only be done by managing the mechanism which is handling it.

O'Malley and [Chamot \(1994\)](#) illustrate two major reasons for the significance of learning strategies to bring autonomous learners into the light. Firstly, consistency in learning strategies is required by having cognitive aspects of learning in mind. This view triggers "Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach". Secondly, research is needed for content information, thus proved to be supportive of learning strategies. O'Malley and [Chamot \(1994\)](#) signify the use of theory and research in learning strategies and to support his argument, he proposed the four basic proportions of the use of learning strategies as follow:

1. "Better learners are the active learners".
2. "Strategies can be learned".
3. "Academic language learning is more effective with learning strategies".
4. "Learning strategies transfer to new tasks".

[O'Malley and Chamot \(1994\)](#) also talk about the psychological techniques which proved to be cooperative in future when there is a question on accomplishing development in learning.

These kind of scholarly methodologies assists the learners, as stated by [Cook \(1993\)](#). Further, he exposed these techniques below:

- Exercise the same discourse of anybody else repeatedly is Repetition technique.
- For diverse kind of materials, action plan is there for the reference of the word is Resourcing technique.
- Translation method deals with comprehension with the help of L1, which is laid down the bases of intended language which is needed to learn.
- Note-taking.
- Deduction approach is to enlighten the learner according to L2 standard
- Guessing a word with the help of situation or surrounding words instead of literal meaning is Contextualization.
- To understand the content in L1 appropriately for the utility of the same word in the context of L2 is Transfer technique.
- The learners assume the meaning of the word themselves is Inference technique.
- Question for elucidation; while requesting that the instructor clarify, and so forth.

[Inozu \(2010\)](#) advised psychological aspects of autonomy and suggested that Autonomy is a name of the capability of having a critical reflection, which helps the learner in making right decisions independently and thus involves autonomous actions. Empowerment of a learner, reflection of a learner and the usage of target language accurately are the three major proportions of pedagogical principles, according to Little (2004). In this first dimension of pedagogy discussed by [Little \(2004\)](#), i.e. empowerment of a learner, the learner shares the responsibility. By presenting to the universe of information, the students get mindfulness which at last prompts more fixation and learning process by knowing their own qualities and shortcomings. Furthermore, the teacher is a provider of the learning environment in which a learner gets the capacity to utilize "language as a communication tool" according to [Little \(2004\)](#). He clarified that the development of meaning lies far better than their existing proficiency as well as their further proficiency level can also be enhanced likewise.

Cognitive Strategies

"The term cognitive strategy refers to specific measures or steps that learners take in order to fulfil learning tasks" ([O'Malley](#) and [Chamot 1994](#)). Some previous researches have shown that the cognitive strategy is the one which assists in creating understanding and whosoever use these

strategies become prominent among the ones who don't use it and left unchanged and not comparatively successful.

Metacognitive Strategies

This term is self-explanatory: Meta is beyond, so the meaning stands for the understanding of cognition about cognition: thinking about thinking. To discuss further, thinking is the process in which the person knows about some fact and what he presently does. [Flavell \(1971\)](#) says "Metacognition is deliberate, planned, intentional, goal-directed and future-oriented mental processing that can be used to accomplish cognitive tasks".

This strategy is the monitoring of the cognitive process vigorously, which results in proper directness and organization of the process of cognition which purpose is to ultimately accomplish the goal of cognition. Hacker (1998) further discusses the metacognitive strategy by pointing its involvement in "awareness of oneself as an actor". He called the learner "a deliberate storehouse and retriever of information, it may be reasonable to reserve the term metacognitive for conscious and deliberate thoughts that have other thoughts as their objects".

[Block \(2004\)](#) categorized the learners' awareness in three characteristics:

1. The role of thinking while learning the course.
2. Level of instigation on the part of learners to beat difficulty when s/he encounters any shortcoming.
3. Which and how a learner decides to pick a thinking process before learning, during learning and after learning.

Shraw, (1998) reveals the difference in cognitive strategies and Metacognitive strategies; for cognitive strategies are more inclined towards and covered in a nutshell of "subject area" instead the various subject area is the intention of metacognitive strategies. O'Malley and [Chamot \(1994\)](#) talked about the characteristics of cognitive strategies which are decision making, translating, summarizing and shortening, connecting with prior knowledge or experience. Moreover, it is applying grammar rules and guessing meaning from texts. Instead, organization and consciousness of cognitive activities are metacognition. The difference illustrated by empirical studies, in quality and quantity of successful and less successful learners depends on the usage of metacognitive strategies.

[Pitts \(1983\)](#) exposed in detail the role of metacognitive strategies in reading comprehension as he observed the less efficiency in poor readers are due to the nonuse of metacognitive strategies thus such learners were furthermore observed and concluded the less awareness of metacognitive approach was the cause of their poor learning. The poor learners lacked in the usage of the strategies like metacognitive, how to monitor their own understanding regarding the text.

Wenden (1998) indicated the fact that student's instinct is all about Meta cognitive information which relies totally on subjectivity. All are governed by the learner as which is the best-suited strategy which will be helpful in letting the learning occur, which strategy will enhance the knowledge and will support in constructing knowledge themselves in another context.

Briefly, [Cook \(1993\)](#) states that the methodologies of meta-cognitive are developed to attain check and assess the action plan as far as learning is concerned. These kinds of methodologies are discussed below:

- Directed consideration; time allocation to be focused.
- Selective consideration; contemplatively allocated assignments.
- Self-observing; checking one's own work.
- Self-assessment; estimating one's particular work for betterment.
- Self-support; to bring balance for achievement.

Social-Affective Language Learning Strategies (SLLS)

Social-affective language learning strategies (SLLS) are connected with the social cognitive processes and their effect on the communication with the people during learning such as working in a cooperative environment, communicating with others, self-exposition and empathizing with class fellows and asking questions (Dornyei, 2014). They also involve controlling oneself to lower anxiety, self-reinforcement, self-encouragement and self-talking. The training of SLLS makes learner compatible to face situations of emotional imbalance during the language learning process, especially in social interaction (Rossiter, 2003).

Context of Pakistan

English is an international language, and its importance cannot be ignored in the context of Pakistan as well, where it has been used as a foreign language since its creation. It is the language of academics, politics and economy (Ashraf, 2007). The English language was introduced by the British rulers in the Indian subcontinent (Mahboob, 2009). It was the language of social, political and official status where all the economic and social activities were associated with it. It was an official language of communication and trade during the British rule (Mahboob 2009; Rahman, 1996). The English language was learnt through formal education during that era. Even after the creation of Pakistan, English gained the status of an official language and became the language of socio-economic spheres despite the fact of declaring Urdu as the national language (Mahboob, 2009).

According to Kazi (2010), in Pakistan, much of the importance is given to the teaching methodologies of language, rather focusing on language learning strategies. It is more focused on which methodology should be used in the classroom, rather focusing on how to make learners independent by using language learning strategies. As a result, many students fail in English at matriculation, intermediate and at tertiary level, while they get good marks in the other subjects.

In Pakistan, the most commonly used method of teaching at bachelor's level is delivering lectures, with inactive learners, where they only record and memorize the materials provided, with less active or independent participation in the target language (Akhter & Fatima, 2016). The dominance in the style of teaching leads learners towards memorizing the content without a clear understanding of it, and learners tend to pass their exams, with little autonomy (Akhter & Fatima, 2016). Thus, learners remain under the same condition of depending totally on the teacher and never take charge of their own learning.

Statement of the Problem

The present study investigates the existence of Learner Autonomy (LA) in English as a foreign language (EFL) classroom, in the context of Pakistan (Punjab) at the bachelor's level.

Research Questions

1. What are the existing practices of learner autonomy among EFL students of Arts and Science groups?
2. What are the differences between the existing practices of learner autonomy between the EFL students of Arts and Science groups?

Population of the Study

The target population of the study was the university students in Punjab, Pakistan.

Sample of the Study

The sample of the study was consisted of 104 university students, whereas 52 students were from

the arts discipline, and 52 were from the sciences. The data was collected from a public sector university of Lahore, Punjab.

Research Methodology

The present study used the quantitative research method, while the data was gathered through survey questionnaire.

The instrument of the Study

The instrument used for the data collection in the present research was a survey questionnaire, which was adopted from a study conducted by [Kazi \(2010\)](#). The questionnaire was composed of various questions based on the use of foreign language learning strategies in the classrooms. The selections of the choices by the students were named as scores to analyze further and to see the differences.

Data analysis

The analysis of the data was done by using SPSS.

Findings and Interpretations

Table 1. Comparison of Mean and Standard Deviation of (Arts group) and (Science Group) Scores

Group name	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Arts group	52	142.307	6.711	.930
Science group	52	168.250	5.178	.718

Table 1 exhibits the scores of the arts group and the scores of the science group. It further reveals that the scores of the science group, N=52, M=168.250, S=5.178 are way higher than the scores of the art group, N=52, M=142.307, S=6.711. A higher rate of the scores in the scores of the science group shows that they had a clear difference in the use of language learning strategies as compared to the arts group.

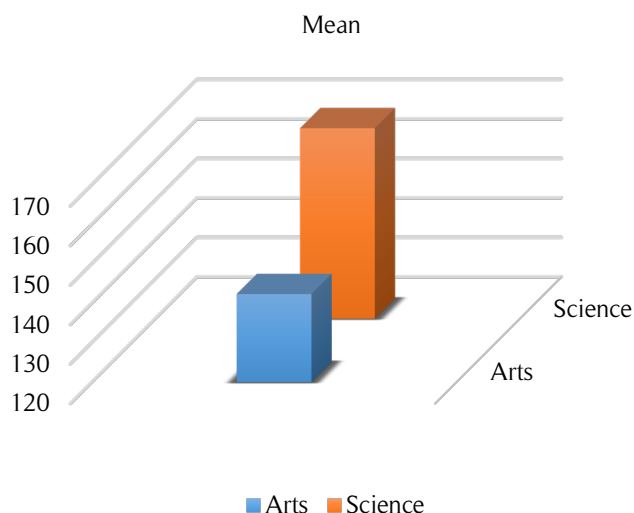


Figure: Graph of (Arts Group) and (Science Group) Scores

The above graph shows that the use of the strategies of the science group was higher as compared to the arts group. The mean bar of the scores of the science group is higher than the mean bar of the scores of the arts group.

Table 2. Independent Sample t-Test for Significant and t Values of (Arts Group) and (Science Group) Scores

		Levine's Test for Equality of Variances		T-Test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig	t	df	Sig. (2-Tailed)	Mean Difference
Post-test	Equal variances assumed	4.294	.041	-22.068	102	.000	-28.942
	Equal variances not assumed			-22.068	95.873	.000	-25.942

The above table 2 presents the t-test values of the arts group and the science group. An independent sample t-test was run to see a clear difference between the scores of the arts group and the scores of the science group. The t value was significant with $t(102) = -22.068$ and $p = 0.041 \leq 0.05$. It indicates that the independent sample t-test value is significant, and there was a significant difference in the scores of the arts group and in the scores of the science group.

Discussion and Conclusion

Learner autonomy refers to the free will and independence of a learner, which further enables him to complete his tasks himself, to be more creative, to do self-evaluation and to rely more on himself rather on others. The purpose of the present study was to investigate the existing level of learner autonomy among EFL learners of science and arts groups and to see the differences among their use of language learning strategies in the language classrooms.

Study findings present that the existing practices of learner autonomy were not quite dominant in the EFL students of the arts group. The students of the art group were not using foreign language learning strategies to enhance autonomy. The study supported the findings of a research carried out by Khoshima and Tiyar (2015), in the EFL context of Iran. The study highlighted that the university students of arts groups were more dependent on their language teachers and were not making any effort themselves to learn the language. They had very less interest in the use of language learning strategies and were having little capacity for autonomy among them. In comparison to them, the students of the science groups were more interested in doing work themselves and were less dependent on their teachers. They were focused more on learning by themselves and were very participative in the classrooms.

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