

# Teachers' Roles in Autonomous Learning

Shanghais Yan

School of foreign languages, Lanzhou University of technology, Lanzhou, China

Accepted: November 02, 2012    Published: December 12, 2012

Doi:10.5296/jsr.v3i2.2860

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5296/jsr.v3i2.2860>

## Abstract

As little described, learners' autonomy has been a new term in the field of applied linguistics. It has become one of the objectives of education now. This paper reviews definition and some misunderstanding of learners' autonomy, and discuss the roles of teachers in autonomy.

**Keywords:** Learning; Autonomy; Foreign Language Learning; Teacher, Role

## Misconception of Learner Autonomy

The concept of learner autonomy has been around for a few years and even become a buzzword within the context of language learning. Unfortunately, it has also been misunderstood as self-instruction. While it may be true that learners who are able to follow a path of self-instruction successfully may have acquired a high degree of learner autonomy. Some also assume that learner autonomy in the classroom means that the teacher transfers all control to the learners and thus becomes a redundant part of the learning process. Consequently, learner autonomy is often described as a new methodology. However, while the teacher may play a major part in developing autonomy in the learners, this certainly cannot be programmed in any way.

## Definition Of Learner Autonomy

Holec (2001:48) one of the earliest advocates of autonomy in language teaching has defined autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning". Dickinson (1987, cited in Gardner & Miller, 1996:6) accepts the definition of autonomy as a "situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions".. Boud suggests that autonomy is "an approach to educational practice" that emphasizes learner's independence and learner's responsibility. Kenny (1999:431) states that autonomy is not only the freedom to learn but also "the opportunity to become a person". These definitions on autonomy can involve learners in taking greater responsibility for what they learn, how they learn, and when they learn.

More clearly, Littlewoods (1999:71) identifies autonomy should include the two features:

1. Students should take responsibility for their own learning.
2. Taking responsibility involves learners in taking ownership (partial or total) of many processes which have traditionally belonged to the teacher, such as deciding on learning objectives, selecting learning methods and evaluating process.

### **Why Autonomy**

Today the important aspect of education is to teach students how to acquire knowledge and how to maintain enthusiasm about learning. Language learning, as Thomson (1996: 78, cited by Lee, 1998: 282) puts it, is 'a life-long endeavor'. Learner autonomy can help to achieve high degrees of creativity and independence. The most common notion for autonomy is a goal of education. Fostering a learner's autonomy should be regarded as one of the most important goals that teachers and educators try to pursue. On the other hand, learner's autonomy lays the foundation of lifelong learning. It goes without doubt that to improve students' ability to learn autonomously becomes the duty of every teacher. It is of course possible to apply this idea to English lifelong learning.

### **Definition of Teacher's Role**

Many linguists and scholars have made a great many researches on teacher's role. Ehrman describes teacher's role as "If the classroom is a stage in a theater, and students are actors, what is teacher? The teacher is many people in theater: director, prompter, coach, scriptwriter, audience, and above all, another actor, but they also emphasize different roles from the array. For instance, in traditional teacher-centered methods, the role of director and scriptwriter are especially important, though there are others in more minor parts. (Ehrman and Dornyei, 1998:222-223) Wright (1991) classifies the term such as manager, resource provider, guide, evaluator, organizer and introductory into two major roles of teachers in the classroom:

- “ 1. to create the conditions under which learning can take place: the social side of teaching.
2. to impact, by a variety of means, knowledge to their learners: the task-oriented side of teaching.”(Wright 1991:51)

The description of Ehrman and Dornyei is accurate, vivid and useful in helping teachers to identify and classify their self-concept and preferred teaching style

### **Teacher's Role in the Traditional English Language Teaching**

In traditional language teaching, teachers play more important roles than student in education. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was much reflection in educational writing in western cultures on traditional teacher-directed, examination-oriented and grammar-and-vocabulary-based. The evaluation of a teacher had depended on the amount of

knowledge he or she crammed into the students' head: the more, the better. The teacher is a unquestionable knowledge-giver" (Cortazzi and Jin 1996), who dominates the class from the beginning to the end. According to Richards and Rodgers (1986), the teacher acts as the model of language, the lesson planner, the controller of learner practice and the assessor of learner's performance, the organizers in the teaching program in terms of knowledge of grammar, the planners of the course, preparing the materials and deciding what and how learners ought to learn.

In these phases, the teachers are definitely the center of teaching, controlling in the whole performance. They control not only the teaching material but also the learning steps of their learners. What is more, teachers are also assessors of the learners' knowledge and performance. In one word, teachers hold the dominant status of teaching and there is no doubt that the teacher is a complete authority and learners appear to follow passively what is taught in a traditional language teaching. This will naturally lead to poor teacher-student interactive relation and unsatisfactory effect of language teaching.

As opposed to the traditional role of teachers, in a learner-centered, communicative and autonomous class, the teacher should shift the role from teacher-centered to the learner-centered mode, in which the learner is the centre of the program.

Autonomy requires the understanding of new roles between teachers and learners. It is necessary for teachers to change their roles so as to adapt themselves to the new requirement of autonomy. The promotion of autonomy is dependent greatly on how teachers are aware of their new roles.

For the learners, they would set their own learning goals, select the learning strategies that suit them best and which are appropriate to their own contexts, and evaluate their progress so that they may become more effective learners and take more responsibility for their own learning. For some teachers, there might be a misunderstanding that learner autonomy would lead to the redundancy of teaching staff because learners are able to do the jobs which formerly belong to their teachers. But in fact, although learner autonomy would help shift the learning/teaching responsibilities from the teachers to the learners, teachers' responsibility should be reinforced rather than reduced. Actually, autonomous learning is not necessarily learning alone, nor is it necessarily learning without a teacher.

### **Misunderstanding Of Teacher's Role In Learner's Autonomy**

First of all, it is a misinterpretation that teachers' roles are no longer the part in the autonomous learning process. However, the fact is that teachers play a vital role and their responsibilities can never be ignored. Learner autonomy is based on learner's independence and active attitude towards learning. The learner has the responsibility to make decisions and take charge of their learning. But without teachers' counsel and supervision, the whole process will result in low efficiency or even fall into disorder.

Secondly, it is a misconception, pointed out by Little, that self-instruction is often regarded as a synonym of autonomy. However, they are not equivalent. “Self-instruction refers to the situation in which a learner is working alone without the direct control of the teacher”. ( Dickinson 1987, p.5, cited in Jones 2003) and in the narrow sense, self-instruction is a “deliberate long-term learning project instigated, planned and carried out by the learner alone, without teacher intervention”.( Benson 2001, p131, cited in Jones 2003) It focuses on whether learning is carried out by the learner alone and excludes the sessions within the taught course. On the contrary, learner autonomy focuses on whether the learning is controlled by the learner. In autonomous learning, learners take their own responsibility for goal-setting, materials selection, learning activities and/or assessment, instead of a teacher or self-study materials being in overall charge (Benson, 2001).

### **Teaches’ Role in Learn’s Autonomy**

In order to foster students’ leaning autonomy, teachers need to adapt to perform a variety of roles. Breen and Candline classify the roles of teachers into the following categories: teacher as manager and organizer; teacher as facilitator; The third role is that teacher as counselor. (Richards and Rodgers 1986, p.77)

#### **1 Managers And Organizers**

In a learner-centered system the teacher should take the responsibilities of organizing various kinds of activities and games which are appropriate, effective and relevant to the classroom teaching and which will best meet the students’ needs and expectations. The ultimate goal is to respond to the students’ interests and abilities so that they will be highly motivated to perform in each stage of classroom activities. But the teacher should bear in mind that he or she should give clear instructions as to what is to be done because the success of many activities, no matter whether it is a specific role-play or a group discussion, depends on good organization and on the students’ knowing exactly what they are expected to do. Otherwise, it is impossible for the two parts of teaching-learning process to achieve their objective. Teacher’s role as manager and organizer is considered to be the first and foremost role teacher has to play in class.

#### **2 Facilitator**

In order to make the progress more flexible and successful, it is necessary for teachers to serve as a facilitator.

##### **2-1 Features of Facilitator**

What are the features of a facilitator in autonomous learning? According to Voller, a facilitator provides psycho-social support and technical support. Psycho-social support refers to the capacity of motivating learner, as well as the ability of raising learners’ awareness. Technical support refers to helping learner to plan and carry out their learning, helping

learners to evaluate themselves, and helping learners to acquire the skills and knowledge.

### **2-2 Teacher as a facilitator: a guide to motivate in learning**

In focusing on the role of teacher as a facilitator in autonomous learning, this part makes clear that autonomous English learning does not mean learners simply learn on their own. Learners in the process of becoming autonomous need a teacher to support them in order to reach the highest possible achievement. As facilitators, teachers need to do all the efforts to help make the learning easier and motivate learners to play to the best of their potentials, which includes: helping the learners to plan and carry out their independent language learning; helping learners to acquire the knowledge and skills and motivate learner to learn actively and autonomously. In the process of facilitating, it involves teachers' encouragement and assist. Teachers encourage learners' commitment, helping them to get rid of the uncertainty and anxiety and overcome the obstacles.

### **2-3 Teacher as a facilitator: a guide to resource.**

During the participation in classroom activities, the teacher is expected to be the language resource. It is obvious that the teacher is responsible to ensure necessary language input and to offer help whenever it is needed. During this process, the teacher's first role is to motivate learners to produce their own language and to advisably correct students' errors so as to help students develop their own learning strategies and techniques. As a guide to resource, teachers could also introduce some learning materials as: English magazines and newspapers, some useful websites to learners. In order to motivate learners, teachers should be capable to select the materials which can be used to arouse learners' interest and cater to their learning level so that this ensures the learners' satisfaction and confidence. And thirdly, when the students had difficulty in learning, teachers would get ready to provide information.

### **2-4. Teacher as A Facilitator: An Evaluator To The Results**

It is generally believed that it is another major part of a teacher's job to assess the students' work. Teachers should focus on students' success or progress so that a success-oriented learning atmosphere could be created. At the same time the students will be more confident in autonomous learning.

## **3 Teacher Role as Counselor**

Richards and Rodgers (1986, p.78) argued: "The teacher-counselor is expected to exemplify an effective communicator seeking to maximize the meshing of speaker intention and hearer interpretation, through the use of paraphrase, confirmation, and feedback."

Teacher as counselor is to give advice and help learners so that they can achieve more efficient learning. This kind of role can be realized by means of helping learners to become more self-monitoring, fulfill learners' aims and needs, as well as give feedback and support learners towards the target of autonomous learning.

### **Conclusion**

It is not an easy thing to make the students really become the master of autonomous learning. The teachers must shift their roles from a dominator to a director and let the students learn positively. The teacher must believe in the students, respect them and create suitable education, making the class a one of discussion equally and cooperate friendly. The students should act as the role of center under the guide of autonomous learning theory. They learn and study actively under the teacher's instructions. Only when the students enrich themselves, encourage themselves, realize themselves and adjust themselves step by step during the teaching evaluation, can they reach the high efficiency of autonomous learning. During the process of autonomous learning, the relationship between the teachers and the students is equal,

Also, becoming autonomous learning is an ongoing process which takes time, patience and support. Students are in the process of becoming autonomous and are expected to be always autonomous to be lifelong learners. It is the responsibility of the educator to foster this development process of learning.

### **References**

- Benson, P. & Volker, P. 1997. *Autonomy and Independence in Language Learning*. London: Longman.
- Bound, D. (Ed.). 1988. *Developing Student Autonomy in Learning*. New York: Koran Press.
- Benson, P (2001) Teaching and researching autonomy in language learning. Longman, Harlow.
- Dickinson, L. Autonomy and Motivation: A Literature Review . Gardner & Miller, 1996
- Hammer, J. The Practice of English Teaching, Longman, 1998
- Holec, Herri. Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning. Oxford: Pergamon, 2001
- Kenny, B. For more autonomy. System 21(4), 431-442, 1999
- Littlewood, W. Communicative Language Teaching: An Introduction. Cambridge University Press, 2003
- Little, D. (1991). Learner Autonomy 1: Definitions, Issues, and Problems. Dublin: Authentik.
- Nunan, D. The Learner-centered Curriculum. Cambridge University Press, 1988
- Nunan, D. Designing and adopting material to encourage learner autonomy , Autonomy and Independent in Language Learning. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2000
- Wright, T. The Roles of Teachers and Learners. Oxford University Press, 1991