Learner's Autonomy in the South Asian Language Class

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Abstract:

In L2 learning field, learner's autonomy is a very popular concept. A lot of researches had been done to establish this practice in different countries of the world but the outcome is not up to the mark. Though almost all the countries are still struggling on this matter. Moreover, most of the teachers as well as the students are not aware about autonomous learning clearly. The purpose of this paper is to know about the learning system of some Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Singapore, Malaysia, China, Japan, Thailand and Srilanka) on Tertiary Level and how they are conducting themselves with autonomous learning process inside the classroom.

Introduction:

Learner's autonomy is still an unknown factor to lots of people who are related with the educational job sector. Thus, it is a gradual process since 19th century. This paper involves the practice of learner's autonomy in some of the countries of Asian sub-continent. Like- whether they are familiar with the term learner's autonomy or not? How much they know about it? Do they have any clear idea about it or not? How much they apply autonomacity inside the classroom? What are views of the teachers of different countries about it? What are the thoughts of the students about it? How much their opinions vary?

For example, past studies had shown that, in Singapore and Malaysia autonomous learning is almost invisible. The classrooms are mostly teacher-centered where the students are fully depended on them. Hence they are trying to revise their educational policy to improve self learning among the students. In Thailand, people are much concern in autonomous learning but only on tertiary level. As in China, where the full education system moves with the concept of Confucianism, it is quiet challenging for them to accept and focus on a new system called autonomous or self learning.

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In Bangladesh, it is still an argumentative subject. Here, the teachers' are still deprived of their personal conception of teaching and learning inside the ESL classroom. At a point, they become confuse and mix a lot of methods to teach.

While the educational institutions in Japan are very concern developing autonomous learning. Their studies and research often include individual project , group or team work and thus provide opportunities self-reflection. Also, if we talk about India, the teachers are keenly interested in the area of self-assessment or self-learning. For this, they are gradually changing their curriculum to develop personal qualities and skills of the learner autonomy process.

Literature Review:

Learners' autonomy is an old theory. According to the scholars, the term was first introduced in the 1950s. In 1970s they conducted studies on learner's autonomy and its implications in education (Zhuang, 2010, p. 591). This concept came to the limelight of the ESL teachers and researchers in 1980s when Henry Holec defined the term as the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Benson, 2006), and much attention was devoted to this idea for creating a better understanding between teachers and students. The focus of this educational system is to transform the roles of the students in the classroom from highly dependent to interdependent, and later to independent.

According to Nunan (1997, p. 195), Autonomous learning varies and can be classified into five stages- 1. Awareness: which means being aware of one's own learning goals, resources and preferred learning style or strategies; 2. Involvement: which means choosing one's own learning and processes; 3. Intervention: which means taking part in adjusting one's own learning goals, contents, and processes; 4. Creation: which means creating one's own learning goals, objectives and tasks; and 5. Transcendence: which means being able to link between classroom learning and the world outside, as well to act like a teacher or researcher rather than a learner.

According to Sinclair (2000), learner autonomy involves a number of important aspects of learning where learners are responsible and aware of their own learning process; there are various and unsteady degrees of autonomy. Here learners continuously reflect on their learning and make decisions; they do not depend on the teaching process only but work as spectators.

These aspects of Sinclair also connect with Benson's (2003) five main qualities which encourage autonomy: 1. Learners being actively involved in their own learning; 2. Learning options and resources being provided or available; 3. Learners having opportunities to choose and make decisions; 4. Support being provided for learners; and 5. Teachers and learners being encouraged to reflect on their own practice or performance.

Thus, learners' autonomy originally developed in the western country and gradually spread across the Asian sub-continents. However, till now the teachers as well as the students are not so familiar with the term. For example, according to Imejinda (2005, p. 104) found in Thailand 'many teachers feel insecure when confronting changes required by government policy'. Moreover, in the Japanese universities students found it boring to continue LLP classes for a long one year which includes only reading and listening practices. The investigation of Stephenson and Kohyama (2003) found their curriculum consisted of 50 reading and listening classes for each year. In China, where the education system still follows the rules of Confucianism, the acceptance of autonomy has become rather challenging to them. Now it is an essential factor for the Chinese Basic Education Curriculum Reform and College English Curriculum Reform in 2004. That means, it is still not under a common practice at Chinese university level. This include a remarkable transfer from the teacher – dominant classroom to a more student-centered classroom, traditional grammar-translation method to the use of Self-Access Learning Centers, and a policy based curriculum guideline initiated by the MOE. The situation of the EFL classrooms in Bangladesh is worst especially in the primary or secondary level. Hence, in Tertiary level the teachers try to imply autonomous learning inside the classroom but the basic of the students are not much strong so they become fully dependable to their teacher.

Therefore, there may be several reasons behind the question of why in some countries autonomous learning is a gradual process whereas in some other it is not a common factor. The reasons lie upon the training procedures or the insecurity or the unfamiliarity with the term of the teachers. It may also be the various problems or the lack of basic knowledge or the dependableness of the students towards their teachers inside the classroom. In addition, it may be the problem of the financial structure of a country that the government cannot provide a suitable classroom and essential classroom materials in most of the educational institutions.

Objectives

The purpose of such present study is to know the condition of autonomous learning in different South Asian countries. How much the educational institutions are applying and getting habituated with such term.

The specific objects of this paper is-

- to know about the system of autonomous learning from various aspects of past researchers and its practices in different countries
- to know the techniques of autonomous teaching and learing
- to know its effectiveness on the learners in tertiary level
- to know the learners' basic needs from autonomous learning
- to know the views (positive or negative) of the South Asian teachers about it

Methodology

The present study employed a mixed methods sequential explanatory design (Creswell, 2009). Data were collected using information from different websites. The information comprised papers regarding eight Asian countries. It analyses different types of situations applying autonomy learning inside the classroom. Furthermore it also shows the positive or negative results of learners' autonomy and its familiarity to them. In addition, it reviews the engagement of the teachers and the students L2 autonomy learning system.

Hypothesis

The Level of Learner Autonomy among the South Asian Language Class/ Results

In Malaysian Universities, students respond the most on the responsibility of learning as 'mainly' their own. Choosing 'mainly' instead of 'completely' indicates that students still find themselves requiring guidance and support from teachers. This renders support to previous studies which claimed that the capacity for learner autonomy is not inborn but "must be acquired either naturally or by formal learning" (Sidhu, Kaur & Chan, 2011, p.218). Thus, this indicates that the General English students have attained moderate levels of learner autonomy with regards to English language learning.

Most English language education in Japan still relies on a teacher centered approach where accuracy is emphasized. Known as the Yakudoku method, teaching English as a foreign language through grammar translation is very much the norm in Japan and often the first exposure that Japanese students receive to foreign

language education. Other characteristics of typical Yakudoku classes include unstated learning goals, highly structured lessons, fossilized teacher and student roles, and Japanese as the language of instruction (Fine and Collins, 2011 p. 53). Thus grammar- translation method still plays a dominant educational style in learning English as a second language. These include teachers' lack of training in communicative teaching styles, lack of confidence in their own speaking ability and the need to prepare students for university entrance exams. While the focus of this study was not focused on autonomy, it does provide insight into the educational experience that Japanese students have studying English and the modes of study to which they are accustomed.

In China, they pay more attention to their ancient culture than accepting new policies of education. In an investigation into the influences of collectivist cultures on argumentative writing by Chinese students, Wu and Rubin (2000) acknowledge the claim that, Chinese are expected to act and behave as determined by their role within the society and not to oppose, challenge, or question prevailing ways (p. 151) and found that this had an effect on their writing. While this particular study focused on cultural aspects as expressed in writing, it is not a leap of faith to assume these cultural norms would also influence classroom behavior. They chose to learn to English in secondary level more than primary level. Learning English or using autonomy in ESL classroom in tertiary level is fully depends on their choice. The study does however find that not only cultural influences but also individual differences are an important factor in influencing student outlook.

In Bangladesh autonomy of the learners in the ESL classroom (from primary to tertiary level) is still a big question. Hence they have provided much training for the teachers and started courses on teaching-learning process but till now it is under process or not a common term. Although, there are few institutions specially in the city where some of the teachers started autonomous leaning in English language classroom but still they feel doubt on the methods which they should apply. All the teaching methods differ in different levels of learning. Thus it always remains a mixed method at the end. Even the students fall in confusions in their basic learning structure.

Discussion

From the results of autonomous learning stated above, it is almost clear that learner autonomy is under process especially in the South Asian region. It relates with a lot of factors such as- training for the teachers, cultural effect, social effect, learners capacity to adopt such learning process, environment, teaching materials,

economy or financial condition etc. In comparison, these Asian countries are still lag behind this process of learning than the other European countries; whereas in the European countries it started during the 19th century here it still struggling though stepping in the 21st century. Therefore it will take some more time to resume among the Asian students as well as to their teachers.

Conclusion

To conclude, findings of the present study have shown that autonomy learners in Asian countries are moderately 'reactively' autonomous in their English language learning process. As discussed above, reactive autonomy refers to the situations where although students do not set the agenda of the learning, they are still able to work independently on tasks. This suggests the need for university teachers to be more explicit in stating the learning objectives or agenda behind each lesson to clearly set students in the right directions. In addition, past literature have stressed the need to guide learners and a plethora of approaches have been proposed, notably, language portfolios, strategy training and learning contracts.

University ESL teachers as well as tertiary institutions also need to realize that the success of language learning lies in the concerted efforts of all stakeholders which include the students, teachers and management level. It requires synchronisation of visions in what leads to effective language learning, giving teachers greater 'space' to manoeuvre in their daily classroom teaching, and above all else, realistic expectations on how much responsibility Malaysian, Chinese, Japanese, Thai or Bangladeshi tertiary students are willing to shoulder in their language learning process.

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