

Activities Contributing to Learner Autonomy in Language Classes

Elmir Gurbanov¹ & Almaz Mirzayeva²

^{1,2} Baku Engineering University, Baku, Azerbaijan

Correspondence: Elmir Gurbanov, Baku Engineering University, Baku, Azerbaijan.

Email: equrbanov@beu.edu.az

Received: April 10, 2018

Accepted: May 26, 2018

Online Published: June 1, 2018

doi: 10.23918/ijsses.v4i5p23

Abstract: The article discusses the importance of learner autonomy in language classes and proposes some activities contributing to develop more autonomous learning skills in students. The concept is analyzed from various aspects, particularly from responsibility perspective noting the development of learner autonomy as a promoter of more responsibility from students' side. However, it also draws attention on teachers' role as a facilitator, declaring that learner autonomy has never meant decline in teachers' responsibility or withdrawal, but the change in the nature of involvement in classroom activities and assignments. The study asked the opinions of language instructors at a university in Azerbaijan collecting quantitative data and drawing conclusions based on literature review and views of the survey participants.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Student-Centered Approach, Students' Responsibility, Language Classes, Self And Peer-Assessment, Seatwork, Homework, Project Assignment

1. Introduction

The concept of learner autonomy raises questions of student learning responsibility (Sakai, Takagi, & Chu, 2010). As a matter of fact, there are several definitions and characteristics of learner autonomy. For instance, Littlewood (1999), who saw the students as responsibility takers, mentioned two significant characteristics of learner autonomy: while the first characteristic is related to the expectation from students taking responsibility for their own learning, the second one is more about implying shared authority and distribution of power. In other words, as learning is something that is done by students, in order to become lifelong learners, they need to develop such kind of responsibility. Moreover, being involved in the decision-making process gives students the feeling of ownership which can be illustrated by the example of learners opportunity to choose learning methods and set their own learning goals.

2. Literature Review

The idea of learner autonomy as a creator of more responsibility for students is a globally accepted concept. For instance, Little (1994) states that autonomous learner is responsible for setting his/her personal learning plan by arranging different stages of pedagogical process. Similarly, Pierson (1996) also thinks that an individual learner is a main holder of responsibility. However, it doesn't mean that an autonomous learner is isolated and completely independent. The relationship with peers and teacher

plays a significant role in the process of learning. According to Popescu and Cohen-Vida (2014), who mention both teachers' and learners' important roles in the language learning process, claim that teachers are responsible for encouraging the sense of learner responsibility and conducting activities aiming to develop learner autonomy. Consequently, increased learner responsibility doesn't mean that teachers' responsibility is decreased.

A wide range of activities can be suggested to contribute to learner autonomy. While some of them are subject-specific, the others are commonly used activities, which means they have general characteristics. For example, while student peer assessment can be used in all social/humanitarian subjects as there is more than one correct answer, however, this kind of assessment is only suitable for Science subjects such as Math and Chemistry if the given task involves verbal explanation.

Student Self & Peer assessment; It is worth noting that there are some differences between student self-assessment and peer-assessment. While student self-assessment is a self-control mechanism which fosters after school engagement in learning, peer-assessment encourages cooperation by stimulating social and cognitive development. The self-assessment criteria can also vary depending on the subject. For instance, while in mathematics lesson the criteria may include math skills, such as arithmetic, problem solving time, in language lessons it may reflect language skills such as reading, writing, or listening.

According to Tamjid and Birjandi (2011) because of the learner-centered approach, self & peer assessment has come to the focus, and it has raised the interest in promoting learner independence. By being involved in giving and receiving feedback, this kind of assessment creates an opportunity for learners to develop critical thinking and to practice professional responsibility.

Nevertheless, because of the difficulty the idea creates for sense of honesty in self-assessment and disbelief in peer's professional judgment in peer-assessment, it has some shortcomings. According to Goodrich (1997), it is difficult for students to give themselves honest marks, so it is better to use self-assessment for giving themselves constructive feedback rather than grades. Similarly, Gurbanov (2016) states that students have some doubts about peer-assessment as they do not completely believe that they can grade each other professionally.

Seatwork (individual/pair/group); Although most educators think that this type of classroom activities are related with traditional teacher centered approach, this idea can be denied in modern pedagogy by examining the nature of these activities and the role of teachers in implementation process. Seatwork may be done individually, in pairs or in groups, and depending on the needs of learners and requirements of learning goals, the appropriate type can be chosen by the teacher. If the teacher chooses the activities carefully, for example, preferring those focusing on application of knowledge rather than memorizing some facts, seatwork will definitely help to develop learner autonomy.

As increased intensiveness of seatwork will help to decrease the teacher's role in the process of learning, they will play only the role of facilitator. For instance, a teacher may guide the students by explaining instructions, giving examples, and she or he can involve the students in the activities by asking some questions. Sometimes, a teacher himself or herself may become an active participant of the activity for a short period of time and then change the group in order to support other learners as well. However, by

being involved in the activities, the teacher should not try to control the process but initiate and maintain collaboration. For example, Roche and Clarke (2015) give an example of a Japanese instructional activity named kikan-shido, where the students work individually or in groups, and the teacher should walk around the classroom communicating with the learners in case they need help. Thus it is clear that, in addition to motivating students, the facilitator role of teachers can make the lessons more productive. Furthermore, giving constructive feedback can help to develop positive environment in the classroom by building students' confidence.

While discussing seatwork, we should focus on the issue of authenticity as well. When the students are asked to memorize some dialogues or act them out loudly, do the tasks not related to their lives, they can be easily demotivated. Therefore, it is better to have more personalized activities, which teachers can modify according to the language level of students (in a language class case) or just create new ones according to the academic needs of students.

Homework (individualized); The approach towards homework in Azerbaijan has changed as a result of recent curriculum changes that have taken place since 2006. While the homework was seen as arbitrary workload and its value was underestimated by some teachers in the past, now it is seen as a type of self-motivated learning activity. As homework helps to develop sense of personal responsibility, it will always play a significant role in the process of developing learner autonomy.

According to Vatterot (2010), who claims that ownership and competence in assignments are the important characteristics of worthy homework, too authoritarian and difficult assignments may lead to lack of motivation. Similarly, Patall, Cooper, and Wynn (2010) argue that it is important to give choices for homework as it can increase sense of competence and intrinsic motivation.

Homework should be individualized so that it fits to the needs and personal interests of the learners. For example, while weak students are asked to do some particular exercises, strong learners can be asked to do more challenging exercises or to find some additional information related to the topic of their interest. Consequently, personalization of tasks should be increased gradually in order to achieve learners' full potential.

Long-term project (individual/group); While homework can be done in a short period of time, projects engage students in one issue for a long period of time. Depending on the requirements of the course and needs of the learners, projects can be done individually or in groups. If the projects are done in groups, they can help develop some teamwork skills, such as collaboration as well. The teacher should let the students discuss and decide how they are going to distribute responsibilities, workload, schedule and other things related to projects. However, it doesn't mean that the teacher should completely leave the students alone, so he or she should have the role of facilitator by guiding and helping them in planning, monitoring and assessment of the projects. Similar to homework, a project can also be finished successfully only if the student takes the responsibility. Therefore, it can be assumed that long-term projects also help develop learner autonomy.

3. Research Methods

The study was conducted among 82 undergraduate students and 13 teachers at one of the universities situated in Baku, Azerbaijan. The study tried to find answers to a number of questions related to the broader research of learner autonomy in language classes. The research questions are given below:

1. How important is it to promote learner autonomy in language classes and why?
2. Can some activities be more effective than others in fostering learner autonomy?

The students and teachers were asked to take different online surveys, which were prepared on “surveymonkey.com” platform, and both questionnaires were open for ten days. There were different types of questions including a 5-point Likert scale which tried to reflect the participants’ attitudes toward learner autonomy.

4. Findings and Discussion

The collected responses from both teachers and students presented similar trends in terms of principal approaches such as acknowledging the importance of learner autonomy. According to the results of the survey, both teachers and students see learner autonomy as a significant feature of the learning process (4.38 and 4.08 mean scores, respectively).

However, some results indicate the slight discrepancies between the perceptions of the two involved parties. For instance, while most students think that autonomous learning helps them to improve their concentration (62.20%), only 30.77% teachers agree with this idea, and 76.92% teachers claim that the most important positive feature of autonomous learning is that students become more engaged in learning process. (See Figure 1 and Figure 2 in appendices). According to the teachers’ responses given to the 3rd question, the most important activity contributing to learner autonomy is a long-term project leaving the self and peer assessment the second and seatwork the third. (4.15, 3.85 and 3.69 mean scores, respectively). However, students think that the most important activity contributing to learner autonomy is seatwork with the highest mean score (3.70), and according to their responses long-term project comes in the last place (Mean: 3.21). (Figure 3 and Figure 4 in appendices)

Both students (mean score: 4.27) and teachers (mean score: 4.54) agree that different principal approaches such as authoritarianism or learner centered standpoint can change the effect of the activities on learning experiences. Similarly, both of them (92.31% teachers and 68.29% students) prefer individualized homework rather than one set of homework for everyone. However, while 55 students (67.07%) think that in class question-answering is better than long-term projects, 61.54% teachers claim that long-term projects can foster learner autonomy more. It is interesting that all of the teachers (100%) who participated in the survey believe that the teacher should be a facilitator and contributor in classroom activities, however, not all students agree with this idea. The study reveals that 81.71% students support the idea of facilitator teacher, therefore, remaining 18.29% students think that the teacher should be a strict controller; (See Figure 5 and Figure 6 in appendices). As far as feedback is concerned, both teachers (92.31%) and students (82.93%) have similar ideas about giving feedback claiming that not only the teacher should give feedback to the students in the classroom and the students should also participate in the evaluation process of their own and peers’ work for feedback.

5. Conclusion

The study reached the following conclusions regarding the perceptions of learner autonomy from both teachers' and students' perspectives and tried to generalize ideas about the effectiveness of some activities as promoters of learner autonomy. It found quite satisfying answers to research questions put forward about the significance of learner autonomy and comparison of certain activities under study which are expected to foster learner autonomy.

- Both teachers and learners understand and accept the importance of learner autonomy, which implies that teachers should feel confident about practicing learner autonomy in certain classroom settings.
- The common positive belief is dominant in both teachers' and students' attitudes towards practicing learner autonomy due to various beneficial effects such as more engagement of students in learning process and better concentration of learners on studies that are expected as a result of the mentioned practice.
- Individualized homework is the most preferred assignment type by both parties revealing the importance of personalized approach to tasks which gives the audience a clear message.
- The principal approach of an instructor (strict controller of authoritarian class or facilitator and contributor of democratic class) plays a crucial role in successful implementation of learner autonomy. Democratic approach is considered to be the most effective in the mentioned context.
- Students should be allowed to take part more in self and peer assessment in order to give and receive feedback on their works and performances rather than being judged and evaluated by instructor only.

Although the study has certain limitations such as small number of the respondents and the fact that the participants have been chosen from one university only, the study can be considered as an effective investigation of learner autonomy from several aspects. Keeping in mind the lack of learner autonomy research in this geographical area, the study is believed to contribute to further investigations of the topic in the area and to draw attention to the significance of the concept in learning process.

References

- Goodrich, H. A. (1997). Understanding rubrics. *Educational Leadership*, 54(4), 14-17.
- Gurbanov, E. (2016). The challenge of grading in self and peer-assessment (undergraduate students' and university teachers' perspectives). *Journal of Education in Black Sea Region*, 1(2), 97-107.
- Little, D. (1994). Learner Autonomy: A theoretical construct and its practical applications. *Die Neueren Sprachen*, 93(5), 430-442.
- Littlewood, W. (1999). Defining and developing learner autonomy in East Asian contexts. *Applied Linguistics*, 20(1), 71-94.
- Patall, E., Cooper, H., & Wynn, S. (2010). The effectiveness and relative importance of choice in the classroom. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102(4), 896-915.

- Pierson, H. (1996). Learner culture and learner autonomy in Hong Kong Chinese context. In R. Pemberton, E. Li, W. Or, & H. Pierson, *Taking Control: Autonomy in Language Learning* (pp. 49-58). Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press.
- Popescu, A.-V., & Cohen-Vida, M.-I. (2014). Communication strategies for developing the learner's autonomy. *5th World Conference on Educational Sciences - WCES 2013* (pp. 3489 – 3493). Rome: Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences.
- Roche, A., & Clarke, D. (2015). Describing the nature and effect of teacher interactions with students during seat work on challenging tasks. *Mathematics Education in the Margins* (pp. 532-539). Sunshine Coast: MERGA.
- Sakai, S., Takagi, A., & Chu, M. P. (2010). Promoting learner autonomy: Student perceptions of responsibilities in a language classroom in East Asia. *Educational Perspectives*, 43(1&2), 12-27.
- Scott, C., & Glaze, N. (2017). Homework policy and student choice: Findings from a Montessori charter school. *Journal of Montessori Research*, 3(2), 1-18.
- Tamjid, N. H., & Birjandi, P. (2011). Fostering learner autonomy through self and peer-assessment. *International Journal of Academic Research*, 3(5), 245-251.
- Vatterot, C. (2010). Five hallmarks of good homework. *Educational Leadership*, 68(1), 10-15.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Questionnaire for teachers

*1. To what extent do you think it is important to promote learner autonomy in language classes?

- Very important Important Neutral
 Not important Should be dismissed

2. What positive features can be noticed in students when practicing autonomous learning?

- Better concentration
 Improved learning outcomes
 More engagement in learning process
 Improved performance regarding assignments
 Improved marks
 Better social relationships
 Good management of time
 Other (please specify)

*3. Please rate the effectiveness of the following activities according to the contribution to promotion of learner autonomy. (1-2-3-4-5)

1. Self and peer assessment
2. Seatwork (individual/pair/group)
3. Homework (individualized)

4. Long-term project

*4. Can different principal approaches such as authoritarianism or learner centered standpoint change the effect of the activities on students?

Definitely can may be neutral may not Definitely not

*5. Which form of homework is the best promoter of learner autonomy?

- One set of homework for everyone
- Individualized homework

*6. What kind of task do you think best fosters learner autonomy?

- In class question-answering
- Long term projects

*7. Which kind of teacher attitude in seatwork do you think best promotes learner autonomy?

- Seatwork in which a teacher is a strict controller
- Seatwork in which a teacher is a facilitator and contributor.

*8. Which illustration of assessment and feedback procedure promotes more autonomy?

- Only teacher provides feedback on works
- Allowing students to evaluate their own and peers' work for feedback

Appendix 2. Questionnaire for students

*1. To what extent it is important to you to have learner autonomy in language classes?

Very important Important Neutral Not important Should be dismissed

2. What positive features can you feel when practicing autonomous learning?

- Better concentration
- Improved learning outcomes
- More engagement in learning process
- Improved performance regarding assignments
- Improved marks
- Better social relationships
- Good management of time
- Other (please specify)

*3. Please rate the effectiveness of the following activities according to the contribution to promotion your autonomous learning (1-2-3-4-5)

1. Self and peer assessment
2. Seatwork (individual/pair/group)
3. Homework (individualized)
4. Long-term project

*4. Can teachers' different principal approaches such as authoritarianism or learner centered standpoint change the effect of the activities on your learning experiences?

Definitely can may be neutral may not Definitely not

*5. Which form of homework is the best promoter of learner autonomy?

- One set of homework for everyone
- Individualized homework

*6. What kind of task do you think best fosters learner autonomy?

- In class question-answering
- Long term projects

*7. Which kind of teacher attitude in seatwork do you think best promotes learner autonomy?

- Seatwork in which a teacher is a strict controller
- Seatwork in which a teacher is a facilitator and contributor.

*8. Which illustration of assessment and feedback procedure promotes more autonomy?

- Only teacher provides feedback on works
- Allowing students to evaluate their own and peers' work for feedback

Appendix 3. Results of the questionnaire retrieved from "surveymonkey.com" platform

Table 1: Students' responses to Question 1

Students' Responses	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Not Important	Should Be Dismissed	Total	Weighted Average
Learner Autonomy	48.78% 40	42.68% 35	6.10% 5	2.44% 2	0.00% 0	82	4.38

Table 2: Teachers' responses to Question 1

Teachers' Responses	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Not Important	Should Be Dismissed	Total	Weighted Average
---------------------	----------------	-----------	---------	---------------	---------------------	-------	------------------

Teachers' Responses	Very Important	Important	Neutral	Not Important	Should Be Dismissed	Total	Weighted Average
Learner autonomy	30.77% 4	53.85% 7	7.69% 1	7.69% 1	0.00% 0	13	4.08

Answered: 13 Skipped: 0

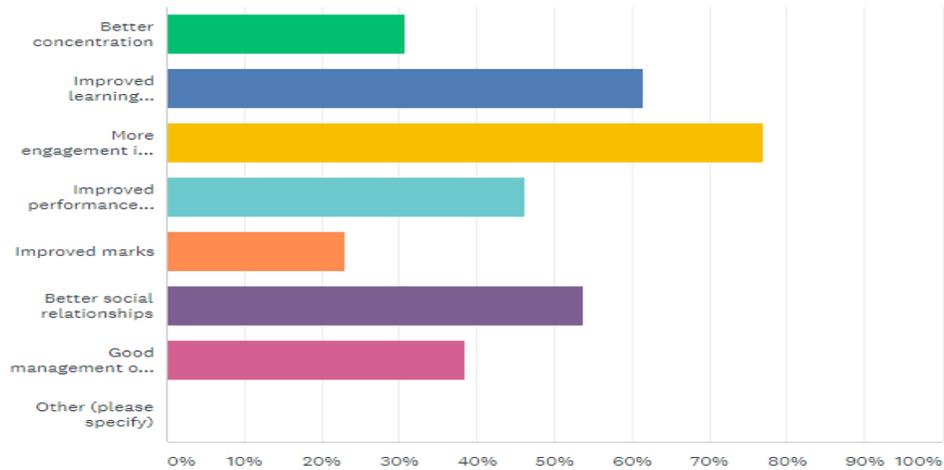


Figure 1: Teachers' responses to Question 2

Answered: 82 Skipped: 0

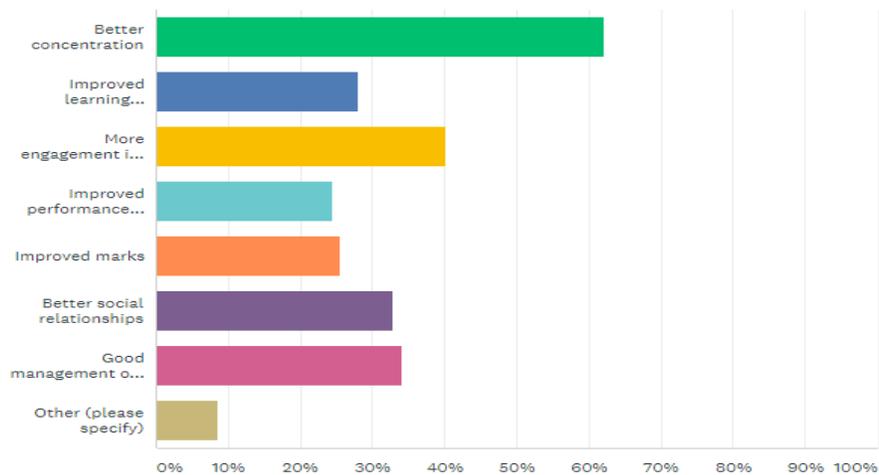


Figure 2: Students' responses to Question 2

Answered: 13 Skipped: 0

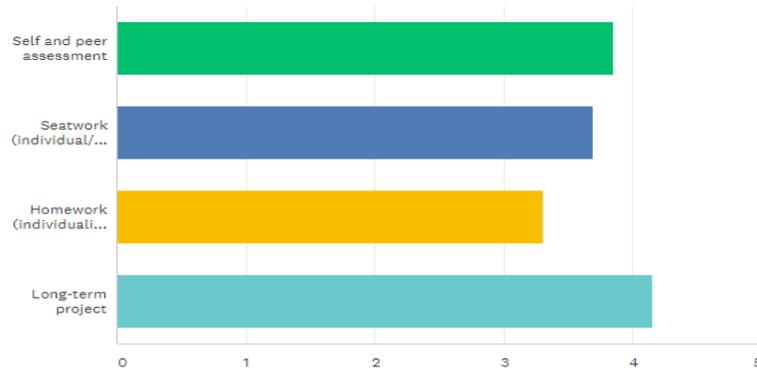


Figure 3: Teachers' responses to Question 3

Answered: 82 Skipped: 0

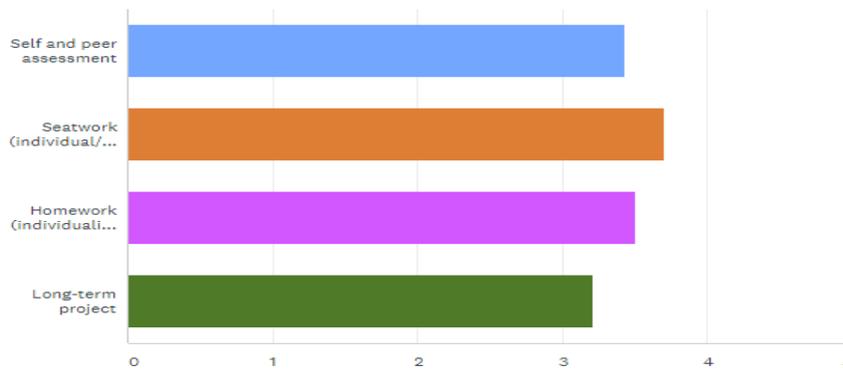


Figure 4: Students' responses to Question 3

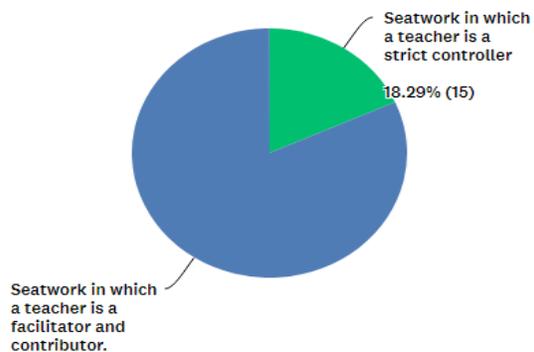


Figure 5: Students' responses to Question 7

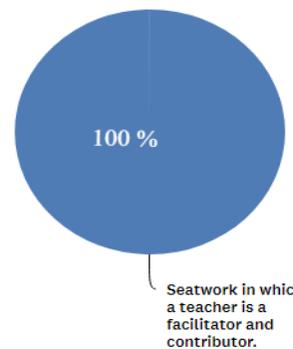


Figure 6: Teachers' responses to Question 7