



Autonomy in English Language Learning and Curriculum Change : Need for New Strategies

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Autonomy, today, is an extensively used term in the context of higher education. The concept of autonomy is as complex as the blend of freedom and responsibility. Little defines,

Learner autonomy is a problematic term because it is widely confused with self-instruction. It is also a slippery concept because it is notoriously difficult to define precisely. The rapidly expanding literature has debated, for example, whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behaviour; whether it is characterised by learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is a psychological phenomenon with political implications or a political right with psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on a complementary teacher autonomy.

In fact, autonomy well balances between learning and teaching and there is a considerable shift in this approach from “teaching” to “facilitating” in which it positively turns towards responsibilities of both teacher and learner. Learner autonomy, learner responsibility and motivation are always related with each other as no one can learn new things if they are not enough motivated. To increase the learner responsibilities and to help the autonomous learners, teachers should know some essential classroom applications (Yagcioglu). This paper attempts to trace the possibilities in linking autonomy with English Language Learning (ELL) in higher education, especially seeking change in the English Curriculum as set for the foreign learners.

In the global scenario, ELL plays a vital role to make students employable. For, employability has been necessarily linked with the language skills and English in the higher education syllabi determines the future prospects of the younger generation. M.C. Nair points out, “India has been and remains the most favoured offshore location for Technology Services. India has the largest number of English-speaking college graduates in the world. India can also claim to have the largest pool of low cost scientific and technical talent along with the language savvy youth”.

According to NASSCOM's (National Association of Software and Service Companies) Strategic Review 2007, the Indian IT-BPO sector would have achieved USD 60 billion in export revenues by February 2010. Even in 2013 it has not yet been achieved. India has become one of the premier countries of outsourcing because of several factors. The ready availability of a great range of human resources comprising qualified English-know-how youth is the prime factor. In fact, proficiency in English language is looked upon as the factor of consequence by both government and private sectors. It is not an abundance of manpower alone that attracts investment to India but quality manpower which rather unfortunately lacks English language enhancement. Where does the problem lie? Who would be responsible for equipping the future human source with the specific language skill required for the employability market domain? To nurture the employability skill among the students, the college campuses must be pro-actively engaged in establishing need based language skill promoting programmes. It is high time to realise the demand for English language user community in this context, especially youth on completion of higher education.

The objectives of the English language curriculum designers so far are: 1. primarily nurturing the students with English communicative skills, 2. preparing them for getting the employment opportunities offered by the corporate sector, and 3. making them believe that English would serve one connected globally. Yet, the question is whether the present day English language curriculum in higher education would fulfil the expectations of the employers today. The answer is a big no. Because, traditionally, the Board of Studies instituted by the University or the college of autonomous state would provide a common syllabi prescribing text books available in the market or recommended by the book sellers for the language learners/teachers belonged to science or humanities wings. Moreover, the system of syllabi is examination oriented ignoring skill acquisition on the part of the learners. The teacher is also restrained from completing the prescribed syllabus on time. Generally, language teaching in higher education level can never be drawn into the domain of accountability. Even after the Choice Based Credit System (CBCS) having been introduced to the Universities and their affiliated colleges there is no choice pragmatically available to the learners to be privileged in scoring their credits greatly. In the class rooms, the prescribed syllabi are executed by the teachers and the learners have no role deciding on how they obtain the targeted knowledge/skill (in case of language) in a stipulated time framed by a few members

of a board. The strategies are also much intended from the point of view of teachers but not of learners who are always considered consumers of a product. Their written performance is weighed by the marks they have scored in the terminal examinations. And, it is an irony that their oral skill in language could also be tested through the question paper set for the written examination.

A learner who is enrolled in such system of learning can hardly prove him/herself to be employed and rather to satisfy the expectations of the present day employers. There is a gap between the employability and the demand based communicative skill of job seeking community. NASSCOM report says that only one third of the present pass out students are employable, and remaining students are unemployable due to lack of English knowledge and skill. In the job interviews, a graduate who has scored top ranks in the university written examinations may not be successful because of their deficiency in communicative execution whereas one who is strong in English language skill but secured less marks than the top scorer may shine well. This kind of imbalance results in losing our trust in higher education system. There still exists a disintegration of communication among language teachers and learners in the class rooms.

Learners are undoubtedly liable for their own acquiring communicative skill inside and outside of their English classrooms. None can expect that an English teacher alone can teach them all the knowledge that they need to know (vocabulary, phrases, sentence structures, grammar and cultures, etc.) within the limited classroom sessions. Therefore, it is critical for themselves to have 'strong motivations and desires to learn, to explore the world of English, and to learn new vocabulary, usages, and knowledge on their own. Eventually, students can progress to learn on their own without the guidance of teachers; and students can become their own teachers. As there are no universally useful strategies available in enhancing English language skills the learners should go for self-motivated independent learning strategies. There is a need for the proactive role of English language teachers who can tap the metacognitive function involved in language learning, particularly English language. This type of independent learning is possible only when autonomy is accepted in language learning. Holec (1979) points out:

The *autonomous language learner* takes responsibility for the totality of his learning situation. He does this by determining his own objectives, defining the contents to be learned and the progression of the course, selecting

methods and techniques to be used, monitoring this procedure, and evaluating what he has acquired. Objectives are specific to the learner, and the learner's communicative needs determine the verbal elements chosen.

Hence, learner autonomy is an ability to take charge of their learning. Krashen (2004) also positively views this with a notion that an autonomous acquirer “will understand ways of making input more comprehensible (e.g. getting background information, avoiding obviously incomprehensible input)... An autonomous acquirer is not a perfect speaker of the second language, just good enough to continue to improve without us... and to continue to grow.” So the goal in foreign language pedagogy is to bring students to the point where they are “autonomous language learner”, prepared to continue to improve on their own.

Littlewood (1998) states in his book *Foreign and Second Language Learning*, that there are varied approaches found among individual learners and have their own personalities, motivations and learning styles caused by their socio-cultural-economic backgrounds. Each one is so differently exposed to his own interests, needs, learning styles and pace. And he also says, “each person is ultimately responsible for his own learning and needs to engage his own personality in the educational process.” The teachers' contribution in this regard is quietly limited to facilitate the students to become self-motivated, autonomous, and life-long learners for their benefits.

If autonomy is linked with English language learning there will be a shift for students to move from dependent learners to autonomous learners, from passive learners to active performers. In short, students can teach themselves and learn on their own. They can learn much more, without any limits. Their self-confidence, satisfaction, and attitude towards achievements will increase if they become self-taught learners.

Therefore, some reforming steps should be taken in introducing autonomy in ELL. The English language teachers would be capable of diagnosing the hurdles that students come across and such important problems are: negative attitude, lack of interest, fear and shyness, inhibition, poor practice and inadequate word power. To make students overcome these problems, they would be separately addressed not by any generalised panacea like teaching method but by individualised and unique method applicable to particular group of learners in micro level. This kind of autonomy is possible when we radically diverge from the conventional theory based framing of common syllabi for all who learn English language. So, firstly the

new strategy can be of not prescribing any tailor made syllabi. Instead, students may be allowed to evolve their self-initiated independent strategy to learn a specific language component as required and as targeted in a given time. Strictly stating, it is like both teacher and student/s involve in framing the syllabi according to the need of the learner/s. There must be a change in system facilitating them to form a syllabus committee, based on the discipline (Science/Humanity), comprising English language teacher, subject teacher, and student/s studying the subject concerned.

The teaching community must be highly competent in creative thinking and emotionally intelligent to achieve this learner autonomy. For, there may not be any static strategies feasible to foster the need of all learners for all the time. The teacher must be flexible and ready to adopt any change or capable of introducing innovative methods according to the students' learning situation. And, students also find their comfort zone forming English Learners Circle (ELC) including their close friends in the class in this autonomous learning which would lead them to be acquiring their soft skills also along with the communicative proficiency in English.

Thus, the learner autonomy in English Language Learning is very dynamic and continues to tap the potential of the learners to generate new strategies accordingly. This paper could serve the purpose of creating awareness among the language teachers who are promisingly aspiring for new perspectives in promoting the higher education to the future generation. Also, there is a wide scope for discussing various novel and live strategies that can be applied by students independently for their language skill enhancement in future.

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