

Relationship between EFL Learners' Autonomy and Speaking Strategies They Use in Conversation Classes

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Abstract

The present study was conducted at Parsayan Language Institute in Isfahan, Iran. The students in pre- intermediate and intermediate classes were examined to investigate the relationship between degrees of learner autonomy, use of strategies for coping with speaking problems and the learners' success in their speaking classes. To determine the degree of correlation among degree of learner autonomy, use of strategies for coping with speaking problems, and success in speaking classes, a validated questionnaire was distributed among 50 participants. The participants were required to self-report the strategies they use when they have problems during speaking English and to report their degree of learner autonomy as an English language learner by choosing one of the items on the questionnaire. The analysis of the obtained results showed that learners with low speaking grades were weaker in comparison with learners with high speaking grades during the use of strategies for coping with speaking problems on the whole. Similarly, learners with low speaking grades reported themselves as less autonomous when compared to high proficiency learners of English, although the difference was not significant between the group of learners in average speaking grade and high grade level. The first desirable endpoint should be some kind of modification on the curriculum of language teaching in terms of development of learner autonomy. More chances for developing autonomy should be offered to the students so that they would get used to it and be more successful in communication skills.

Keywords: Learner Autonomy, Strategies for Coping with Speaking Problems in English, Speaking Classes

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy called the ability to take responsibility of one's own learning, which is specified as to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning (Holec, 1981). Strategies for Coping with Speaking Problems are the strategies speakers apply when they encounter some difficulties during speaking. When speakers cannot communicate the message, giving more examples to clarify themselves can be counted as examples and they have to use gestures and body language (Nakatani, 2006). The ability to take responsibility of one's own learning, which is specified as to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning is learner autonomy. The strategies speakers apply when they encounter some difficulties during speaking are Strategies for Coping with Speaking Problems.

The ability to direct one's own learning is more important in the area of foreign language study. At more advanced stages of the language learning process this is especially obvious, where learners often stay within the target culture (for example as part of a study abroad experience). Independent learning skills are magisterial in these situations in order to cope with the demanding situation. Furthermore, due to the augment importance of international business relations and the fact that it is no longer an uncommon situation to work with nation from a foreign country, speaking a foreign language as well as the capability to learn a foreign language high-handedly is a precious skill. A central part of life-long learning is the ability to take charge for one's own learning, a goal that is necessary to education in the current century. This is obvious, for example in the objectives that have been postulated by the National Standards for Foreign Language Education Project (1999). The goals are Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities (they are also known as "the five Cs"). Programs of learner autonomy are reflected in all five goals, but are most obviously mentioned in the goal called communities. Included in this goal are two modulus, namely that the students use the foreign language they are learning into as well as out of the learning background (i.e., the classroom),

and that the students show proof of becoming life-long pupils. Two important reasons to foster language learner autonomy are the role of foreign language education and independent learning. To achieve the aim of the study, the following research question was formulated:

1. Is there a relationship between reported use of strategies for coping with speaking problems, reported degree of autonomy and the speaking grade of the students?

2. Problem Statement and Related Literature

One of the relatively recent and much debated concepts as scholars have difficulty in defining and applying is learner autonomy. The obstacle of the notion is actually correlated with the problem of breaking habits. Teachers as well as learners are having problem in redefining the roles of performers in a classroom. When we notice the fact that much of the learning happens outside the formal context, then it can be stated that the learners are not addicted to be in the heart of their own learning. Hence, at this point there step up a difficulty to be solved. To what extent the students in the classroom are conscious of the role of autonomy and strategy use while they speak in English.

The situation roots from students' over-reliance on teachers and it is magisterial that they learn how to survive on their own because the current situation is unsustainable. The answer to the obstacle is learner autonomy, and the sooner they get self-confidence, the better for them and their teachers. Learner autonomy seems to be the magical solution to the problem; the change will not come overnight. They first need to be tested for their readiness for taking control of their own learning and given any needed schooling before autonomous policies can be performed.

Trebbi believes (in Lamb & Reinders, 2008) that before we can answer the question what learner autonomy is, we need to figure out what freedom is; because it is a prerequisite to learner autonomy. He believes that we can't talk about total autonomy because we can still explore the possibilities of pushing the limits set by those constraints in order to achieve more autonomous language learning. Training systems in many societies put limitations on teachers and learners that are not likely to increase learner autonomy.

To give a flattened description, Sinclair (in Borg and Al-Busaidi, 2012) believes that learner autonomy does not presently mean that a student should study individually. Cooperation with other members of the society is essential for autonomy to truly succeed. "Socio-cultural setting and cooperation with others are important aspects of training, and of our lives.

In accordance with the changes especially in the world politics and economics as these two issues act as the main decision-making structure in people's daily lives, the field of language learning and teaching is subject to change itself. Hence, as Gremmo and Riley (1995) believe, the first concern in the concept of autonomy in language training is an answer to ideals and outlook which came out as a consequence of political issue in Europe in 1960s (as cited in Benson, 2001). According to Holec (1981), at those times Western countries were being specified by "social improvement" rather than the amount of materials they produce. Hence, the focus was more on expanding the standards of living, which would inevitably bring about respect for human beings and individualization (as cited in Benson, 2001). The notion came into being via the Council of Europe's Modern Languages Project, which was first formed in 1971. Its primary aim was more related to adult learners and lifelong learning. Furthermore, the project was specifically affected by self-directed learning, which was receiving greater attention every other day.

Little (1995), as well as Burkert and Schwienhorst (2008) discuss that teachers must become autonomous themselves, in order to help their pupils to expand as autonomous and responsible learners. By realization the curriculum as the teacher's own curriculum – a curriculum which is inevitably shaped by the teacher's character, groundwork knowledge, and experience- this can be attained. Being informed of the personal character of the curriculum makes it feasible to specify zones which establish room for learner autonomy. These will be zones which lend themselves to discussion of content, materials, and activities, which in turn will develop learner responsibility.

Although, Holec believes autonomous learning is a twofold procedure. On the one hand, it implicates learning the foreign language; on the other, learning how to study. Holec's description implicates that autonomous learners can independently exert their wisdom and proficiency out by the instant setting of learning. Likewise independent learning expands beyond a school setting. It is a life-long procedure of continuously developing knowledge.

The concepts of autonomous learning and independent learning are sometimes interlinked and have come to play more and more significant role in language training. Autonomous language learning is determined by optimizing or developing learner choice, focusing on the needs of individual learners, not the interests of a teacher or an institution, and the choice of decision-making to learners. It is also learner-centered which views learners as individuals with needs and rights, who can expand and practice responsibility for their learning. Autonomous learners are expected to expand the ability to engage with, interact with, and benefit from learning environments which are not directly mediated by a teacher. Thus independent language learning can refer to a context or setting for language learning (Benson & Voller, 1997) in which learners extend skills in the target language often, though not always, individually. There is in fact a growing literature demonstrating that more autonomous teachers and learners have better results in language learning (Little, 2009). The notion of teacher autonomy came from the discussion of learner autonomy, that is, how teachers can increase autonomy in learners. It is based on the premise that there is a symbiotic relationship between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, but the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the advancement of teacher autonomy (Benson, 2001; Little, 1995; Smith, 2000).

2. Methodology

Investigating the reported level of autonomy of the students does not mean that the students' autonomy is declared with that questionnaire. However, the students will have a statement of their own view of autonomy while learning a foreign language. Apart from that speaking strategies used by the students would also reflect the answers supplied by the students. To cut it short, the study used of three parts using two different questionnaires to collect data.

The present study seeks to investigate the correlation among reported degree of learner autonomy of the students, strategies they use while coping with speaking problems, and their speaking grades. The data collected via quantitative instruments. The study investigating relationship between autonomy, strategy use and proficiency level will administrate at an institution with the participation of 4 preparatory classes of 50 EFL learners. In order to reach the answers of the research questions two questionnaires administered and the results of the questionnaires compared with the grades displaying the speaking proficiency level of the students.

The students' grade of speaking consists of all levels. Participants from four different classes supplied responses for the questions towards the end of the term as the students would have developed some kind of strategy towards speaking coping strategies then. As the final part of the study, at the end of the term the speaking portion of their speaking and listening class calculated for 50 students and the data were put into analysis.

After the data collection, in order to analyze the quantitative data, the Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) was used. Especially descriptive and statistical procedures will be used to present the data and draw conclusions. As for the questionnaires, the items on the five-point Likert scale will be assessed as values ranging from 1 to 5.

3. Results

Participants of the present study consist of 50 pre-intermediate and intermediate students of four EFL classes at Parsayan institution in Esfahan. The students participating in the study are at the second year of their study at Parsayan. They are male and female from the age 18 to 22. While a half (50 %) of the respondents are female, the remaining 50% are male participants meaning that a homogenous sample regarding gender was achieved. It means that the results of the survey will not fluctuate due to gender differences. The rationale behind sampling of students in this language center was the ease of access to these students. As it seemed to be difficult for the beginners to respond to the questionnaire and it would be more practical with pre- intermediate and intermediate students the second year learners were chosen as the subjects of the study. In order to increase the validity of the present study the researcher also interviewed four teachers and five students.

In order to test the relationship between the independent variables, i.e. speaking strategies and autonomy level with the dependent variable, i.e. level of English speaking proficiency, linear multiple regression analysis was utilized.

In order to test the correlation between the three variables, bivariate Pearson correlation technique was applied.

Table 1. The results of the correlation analysis

	Level	Speaking Strategy	Autonomy
Level	1.00		
Speaking Strategy	0.67**	1.00	
Autonomy	0.77**	0.56**	1.00

** Correlation is significant at 0.01 levels.

As shown in Table 1, the results of the Pearson correlation indicate that the correlation between all three variables is significant at 0.01 levels. Therefore, the hypotheses 1, 2, and 3 are significantly supported.

The results of these investigations highlight that majority of the questions (76 %) proves that there is a difference between high and low proficiency groups with respect to the use of strategies for coping with speaking problems but there are still responses to some questions that show no difference. The result supports the hypothesis that "the students who did better in the speaking class turn out to report themselves as better in applying strategies. However, this difference is not significant for the comparisons of intermediate group and there are still responses to some questions which do not support the hypothesis (24 %).

When the results of data analysis relating to the use of strategies for coping with speaking problems and the results of this data analysis were combined, the linkage between those two variables was clearly observed. On the whole, the students from high speaking grade scored high on the first part of the research tool as well as on the second part. Likewise, the case is the same for the students from low speaking grade as they scored worse on both of the questionnaires. All of these data which were investigated proves that there is a mutual and direct correlation among speaking grade, learner autonomy and use of strategies for coping with speaking problems.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

Statistical calculations demonstrate that there is a positive correlation between speaking grades of the pupils and reported degree of autonomy and use of coping strategies while speaking English. This is a sign of the fact that the

students, who are good at using the strategies in question, reported themselves as autonomous in comparison with the other groups, as well. The correlation is again positive for low proficiency speakers of English. However, with intermediate speakers, such a correlation is not observed as there is no significant difference between the answers of the high proficiency students and intermediate-level speakers. Therefore, as is obvious, the more the students report themselves as autonomous and competent in the use of strategies in question; the higher grades they have in speaking class. Actually, the results gained on both questionnaires support both of the results in the original studies (Dafei, 2007; Nakatani, 2006).

This study has shown that the courses of Freire (1970) and Foucault (1995) have a place in foreign language training and can be addressed in various ways on the learner autonomy continuum. Considering the full width of the learner autonomy spectrum (from fully controlled to fully self-directed and autonomous), the level of autonomy and alteration to the traditional power formation in educational institutions were relatively small in this study but initiated large changes in terms of the students' approach to the material. While on the learner autonomy continuum, this research may be placed closer to the end of controlled learning environments, given the institutional context with its strict power range, the autonomy performed in the study introduced pupils a freer atmosphere in which to capitalize on the learning strengths and recognize their learning weaknesses. Given that the learners themselves desired more structure in the courses, suggests that there is a limit to how open and autonomous foreign language learning atmosphere can be in post-secondary institutions.

This tendency for structure also shows the problems with which the students encounter when they are used to learning a language in a very structured format and then are expected to make autonomous decisions regarding their learning from one semester to the next. Consequently, learner autonomy is a goal that needs to be performed through the curriculum. In practice, the extent of learner autonomy should be modified according to the pupils' level of language proficiency.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Oral Communication Strategy Inventory (OCSI)

Direction: Please read the following items and choose a response.

Strategies for coping with speaking problems

Questions	Never or almost never true for me	Generally not true of me	Somewhat true of me	Generally true of me	Always or almost always true of me
1. I think first of what I want to say in my native language and then construct the English sentence.					
2. I think first of sentence I already know in English and then try to change it to fit the situation.					
3. I use words which are familiar to me.					
4. I reduce the message and use simple expressions.					
5. I replace the original message with another message because of feeling incapable of executing my original intent.					
6. I pay attention to grammar and word order during conversation.					
7. I try to emphasize the subject and verb of the sentence.					
8. I change my way of saying things according to the context.					
9. I take my time to express what I want to say.					
10. I pay attention to my pronunciation.					
11. I try to speak clearly and loudly to make myself heard.					
12. I pay attention to my rhythm and intonation.					
13. I pay attention to the conversation flow.					
14. I try to make eye-contact when I am talking.					
15. I use gestures and facial expressions if I can't communicate how to express myself.					
16. I abandon the execution of a verbal plan and just say some words when I don't know what to say.					
17. I correct myself when I notice that I have made a mistake.					
18. I notice myself using an expression which fits a rule that I have learned.					
19. While speaking, I pay attention to the listener's reaction to my speech.					

20. I give examples if the listener doesn't understand what I am saying.					
21. I repeat what I want to say until the listener understands.					
22. I make comprehension checks to ensure the listener understands what I want to say.					
23. I try to use fillers when I cannot think of what to say.					
24. I try to give a good impression to the listener.					
25. I don't mind taking risks even though I might make mistakes.					
26. I try to enjoy the conversation					
27. I leave a message unfinished because of some language difficulty.					
28. I try to relax when I feel anxious.					
29. I actively encourage myself to express what I want to say.					
30. I try to talk like a native speaker.					
31. I ask other people to help when I can't communicate well.					
32. I give up when I can't make myself understood.					

Appendix B

Questionnaire to investigate the learner autonomy of the subjects

Direction: in order to investigate the learner autonomy will you please chose the best answers to the following questions according to your true cases. Thank you very much for your cooperation and patience.

Part I

Questions	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often	Always
1. I think I have the ability to learn English well.					
2. I make good use of my free time in English study.					
3. I preview before the class.					
4. I find I can finish my task in time.					
5. I keep a record of my study, such as keeping a diary, writing preview etc.					
6. I make self-exam with the exam papers chosen by myself.					
7. I reward myself such as going shopping, playing etc. when make progress.					
8. I attend out- class activities to practice and learn the language.					
9. During the class, I try to catch chances to take part in activities such as pair/group discussion, role play, etc.					
10. I know my strengths and weaknesses in my English study.					
11. I choose books, exercises which suit me, neither me too difficult nor too easy.					

Part II

12. I study English here due to:	A. My parents demand	B. Curiosity	C. Getting a good job, help to my major	D. Interest of English culture, such as film, sports, music etc.	E. C and D
13. I think the learner-teacher relationship's that of:	A.Receiver and giver	B. Raw materials and maker	C. Customer and shopkeeper	D. Partners	E. Explorer and director
14. I think my success or failure in English study is mainly due to:	A.Luck or fate	B. English studying environment	C. Studying facilities(aids)	D. English studying	E. Myself
15. Whether students should design the teaching plan together with teachers or not, my opinion is:	A.Strongly agree	B. Agree	C. Neutral	D. Oppose	E. Strongly oppose
16. When the teacher ask questions for us to answer, I would mostly like to:	A.Wait for others' answer	B. Think and ready to answer	C. Look up books, dictionaries	D.Clarify questions with teachers	E. Join a pair/group discussion
17. When I meet a word I don't know, I mainly:	A .Let it go	B. Ask others	C. Guess the meaning	D.B and E	E. Look up the dictionary
18. When I make mistakes in study, I'd usually like the following ones to correct them:	A.Let them be	B.Teachers	C.Classmates	D.Others	E.Books or dictionaries
19. When I am asked to use technologies that I haven't used before(e.g. internet discussion):	A.I usually try to learn new skills	B. I learn them following others	C. I feel worried, but anyway	D. I put it off or try to avoid it	E. I resist using them
20. I think the following way is most useful in my English study:	A.Taking notes	B.Mechanic memory	C.Group discussion	D.Doing exercise of grammar, translation, words etc.	E.Classifying or grouping or comparing
21. I usually use materials selected :	A.Only by teachers	B. Mostly by teachers	C. By teachers and myself	D. Mostly by myself	E.Only by myself