

Constructivism and
Autonomous Learning

建构主义指导下的自主学习 理论与实践

张雅军

著

山东省社会科学

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责任编辑:赵财霞 谢 琴

责任校对:易 雯

封面设计:甘 英

编辑室:高校教材编辑室

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Preface

Learner autonomy is one of the dominant international topics in language learning nowadays. The promotion of learner autonomy has been considered as a central goal of education, and the achievement of autonomy is an aspiration already enshrined in many syllabi. Constructivism is a learning theory describing the process of knowledge construction. Constructivists believe that learning is a process and that learners must individually and actively discover and transform complex information to make it their own. This theory is also the theoretical basis of learner autonomy. So combining them together becomes the new angle of the study in this book.

However, frequent complaints and careful observations from language teaching indicate that most learners or students do not have initiatives to involve or participate in learning inside and outside the classroom. They are passive and dependent. They lack the ability to plan, control and manage their learning affairs. Learning becomes a responsibility of the instructors who are rendered central to the successful implementation of learning. Learners are getting used to the habit and the role of being passive recipients who exhibit no intellectual initiative and personal involvement in their learning.

Under this background, the author directs the attention to autonomous learning, which aims to check and discover the problems of autonomous learning in language learning context and try to find out some effective remedies consequently. The author explores the necessity of cultivating learning autonomy and the ways to develop autonomy ability by getting some evidence from constructivism approach and some related theories. Therefore, the purpose of the present study is to make some endeavors to develop and promote students' learning autonomy, and change them from passive learners to autonomous learners.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

As the theory and practice of language teaching and learning enter a new century, the concepts of learner autonomy and independence have gained momentum, the former becoming a “buzz-word” within the context of language learning (Little, 1991). Language learning and teaching has been placed on the role of learners in the language learning process (Wenden, 1998). This shift of responsibility from teachers to learners does not exist in a vacuum, so helping learners become more autonomous in their learning has become one of the prominent themes. Autonomy is a precondition for effective learning. When learners succeed in developing autonomy, they not only become better language learners, but also develop into more responsible and critical members of the communities they live in.

1.1 Traditional Teacher-Centered Approach

Over the past two decades, researches in first language acquisition have had an enormous influence on the study of second language learning, both at theoretical and practical level. Particularly, language teaching should move away from an emphasis on the properties of sentences in isolation to a concern for learners. As a matter of fact, the process of education is one of the most important and complex of all human endeavors. The so-called popular notion that education is something carried out by one person, a teacher, standing in front of a class and transmitting information to a group of learners who are all willing and able to absorb it has prevented learners from developing their interests in their learning of English.

A successful educator must be one who understands the complexities of

the teaching-learning process and can draw upon this knowledge to act in ways which empower learners both within and beyond the classroom situation. Just as Littlewood states: "The goal of language teaching is to develop independent capacities in all domains." (Littlewood, 1996) People who take the initiative in learning learn more things and learn better than those who sit at the foot of the teacher, passively waiting to be taught, and they learn more purposefully and with greater motivation.

Therefore, to cultivate learners' recognition of self-dependent learning ability and so as to develop their autonomous learning ability is of great urgency and importance, which is also teachers' great responsibility to assume. Then what is the role of teachers in learners' autonomous learning? Transformation of the teaching and learning model entails a fundamental change of teachers' role. A teacher should play an important part in promoting effective learning, rather than being peripheral, and he/she is vital in fostering the right climate for learning to take place, for confidence to develop, for people's individuality to be respected, for a sense of belonging to be nurtured, for developing appropriate learning strategies, and for moving towards learner autonomy.

1.2 The Aim of This Book

Constructivism as a recently emerged learning theory has been playing a more and more important role in promoting learners' process of learning. Jerome Bruner, Jean Piaget, Lev Vygotsky are the major represents of constructivism. According to constructivism, learners build up their own knowledge structure in the process of their learning rather than obtain knowledge directly from teachers. In other words, learners do not learn what teachers teach in the classroom word for word, but learn the knowledge with the help of their own experience and understanding.

Nowadays a person's learning span is no longer limited in his/her school learning periods. Some experts say that it is until the graduation of learners that they begin their real learning. Autonomous learning is one of the means of "learn how to learn." During all his/her lifetime, a learner may face many new

challenges and opportunities. Learning new knowledge has become an important part of the people living in the 21st century. From this point of view, autonomous learning is one of the most important abilities for a talented person. The “self-access” or “autonomous learning” means individuals take responsibility for their process of learning. Learners should not only learn knowledge from textbooks in order to be able to recall it when needed, but also nurture the ability of “self-access” or “autonomous learning.” Learners should learn how to learn in the process of their learning.

Many researchers and teachers have been doing experiments to find the approaches to promote English teaching and learning. In the 1960s the term “autonomous learning” was invented in the debates about the development of life-long learning skills and the development of independent thinkers (Gardner, 2002).

Learner autonomy through a focus on learner reflection and taking responsibility for one’s own learning processes has become a central concern in the recent history of language teaching (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991; Dam, 1995; Smith, 2000; Benson, 2007; Little, 2006; Lamb & Reinders, 2007; Barfield & Brown, 2007; Murphy, 2008; Little, 2009). However, in-service language teachers struggle with the ways to promote learner autonomy or at least to encourage the idea of autonomy in language classrooms (Dickinson, 1992; Littlewood, 1999; Nunan, 2000). Promoting learner autonomy refers to encouraging students “to determine the objectives, to define the contents and progressions, to select methods and techniques to be used, to monitor the procedures of acquisition and to evaluate what has been acquired” (Holec, 1981). Through this process, eventually, a autonomous learner establishes “a personal agenda for learning” (Little, 1995) by setting up directions in planning, pacing, monitoring and evaluating the learning process.

Learner autonomy is based on the idea that if students are involved in decision-making processes regarding their own language competence, “they are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning and learning can be more focused and purposeful for them” (Dam, 1995). Additionally, the notion that “learners have the power and right to learn for themselves” (Smith, 2008) is

seen as an essential aspect for learner autonomy. In order to contribute to the development of learner autonomy in language classrooms, it is vital that students be involved in making decision about their own learning. Learner autonomy is one of the prime goals of modern education (Wenden, 1998). The autonomous learning mode lays emphasis on involving learners in taking responsibility for their own learning. It also requires learners to change their roles and to become independent of teachers. During the process of autonomous learning, learners may become more aware of their attitudes, motivation, meta-cognitive knowledge and learning strategies.

On the other hand, learner autonomy does not mean a reduction of teachers' intervention or initiative. In fact, it challenges teachers to make great shifts in their roles from classroom controllers to autonomous facilitators, counselors and resource. Teachers should be involved in learners' autonomous learning class to provide learners with useful information about English learning, give them advice, enhance their autonomous learning awareness instead of making decisions for learners, instruct them what to do, regulate their learning process and evaluate their learning outcomes. According to Little (1995), learner autonomy depends on teacher autonomy in two senses: Firstly, it is unreasonable to expect teachers to foster the growth of autonomy in their learners if they themselves do not know what it is to be an autonomous learner. Secondly, in determining the initiatives they take in their classrooms, teachers must be able to apply to their teaching those same reflective and self-managing processes that they apply to their learning.

On this basis, teachers need to experience autonomous skills in their initial teacher training, so they will be able to take a positive stance towards the development of learner autonomy in their own teaching and their students can take charge of their own learning following the models of their teachers. Work on learner autonomy in language learning focuses not only on out-of-class learning (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2001), but also on classroom practice (Little, 1991; Dam, 1995). As mentioned above, language teachers play a crucial role in fostering learner autonomy by taking both out-of-class and classroom perspectives. Thus, if our target is to lead our student teachers to become autonomous teachers, an understanding of student teachers' perspectives on

learner autonomy while they are being trained to be teachers would provide valuable information for teacher educators.

1.3 Autonomy and Related Concepts

The concept of autonomy in language learning is closely related to self-directed learning and individualization. Self-directed learning and autonomy both focus on the need to develop the individual's ability so that he/she can take an active role in the society in which he/she lives (Holec, 1980; Benson, 2001). Learner autonomy is a matter of degree (Nunan, 1997). In language learning, learner autonomy is a capacity, attribute, and attitude (Holec, 1980; Little, 1991), and can take different forms in different contexts, and to different degrees as a result of the characteristics of each learner. Thus autonomy is not inborn (Holec, 1980), but a natural tendency (Benson, 2001). Holec (1980) believes that it is open to all and learners who lack autonomy are capable of developing it, given appropriate conditions and preparation.

In the literature, the terms “learner autonomy” and “self-directed learning” are often mentioned vis-à-vis each other. They relate to each other and are nevertheless used in contrast. To Holec (1980), learner autonomy is a capacity of the learner, while self-directed learning is a mode in which the learner takes charge of the learning process. Dickinson (1987) states that autonomy is “the situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his learning and the implementation of those decisions,” and self-direction refers to “a particular attitude to the learning task, where the learner accepts responsibility for all the decisions concerned with his learning...” Little (1999) uses the term “self-direction” to refer to “the organization of learning” and the term “autonomy” to refer to “that state of independence in which the learner is able to and accepts to take full responsibility for his learning.”

In addition, Dickinson (1987) uses “self-instruction” for discussing learning responsibility. In an educational context, a teacher may seek to include learners increasingly in the “decision-making process about their

learning and the management of it” (Dickinson, 1987). In a continuum with autonomy at one extreme and programmed learning (or traditional classroom teaching) at the other, self-instructional mode is the transition from non-learner-centeredness to learner-centeredness. In this mode of learning, a pedagogical approach aims to help learners become motivated and gradually able to make decision about their learning by transferring responsibility of language learning from the teacher to the learners (Dickinson, 1987).

It can be seen from the above that autonomy, self-learning, independent learning, and self-directed language learning are interrelated concepts that have been extensively described, discussed and theorized in different contexts. So in this book, these terms are used interchangeably.

1.4 Overview of This Book

This book is divided into 9 chapters.

Chapter 1 serves as an introduction in which the drawbacks of the traditional teacher-centered method of English teaching, the aim and the content of the book are under discussion.

Chapter 2 presents the concept of Constructivist theory. It analyzes its historical development, characteristics, learning principles and implication to language teaching.

Chapter 3 explores the concept of autonomy in language learning, seeking a working definition of the concept in the relevant literature. Defining autonomy involves making comparisons between different definitions. This chapter also consists of theoretical support for autonomy, justification of autonomy, and promotion of autonomy.

Chapter 4 elaborates on the characteristics of learner autonomy: attitudes, motivation and meta-cognitive knowledge, as well as their relations with learner autonomy.

Chapter 5 concentrates on the learning models of learner autonomy, mainly including models of Pintrich, Bandura, Zimmerman, Butler & Winne, Winne & Hadwin, McCombs, Garrison, and Brockett & Hiemstra.

Chapter 6 introduces the instruction models for educators to reflect on.

The models included in this chapter are cooperative instruction model, problem-based instruction model, web-based instruction model, and anchored instruction model.

Chapters 7 and 8 are the practical use of the theories of learner autonomy. Chapter 7 is on classroom autonomy. It starts with the description of the features of autonomous classroom, then furthers the activities and implementation of autonomy, and finally emphasizes the significance of assessment and feedback. Chapter 8 presents autonomy outside the classroom—autonomous learning centers or self-access centers (SACs). It elaborates on the features of SACs, how to set up and manage a feasible SAC, and introduces several world-famous SACs for readers to reflect on.

With all the work done, the book will come to a conclusion in Chapter 9. Fostering learner autonomy in the teaching of English will greatly help learners assume responsibility for their own learning. Moreover, when developing learner autonomy three factors of learner autonomy should be taken into full account; learners' attitudes, motivation and meta-cognitive knowledge, for these factors will influence the degree of autonomy. More importantly, teachers' recognition of their own roles in teaching is of prime significance when the class shifts from teacher-centered approach to learner-oriented teaching method; autonomous learning is increasingly brought into most teachers' class. Autonomy is not only desirable but also achievable in everyday contexts of language teaching and learning. The development of autonomous learning in teaching practice demands more and better teaching and learning materials. Autonomy in language learning continues to be an area of research and practical applications.

Chapter 2 A Survey of Constructivist Theory

Constructivism is a theory about knowledge and learning. Having the roots in philosophy, psychology, sociology, education, and with Piaget the dominant figure, constructive psychology has a considerable influence on language learning. The theory asserts that each of us learns constructively, building our personal understanding of the world in which we live. It mainly assumes that individuals, right from birth, have the initiative to construct personal meaning, which is their own personal understanding of the external world from their experience. Therefore, learners become the center in learning knowledge (Williams & Burden, 1997).

Brooks & Brooks (1993) state: "Each of us makes sense of our world by synthesizing new experiences into what we have previously come to understand. Often, we encounter and object an idea, a relationship, or a phenomenon that does not quite make sense to us. When confronted with such initially discrepant data or perceptions, we either interpret what we see to conform to our present set of rules for explaining and ordering our world, or we generate a new set of rules that better accounts for what we perceive to be occurring. Either way, our perceptions and rules are constantly engaged in a grand dance that shapes our understanding."

Constructivist learning theory holds the view that learning is the construction of knowledge, and learning is the knowledge not simply transferred from teachers to learners, but achieved through getting others' help in a certain social and cultural background, using the necessary learning materials, and constructing of meaning through the way learners get. Constructivist theory suggests that education is to give the educated the ability

to think independently, and to emphasize on taking their own experience into the learning process and their roles to be positive sense-makers and problem-solvers. It stresses the main role of learners' knowledge, without losing sight of the leading role of teachers. It believes that teachers are the constructors and facilitators of meaning rather than those who only impart knowledge and instill learners. It advocates that learners are the main body of information processing, the active constructors of meaning, rather than the passive recipients of external stimuli and the targets of education.

2.1 Definition of Constructivism

The meaning of constructivism varies according to one's perspective and position. Within educational contexts, there are philosophical meanings of constructivism, as well as personal constructivism as described by Piaget, social constructivism outlined by Vygotsky, radical constructivism advocated by von Glasersfeld, constructivism epistemologies, and educational constructivism.

Von Glasersfeld (1995) holds that "knowledge, no matter how it be defined, is in the heads of persons, and that the thinking subject has no alternative but to construct what he or she knows on the basis of his or her own experience."

Brooks & Brooks (1993) think that "constructivism is not a theory about teaching. It is a theory about knowledge and learning. The theory defines knowledge as temporary, developmental, socially and culturally mediated, and thus, non-objective."

According to Audrey Gray (1997), constructivism is a view of learning based on the belief that knowledge isn't a thing that can be simply given by the teacher in the front of the classroom to students at their desks. Rather, it is constructed by learners through an active, mental process of development; learners are the builders and creators of meaning and knowledge. So a constructivist classroom should be learner-centered, and the teacher provides students with experiences that allow them to hypothesize, predict, manipulate objects, pose questions, research, investigate, imagine, and invent. The

teacher's role is to facilitate this process.

Constructivism advances meaning-making and knowledge construction as its foremost principles (Crotty, 1998). Individuals are assumed to construct their own meanings and understandings, and this process is believed to involve interplay between existing knowledge and beliefs and new knowledge and experiences (Richardson, 2003). This view of meaning-making through previously constructed knowledge implies that:

(1) Learners are intellectually generative individuals (with the capacity to pose questions, solve problems, and construct theories and knowledge) rather than empty vessels waiting to be filled.

(2) Instruction should be based primarily on developing learners' thinking.

(3) The locus of intellectual authority resides in neither the teacher nor the resources, but in the discourse facilitated by both teachers and learners. (MacLellan & Soden, 2004)

In general, constructivism refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves—each learner individually and socially constructs meaning—as he/she learns. Constructivists believe that knowledge and truth are constructed by the learner and do not exist outside of his/her mind. Therefore, according to constructivists, learners construct their own knowledge by actively participating in the learning process. Constructivist instructional developers value collaboration, learner autonomy, generativity, reflectivity and active engagement.

2.2 Historical Roots of Constructivism

The constructivist revolution has its roots in philosophy and has been applied to sociology and anthropology, as well as cognitive psychology and education. The first constructivist philosopher may be Giambatista Vico who commented in a treatise in 1710 that “one only knows something if one can explain it” (Yager, 1991). But the first major contemporaries to develop a clear idea of constructivism as applied to classrooms and childhood development were Jean Piaget and John Dewey. Piaget's constructivism is based on his view