From Autonomy to Automaticity and Back

الطلاقة بين الإستقلالية والتلقائية

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ملخص البحث

يهدف هذا البحث إلى فحص الدور الذي تلعبه التلقائية والإستقلالية في إكتساب اللغة الأجنبية والوصول للطلاقة، حيث كشفت مراجعة الأدبيات السابقة أن التلقائية عنصر أساسي للوصول للإستقلالية، ويشكل الاثنان دورة ، أفضل وصف لها بالتعلم الذاتي للمتعلم، وتستلزم الإستقلالية قرارًا واعيًا من قبل المتعلم ينطوي على رغبته في الوصول للطلاقة؛ ويتطلب ذلك تقبله للمخاطرة وإختبار الأنماط والتراكيب اللغوية الجديدة أمام أقرانه ومعلميه على حد سواء الذين يلعبون دورا هاماً في هذا الشأن حيث يتم إستبعاد التراكيب المرفوضة بينما يتم إعادة توجيه النماذج المقبولة إلى "قسم التلقائية" لدى المتعلم. ويصل الطالب للطلاقة في إستخدام اللغة من خلال تكرار النماذج والتراكيب المقبولة في تفاعل الطلاب مع بعضهم البعض ومع المعلم، وتقوم التلقائية بتعزيز هذه التراكيب المقبولة وجعلها جزءًا لا يتجزأ من مخزون اللغة للمتعلم،

وهذا من شأنه تحرير الذاكرة العاملة من التراكيب المقبولة لإجراء تجارب جديدة للغة المستهدف إكتسابها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الإستقلالية، التلقائية، الطلاقة، التعلم القائم على المتعلم، المخزون اللغوي.

Abstract

This paper set out to examine the role played by automaticity in language acquisition and autonomy. A review of the extant literature revealed that automaticity is found to be embedded within autonomy, where the two form a cycle, best described as learner-driven learning (LDL). Autonomy entails a conscious decision involving acquisition of a new skill; it requires risk taking and testing of new forms and structures. Rejected forms get dismissed whereas accepted ones are forwarded to the 'automaticity department.' Automaticity of lower-level processes is required before the acquisition of higher-level skills can be attempted. Through repetition of accepted forms and structures, automaticity renders them as an integral part of the learner's subconscious linguistic inventory, achieving fluency and freeing up the working memory for new, autonomous experimentation with the target language, creating the autonomy/automaticity cycle (ATAC).

Keywords: Autonomy, automaticity, fluency, learner-driven learning, linguistic inventory.

Introduction

Learner Autonomy (LA herein) is defined by Holec (1981) as "the ability to take charge of one's learning" (p.3). In 2007, Benson & Voller seemingly covered all the possible facets of autonomy, using the term 'autonomy' to denote instances where learners study on their own, applying the skills of self-directed learning, that stems from an innate capacity "often suppressed by institutional education," to demonstrate responsibility of their own learning (p.28). Little (2009) went on to define it as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making and independent action" (p.4). At the heart of this all, is the locus of control, which shifts the control of the teaching/learning process from the educator to the 'educatee', thus, transforming them from learners to life-long scholars, as outlined by Omaggio (1978).

Locus of control has been the focus of many research papers. In the research paper by Nuțu et al. (2015), they discuss how allowing learners to choose topics that they find interesting (i.e. shifting the Locus of Control from the instructor to the student, with respect to writing topics) better stimulated learners' metacognitive awareness. Accordingly, they hypothesized that MC awareness would greatly enhance learners' writing in terms of coherence, cohesion, format, and vocabulary, in agreement with the assumptions of (Reid, 1990).

In order to test their hypotheses and compare them to those of Gu & Johnson (1996), they used these parameters (coherence, cohesion, format, and vocabulary) to compare the development of the performance of their target groups. While these parameters seem to have improved learners' fluency significantly, this was not the case with their accuracy. Their study further demonstrates how learners preferred writing tasks online as they perceived them to be faster and more pleasurable, where the expressed how editing their work was more convenient, thus, confirming the findings of Stoffer (1995). However, they recommended that extra vocabulary and grammar practice be assigned so as to enhance online communication, such as when writing across social media platforms (a time when students seldom pay attention to style or form).

The effect of technology on students' writing is explored by Motlhaka (2020). Based on Vygotsky's acculturation framework, Motlhaka elaborates how higher education writing involves acculturation to new academic as well as social conventions. He sets out to examine how using online collaborative writing tasks gives learners a sense of a larger audience than just that of the teacher. It is through such collaborative tasks that learners share ideas and exchange peer feedback. Learners get to share metacognitive skills in helping each other during the writing process of drafting, revising and editing their academic papers, which is further facilitated by learners' employment of scaffolding techniques that emerge as a result (Zamel, 1983). Rizk (2002) explored learners'

OWC or Online Writing Collaboration is used to form positive attitudes towards writing and found that OWC is correlated to a "higher sense of audience awareness" during the composition process.

1. AUTONOMY

Basing his study on Reid's hypotheses (1990), Motlhaka (2020) also explores the effect of learners' choosing their own topics on the writing outcomes. The instructor had to pre-approve the topics to avoid duplication and to ascertain that the topics learners chose were of similar difficulty level. Learners had to submit first and final drafts and offer peer feedback. Then they are assessed on their choice of rhetorical and linguistic resources based on the feedback they received. Through the use of focus group interviews, it is the learners that were in control of the research outcomes, not the researcher, as they compared their pre and post feedback writing drafts and were given time to reflect on whether the feedback affected their academic writing proficiency. Results were analyzed and triangulated, comparing the students' reflections and opinions with the writing rubric that focuses on the placement of a "thesis statement at the end of introduction, introducing paragraphs with topic sentences, including supporting ideas within the paragraphs, using logical transitions and connecting words between the paragraphs and the sentences (Martínez et al., 2017).

With the global pandemic, more and more HEIs (Higher Education Institutes) are embracing computer mediated online educational services, exerting more and more demand for student-centered approaches, that cater to learners' needs and prior experiences. With the varied online learner population, incorporating technology in literacy teaching is expected to offer them both flexibility, convenience, variety, and more importantly, it is expected to foster autonomy and learner-driven learning (LDL) (Dörnyei, 2005). The drawback that sticks out is the need for time management skills and being technologically savvy enough to handle the associated complex cognitive and metacognitive skills required for online oral discussions and forums, submitting of assignments, and participation in the virtual classrooms. While they are often criticized for not offering physical interaction, online learning platforms cater to various learning styles and, as such, promote learning at their own paces (p.128).

Abdalla (2009) discusses a practitioner's role within the teaching / learning EFL environment. She describes how VanPatten (1995), defines a role as what is expected of a person in a certain environment, elucidating the notion that a person's role is multifaceted depending on the perspective one takes in defining it. Consequently, three principal elements of a role: 1) the work done and project-related activities; 2) the network of relationships one has with others; and 3) his/her beliefs and attitudes. Thus, roles are intertwined. We cannot talk about the role of the teacher without

examining the role of the learner as well (Wright, 1987). Roles are also dynamic and continuously evolving. If the role of the teacher changes, it becomes apparent that the role of the learner will probably change as well

In so doing, Abdalla (2009) also notes that unsolicited LI use prevailed in pair and group work. Another noteworthy observation was that students did not work effectively in groups, as they had little knowledge of the basic skills needed for effective group communication. Students regularly complained that they did not want to engage in group work. In a five-minute reflection paper, students were able to create an almost exhaustive list of negative features of team work. Yet they could come up with no more than three or four positive aspects. It became evident that the main issues at hand were the students' attitudes towards and lack of the basic skills needed for effective group work. This made students resist classroom activities, which manifested itself in unsolicited use of L1 and too much time spent off task.

It cannot be stressed enough that those learners, who have assumed responsibility for their learning, have decreased their use of L1 and increased their time-on-task. When learners were educated on group work, they developed a greater confidence in managing group personalities. Their participation increased as they experimented with various roles and negotiated the inherent conflict involved in dealing with a diversity of personalities, attitudes, and abilities. The results support the idea that educating

learners on the virtues and the know-how of positive interdependence skills will help them become more positive towards cooperative group work in the classroom. As researchers have noted, cooperative group work is a superior way of learning for almost all students. Small groups of four are particularly suited for language-learning tasks, as students have enough time and space for self-expression. This study has indicated that training and experience in group dynamics have had positive effects. Lowered anxiety and heightened motivation lead towards more positive attitudes about working cooperatively, but also to decreased use of L1 and increase in time-on task, both important factors in proficiency gains.

Nguyen & Habok (2020) explain how LA, as a construct, refers to the capacity of making decisions about learning, which also requires three principles: (a) a certain amount of cognitive knowledge relating to the learners, the context, the subject, and the learning process; (b) conscious awareness of this knowledge (MC); and (c) conscious reflection on learning. It also requires the usage of metacognitive strategies such as planning, goal setting, monitoring, self-assessment, evaluation, and using learning resources (Sinclair, 2009). Secondly, it values the significance of willingness or readiness as LA is regarded as "a construct of capacity which is operationalized when willingness is present" (Sinclair, 2009). That readiness facilitates successful implementation of LA-based programs by guiding curriculum development and classroom

practice (Chan et al., 2002; Lin and Reinders, 2019). Also, investigating willingness for LA enables researchers Nguyen and Habok (2020) to depart from the culturist view of LA (Yildirim, 2012) to the LoC (Nuţu, 2015) where arrive at the model depicted in Fig 2, below.
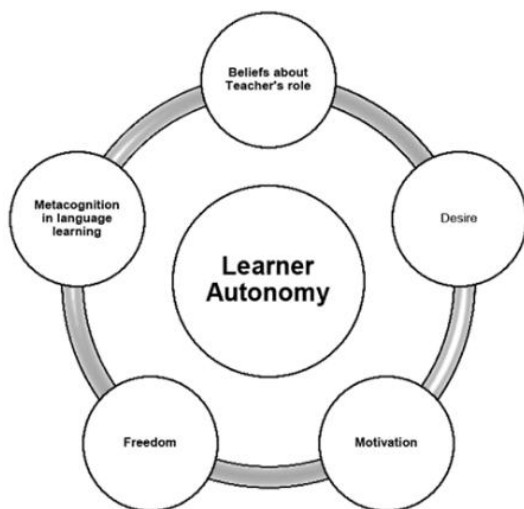
Figure 1Conceptualization of Learner Autonomy (Nguyen & Habok, 2020)

Omaggio (1978) mentions seven distinct characteristics of autonomous learners within the educational context: "autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies; they take an active approach to the learning task at hand"; they are risk takers, willing to make mistakes, realizing this is the only way to ultimately learn the target language (TL herein) effectively; they are "good guessers" who pay attention to content as well as to form as well. They exercise a balance between fluency and accuracy; they develop their own interlanguage of TL which has its own reference

system and then they experiment with, revising and rejecting rules and hypotheses that do not work for them; and lastly, they are very tolerant in approaching target language use.

For Dam (1990), autonomy is situated within learners' capacity to take charge of their own learning. To her a learner is autonomous if they are able to independently plan and monitor their own learning by setting their objectives, choosing material, applying whichever method they deem befitting of the communicative task(s) they are a part of, all the while exercising self-assessment.

Littlewood (1996) believes that a person whose actions are governed by his own choices as 'autonomous'" (p.428) and concurs with Omaggio on the need for both 'ability and willingness' on part of the learner to achieve this. He explains that both are essential in the autonomy equation, as for a person to be autonomous, they may be willing "to make independent choices but not have the ability to do so" (p.428) or vice versa.

To sum up, autonomy is an equation that comprises various element on each side; a learner endowed with ability and willingness, which act as a catalyst, if you will, leading to life-long learning and ultimately autonomy. Caution should be exercised when defining autonomy, as it should not be used synonymously with independence, as at the heart of autonomy within the context of learning, lies interdependence which involves both ability and willingness to, as mentioned earlier, take charge of one's learning.

1.1. AUTONOMY AND LANGUAGE LEARNING

Autonomy and its impact on language learning has been well documented in literature (e.g., Barfield & Brown, 2007; Benson, 2007; Lamb & Reinders; Little, 2009, 2006). A study by Dafei (2007) explores how learner autonomy (LA) relates to English language proficiency. He reports a significant positive relationship between the two variables. He asserts that "... the more autonomous a learner becomes, the more likely s/he achieves high language proficiency" (p.15).

Little (2009) confirms Dafei's assumptions stating that there is a direct relationship between LA and language learning (LL). However, little posits that autonomy cannot be equated with being '100% free' to do whatever they like, pointing out that learners "who are ENTIRELY free and detached from all responsibility are not autonomous, they are autistic" (p. 223).

Unal et al. (2017) explore the relationship between ESL learners' perceptions of LA and their proficiency levels. Despite the fact that they could not identify a significant difference between the two variables, they highlight that ESL learners have "a positive attitude towards learner autonomy" (p.121). Correspondingly, Yassin & Sohail (2018) found a positive correlation between LA and English LL. They argue that "learners' autonomy features such as curiosity, motivation, and confidence play pivotal roles in surviving the challenges related to language learning" (p.59).

Godwin-Jones (2019) argues that LA gained increasing recognition, especially because of the advent of technology and the availability and affordability of techno-educational learning devices such as cellphones, personal computers, tablets, and "streaming videos". He explains the interconnectivity of informal LL that occurs when using such devices and on social media platforms and LA. He bases this on the fact "that learner autonomy in language learning entails the use of innate cognitive functions" and a social tool – language – the manifestation of which combines, by default, independence and interdependence for communication to take place (p.8).

2. AUTOMATICITY

The main tenet of this model is that the brain is a limited capacity processor. When a learner is exposed to new linguistic data, it goes into the working, short-term memory. Through practice, planning and monitoring, the learner internalizes the new information until it becomes routinized. Once it is routinized through practice and interaction, it goes into the long-term memory. This frees up the working memory to learn new structures. Planning helps decide what becomes automaticized. The role of the monitor here is different from Krashen's (2009), where it modified production. Here the role of monitoring is to notice the successful utterances (i.e. monitor one's speech) and use it in future situations. Knowledge is seen as a continuum moving from the implicit to the explicit.   Automaticity means making explicit (conscious knowledge / processing) implicit (subconscious) so as to free up

working memory for more learning.

This is not to be confused with restructuring, where when new information is introduced, the learner's existing system has to be restructured for acquisition to take place (McGlaughlin, 1987). McGlaughlin argues that learning has to be discontinuous, where a qualitative change to the learner's interlanguage (IL) has to occur for restructuring to take place, not just mere addition of new knowledge or information. That is, the new knowledge has to be integrated into the existing IL, thus, reshuffling existing knowledge. He describes how this takes place over three stages. In the first stage, learners confirm to target-like norms using produce, practice formulas, and are able to produce error-free structures. In the second phase, backsliding takes place, where learners lose something that was learnt before due to the interference of their first language. In the third and final phase, they establish a one-to-one relationship between function and form and they revert back to the target-like structures. This is represented by a U-shape, as depicted in the figure below.
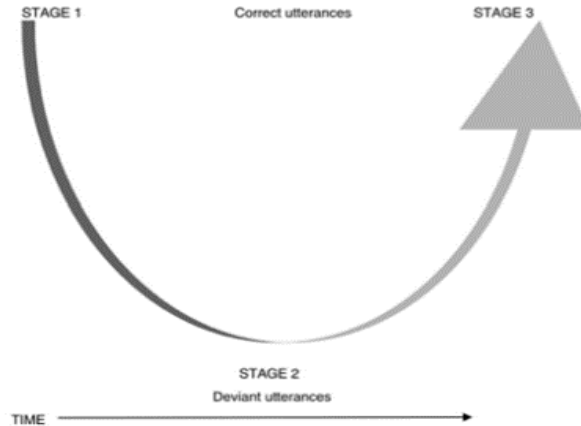
Figure 2 U-shaped Learning (McGlaughlin, 1987)

Maltagliati et al (2023) explored the causal relationship between autonomy and automaticity. While their findings cannot guarantee causal links between the two variables, co-occurrence appeared to be plausible. That is, autonomous behavior, on the part of the student, is needed for that behavior to be reach automaticity. Once that is achieved, automaticity frees up the working memory so that new autonomous behavior can be achieved. Figure 3 below outlines this learner-driven learning cycle and is referred to as the Autonomy to Automaticity Cycle (ATAC) (Abdalla, 2023).
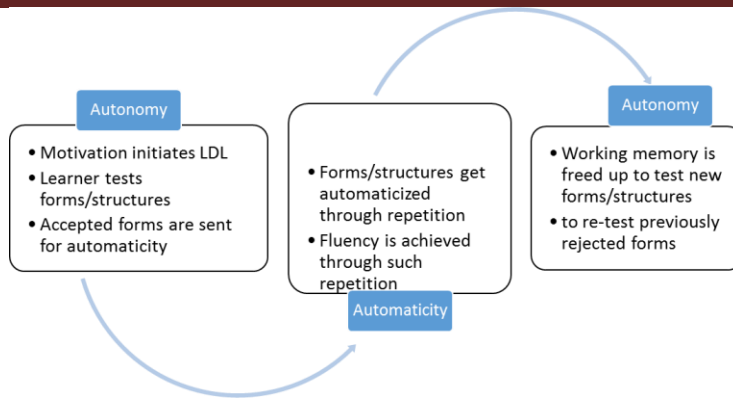
Figure 3Autonomy/Automaticity Cycle (ATAC) (Abdalla, 2023)

Conclusion

To conclude, it can be fairly stated that LA is a central notion in LL theories and teaching practices, where it has been shown that proficient LLs demonstrate more autonomy, and autonomy in LL strongly correlates with autonomy in using the language. These two models complement each other, when one-to-one relationships between function and form are established and with practice, they would lead to automaticity. This would, in turn, free up the working memory, allowing for new learning to occur, as depicted in the following chart.

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