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GLR
GLOBAL LANGUAGE REVIEW
Cite us

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Vol. IV, **No.** II (Fall 2019) | **Page:** 41 –49
p-ISSN: 2663-3299 | **e-ISSN:** 2663-3841
L-ISSN: 2663-3299
DOI: 10.31703/glr.2019(IV-II).07
URL: http://dx.doi.org/10.31703/glr.2019(IV-II).07

Fostering Learner Autonomy through Foreign Language Learning Strategies among Pakistani EFL Learners

Abstract

Learner autonomy refers to the practical situations and interventions of learning, where individual independence of a learner is given more attention (Smith, 2008). Learner autonomy (LA) can be promoted in foreign language classrooms by using foreign language learning strategies and it can pave the way for successful learning outcomes (Kim, 2013). Foreign language learning strategies (FLLS) are the behaviors, techniques and active engagement of learners (Ellis, 2008). The present study identified the foreign language learning strategies (FLLS), used by the Pakistani students at the tertiary level, where they were found to be unaware of the phenomena. Then a learner-training program based on FLLS was designed and implemented on the sample of 50 EFL students to foster autonomy. The research through an experiment of intervention found the effectiveness of the program with reference to LA development, the enhanced use of FLLS by students and the stimulation of their interest.

Key Words

Learner autonomy (LA), Foreign language learning strategies (FLLS), English as a foreign language (EFL), Foreign language classrooms

Introduction

Learning and teaching of a foreign language have been going through a lot of change during the period of the last three decades (Orellana et al., 2016). There has been a shift from the focus on foreign language teaching strategies to foreign language learning strategies and foreign language classrooms are more student-oriented as compared to teacher-oriented (Moeller & Catalano, 2015). Successful learners use numerous strategies while learning the target language (Benson, 2011). A number of factors have been identified by the researchers which affect foreign language learning, where the most important factor is language learning strategies (Kim, 2013). These strategies help learners to become independent in language classrooms where the teacher is a facilitator and learners are more active and take responsibility for their own learning (Benson, 2010). Language learning strategies are the patterns of behavior and thought process which indulges learner to learn more actively, help them to understand and store new information (O'Malley & Chamot, 1994). They gave those patterns of autonomy development in cognitive strategies including repetition, summarizing, rephrasing, understanding, transferring, questioning, translating and production. Furthermore, metacognitive strategies like attention, monitoring, self-evaluation and self-monitoring also enhance learner autonomy (Wendon, 1998).

English as a Foreign Language in Pakistan

English is an international language and its importance cannot be ignored in the context of Pakistan as well, where it has been used as a foreign language since its creation. It is the language of academics, politics, and the economy (Ashraf, 2007). The English language was introduced by the British rulers in the Indian subcontinent (Mahboob, 2009). It was the language of social, political and official status, where all the economic and social activities were associated with it. It was an official language of communication and trade during the British rule (Mahboob, 2009; Rahman, 1996). The English language was learned through formal education during that era. Even after the creation of Pakistan English gained the status of an official language and became the language of socio-economic spheres despite the fact of declaring Urdu as the national language (Mahboob, 2009).

In Pakistan, different methods of teaching English are used where the most common is the Grammar translation method (Mansoor, 2004). In this method, students translate text from Urdu to English and from English to Urdu and memorize vocabulary and tenses. This method stands in contrast with the modern methods of language teaching which are more contextual based and emphasize more on the practical use of the target language. In Grammar translation method (GTM) learners are less involved in the classroom and are dependent on the teacher (Mansoor, 2004). In contrast, the direct approach of English teaching is less used in Pakistan, which puts much focus on the active participation of learners and using target language without translation (Awan &

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Nawaz, 2015). The shift of language teaching methods to language learning strategies is still given less emphasis in Pakistan, despite its worldwide importance (Khan, 2012). Language learning strategies are the most effective part of foreign language learning (Zare, 2012). The possible way of making Pakistani foreign language learners independent and autonomous in language learning is to enable them to use language learning strategies (Ghazal, 2007).

Foreign Language Learning Strategies

O'Malley and Chamot (1990), studied foreign language learning strategies and proved them as an "important assessment project". They stated that methods of learning are "not so ordinary meditations and practices that people use to offer them some assistance with comprehending materials", (O'Malley and Chamot, 1990, as cited in Cook, 1993). These strategies are supportive for the learners to learn a foreign language as they provide different learning techniques. Skehan (1998, p.237), noted that the methods or the styles used for learning "might halfway reflect individual inclination as opposed to inborn blessing".

Language Learning Strategies are divided by Oxford (2001), into two classes: one is direct and the other is indirect. To construct communicative competence, these strategies are aiding material stated Oxford (2001). To self- regulate and organize learning, metacognitive strategies are opted by learners. Two kinds of strategies were under discussion such as affective strategy's concern was emotional factors and to deal with the confidence of the learners, whereas the other strategy, the social strategy deals with the interaction in the classroom or outside the classroom in the target language.

Cognitive, Memory and Compensation Strategies have their own role in autonomous learning. Compensation Strategy deals with fulfilling the communication gaps by making the momentum in duration. Memory strategy is a mechanical insertion of keeping the storehouse full of information whereas Cognitive strategy is prominent to enlighten learners of their own learning and activate their sense in this matter. These strategies widen the concept of learner autonomy. Scholars called the learners as commandos, who are responsible for their own decisions, which can only be done by managing the mechanism which is handling it.

O`Malley and Chamot (1994), illustrate two major reasons for the significance of learning strategies to bring autonomous learners into the light. Firstly, consistency in learning strategies is required by having cognitive aspects of learning in mind. This view triggers the "Cognitive Academic Language Learning Approach". Secondly, research is needed for content information thus proved to be supportive of learning strategies. O`Malley and Chamot (1994), signify the use of theory and research in learning strategies and to support his argument he proposed the four basic proportions of the use of learning strategies as follow:

- Better learners are active learners.
- Strategies can be learned.
- Academic language learning is more effective in learning strategies.
- Learning strategies transfer to new tasks.

O'Malley and Chamot (1994), also talk about the psychological techniques which proved to be cooperative in the future when there is a question on accomplishing development in learning.

This kind of scholarly methodology assists the learners as stated by Cook (1993). Further, he exposed these techniques below:

- Exercise the same discourse of anybody else repeatedly is the Repetition technique.
- For diverse kinds of materials, an action plan is there for the reference of the word is Resourcing technique.
- The translation method deals with comprehension with the help of L1 which lays down the bases of the intended language which is needed to be learned.
- Note-taking.
- Deduction approach is to enlighten the learner according to L2 standard
- Guessing a word with the help of a situation or surrounding words instead of literal meaning is Contextualization.
- To understand the content in L1 appropriately for the utility of the same word in the context of L2 is the Transfer technique.
- The learners assume the meaning of the word themselves is the inference technique.
- Question for elucidation; while requesting that the instructor clarify, and so forth.

Inozu (2010), advised psychological aspects of autonomy and suggested that Autonomy is a name of the capability of having a critical reflection, which helps the learner in making the right decisions independently and thus involves autonomous actions. The empowerment of a learner, reflection of a learner and the usage of target language accurately are the three major proportions of pedagogical principles according to Little (2004).

Cognitive Strategies

The term cognitive strategy refers to specific measures or steps that learners take in order to fulfill learning tasks (O'Malley and Chamot 1994). Some previous researches have shown that the cognitive strategy is the one which assists in creating understanding

and whosoever uses this strategy becomes prominent among the ones who don't use it and left unchanged and not comparatively successful.

Metacognitive Strategies

This term is self-explanatory: Meta is beyond so the meaning stands for the understanding of cognition about cognition: thinking about thinking. To discuss further, thinking is the process in which the person knows about some facts and what he presently does. Flavell (1971), says metacognition is deliberate, planned, intentional, goal-directed and future-oriented mental processing that can be used to accomplish cognitive tasks.

This strategy is the monitoring of the cognitive process vigorously which results in proper directness and organization of the process of cognition which purpose is to ultimately accomplish the goal of cognition. Hacker (1998) further discusses the metacognitive strategy by pointing its involvement in awareness of oneself as an actor. He called the learner a deliberate storehouse and retriever of information, it may be reasonable to reserve the term metacognitive for conscious and deliberate thoughts that have other thoughts as their objects.

Block (2004) categorized the learners' awareness in three characteristics:

1. The role of thinking while learning the course.
2. Level of instigation on the part of learners to beat difficulty when s/he will encounter any shortcomings.
3. And how a learner decides to pick a thinking process before learning, during learning and after learning.

Briefly, Cook (1993), states that methodologies of meta-cognitive are developed to attain check and assess the action plan as far as learning is concerned. These kinds of methodologies are discussed below:

- Directed consideration; time allocation to be focused.
- Selective consideration; contemplatively allocated assignments.
- Self-observing; checking one's own work.
- Self-assessment; estimating one's particular work for betterment.
- Self-support; to bring balance for achievement.

Social-Affective Language Learning Strategies (SLLS)

Social-affective language learning strategies (SLLS) are connected with the social cognitive processes and their effect on the communication with the people during learning such as working in a cooperative environment, communicating with others, self-exposition and empathizing with class fellows and asking questions (Dornyei, 2014). They also involve controlling oneself to lower anxiety, self-reinforcement, self-encouragement, and self-talking. The training of SLLS makes learners compatible to face situations of emotional imbalance during the language learning process especially in social interaction (Rossiter, 2003).

Approaches to Strategy Training in the Present Study

A number of theories to enhance autonomy and approaches to develop learner autonomy have been offered by different theorists. The present study uses a few of them as a framework for the research.

According to Andrew (2007), a curriculum should include autonomy as a part of teaching and learning procedures, where it can be fostered through regular training programs. He further elaborates some tools for the training such as:

- Self -identification of the strengths and weaknesses in the context of FL learning
- Problem-solving approaches
- Decision-making for the completion of language learning tasks
- Engaging oneself into new experiments of learning new concepts
- Awareness with the activities of the target language learning
- Applying strategies to the learning activities and new learning procedures
- Evaluating and monitoring their own performance

The sequence brought by Oxford (2011) is as follow:

- Knowledge about the strategies
- Discussing the use of language learning strategies
- The use of strategies in different contexts
- Bringing the knowledge of the use of strategies into practice
- Monitoring one's own self
- Evaluating one's own self

- Giving suggestions to one's own self

A.U. Chamot (2005), proposed the four stages of the process as follow:

- Planning ahead before the learning task starts
- Monitoring one's own self with reference to different classroom learning tasks
- Finding the solution to the problems that they face during the tasks
- The art of evaluating one's own self after the completion of the tasks

Research Questions

What are the existing practices of foreign language learning strategies with reference to learner autonomy in English language classrooms at the tertiary level in Lahore, Punjab (Pakistan)?

What are the effects of the intervention program on the development of learner autonomy in EFL classrooms at the tertiary level in the context of Lahore, Punjab (Pakistan)?

Significance of the Study

The study is of importance with reference to the nature of language learning and teaching at the tertiary level, in the context of a foreign language environment. The results of the study can be used to develop new teaching methodologies for the non-native contexts, where autonomy practices can be maximized with a continuous effort. The study may also be critical, in a way that it can give an understanding of the efforts of Pakistani learners, to become autonomous by highlighting the techniques they are using. Moreover, it is foreseen that the intervention program used in the study in a Pakistani university setting can serve as a useful resource for the future examination of learner autonomy in Pakistani or different connections.

Methodology

The present study at first investigated the present level of autonomy among Pakistani EFL learners and how they were using foreign language learning strategies in their EFL classrooms. Then it developed a learner-training program to maximize the use of language learning strategies to enhance autonomy practices in Pakistani EFL learners at the tertiary level. It further measured the effect of the intervention learner-training program on the development of autonomy in EFL learners and how it changed the perspectives of EFL learners with reference to autonomy practices.

Population

The target population of the study was the tertiary level students in Lahore, Punjab (Pakistan). They were studying English as a compulsory subject in a foreign language context.

Sample

The study was conducted on a sample of 50 students, as an experimental group. The age range of the students was between 18-21. They were studying English as a compulsory subject at the tertiary level and they were enrolled in the BS program year 2.

Research Design

The present study followed the pragmatic research paradigm and was experimental in nature. A learner-training program was developed, which was further based on multiple foreign language learning theories. The frameworks of different theories used for the development of the program were Andrew's framework (2007), Oxford's framework (2011) and Chamot's framework (2005). The framework was further categorized into foreign language learning strategies and was used as an intervention in the study. The intervention learner-training program had numerous language learning activities and everyday lesson plans to develop autonomy among EFL learners. The duration of the program was 12 weeks, including various learning assessments.

Research Instruments

Interviews were used as a tool for data collection. The questions in interviews were open-ended and were based on the use of foreign language learning strategies by EFL students to develop learner autonomy. Interviews were taken at the beginning and at the end of the intervention program, from the participants of the experimental group. The questions of the interview were designed to investigate the perceptions and views of the participants on learner autonomy and the use of FLLS.

Data Collection Procedure

The data of the study was collected from EFL learners at a public sector university in the context of Punjab, Pakistan. The procedure

of the data collection was divided into 2 phases. At first, the data was collected before the intervention program and then it was collected after the intervention program.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used for the qualitative data i.e. student interviews of the experimental group. The data obtained were categorized into different themes under the phenomena of language learning strategies and learner autonomy and then each theme was examined and analyzed independently.

Delimitations of the Study

The study examined the practices and implementation of FLLS in the context of a single city of Pakistan at the tertiary level. The participants were also restricted to the English language classes within a single university in the public sector.

Results and Findings

The data obtained from the experimental group were analyzed through the student interviews at the start and at the end of the experiment. The thematic coding of the data clearly shows a development in the knowledge, learning and interest of the participants towards FLLS. The analysis of the interviews before and after the experiment is discussed below.

Do you Consider Yourself an Autonomous and an Active Learner? How?

The participants were not aware of autonomy and its practices in the beginning and they responded as not being active learners in their EFL classrooms. They elaborated themselves as being disinterested in learning the language and to be less participatory in the classroom activities.

While towards the end of the study they considered themselves as autonomous learners as per their interview reports. They reported having an awareness of themselves as students, who were more into self-learning activities and were depending more on their own capacities.

I like to explore and know the things myself. I like to give it a try first and I keep on trying until I complete my tasks.

(A)

It is just that I read and I understand. I can tell and share with no fear. I like Working with my class fellows and its more like a wonderful atmosphere than a Boring routine classroom.

(G)

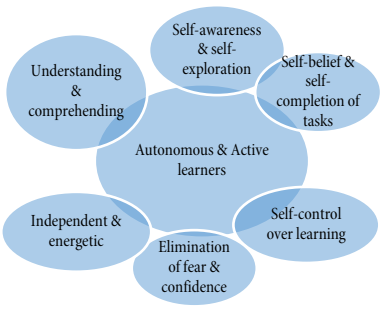

Figure 1: Autonomous Learner

The above responses indicate that the participants of the study developed an understanding of the active FLLS and they were considering themselves as active and autonomous learners. The figure below shows the emerging themes from the responses of the experimental group.

Do you Consider Learner Autonomy as an Important Factor of Language Learning? Why? Why not?

At the end of the study, the participants reported realizing that learner autonomy is an important factor in language learning. Their keen interest in autonomy was clearly mentioned in their responses. They named autonomy as an important tool for language learning and presented some logical reasons for it.

It has given me a lot. I guess I have found myself finally. Oh ! I am so happy.

(D)

I believe I can never be a good student if I don't do my things myself. This self-support and self-guidance have really given me so much. I think all the classes should have this kind of practice so that students can be autonomous.

(I)

Figure 2: Importance of Lerner Autonomy

It is clear from the responses above that the participants of the study were taking learner autonomy as a phenomenon of great interest and were valuing as an important language learning tool. They did have strong reasons to justify their stance and they were aware of the significance of autonomy.

Do you Think the Language Learning Program has Prepared you for Autonomous Learning? How?

There is clear evidence in the responses that the participants got a positive effect on the learner-training program. They learned to be more participative in the discussions and liked sharing their ideas with confidence.

Yes, because now I do my assignments myself. I read the next class notes before the class. I always want to be more creative. I love to participate in the discussions and I want people to listen to me. I have learned so much in class. It also has told me how to respect the ideas of other people. I like it when my teacher asks so many questions and I plan to answer them always.

(A)

Yes, it has prepared me well. I know how to share my thoughts. I have learned to not get angry with the feedbacks of people. In fact, I like to get critical comments. I do self- corrections.

(H)

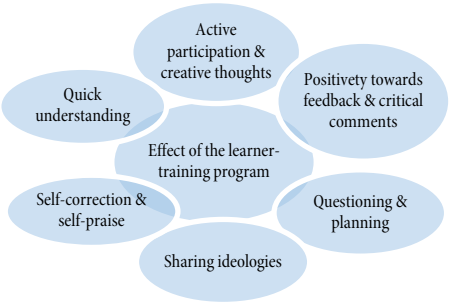

Figure 3: Effects of the Learning Training Program

Do the Teaching and Learning Program in your Class Help you to Learn English Better?

In the beginning, the participants were reluctant to say much about the EFL classes or program in their classes and mentioned that it was not of such help for learning the language. And with the help of the intervention program of this study, the responses of the students were molded as they were much more motivated towards learning English.

Of course! Yes, because it was all about English. I mean we have learned to be independent to learn the things ourselves in our English class.

(H)

I think why not to say yes. You know what I like watching English movies now. In fact, I buy them now. I listen to English songs, find the lyrics and see for their meanings. Isn't it a change? Yes, I was never like that before.

(B)

The responses above show that the participants were more efficient towards learning the target language and they had more plans in the future to acquire the language skills. The emerging themes from the interviews are sown in the figure.

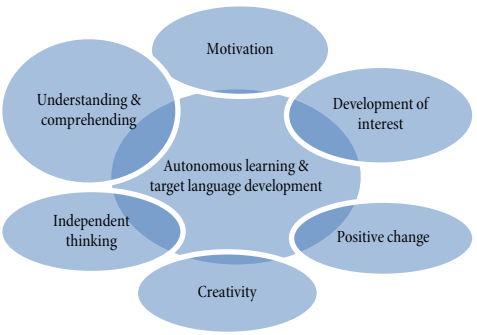

Figure 4: Autonomous Learning &Target language Development

Share a Few Autonomous Learning Activities that you Found to be More Interesting.

It appeared from the responses that the participants liked many of the classroom activities, which were designed to enhance the learner autonomy of the students.

It was making those PowerPoint slides in the class and presenting them in the same

I liked working in groups. (H)

When you said no work today. You decide what you want to do and then we decided to do puzzles. Playing is fun.. why to study all the time.

(K)

Sharing ideas. Giving feedback on each other's work. That was really interesting. Trust me! it was.

(J)

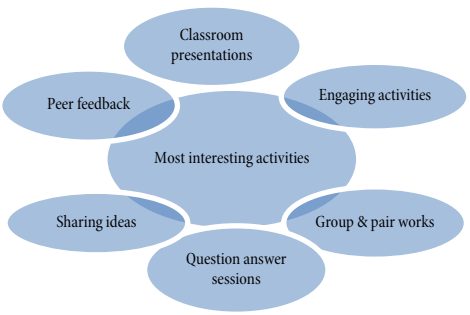

Figure 5: Most interesting activities

What are Your Future Plans to Keep up With the Practices of Autonomous Learning?

The participants of the study were really ambitious and motivated towards carrying on the autonomous learning practices with them, in the future as well.

I will take less help from people around me. I will handle my study stuff myself. I will take the initiative to carry on the class discussions. I will practice things at my home too.

(C)

I will practice my skills outside the classroom as well. I would go to libraries, would read books and understand the world too. It's not just about the class. It's more than that.

Figure 6: Future Plane to Practice Autonomy

(B)

I will try to solve all my study issues myself. I would see at the end of all my classes what I have learned in the future too. I will not leave all that I have learned and I will try to be the same person that I am now.

(I)

I will correct myself…myself. Why do I need others to do that? I am my own teacher at times. I will write about myself and would share it with others that this is how I have made myself to be more productive and creative.

(J)

Discussion

The perceptions of the students about their autonomy practices were investigated through interviews, where the participants of the experimental group demonstrated a greater acceptance for the less teacher-centered classrooms. They further perceived the practices of autonomy as beneficial and more effective to learn the target language. They showed a deep level of motivation and positivity for practicing autonomy in their EFL classrooms in the future as well. The students developed a deeper understanding of cognitive, meta-cognitive and social affective language learning strategies by putting them into practice in everyday classroom contexts. The data obtained from the interviews of the participants showed that they learned to adjust learning activities, problem-solving skills, sustaining learning efforts, trying and evaluating learning strategies and self- management.

Learner Autonomy and its Existing Practices in Pakistan

The study presents that the existing practices of learner autonomy were not quite dominant in the EFL classrooms in the context of Pakistan. The students at a tertiary level were not using foreign language learning strategies to enhance autonomy. The study supported the findings of a research carried out by Khoshsima and Tiyar (2015), in the EFL context of Iran. The study highlighted that the university students were more dependent on their language teachers and were not making any effort themselves to learn the language. They had really less knowledge about the use of language learning strategies and were having low levels of autonomy among them.

Effect of the Learner-Training Program on the Development of Learner Autonomy

Study findings mentioned that the learner-training program based on the language learning strategies proved to be helpful in the development of learner autonomy among EFL learners in the context of a Pakistani university. Students of the experimental group were found to be autonomous in their learning practices and were more independent in terms of completing classroom tasks, completing assignments, and were also participating much in the classroom discussions. A very positive change was seen in them with reference to the acceptance of feedback, critical comments, and evaluation.

The present study also indicated that the participants of the experimental group perceived language learning strategies as an important element in developing learner autonomy. Most of them were aware of the use of cognitive, metacognitive and social-affective language learning strategies, moreover, they explained how well they were using these strategies in their language classrooms. They perceived themselves as independent language learners and showed great passion and motivation to continue the same practices in the future. The present study shows relevance to the study conducted by Nur Begum and Chowdhry (2016), which was done in the context of Bangladesh's foreign language learning context. The findings of the study revealed that the participants showed a better understanding of the language content through self-learning and were much confident in their EFL classrooms.

Conclusion

The study intended to investigate the existing level of Pakistani EFL students at the tertiary level with reference to the use of language learning strategies. Further, it aimed to develop a learner- training program to develop learner autonomy among EFL learners. The findings of the study indicated the positive effect of the learner-training program on the development of learner autonomy among EFL learners. The present study clearly demonstrated that the learner-training program was an effective way of developing autonomy with the integration of foreign language learning strategies. The suggested learner-training program can be employed to further develop learner autonomy with guided learning practices whereas the participants of the study also reported that the program provided them with effective tools to manage their learning practices by themselves.

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