

## Nature and Relevance of Learner Autonomy for Quality Curriculum Delivery in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria

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### **Abstract**

*Nature and Relevance of Learner Autonomy for Quality Curriculum Delivery in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria attempted to briskly look at what constitute learner autonomy, its relevance in the education process and how best to foster it amongst students of higher learning in Nigeria. Literature had shown that learner autonomy has enormous benefit not only to the learner but the entire education system as well as national development; it is nourished by, and in turn nourishes learner's intrinsic motivation, as well as proactive interest in the world around them; and because autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective. It has been observed that both educators and students have vital roles to play towards the success of learner autonomy. Suggestions were made to the effect that: teachers' be fully prepared to play roles effective in facilitating learner autonomy, through training and collaborative efforts; students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria will be made to be aware of and appreciate the benefits of autonomous learning; and that as educators contemplate the utilization of learner autonomy as part of their curriculum delivery system, close supervision must be ensured in order to avoid students' formation of cue that may result in unwarranted excuses.*

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**Key words:** *Learner Autonomy for Quality Curriculum Delivery in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria*

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### **Introduction**

Scholars and personalities had variously speculated on why some students are more successful than the others in academic pursuits. Phenomenologist (McCombs, 1989) study self-concepts of the students and found that students who had positive self-concepts are prone to achieve more. Attributional theorists (Dweck, 1986; Weiner, 2005) focus on personal outcome such as effort or ability. Metacognitive theorists (Pressley, 2000; Schunk, Pintrich & Meece, 2007) examine students' self-regulated learning strategies whereas Constructivists (Maxim, 2009; Paris & Byrnes, 1989) believes supportive environments are important to be successful. Zimmerman (1986) pointed at Self-regulation, asserting that the major cause of failure is the lack of self-regulation, while Jyoti, Takwale and Som (2012) believed that the tendency of the learner to articulate his abilities (learner autonomy) to confront issues s/he faces in a real situation would help them contribute towards the development of the society. This to some extent also takes into consideration the learners' perspective as the ability to modulate and deploy learning styles that are relevant to his/her social context. This paper attempted to provide insight into what learner autonomy is, including its relevance and how best to enhance it particularly amongst learners in tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

### **Concept of Learner Autonomy**

Learner Autonomy is relatively a new phenomenon and/or strategy for effective Curriculum delivery. The term Learner autonomy was first coined in 1981 by Henri Holec (crowned the "father" of learner autonomy). Learner autonomy has recently acquired prominence in discourse, particularly on second language education. It is used as a strategy in the teaching and learning of the second language. Many terms have been coined to refer to the concept of learner autonomy. Terms such as learner independence, self-access learning, self-paced learning and distant learning emphasize a shift of attention to learner-oriented approach to learning. In this approach, learners take the responsibility of their own learning, learn at their own pace and use their own strategies. Benson and Voller (1997) saw learner autonomy as the ability to take personal or "self-regulated" responsibility for learning and it is widely theorized to predict academic performance. According to the (CIEL Handbook, 2000, p. 5): "Learner autonomy indicates a number of dimensions in which learners move away from dependence on the teacher and:

- Take responsibility for their own learning and learn to learn;
- Develop key transferable skills (e.g., study, time-management, IT, interpersonal skills etc);
- Actively manage their learning; seeking out learning opportunities and using appropriate learning strategies;
- Involve them in an interactive process in which they set short and long term learning objectives, reflect on and evaluate progress."

Many definitions have since been given to the term, depending on the writer, the context and the level of debate. It has been considered as a personal human trait, as a political measure or as an educational move. This is due to the fact that autonomy is seen either (or both) as a means or as an end in education. Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning", which he then specifies as "to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning". According to Holec (1981) there are varying degrees of self-direction in learning which may be connected to varying degrees of autonomy. He outlines the following components as an entirely self-directed process of learning: fixing the objectives; defining the content and progressions; selecting the methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the acquisition procedure; and evaluating what has been acquired. Rousseau (1911) cited in Candy (1991) regarded autonomous learner as someone who 'is obedient to a law that he/she prescribes to him/herself. According to Pena florida (2002) learner autonomy is thought of as "a process that enables learners to recognize and assess their own needs, to choose and apply their own learning strategies or styles eventually leading to the effective management of learning". Macdougall (2009) described autonomous learning as a type of learning which is characterized by personalization, self-directedness and less dependency on the educator for affirmation, and which therefore enhances rather than hinders the capacity for constructive collaborative participation in the workplace. Learner autonomy might be described as the degree to which learners are free to select their own learning materials and methods, practice as far as they need, and produce positive outcome when they get ready. Certainly, learner autonomy has its own levels which vary with circumstances. The optimal form of learner autonomy is in making complementary contributions which result from students and teachers' negotiation process in planning and implementing activities and exercises. Wolter (2000, p. 315) believes that "ownership is an important condition" in which the learners think of classroom and curriculum as their own.

On a general note, the term 'learner autonomy' has come to be used in at least five ways (Benson & Voller, 1997: 2):

- i. For situations in which learners study entirely on their own;

- ii. For a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- iii. For an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- iv. For the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- v. For the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning.

It is important to note that in learner autonomy, while students take responsibility for their learning and work in partnership with tutors and other students, it involves risk taking by all concerned. Learner Autonomy is about learning to learn and developing self-assessment for learning; students reflect on their experiences and are able to create their own meanings and challenge ideas/theories; it requires tutors to trust students' abilities and to promote the use of student-directed learning. This shift of responsibility from teachers to learners does not exist in a vacuum, but is the result of a concatenation of changes to the curriculum itself towards a more learner-centred kind of learning. What is more, this reshaping, so to speak, of teacher and learner roles has been conducive to a radical change in the age-old distribution of power and authority that used to plague the traditional classroom. Cast in a new perspective and regarded as having the 'capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action' (Little, 1991: 4), learners, autonomous learners, that is, are expected to assume greater responsibility for, and take charge of, their own learning. However, learner autonomy does not mean that the teacher becomes redundant; abdicating his/her control over what is transpiring in the language learning process. Learner autonomy is a perennial dynamic process amenable to 'educational interventions' (Candy, 1991), rather than a static product, a state.

#### **Characteristics of an autonomous learner include:**

Autonomous learners are characterized variously, particularly according to their disposition. For instance, Little (1991) is of the view that Autonomous learners are those who explicitly accept responsibility for their own learning. The autonomous learner shows initiative regarding learning, and shares in monitoring progress and evaluating the extent to which learning is achieved. Schunk (2005) asserted that the Autonomous learners can be characterized to possess:

- i. Critical reflection and thinking
- ii. Self-awareness
- iii. Taking responsibility for own learning
- iv. Working creatively with complex situations
- v. The ability to create own meanings and challenge ideas/theories.

In another instance, Omaggio, (1978), cited in Wenden, (1998), observed that within the context of education, there are seven main attributes characterizing autonomous learners:

1. Autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
2. Take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
3. Are willing to take risks;
4. Are good guessers;
5. Place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
6. Develop the target into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and
7. Have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target.

#### **Relevance of learner Autonomy**

Empirical research in social psychology had shown that autonomy – “feeling free and volitional in one's actions” is a basic human need (Deci 1995, p.2). With the rapid development of science and technology, social interactions are increasing often. A great number of competitive inter-disciplinary talents are needed in different professional fields,

especially in many work situations. It is nourished by, and in turn nourishes students' intrinsic motivation and taking proactive interest in the world around them. This explains how learner autonomy solves the problem of learner motivation: Autonomous learners draw on their intrinsic motivation when they accept responsibility for their own learning and commit themselves to develop the skills of reflective self-management in learning; and success in learning strengthens their intrinsic motivation. Precisely because autonomous learners are motivated and reflective learners, their learning is efficient and effective (conversely, all learning is likely to succeed to the extent that the learner is autonomous). And the efficiency and effectiveness of the autonomous learner means that the knowledge and skills acquired in the classroom can be applied to situations that arise outside the classroom. Maxim (2009), is of the view that students who use self-regulated strategies and prove to be autonomous learners are more likely to volunteer for special projects, they are intrinsically self-motivated, they rely on a planned learning and use more goal setting, planning, organizing, memorizing and self-monitoring strategies whereas the second type of studies are concerned with teaching the strategy training especially meta cognitive components, providing feedback to increase efficacy.

### **Principles for Learner Autonomy**

It is important to clarify that autonomous learning is achieved only when certain conditions are met. These conditions according to Candy, (1991) include:

1. Acknowledging that learners have to follow certain paths to attain autonomy, is tantamount to asserting that there has to be a teacher on whom it will be incumbent to show the way. In other words, autonomous learning is by no means "teacher less learning." As Sheerin (1997) succinctly puts it, 'teachers have a crucial role to play in launching learners into self-access and in lending them a regular helping hand to stay afloat'.
2. Transition from teacher-control to learner-control is fraught with difficulties but it is mainly in relation to the former (no matter how unpalatable this may sound) that the latter finds its expression.
3. Learner-control, which is ancillary to autonomy 'is not a single, unitary concept, but rather a continuum along which various instructional situations may be placed' It is to these 'instructional situations' that we will turn in the next section.
4. It is of utmost importance to gain insights into the strategies learners use in grappling with the object of enquiry.

### **Strategies for Enhancing Learner Autonomy**

Literature had shown that strategies abound through which learner autonomy can thrive. A central research work on learner autonomy strategies is the one undertaken by O'Malley and Chamot (1990). According to them, learner autonomy strategies are special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information According to them Learning strategies are mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so'. To a greater or lesser degree, the strategies and learning styles that someone adopts 'may partly reflect personal preference rather than innate endowment' (Skehan, 1998: 237). Some of the main autonomy learning strategies include cognitive, meta cognitive, mentioning communication and compensatory strategies.

### **Cognitive Strategies**

According to O'Malley and Chamot (1990: 44), cognitive strategies 'operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning'. Learners may use any

or all of the following cognitive strategies (Cook, 1993: 114-115): repetition; note-taking; deduction, i.e., conscious application of rules; contextualization; inferencing; and questioning for clarification.

### **Metacognitive Strategies**

In a sense, metacognitive strategies are skills used for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning activity; 'they are strategies about learning rather than learning strategies themselves' (Cook, 1993: 114). According to Wenden (1998: 34), 'metacognitive knowledge includes all facts learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations'. Some of these strategies are:

- Directed attention, when deciding in advance to concentrate on general aspects of a task;
- Selective attention, paying attention to specific aspects of a task;
- Self-monitoring, i.e., checking one's performance as one speaks;
- Self-evaluation, i.e., appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards; and
- Self-reinforcement, i.e. rewarding oneself for success.

### **Communication Strategies**

Communication strategies are used by speakers when faced with some difficulty due to the fact that their communication ends outrun their communication means or when confronted with misunderstanding by a co-speaker. Although this strategy provides exposure to the target language, they contribute indirectly to learning since they do not lead directly to the obtaining, storing, retrieving, and using of language. Communication strategies are less directly related to language learning since their focus is on the process of participating in a conversation and getting meaning across or clarifying what the speaker intended.

### **Fostering Learner Autonomy for Effective Curriculum Delivery**

The development of learner autonomy rests on the pedagogical claim that in formal educational contexts, reflectivity and self-awareness produce better learning (Pintrich, 2000). Fostering learner autonomy should be an important and appropriate goal in curriculum delivery. Holec's previous components that were earlier stated are comprehensive and give learners good strategies in the process of learning. A learner who wants to learn autonomously must follow specific steps when learning a subject, such as deciding what his objectives in learning are, selecting the most suitable techniques, monitoring his acquisition and evaluating his experience. In order to help learners to assume greater control over their own learning in whatever field of study, it is important to help them to become aware of and identify the strategies that they already use or could potentially use'. There are some generally accepted aspects of autonomy such as: "situations in which learners study entirely on their own, and determine the direction of their own learning" (Lynch, 2001, p. 390-1). The main reason that teachers need to promote learner autonomy is that students can continue their learning without their teachers after they finish their classes work (Jordan, 1997, p. 116). Therefore, if teachers want to have independent students in their classes, they need to make their students responsible and accountable for their own learning. What teachers need is to find practical ways of contributing to learner autonomy rather than following dry and rigid curriculum theories. However, both theory and practice can complement each other. To set up a learning-centered programme of instruction, Skehan (1998, p. 261) proposes two approaches to curriculum development: cognitive development perspectives and self-actualization (affective) curriculums. The first one rejects direct transmission of knowledge and advocates learner independence and development of thinking techniques, as well as the



ways of learning. The latter approach emphasizes the role of the learners and their affective process in the learning context. It emphasizes that the educational institution should facilitate a balanced process of personal growth. Both cognitive and affective approaches emphasize that students need to develop their questioning attitudes and become aware of their learning process. At any rate, individual learners differ in their learning habits, interests, needs, and motivation, and develop varying degrees of independence throughout their lives. Specifically, Macdougall (2009) identified ten steps through which learner autonomy can be encouraged, viz:

- Face the facts concerning inhibitions and the need for stamina in the student's own learning;
- Validate the student's capacity to know;
- Provide a comprehensive Data base;
- Preparation of tutorial to counteract psychological barriers to learning; ensure that the student maintains ownership of their own project;
- Make use of readiness for autonomous learning inventory and self-efficacy questions to assess the preparedness of students for self-directed learning and effective engagement;
- Where constraints on time are considerable, ensure that dependency is not a necessity of efficiency;
- Be sensitive to the notion that student autonomy is a process which can be represented by a staging model; ensure that learning activities are fully integrated with core learning material rather than bolted on in the form of additional modules with only the appearance of clinical relevance;
- Ensure that the principle of integration of statistics with core learning material is carried over to formal assessment; and
- Engender critical thinking and a sense of certainty regarding the presentation of learning experiences.

Brajcich (2000) suggested twelve ways to promote learner autonomy, as it relates to language learning. He pointed out that teachers should:

1. Encourage students to be interdependent and to work collectively. The fewer students depend on their teacher, the more autonomy is being developed.
2. Ask students to keep a diary of their learning experiences. Through practice, students may become more aware of their learning preferences and start to think of new ways of becoming more independent learners.
3. Explain teacher/student roles from the outset. Asking students to give their opinions on the issue of roles could be beneficial.
4. Progress gradually from interdependence to independence. Give the students time to adjust to new learning strategies and do not expect too much too soon.
5. Give the students projects to do outside the classroom. Such projects may increase motivation.
6. Give the students non-lesson classroom duties to perform (taking roll, writing instructions, notices, etc. on the board for the teacher)
7. Have the students design lessons or materials to be used in class.
8. Instruct students on how to use the university's resource centers
9. Emphasize the importance of peer-editing, corrections, and follow-up questioning in the classroom.
10. Encourage the students to use only English in class.
11. Stress fluency rather than accuracy.
12. However, do allow the students to use reference books, including dictionaries in class.

## Conclusion

Thus far, literature had shown an autonomous learner is the one who is prepared to take some significant responsibility for his own learning. And in order to be a good autonomous learner, the learner should make decisions about his/her own learning, he/she should be able to set realistic goals, plan program of work, develop strategies for coping with new and unforeseen situations, evaluate and assess his/her own work and, generally, to learn how to learn from his/her own successes and failures in ways which will help him/her to be more efficient learner in the future. Autonomous learners willingly partner with educators and peers in learning, and are reflective about their own learning.

## Suggestions

Having come this far, it is suggested that:

- i. Teachers' be fully prepared to play their role effective in facilitating learner autonomy, through training and collaborative efforts.
- ii. Students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria be make to be aware of and appreciates the benefits of autonomous learning.
- iii. As educators contemplates the utilization of learner autonomy as part of their curriculum delivery system, close supervision must be ensured in order to avoid students' formation of cue that may result in unwarranted excuses.

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