Chapter 4

Learner Autonomy: A Cultural Perspective From Libya

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores teachers’ perceptions of learners’ readiness to adopt autonomous roles and to develop their critical and analytical thinking. The chapter reports on an ethnographic study investigating teachers’ views on whether the notions of learner autonomy and critical and analytical thinking can be developed in the Libyan cultural context. The reason behind this exploration is that Libyan culture is one of the Middle Eastern cultures in which some educationalists believe learner autonomy to be inappropriate. The study’s findings suggest that notions of autonomy, critical and analytical thinking, and creativity can well be fostered in the context of this study.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of autonomy and critical thinking in life is by all means clear to all. The route to developing these notions has, however, many diverse ways and techniques that differ from one culture to another. This chapter deals with the notion of critical thinking and autonomy in the Libyan context, one of the Middle Eastern cultural contexts in which, according to some assumptions, notions of autonomy and critical and analytical thinking are inappropriate. More precisely, it investigates the teachers’ perceptions of their students’ capacity to adopt autonomous stances.

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Findings derived from this investigation suggest that the participants generally appreciate opportunities for their learners to engage in collaboration and negotiation in learning. Teachers mostly held positive attitudes towards allowing learners opportunities to be active, responsible learners. One of the significant approaches that was particularly preferred for most of the teachers was to provide help and encouragement as well as scaffolding to enable learners to take more autonomous stances in their learning and to enhance their critical thinking abilities. Therefore, the results of this study refute assumptions that Middle Eastern cultures are not appropriate for accommodating such notions as autonomy and critical and analytical thinking.

In this chapter, we first present a theoretical background about learner autonomy, including how learner autonomy is presented in literature in relation to different cultures, including how it can be seen to be valid in different cultures depending on how it is manifested. After that, we present the empirical part of the study itself and conclude by presenting and discussing the findings.

**What Is Learner Autonomy?**

In the early 1990s, autonomy was considered to be a ‘buzz word’ (Little, 1991, p. 2) in education and language education in particular and began to occupy significant space in literature related to language education (Benson and Voller, 1997) and this has continued to increase ever since. A classic and widely cited definition of autonomy was offered by Holec (1979), who stated that, in the context of education, autonomy is ‘the ability to take charge of one’s own learning’ (1979, p. 3). Holec went on to suggest that taking charge of one’s own learning means or requires being responsible for and having control over certain attitudes towards and elements of learning, namely ‘determining the objectives’; ‘defining the contents and progressions’; ‘selecting methods and techniques to be used’; ‘monitoring the procedure of acquisition’; and ‘evaluating what has been acquired’ (Holec, 1979, p. 4). However, despite being largely accepted, Holec’s definition, alongside others, has been accused of not addressing learning as a social activity and the importance of socialisation for autonomous learning. Socialisation in learning provides a crucial condition for autonomy as well as for motivation on the part of the learner both in educational and social contexts (Benson, 1996; Little, 1996). In this regard, Benson (1996) suggests: ‘Greater learner control over the learning process, resources and language cannot be achieved by each individual acting alone according to his or her own preferences. Control is a question of collective decision-making rather than individual choice’ (p. 33). Related to the neglect of the social dimension of learning
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