

## REFLECTIONS ON LEARNER AUTONOMY: CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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**Abstract.** *Learner autonomy is one of the recent concepts in the foreign language teaching theory which has become a buzz-expression (Little, 1991) as it has become also central to understanding the changing role of the teacher on the one hand, and the attempts on the part of the professional educators to raise learners' motivation in the teaching/learning process. However, the teachers' and the learners' attitudes to the idea of learner autonomy seem to vary in different cultural environments. Why it is so is a question of crucial importance for both teachers and students, as well as for the theoreticians of FLT, the policy makers in the field of FLT and the professional teachers. The aim of the article is to bring to the fore some considerations relating culture and education, on the one hand, and some objective drawbacks in the practical implementation of the autonomy concept, on the other. It is suggested that the teacher and the student are seen as an archetypal case of micro social organization revealing typical patterns of social behaviour that is specific for every national culture. It is the authors' belief that a deeper analysis of a national culture would help identify and avoid the possible pitfalls if learner autonomy is accepted uncritically, and the educational requirements the teaching/learning process has to comply with if it is implemented on a global scale.*

**Keywords:** *autonomy, motivation, cultural dimensions, teacher role, student role.*

**Autonomy, Motivation and the Teacher role: an overview.** Learner autonomy is defined as the ability on the part of the learner 'to take charge of own's learning' (Holec 1981: 3). Such a definition immediately implies that the teaching/learning process presupposes equal participation of both teachers and learners and, consequentially, shared responsibility. If done correctly learner autonomy is expected to help students develop a positive perception of their selves by demonstrating knowledge about the culture, history, and contributions of diverse groups of learners in the language classroom and thus raise their motivation to achieve better results in acquiring the foreign language. However, some FLT theoreticians (Candy 1991: 337) argue that autonomy can lead to departure from education as a social process and that it should be seen not as a product, but a process taking place throughout the whole period of learning.

There is a strong relation between motivation and autonomy based on the presumption that autonomy increases motivation. Motivation is defined as 'effort plus desire to achieve, plus favourable attitudes towards learning the language' (Gardner 1983; 1991; 2004). In this way autonomy and motivation in the ideal teaching/learning environment present two sides of one coin where autonomy is the vehicle for increasing motivation and increased motivation contributes to the further development of autonomy.

Both the educational theories since the time of the communicative approach and the recent constructivism have contributed immensely to the change in the views about the teacher and the learner roles. Learner autonomy which appeared as a relatively new concept contributed a lot to the dramatical shift from a teacher-centered to a learner-centered approach. This shift prompted the move from the traditional teacher's role of a supplier of knowledge characteristic of the time of the grammar-translation and audio-lingual methods when the learner was treated as an empty vessel, to the one of a facilitator where the learner is expected to actively participate in the teaching/learning process in and out of the language classroom. This shift is closely related to the philosophy of the egalitarian pluralistic approaches in education that have become part of the educational policies of the Council of Europe and involves all EU member countries. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that attitudes towards pluralistic education and learner autonomy depend highly on the readiness of both teachers and students to accept and practice them, and that their openness to these newly introduced educational polices depend immensely on their belonging to a particular culture and the country's internal educational policies. In this way, the factors that can handicap educational innovations can be divided into objective, lying within the educational system per se, and subjective, such that are invisible as they are part of the attitudes to education, rooted in the particular culture.

**Objective factors impeding the concept of learner autonomy.** The fact that there are objective factors which make the concept of learner autonomy rather controversial in itself cannot be put aside. They belong to two different fields: psychology and the educational system.

First, learner autonomy requires that an individual should have the psychological capacity to explore their own learning abilities and evaluate their foreign language performance. However, observations of learners' behaviour show that foreign language learning inevitably requires leaving one's comfort zone. Learners in general feel uncertainty and need help and encouragement, especially at beginner and elementary levels. The degree of autonomy also depends on the learners' age. Young learners tend to be more autonomous than older learners. It also depends on the goals of the learning. If a foreign language is studied for pleasure, autonomy is higher compared the scenario when studying is related to achieving certain important goals such as getting a job, going to university etc.

Second, the educational system and the national curriculum allows for little freedom for both the teachers and the learners in the primary and secondary school, especially when every educational stage is bound to an independent national assessment test. Most tests, both national and international, are designed so as to cover the two basic areas: grammar and vocabulary, which itself leaves almost no room for personal choices and thus contradicts the idea of autonomy. It can be concluded that learners in areas normally determined by institutions do not have the full capacity to take charge of decision making concerning their FL learning. They are deprived of freedom as the pace, time and place of classes are predetermined in structured educational environment. What is more, the fulfillment of the requirements set in the curriculum creates time pressure for the teachers.

Autonomy is regularly related with the appearance of the internet and the use of I-phones and I-pads, which are devices claimed to guarantee a free choice for the learners to get a wider exposure to FL. However, this might be quite questionable having in mind that learners, and often the teachers as well, cannot always be sure how reliable on-line materials are. Other debatable issues are how the quality of learning can be evaluated and whether the learners can get an adequate feedback even if the on-line exercises and tests are accompanied by answer keys. Last but not least, chatting with native and non-native speakers, which gives the impression of 'real communication' also has its pitfalls. There is no error correction in the chat or blogging, learners can memorize wrong spelling or non-standard language models that can become part of their communicative competence.

Finally, autonomy, as defined above, intrinsically implies freedom of choice. However, too many choices, which seemingly give more freedom, may in fact lead to paralysis due to low self-esteem and fear of failure (Schwartz 2004) and to the effect of blocking motivation, especially if a wrong choice causing dissatisfaction is made. This psychological phenomenon is known as the *Paradox of Choice*. What is more, some cultures are more sensitive to decision making than others, and the Paradox of choice is very likely to result in blocking motivation thus affecting the whole teaching/learning process.

**Cultural factors influencing learner autonomy.** The teacher and the student are an archetypal role pair in virtually any society in the same way as a mother and a child or a boss and an employee. Their actual behaviour in the teaching/learning process depends exclusively on the established patterns of social interaction on the one hand, and on the concept of the nature of education that has been historically established and which has ended up in the establishment of relatively rigid cultural models, on the other, which inevitably differ cross-culturally. This fact is particularly important when it comes to foreign language teaching in general and teaching English as a foreign language, in particular. Complexities can arise both when the teacher and the student come from different cultures (a native-speaker teacher working abroad) and when the teacher and student belong to one culture but teach/learn a foreign language. Normally, such intricacies arise also due to the different social positions of the teachers and students in different societies; to the differences in the culturally established patterns of teacher/student interaction in society; and to the differences in the conventional ways students are expected to learn in society. It can be concluded that the process of education is culturally biased and leads to establishing relatively rigid educational models that are culture-dependent. Consequentially, any global innovative ideas in the sphere of education, including pluralistic approaches and multiculturalism, relating a variety of different cultures can be either enhanced or prevented by factors embedded in the recipient native culture and the existing educational models. What is more, as already mentioned above, the concepts of learner autonomy and motivation,

which tend to serve as underlying principles in multicultural education, are concepts that are extremely sensitive to culture as shown below.

Fullinwider (2003) points out that trivial acts such as the socially established and expected models of interaction between the teacher and the learner in the language classroom should necessarily address the deeper values and ideas behind cultural customs through which we truly get to understand their differing viewpoints which will help understand the challenges that arise in multicultural education.

Such considerations open a wide area for future research aiming at delving into these deeper issues and finding out what cultural specifics facilitate or hinder the implementation of multicultural approach in the Bulgarian language classroom. In the following section an attempt to analyze the Bulgarian cultural attitudes toward education as a whole, the teacher and learner roles, motivation and autonomy is made using Geert Hofstede's theoretical framework of cultures and organizations.

Bulgaria is a typical collective country, where the in-group relations are dominant and predetermine members' behaviour. The outsiders are seen as foreigners and thus as potential threats. The power distance is high and this results in strict hierarchy where leadership is taken for granted and although power may be questioned, the society generally believes that attempts to change the existing status quo are unreasonable. These two dimensions are combined with high uncertainty avoidance where keeping to the established patterns is seen as the safest behavior, and which induces intolerance to innovations. Bulgaria is also a feminine culture where quality of life is more important than standard of living, which prevents efforts to stand out of the average. It is also a short-term oriented society which places it among the pragmatically oriented cultures where immediate success is important and investments in the future seem to be unreliable. Bulgaria belongs to the restricted societies, where indulgence is evaluated as a wrong social behavior.

The strongly collectivist Bulgarian society places the teacher and the learner in two different groups, where the learners consider teachers as outsiders and vice versa. There is little or no chance of change of the group belonging, which prevents or limits co-working. In-group relationship prevails over task. In essence the concept of multiculturalism goes against the in-group type of thinking as any other culture is judged as an outsider.

Collectivism combined with the high power distance that is typical for the Bulgarian culture prevents the idea of equal participation and shared responsibilities between teachers and learners in the teaching/learning process. The students are expected to show respect and obedience and choose only among the options given by the leader which in the educational environment is the teacher. Naturally, this goes counter autonomy and maintains in essence a teacher-centered education. The high power distance reflects the general belief that there is somebody up there to make decisions and tell the group members what to do. As a result learners expect to be given tasks and the teacher is expected to direct the learner's actions. The failures on the part of the subordinates are evaluated as their own failures, while the success is most often ascribed to the leader.

High uncertainty avoidance in general prevents the implementation of innovations on the part of both teachers and students. The general learners' belief is that the teacher has all answers. The high uncertainty avoidance combined with the collectivistic social consciousness and the high power distance creates a common attitude to everything foreign on the basis that what is felt foreign is different, and what is different is dangerous. The combination of these three dimensions can easily block creativity and the implementation of innovations. What is more, they may reinforce the social fears of the unknown, and prevent the successful implementation of pluralistic approaches and multiculturalism in the Bulgarian educational system.

The feminine type of the Bulgarian culture promotes keeping low-profile in-group behaviour. Femininity as an attitude to the values of life requires modesty, status is unimportant, 'popular' students are an exception and leisure is a measure of success. Femininity combined with short-term orientation makes students attribute success and failure to sheer luck where for the majority of them *Carpe diem* has become a leading principle.

Indulgence places Bulgaria among the strongly restrained cultures. Students are raised to control their actions according to the established social norms and to feel that indulging themselves is evaluated as an inappropriate behaviour. The combination of pragmatism and indulgence can explain the general lack of motivation.

**Conclusions.** Autonomy depends on various factors such as age, cultural background, personality etc., which taken together prevents it to be seen as a panacea in the foreign language teaching. In addition, the different stages in the learning process allow for different levels of autonomy. This leads to the conclusion that autonomy should be seen as a process, not as a state. What is more, the teacher plays a crucial role in this process. It is the teacher's responsibility to work towards building up learner autonomy so that the learners are enabled to make an informed choice at the different stages of the learning process. This in turn will help enhance their motivation and guarantee better results. Finally, it can be concluded that in a structured educational environment in general, and in some particular cultures, autonomy is a "wishful thinking" kind of concept, which can be applied only under the strict guidance and through the nurturing facilitation of the teacher.

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