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Fostering Autonomy in the Second Language Writing of Iranian University EFL Learners

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THIS THESIS

FOSTERING AUTONOMY IN THE SECOND LANGUAGE WRITING OF IRANIAN UNIVERSITY EFL LEARNERS

BY

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STATEMENT OF AUTHENTICATION

I declare that “Fostering Autonomy in the Second Language Writing of Iranian University EFL Learners” is my own work, that it has not been submitted for any degree or examination in any other university, and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been properly indicated and acknowledged by complete references.

Zeinab Azimi

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This thesis is dedicated to my beloved parents for their unwavering support during my years of formal and informal education and to all the teachers in my many years of education.

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Abstract

Few research attempts at undergraduate levels have ever experimentally investigated levels of autonomy in the writing of EFL writers in the context of Iranian higher education or shown practical ways for fostering it. The study reported here tried to experimentally test the possible effects of writing strategy instruction on the development of writing autonomy and writing ability. To explore the role of autonomy in writing English as a foreign language, a quasi- experimental design was used in which two intact groups of adult EFL learners enrolled in two parallel classes in essay writing in an English department were chosen as control and experimental groups. One group received the experimental treatment of instruction on Oxford's strategies for writing autonomy while the other parallel group was on the normal course of instruction. A version of the TWE (Test of Written English), and Scott's writing autonomy questionnaire (1996) were used for the collection of data before and after the instructional treatment. To test the research hypotheses, descriptive and inferential statistics rendered by SPSS were employed. Within-group and between group mean comparisons for pretest and posttest data indicated that a) instruction significantly improved EFL writing autonomy as reflected in responses to Scott's questionnaire; b) the experimental group significantly outperformed the control group in EFL writing ability development. Based on the findings of the present study, independence and autonomy in EFL writing are discussed as goals to be set in writing classes.

KeyWords: *EFL writing, Learner autonomy, Writing strategies, Strategy instruction*

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction and background

Methods of language teaching and learning have changed based on the psychological perspectives and goals of learning. These changes have always been toward introducing a kind of learning and teaching method that is learner-based and in which the learner is considered as the center of attention and the learner is involved in analyzing his/her own needs. In new methods, the focus has steered from teaching to learning and the learner should be aware of his/her own process of learning. Leaner autonomy is a buzz word and a related concept within the learner-centered methodologies. (Dickinson, 1987; Nunan, 1988; Ellis and Sinclair, 1989; Little, 1991; Dam, 1995; Benson, 2001)

Autonomy in learning is a concept related to empowering learner to take control over his/her leaning in different situations. To make learners autonomous and independent is the unquestionable goal and the integral part of new views toward learning in general. Recently, making learners autonomous has become one of the main concerns in language teaching. (Holec, 1981; Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991; Dam, 1995; Benson, 2001; Palfreyman, 2003; Lamb and Reinders, 2007). In higher education, autonomy is now seen as a "marker of graduateness" (Railton & Watson, 2005, p. 192). A teacher in this trend is also helpful and plays his role as a facilitator. Language teachers should behave in such a way to promote greater autonomy in their students. Making learners autonomous in language skills is also one of the pedagogical goals. Students should gain control over

different language skills independently. Oxford (1990) states: “Owing to conditioning by the culture and educational system, however, many language students (even adults) are passive and accustomed to being spoon-fed” (p.10). Students should not be considered as empty vassals that should be filled with knowledge. They should not be given the fish, but they should learn how to fish in order to become successful students. It is the individual who is responsible and active in shaping his or her own life and therefore that of others. Education has to prepare learners for this, which involves teaching them the skills necessary to take control over the processes and content of learning.

Learner autonomy was put forward first by Henri Holec, the father of learner autonomy. Holec (1981) defined learner autonomy as “the ability to take charge of one’s own learning” (p.3). He states that the learners should plan, monitor and evaluate the learning process in a way to support their autonomy and for this reason the learner should be able to provide his own learning opportunities. Variations on this definition abound. ‘Ability’ is often replaced by ‘capacity’ (a term used by Holec elsewhere), while ‘take charge of’ is often replaced by ‘take responsibility for’ or ‘take control of’ one’s own learning. The last terms are also used by Holec (Reinders, 2000).

According to Holec (1981), autonomy does not mean a kind of act and he considers autonomy as ability. Nunan (1995) also regards ability as an important factor and states that learners who are able to define their own goals and produce their own learning opportunities become autonomous. Some other definitions, presented by the scholars, consider autonomy as a certain act of learning. Linguists and educationalists do not reach a consensus as to what autonomy really is. For example, David Little (1991) defines

autonomy as “essentially a matter of the learner’s psychological relation to the process and content of learning, a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action” (p.4). In the same vein, Leni Dam (1995), defines autonomy in terms of the learner’s willingness and capacity to control or oversee her own learning. More specifically, she, like Holec (1981), holds that someone qualifies as an autonomous learner when he independently chooses aims and purposes and sets goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluation (Nunan, 1995, p.145). Reinders (2000) believes that there are still conflicts about the fact that learner can become autonomous by learning such abilities or the learner is autonomous in itself or they have few autonomous dispositions that should be fostered, so autonomy may be considered on a continuum that differs according to different situations. Candy (1991) states that autonomy “is learned at least partly through educational experiences and interventions” (p. 115).

Dickinson (1987) suggest that according to all of the definitions, the learner is considered as the centre of learning process and learning is considered as a self-initiated process that is different from behaviorist perspective in which the learner has a passive role and learning is synonym with rote memorization. The key element that can be understood in these definitions is the idea that autonomy is an attribute of learners, rather than learning situations (Dickinson, 1987, p. 11). Benson (2001) states that almost all research in the field of autonomy focuses on the three hypotheses: the nature of autonomy and its components, the possibility of fostering autonomy among learners and the effectiveness of

some approaches to fostering autonomy in terms of language learning (Benson, 2001, p. 183).

Some wrongly consider autonomous learning as learning alone or without the help of teacher. Teachers traditionally were viewed as authority figures (Oxford, 1990). Teacher in autonomous learning will get a new role according to Boud (1981). Reinders (2000) argues that if one takes a closer look at it, he would find a kind of continuum in which dependence on the teacher would be a part of autonomous learning. Needless to say that human being nature dictates such feelings, feeling of belonging and relying on others as well as independence feeling. Holec(1981) advocates that language learners take charge of their learning in all respects. According to him, teachers can help learners take this responsibility, but the ultimate responsibility lies with the learners themselves. Teacher should support and challenge students in order to make them autonomous. Autonomous learning can be justified politically on the grounds that it helps students become critically and socially aware participants in their own and others' lives. Students collaborate in this atmosphere and find the ability to assess themselves as well as others learning, so teacher scaffolding diminishes gradually, but never removed. Therefore the role of teacher in creating room for the development of autonomy is very important. Boud (1981) states:

> It is compatible with autonomous learning for learners to opt to be ‘taught’ in situations in which they have decided that it is desirable for their own ends. Developing autonomy does not simply involve removing structured teaching; it may require a greater degree of structure than didactic teaching, but of a different kind (p. 25).

The role of the teacher in autonomous learning may change, but it would not be removed. Teacher should empower students to become autonomous and encourage them to feel that they can develop their learning in a safe environment. Cooperation in such environment fosters learner autonomy. Little (2000, 23) as cited in Benson (2007) proposed a holistic view of strategic control of language learning and use, which develops in the classroom as a by-product of target language use and active involvement in planning, monitoring and evaluation processes. Autonomy in the classroom is the shift towards classroom application of autonomy that was introduced in the early of 1990. Some books on language teaching with chapters about autonomy have helped movement of autonomy into mainstream language education. Hedge's (2000) chapter entitled 'Learner autonomy and learner training', is one of three introductory chapters (following 'Learners and learning: classrooms and contexts' and 'The communicative classroom') which frame the approach taken in the book as a whole. Benson (2007) discusses the implications of the rise of 'classroom autonomy' in more detail, arguing that it has led to a re-conceptualization of autonomy as a usable construct for teachers who want to help their learners develop autonomy without necessarily challenging constraints of classroom and curriculum organization to which they are subject.

In the 1990s, autonomy was more closely allied with learning strategies than it was with any other language education concept, although it has often been argued that learner autonomy involves more than use of learning strategies and that learner training should not be limited to training in strategy use (Palfreyman 2003). Strategy instruction is therefore an important part of autonomy development. Cohen (2002, p.62) has expressed a view within

the learning strategy literature and has contributed to courses at the University of Minnesota, which focus on helping learners "to be more in touch with (a) their learning style preferences and language strategy choices on specific tasks, and (b) their motivational temperature", rather than strategy instruction.

Learning strategies, learner training and learner development continue to be a focus of interest in the recent literature on autonomy (Gao, 2002; Jim´enez- Raya & Lamb, 2003; Huang, 2006). Autonomy is also related to the way learners gain control over the language skills. It focuses on empowering learner to behave independently of the teacher in different situations. Helping students to collaborate in the classroom will help them to reach autonomy. Nordlund et.al (1997) states that:

> Language skills can best be developed if the learner develops awareness of his or her own learning, and of the strategies and styles that are available. Strategic competence means being able to plan, implement, monitor and evaluate one's learning, and making use of all available opportunities both in and outside the classroom (p.207).

All the four language skills will develop properly if the learners have conscious awareness of their own learning process. Writing as one of the important skills in language acquisition is considered as an area in which students should exercise autonomy. Most contexts of life call for some level of writing skill and recently with the advent of communication through written language it has become one of the necessary skills that is required.

1.2. Statement of the problem

For the Iranian EFL learner population, the development of autonomy in EFL writing can be a major goal the fulfillment of which can make up for deficits in the formal instruction of writing. This is, in fact, the main problem that motivates the present research. The effects of learning strategies on learner autonomy and more specifically on writing autonomy can be a great concern for researchers and teachers, but unfortunately in the Iranian context of the teaching of EFL writing, the instruction of learner strategies with the purpose of fostering autonomy has not been practiced. Due to the lack of research in this area and scant empirical validation of teaching strategies effectiveness, the present study therefore aims to experimentally explore the effectiveness of strategy instruction on learner writing autonomy and writing ability. It seems that Iranian students are less aware of learning strategies and their effects on their learning, so with such unconsciousness they are not able to have control over the learning of language skills. They are mostly dependent on their teachers and after leaving universities, they are not able to learn on their own. Writing as one of the essential skills of language learning, constitutes a part of students problems. They do not know how to solve writing problems they encounter after learning periods in classrooms. This research is carried out on the assumption that learners do not automatically know how to achieve autonomy; they needed to be guided in developing it in classroom practice, and a teacher may start by providing them with appropriate tools and with opportunities to practice with them.

1.3. Objectives of the study

Learner autonomy in recent years has become a special issue in applied linguistics, methodology of teaching and pedagogy. It aims at a kind of teaching that empowers students to take control over their learning, making them independent from the teacher. With the advent of technology and communication through net and email, writing has become one of the important skills that learners should gain control over. Due to the growing role of English in different areas of written communication through internet and e-mail, teachers aim to make learners good writers through different methods. The objectives of the present study are to make students aware of some learning strategies that they can use to learn a language, to begin to prepare them for lifelong learning, and to develop their ability to manage their learning and to take responsibility for it. Supporting learner autonomy is also the ultimate goal of recent teaching methodologies and encouraging teachers to utilize writing strategies in their teaching to Iranian EFL students is highlighted in this work.

1.4. Research Questions:

1. Does writing strategy instruction foster autonomy in the writing of Iranian University EFL learners?
2. Does writing strategy instruction improve the writing quality of Iranian University EFL learners?
3. Is there any relationship between Iranian University EFL learners' level of writing autonomy as measured by Scott's questionnaire on the one hand and their writing ability on the other in higher proficient writers?