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AUTONOMY AND ENGLISH LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN NIGERIA: THE THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Introduction

Learning English language especially in Nigeria has often been considered a complicated process because of various factors. These factors include the linguistic and non-linguistic competence of learner. Some of such variables can be affective (e.g. motivation) or cognitive (e.g. learning strategies). But there is a huge factor which is the combined version of these cognitive and affective factors in all learning and teaching processes. Autonomy therefore can be regarded as the umbrella term of the whole learner-centred approaches. Among the pedagogical principles that have been revealed by learner-centred approaches is the promotion of learner's self-directed and active participation to his/her learning experience, and it is this way of functioning that brings learner autonomy to limelight (Benaissi, 2015).

Abstract

The concept of learner autonomy has been promoted in the context of language education in the past twenty years. It has become influential as a goal in many parts of the world but Nigeria is yet to experience its effect. Nigeria is an ex – British Colony with long traditions and ties to English. The language is taught in primary, secondary and tertiary institutions as a compulsory subject. This article discusses the Nigerian educational context and reforms. It will discuss the status of English language in the country and explains the definitions of autonomy, its implication and problems and discusses as well constructivist theory of learner autonomy which is part of a recent educational reform. The political perspective that emphasizes empowerment or emancipation of learners - by giving them the control over

The content and process of their learning will be discussed. The article will suggest some measures for quality learner emancipation.

Keywords: Learner-autonomy, English, Education, Nigeria

Learner autonomy is based on the principle that learners should take maximum responsibility of what they learn and how they learn it. Learner autonomy has become a familiar term in English language teaching and learning context, self- access learning and learning to learn. It has been visibly promoted in the last thirty years (Lake 1997), for example in text books and through professional qualifications such as the Cambridge diploma which includes specific marking criteria that is related to autonomy when assessing teaching practice. There are so many students who don't know even the term autonomy and also some English Language teachers who are not aware of learner-centred teaching (Ismail, 2016). It can be said that such approaches are increasing day-by-day, the participants of learning and teaching process now are becoming more familiar with these terms: learner autonomy, teacher autonomy, learner-centred lesson, learner motivation, etc. On the other hand, the number of the participants of the other group is so huge that it can't be underestimated.

This article discusses the educational context, reforms and English language status in Nigeria. It will explain learner autonomy; explore the perspectives of autonomous language learning, and the potential problem / implications of autonomous language learning. This article will suggest measures for quality learner emancipation.

Nigeria Educational context- status cum reforms

Nigeria as an ex- British colony secured her independence in 1960 - a country with history of linguistic diversity and different culture and traditions with educational system inherited from the west as a result of the horse whip of colonialism (Bellarmine, 2018, Olalere Y. & Taiwo H., 2009). This system of education seen as biased in most cases served solely the purpose of enhancing the achievement of colonial interests and administration. To a great extent this has decided the nature of the curriculum in the country especially where both the colonialist and their counterpart missionaries were pursuing their various interests. The interest here is to show the type of education inherited

from the foreign incursions into Nigeria. Due to these predicaments, Nigerians were not offered good opportunity to influence their curriculum. This was because of the redirection of the level of their traditional education. The communication gaps and instructions in English language precisely, became priorities in Nigeria. The education in the languages of the master took after the Skinner-styled 'respondents' of elicited responses (see Skinner, 1953 cited in Bellarmine, 2018). The system of eliciting and transmitting knowledge was adopted for teaching English even other subjects in Nigeria. The height of it was that it created an impression that the colonialists are the superior embodiment of knowledge, whereas the Nigerians were not, but an empty vessels waiting to be filled up with the 'required' knowledge. Education was seen as a process of transmitting knowledge from the master/teacher who is believed to have knowledge, to the student/learner who does not (Bellarmine, 2018). The situation as at today has not changed much.

It is important therefore, to say that the western – styled and inherited education system did not provide for satisfying learner autonomy and this is inadequate to the Nigerian educational needs- and every effort made by means of policy regulations have not provided good result. Education in Nigeria have refused to produce the much required developmental result even after series of national policies on education designed and presume to be adequate for national goals. It is pertinent to posit further that learner-autonomy remains one of the ways out of Nigerian educational predicaments because it provides a greater degree of creating ideas, facts and knowledge that will benefit individuals as well enhance social development.

English language has been the official language for government, administration and law since the beginning of the colonial rule by the British. Until date, the importance of the English language in Nigeria has not decreased rather increased due to globalization. Its importance according to Evans can be attributed mainly to the growth of English as the international language of business and increase use of the language as the medium of wider communication, and the various ties between countries (2000: 199). The policy on language in Nigeria accommodates the indigenous languages as substrates, while English holds an important position in various domestic domains in the country (Dada and Owolabi, 2012). Nigeria is an 'outer circle' country (Kachru, 1997) because it falls in the category of developing countries in the list of ex- British colonies.

English language is a necessary tool in Nigeria to facilitate daily interactions with others whether in the face-to-face exchanges or in other social context within the country. This is widely evidenced in the territory for example through the variety of English language media and in the international business and financial world. It is as well a compulsory subject from primary to Tertiary education. Young learners in Nigeria attend school Monday – Friday, and additionally, most children have extra – curriculum studies, of which English in most cases seem to be a priority subject.

There have been several methodologies employed in Nigeria (Ajiwogu, 2015) as part of educational reform policies for teaching English language. These include Grammar Translation Method (GTM), Audio-Lingual Method (ALT), Direct Method (DM), Eclectic Method (EM), and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). All these methods are conventional teaching methods that involve teacher in complete verbal instruction or expression. These methods of teaching encourage lopsided instruction and Ayima (2011) says that communication mostly flow from teacher to students. In other words, students do not have to give instructions themselves especially in TPR Total Physical Response (Hammer, 2007). The activity of these conventional teaching methods therefore violates the principle of learner autonomy. Bellarmine (2018) suggests the need for necessary enlightenment and guides to realize and utilize learners' capabilities because they possess all it takes to influence their guides on the route to lead them. In essence, "those who are led can contribute to their guidance".

No doubt, the objective of the educational reforms is to nurture an education system that will improve the quality of education at all levels, make education system relevant and functional for the acquisition of skills for everyday life (Bisong, 1999 cited in Amadioha 2015). But these are yet to realize its potentials in Nigeria. Education reform is a term for the goal of changing public education in terms of educational theories and policies. The first attempt of serious educational program in Nigeria was in 1969 (Fafunwa, 1974 cited in Olalere and Taiwo 2009). Before and since then, Nigeria has experienced series of education reforms based on the outlines by Amadioha (2015) below:

- The education reforms of 1889 to 1906 in southern Nigeria for educational expansion.

- The proclamation in southern Nigeria of 1900 1903 which introduced the system of assisted schools through government grant.
- The Phelps strokes funds of 1920 African Education Commission which recommended that secondary education should aim at training African leaders
- The 1926 and 1929 education reforms which led to the closure of many illegal schools and establishment of new government secondary schools, and the introduction of
- The 1948 reforms which led to the establishment of the first University College, at Ibadan.
- The 1954 education reforms which led to the reduction of the number of years spent in primary and secondary schools. Also, higher school certificate (HSC) was introduced to screen candidates for the university.
- The 1969 education reform which led to the National Conference on education and the formulation of the national policy as education and the introduction of 6-3-3-4 system. The policy came to light in 1976.
- The May 2003 and 8th June, 2003. Education system which worked out modalities and framework for Universal basic education and implementation of 6.3.3.4 system of education.
- The 2005 education reform which led to major restructuring in the education sector as follows: operation-reach-all-secondary- schools, (ORASS), tracking assets for progress (TAP), community accountability and transparency initiative (CATI) and public private partnership (PPP) in funding education.

The most resent of the reforms according to Amadioha was the reform act of 2007 that provides information on wide ranging reforms for the educational sector in the country. Unfortunately, while the conceptual ideas and provisions are commendable, the issue of implementation has become a matter of concern (2015).

Integration of learner autonomy in English language curriculum is necessary in Nigeria, but the education reforms from nineteen -twenty first century did not put into consideration this educational need especially as the world is gradually becoming a global community. As Obioma and Ajagun (2006) rightly observed that the need for reforms in education was as a result of

global changes in the economic and social context. The writer therefore suggest that education reform in Nigeria should consider this underlying need and come up with policies that will project the design of curriculum to encourage and enhance autonomous learning.

The perspectives of autonomous language learning

Beson(2013) testimony on language learner autonomy organized autonomous learning theory into three perspectives: psychological, technical and political (as cited in Anderson, 2015). Autonomy is the combination of the three perspectives that offer us lenses that is so clear that through it we can further examine the theory of learner autonomy.

The psychological perspective that is associated to Holec(1981) is of the notion that capacity need to be fostered and nurtured. The broader cognitive skills are necessary in the development of one's ability to interpret and construct knowledge (Benson, 2011; Little, 2007). Holec argued that autonomy, the notion of universal, "right knowledge"(1981), is replaced with individual subjective, deeply personal knowledge constructed and dominated by the learner (pg.21). The psychological perspective of language learner autonomy therefore adopts the constructivist approach to knowledge construction (Beson, 2011, 2013; Little, 2007; Reinder,n.d). In constructive paradigm, effective learning is achieved through internal understandings, transformation and developments with external aid. This internal construction of knowledge as Reinder(n.d) writes is something that cannot be taught directly because the experience is unique for every individual. Negotiation of meaning is key in constructive paradigm in the sense that constructivism respects and value broader attitudes, interpretations and cognitive skills that permit a learner to take greater responsibility for his or her learning.

The political perspective emphasizes learner empowerment or total emancipation from existing traditional education institutions. Learners are to take control of their learning content. Late Paulo Freire in a work title: Education for critical consciousness (1974), argued that responsibility no matter the form is a fundamental need and man should also have to take decisions in order to satisfy the need. Benson and Little relates Freire's testimony to language learning context claiming that learner responsibility does not only answer a basic human need (Little, 2009, p.223), but also

improve student motivation because learners strive to realize self-determined goals rather than the one imposed on them (Benson, 2011,p.116). Autonomy is important to language learning as well as learning in wider sense, independence, self -fulfillment and freedom from external pressures – are necessary for learning to continue throughout life (Littlewood, 1999, p.71). There is rise in autonomous individuals operating within societies with a powerful force (Anderson, 2015), and adult learners should become a tool to arouse increasing sense of awareness and liberation in man, and in some cases, an instrument to change the environment itself. By this, ideas will change from man being the product of his society to the idea of man as producer of his society. The argument is that autonomous language learners may not only impact positively on their current and future learning but to the society in which they live.

The technical perspective accentuates the designed technical method and processes that is capable of improving learning through metacognitive, cognitive and social strategies commonly referred to as learning training (Dickson, 1996). The argument is that while learner has to learn to become cognitively aware, he/she also ought to be suitably equipped to consider, understate, and evaluate their learning if indeed autonomous learning or education serves to give learners' control over their own learning (Reinders, n.d, p.43, as cited in Anderson, 2015). Drawing from Cotterall, autonomy is defined through the way learners can demonstrate tactics and strategies, which is an interpretative of autonomous learning that firmly points towards technical skills and processes and self- management thereof, as indicative of fully realized autonomous capacity (1995). Therefore, the technical perspective projects the indispensability of designing policies, curriculum and methodologies that will harness the social strategies, cognitive and meta-cognitive potentials so that language learners can navigate their learning.

Language learner autonomy is a special case of learner autonomy in the sense that it exploits a universal human capacity and drive. Every pedagogical approach that seeks to develop learner autonomy succeeds not because they are technical or political imperative but because they respond to how human beings are constituted. Going by constructivist theory of language learning autonomy, language is the medium of communication and reflection. Therefore, knowledge is constructed via the learners' commitment and involvement in linguistically mediated interaction encoded in the language

and reproduced through communicative activity which is writing and speaking. Language is used for metacognitive/ metalinguistic processes of reflective intervention and also a tool for constructing knowledge. There is need therefore to maximize learner autonomy. The theory's emphasis is that learners should use the Target Language (TL) as a medium of task performance, metacognitive and metalinguistic reflection to enhance their proficiency (Little, 2017). Drawing from the constructivist theory, autonomy generally is a universal human scope of behavioral drive and emotional needs. Both form the major force that projects learner competence.

We shall return in the chapters that follow to the various perspectives that have shaped our view of language learner autonomy, but for our present purpose the essentials of that view should be clear enough. For us language learner autonomy is not an organizational option but a pedagogical imperative. Whereas Holec (1981) admits the possibility of (teacher-led) programmes of learning in which learner autonomy plays no role, for us all successful learning draws on the learner's capacity for autonomous behaviour. Whereas for Holec learner autonomy is something that is 'added' to learners, for us learners have experience of autonomy in their lives outside the classroom, and it is the teacher's job to harness their pre-existing capacity for autonomous behaviour to the business of language learning. Whereas for Holec the development of proficiency in the TL and the development of learner autonomy are separate processes, for us language Introduction – the autonomy classroom: procedures and principles learner autonomy is inseparable from the learner's gradually developing TL proficiency.

Whereas for Holec learner autonomy is a capacity of the individual learner, for us it is a collective as well as an individual capacity, and its development is stimulated by the social-interactive processes on which effective cooperation between teachers and their learners depends.

Implication and problems of autonomous language learning

Holec (1981) defines autonomy as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. It is acquired either through natural means or (as most often happens) by formal learning, (cited in Little 2007: 1). This implies that in order to develop autonomy, we need to actively develop appropriate skills and strategies with learners.

Vygotsky's ZPD theory (Vygotsky 1962 cited in Cameron 2001: 6) is relevant to the child's autonomy. This notices the differences between what a learner knows and their potential for learning and that a learner can realize this potential interactively – through the guidance and support of other persons such as parents, teachers and peers (cited in Wenden 1991:207). School is an ideal environment to develop autonomy as children have potential support networks in school and at home. Little (1991) discusses the unconscious autonomy of a developing child which with support can become "conscious autonomy". Students are subconsciously making decisions; therefore teachers can develop these and other self-directed skills for effective learning. Younger learners need purpose and meaning in what they do, so activities to promote autonomy need to be introduced in a meaningful way, Sinclair and Ellis suggest we bear transfer in mind so that students can see that a task is useful for other subjects, for example, vocabulary pelmanism cards could be used for multiplication tables in mathematics or counting and capital combinations in geography (1991: 212).

Nunan discusses the importance of educators in developing autonomy, and believes that there are degrees of autonomy and that a variety of factors will influence the extent of autonomy a learner will achieve (1997:193 – 4). He describes five levels of autonomy: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence where the students will have deferring control over what they do, and at the highest level, students will take control of their learning becoming teachers and researchers (Nunan 1997: 195). I would argue that while we may not expect younger learners to reach transcendence level, we can introduce elements of autonomy from at least the awareness and involvement level from young age.

Conclusion

The Nigerian educational system is biased in most cases because the system embarks on enhancing the achievements of colonial interest and administration without striking a balance between local, national and international language need of her citizens. Her educational reforms are yet to incorporate autonomous language learning in their educational reforms even as awareness for communicative competence for global communication is trending. Autonomous language learning is not an organizational option but a pedagogical imperative. Successful learning draws on the learners'

capacity for autonomous behavior because they have experience of autonomy in their various lives outside the classroom, therefore, in autonomous learning; the teacher is expected to harness their pre-existing capacity for autonomous behavior to the business of language learning. Autonomous learning is a collective as well as individual's capacity, and its development is stimulated by the social interactive processes on which effective cooperation between teachers and learners depends.

Recommendations

After exploring different contributors' view on autonomous language learning, the writer therefore recommend that:

Educational administrators should understand that the world is becoming a global village and English language learners in Nigeria should not be left behind in the theories, principles and methodologies of language learning that is globally considered to be effective.

Educational policy makers should consider incorporating elements of autonomy in language policies that would stream down to English language.

Curriculum designers should adopt theories, principles that will drive language learner autonomy especially English.

School administrators should suggest learning materials capable of fostering autonomy for English learners

Government should ensure that Educational policies especially those that relate to English language are of international standard so that English language learners in Nigeria can be relevant internationally.

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