Learner Autonomy through Digitalized Instruction

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ABSTRACT

Teachers need to acquire digital literacy in order to prepare their students for autonomous learning. In other words, they need to have working knowledge in using digital tools to facilitate self-learning even beyond the four walls of a classroom. In a national workshop conducted recently on 'Using Digital Tools for Developing Learner Autonomy', organized by ELTAI, teachers were given hands-on experience in using various digital tools for developing the four language skills among students. In this article, the authors would elaborately discuss the effectiveness of such training and also the extent to which it had paved the way for promoting teachers' professional development.

Key Words*: Digital Literacy; Teacher Education; Teacher Literacy; Learner Autonomy; Digital Tools.*

Introduction

Learner autonomy has been a key theme in the field of teaching English as a second and foreign language for more than 30 years. In terms of its rationale (Camilleri-Grima, 2007; Cotterall, 1995; Palfreyman, 2003), claims have been made that it improves the quality of language learning, promotes democratic societies, prepares individuals for life-long learning, is a human right, and allows learners to make the best use of learning opportunities in and out of the classroom.

Needless to mention, it helps learners prepare themselves to communicate in a second or foreign language. Learner autonomy is a pedagogical ideal and so teachers need to encourage its practice even in a traditional classroom situation. In order to do it, they need to equip themselves with autonomous teaching skills that encourage them to train their students in taking responsibility for their own learning. New teachers have to be trained to possess various competences such as content knowledge, flexibility in thinking, positive and self-directed learning, leadership skills, team work, and so on. Smith (2001:5) offers a comprehensive set of six characteristics

of teacher autonomy as follows:

- Self-directed professional action

- Capacity for self-directed professional action

- Freedom from control over professional action

- Self-directed professional development

- Capacity for self-directed professional development

- Freedom from control over professional development

The ultimate goal of education is to bring change in the behaviour of an individual. Behaviour can be changed when the barriers between learning and living are transcended. Receiving knowledge without applying it in real life is meaningless. Gardener (1993; as cited in Little, 1995) has distinguished three types of learners: "the intuitive learner, the traditional student and the disciplinary expert" (p. 175). A disciplinary expert, according to Gardner, "is an individual of any age who has mastered the concept and skills of a discipline or domain and can apply such knowledge appropriately in new situations" (ibid) and an autonomous learner is considered a disciplinary expert. It must be stated that learner autonomy cannot be facilitated without teachers' intervention in the early stages, as teaching and learning are intertwined. Vieira (2001:24) doubts that "our efforts to promote pedagogy for autonomy in school will have any sustainable effects unless we put teachers

centre-stage." She has indicated four major assumptions about the need for teacher autonomy:

- Pedagogy for autonomy is an ideological choice and a realistic activity.

- Teacher and learner autonomy are interconnected.

- Teachers are constrained agents of change.

- Teacher development needs to be self-directed, inquiry-oriented, experience-based, collaborative, and locally relevant.

It is believed that the subject of learner autonomy has to be included in teacher education courses for teachers to understand the importance of encouraging learners to be autonomous. Considering this, ELTAI conducted a national workshop for teachers in using digital tools as a teacher development activity.

Impact of Social Learning Theory on Teacher Development

Teacher development is facilitated through teacher education programmes and new teaching practices. In this regard, workshops on using digital technology (as stated above) offer scope for new learning. Watson (2013:2) presents the perspective of Social Learning Theory (SLT) and states that "teachers choose and construct behaviours as influenced by the extent to which they believe they will be successful with a course of action in a particular context. This self-regulatory process within SLT is referred to as self efficacy." Applying SLT to the effect

of this workshop as a teacher development activity, it could be said that the introduction of various digital tools and the hands-on experience provided to the participants made them observe and, as Watson stated, 'form individual knowledge' (Bandura, 1977) of using digital tools in their classrooms.

Methodology

The purpose of conducting the workshop, which was funded by Hornby Trust, UK, was to educate and train teachers in using digital tools effectively in a language classroom. The objectives of the workshop were:

- to highlight the importance of preparing students for autonomous learning;

- to provide hands-on experience in preparing self-instructional material to promote learner autonomy; and

- to introduce digital tools like Nearpod, Tricider, Padlet. Trello, Google docs and Grammarly to list a few, to the participants, who were practising teachers.

It is observed that teachers at a traditional classroom in Indian institutions most often require training in using technological tools. It is believed that once they are given adequate exposure to learner autonomy and using various digital tools, they will be able to design tasks and activities that would make students use those digital tools for learning. Considering this and in order to provide a wider reach to teachers across the nation, 17 chapter heads of ELTAI from various locations were enrolled as participants for this workshop. The sessions were designed in such a way that the participants were first exposed to the concept of learner autonomy and then the importance of making students take responsibility for their learning was reiterated. In addition to this, the trainers demonstrated the way the four language skills could be taught to students through self-instructional strategies and finally hands-on training in using various technological tools was provided. The initial discussion on learner autonomy highlighted the need for teachers taking up the role of facilitators and encouraging students to be active participants of learning in a large classroom.

As mentioned earlier, the exposure to various strategies of learning pertaining to the four skills in general, and listening and speaking in particular, was given to orient the teacher participants to encourage their students to choose appropriate strategies to master the language skills. The demonstration sessions in preparing self-instructional materials and the hands-on experience to use digital production tools like **Nearpod, Tricider, Padlet. Trello, Google docs** and **Grammarly**, to list a few, were aimed at motivating teachers to use those tools while teaching and enhancing their students' performance in writing. They were also introduced to website resources such as **Visuwords, Vocagrbber, Lexical lab** and **Lingro,** to list a few, for developing students' knowledge of vocabulary. It was believed that this exposure would help

teachers integrate them in their self-instructional training to students and make them autonomous learners.

Data Collection and Discussion

The success of a teacher development programme is determined by the positive feedback of its participants and in this workshop, the teacher participants' feedback was collected in order to review the extent to which they could develop their efficiency. The teachers were asked to present their views in response to these two questions:

1. What lessons have you learned from this workshop?

2. What three things are you going to do differently as a teacher after attending this workshop?

In response to the first question, the participants said that they had learned:

• to cater to the demands of the GenZ learners in different and innovative ways.

• to use digital tools to enhance Learner Autonomy and make them understand how they would help in promoting collaborative learning.

• the need to adopt the idea of self-directed learning and how it could/should be implemented to make learners more independent.

• the elements involved in self-access learning.

• the way of preparing a lesson plan for

tasks that would promote learner autonomy.

• how to integrate and incorporate digital tools like NearPod, Tricider and Padlet in teacher training programmes and workshops.

In response to the second question on what they would do differently after the workshop back in their own teaching contexts, most of the participants said that they would provide a variety of learning experiences, particularly offer technology-oriented training to their students. It was evident that the hands-on experience given during the workshop had made the participants understand the possibility of using technological tools to give such learning experiences to their students. In addition, they said that they decided to promote self-direction and autonomy among their students. Further, they said that they would prepare self-instructional materials and lesson plans considering their learners' needs.

The participants were introduced to a few classroom practices, highlighting learners' and teachers' roles while implementing learner autonomy in an institution. As a result, they expressed their interest in implementing student-centred learning and promoting peer evaluation among students besides using language applications and websites within and beyond their classrooms.

The participants further mentioned their plan for developing their students' reading skills to achieve communicative competence

and that indicated the effectiveness of exposure given during the workshop to aspects of reading and the reading process. The sample tasks that participants prepared as self-instructional materials during the workshop sessions indicated their preparedness for changing the learning scenario for their students.

Conclusion

Thus, it is clear that the workshop has opened new avenues for teaching language skills in a traditional classroom. It is further evident from the participants' interest to share their learning with their colleagues and their confidence in encouraging collaborative learning with the use of applications like Padlet and Google Docs (besides integrating the use of digital applications) that the workshop had prepared them at least in respect of their attitude towards promoting learner autonomy in their classrooms.

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