



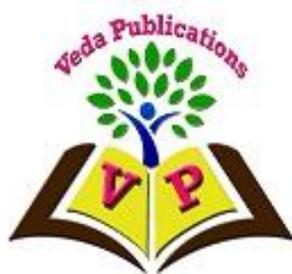
## A META-ANALYSIS OF LEARNER AUTONOMY FOR PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES

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### ABSTRACT



The teaching and learning of language has gained a dynamic impetus, across decades. Considering the trends of English Language Teaching, we can rightly assert that one method paved the way for the following one. Similarly, the transition from Grammar Translation Method to Communicative Language Teaching marked a paradigm shift between the roles of the teacher and the students. The role of the teacher has been transformed from the sage of the stage to a guide by the side. Keeping in mind the heterogeneous nature of the class composition, wherein each learner has their own level of proficiency, it is utopian for the teacher to cater homogeneously to the collective needs and demands of the learners. Learner autonomy, the term coined by Henri Holec in 1981, has unleashed the origin and concept of self-access language learning. Learner autonomy is an avant-garde educational innovation, wherein the learners are at the center of the educational context, and the facilitator's role is reduced to directing them towards their ascertained interests. This paper throws light on the spectrum of possibilities through which the learners can improve their reading skills, through self-directed language learning in the contemporary scenario.

**Keywords:** *Autonomy, Communicative Language Teaching, Self-Access Learning, Interests.*

**INTRODUCTION**

"Tell me and I forget,  
Teach me and I'll remember,  
Involve me and I'll learn".

This quote by Benjamin Franklin rightly brings out the significance of the involvement of the learners in the classroom transaction. The teaching and learning of English is dynamic in itself and, therefore, is reforming from time-to-time. In the leap of communicative language teaching, learner autonomy has evolved as a pre-requisite to foster efficiency among the learners. Learner autonomy is better understood when it is contrasted with the behavioral theory of learning and teaching wherein the teacher's role was primordial.

The behaviorists focused on observable behavior, without giving much importance to critical thinking and learner-centric activities. The teacher vested power and authority in the classroom, wherein the learners were either mute spectators or passive listeners. The proponents of behaviorism such as Skinner and Pavlov gave much importance to form, repetition and drills. Knowledge of the rules of a language was considered to constitute the knowledge of the language. Reading the text and translating (word-to-word) it into English were given importance. Moeini (2002) summarizes that reading was traditionally regarded as a passive process of reconstructing the author's intended meaning through recognizing the printed letters and words.

However, profuse researches in the domain of learning theories have made way for communicative language teaching to emerge. The mid-1950s marked a radical shift in the paradigm of learning theories and methods of English language teaching and learning. The cognitivists along with the constructivists, such as Piaget and Bruner emphasized upon a holistic development of language, unlike mere word to word meaning. That is, both linguistic competence and communicative competence were regarded as important. It was not late for the learned researchers to establish that learners differ in their styles and interests of learning. Keeping in mind the variations of proficiency levels, it is seldom possible for the teacher to feed or cater equivalently to a huge range of learners. Also, bearing in mind the fact that it is not practically

possible for teachers to support the learners in transactions occurring outside the classroom, it becomes all the more significant that we develop and provide our students with materials that develop autonomy and make them responsible for their learning activities.

**TRANSITION FROM LEARNING TO READING**

"Reading is thinking under the stimulus of the printed page" Sonnerschein (1982). According to Goodman (1982) "reading is a psycholinguistic game". These two definition helps us understand that reading involves understanding the literal meaning of words, recognizing the author's/writer's intended meaning and critically interpreting the text on the basis of an individual's schemata (background knowledge). The following diagram brings out the role of a reader in comprehending a text.



The purpose of reading in a second language is significant as we extensively use this skill to interpret meaning from the given text in order to serve both academic and non-academic needs in real life. In a classroom, the learners read various kinds of texts, including texts from all the different subjects such as English, social sciences, sciences etc. These texts differ from one other in terms of both content and organization. Since the nature and composition of these texts differ, the approaches to comprehend them must also be different. Reading as Kalpan (2002) states "...is a rapid, strategic, interactive and purposeful process that requires sufficient knowledge of language and world, extensive time on task, and efficient as well as strategic processing." Thus, while reading, a reader does not just decode the text, but also interprets and constructs it on the basis of his/her global knowledge/schemata.

**FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ESL CLASSROOMS**

Learner autonomy enables the learners to be proactive and self-sufficient participants in the teaching-learning process. The learners are responsible throughout the learning activity, rather than being passive listeners. Learner autonomy is associated to learner responsibility and motivation. As Moore states: "The Sheffield Hallam definition of



learner autonomy starts with the premise that an autonomous learner takes responsibility for his/her own learning". An autonomous learner can decide on his/her learning goals. S/he can identify learning goals, determine learning processes, evaluate and use the learning experience to meet real-life needs. They can have well-determined concepts of learning through different approaches and skills as suited to the relevant subject and demands of the task. This would further lead to a proper organization of learning methods and materials, fostering prominent information processing skills. The learners are motivated to learn, when their achievements are appreciated.

### TEXT TYPES

Learners of second language encounter different kinds of texts. The texts can be broadly classified into:

Academic  
texts

Non-academic  
texts

To list a few would be:

1. Textbooks, novels, short stories
2. Lecture notes
3. Dictionaries, telephone directories
4. Articles available on websites
5. Letters, telegrams
6. Statistical diagrams (charts, pie diagrams, graphs, bar-diagrams)
7. Recipes, puzzles, menus
8. Cartoon, comic strips
9. Timetables, maps.

### DIFFICULTIES ENCOUNTERED BY ESL LEARNERS

Alan Duff and Alan Maley (1990) speak of the following difficulties faced by the learners of English as a second language while reading materials/texts:

1. Linguistic complexity: The learners are confronted with syntactic complexity, lexical density and discourse organization.
2. Text length: Some learners find long texts difficult to comprehend, whereas other learners find short texts challenging; the latter due to the lack of contextual support.
3. Cultural references: Learners who are unaware of cultural components might not

comprehend the text that is related to a foreign culture. 'Foreign culture' refers to any culture that the learner is not familiar with.

4. Conceptual difficulty: This arises when the concept that the text deals with is unknown to the learner. The student/learner might not have come across a particular concept earlier, so it becomes vague for him/her to decipher and infer the intended meaning.

### STRATEGIES OF READING

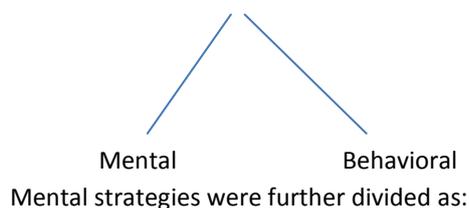
A reading text differs not just in its type but also in the nature of its interpretation. Thus we must employ divergent strategies in order to comprehend the multiple dimensions in which the text lends itself. Therefore, as teachers we must expose our learners to various different strategies that would help them comprehend a text in multifarious dimensions. This would help us prepare and develop the reading abilities of our learners, contributing to make them self-sufficient and independent readers.

Most of the teachers in the educational setting restrict reading to a process wherein the subjects (learners) are expected to extract information. Verdugo (2004) believes that students hardly receive any guidance as to the strategies that facilitate the autonomous interpretation of texts. However, Barlett (1932) asserts that reading is not simply decoding the written symbols into sounds; it is rather a constructive process to attain comprehension. Thus it is something beyond just a transfer of information, as intended in the text by the writer. Reading involves the interplay of cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective factors. This would direct the learner to be active, independent and pro-active throughout the process of reading the text.

Kolers (1970) lists that a skilled reader has three levels of competencies; namely, visual operation, sensitivity to grammatical relationships and construction of personal meaning. These competencies help the learners to recognize, effectively and instantaneously, vocabulary, understand concepts and manipulate the linguistic code employed by the writer. This clearly indicates that the meaning of a text does not necessarily reside within the purview of the text.



Weinstein and Mayer have categorized learning strategies as:



Mental strategies were further divided as:

1. Cognitive and
2. metacognitive

Behavioral strategies were grouped under:

1. Social and
2. Affective

Cognitive and metacognitive strategies deal largely with memory, cognition and compensation. Memory refers to anything that assists an individual to remember, recall and recognize. Cognitive strategies are much more demanding, and they promote higher order thinking skills among the learners. These strategies help the learners reason out and rationalise practical applications of theoretical knowledge. Compensation strategies refer mainly to guessing from the given context. This strategy is widely explored by learners to comprehend texts, when they are unable to decipher the language used. These strategies are directly related to the target language used and are observable. However, they differ in their degree of employment by different individuals.

Behavioral strategies are innate and unobservable. Encouragement, positive motivation, lowering one's level of anxiety etc all belong to the class of affective strategies. Social strategies are more related to inter-personal skills, such as group/pair work, peer group interaction and feedback. These strategies operate at different levels and, if properly guided or controlled, can help an individual to gain self-esteem, which would act as a stimulus on learning behavior.

The effective employment of these strategic techniques has marked a considerable improvement in the learners' achievement, in terms of reading comprehension. The readers' by using these strategies would be able to:

- Effectively comprehend the input.
- Retrieve or recall previous knowledge to aid comprehension

- Retain information better
- Analyze an obstacle, and make informed decisions to employ a specific strategies to overcome specific learning obstacles

### **SUB-SKILLS TO FOSTER LEARNER AUTONOMY AND READING COMPREHENSION**

The purpose of reading a text determines how it should be read and comprehended. A learner can make use of the following sub-skills to derive meanings from a given text.

1. Skimming – refers to reading a text quickly without focusing on minute details. In other words, skimming means reading for having a general idea about the text.
2. Scanning – quickly refers to reading a text quickly for specific information.
3. Extracting main ideas – is intended to develop an overall idea of the text by focusing upon the main ideas. This helps learners understand the context.
4. Predicting: Guessing restores the information following in the text. This creates a learning opportunity wherein the learners are prepared for the lesson, and not overloaded with information/input.
5. Inferring – promotes reading between the lines. Inference involves recognizing implied meanings, indirectly stated by the writer. It is implicit in the passage/text, however not explicitly stated.

### **TEACHER'S ROLE IN PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY**

Learner autonomy moves the teacher from the center-stage, and puts spotlight on the learners. The teacher is a facilitator, the one who guides the learner by creating appropriate learning opportunities. The teacher's role in an autonomous classroom is delineated by Dam as below:

“Let me first of all mention the fact that learners do not necessarily learn what we believe ourselves to be teaching... What we can do is give our learners an awareness of how they think and how they learn – an awareness which hopefully will help them come to an understanding of themselves and thus increase their self-esteem” (Dam, 2000).



The teacher's role is to manage activities in the classroom, maintain a well-knit collaboration with the learners, initiate constructive interaction amongst the learners, provide ample discourse for the learners to implement various learning strategies, and provide feedback and motivation.

### **MATERIALS TO ENCOURAGE LEARNER AUTONOMY IN READING SKILLS**

A huge range of materials can be utilized to inculcate conscious awareness among the learners. Activities related to reading a text can be further classified into pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading activities. The focus of each of these activities is to help the learners associate with the content of the text. The texts chosen for classroom discourse should be appropriate in terms of its linguistic components as deemed suitable for the level of the learners (age group), suitability of the topic (content of the text) and cultural conversance. Exposure to different kinds of texts such as descriptive, visual, factual and expository ones would prepare the learners for reading outside the classroom scenario as well. This helps in reinforcing the learned skills and application of the theoretical knowledge in the empirical situation. Exploration of the graded activities available online can be used whenever possible. Through these materials and activities the learners' interests are stimulated, which in turn leads to optimum learning outcomes.

### **CONCLUSION**

The revamp of teacher and learner roles in the classroom situation has improved efficiency and productivity among the learners. Learner autonomy ensures that learners are responsible in the process of learning, making use of suitable strategies from their repertoire of skills. Although the concept is just blooming in our present educational context, an interplay of these factors, along with support from educational policies, can contribute to make learning an accomplishment.

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