Promoting Learner Autonomy in the Second Language Classroom: An Examination of Teacher-Implemented Strategies

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Abstract: Learner autonomy has been widely recognized as a key factor in second language acquisition. It is closely related to learner motivation, strategy use and academic performance. While numerous studies have explored the development of autonomous learning from the perspective of individual learners' perceptions and behaviors, there has been relatively little focus on how teachers can promote student autonomy through classroom teaching. To address this gap, this paper focuses on the specific ways in which teachers promote learner autonomy and identifies the future directions for research in this area. It adopts a literature review method to analyze the relevant empirical research, and mainly discusses two types of instructional approaches: learning strategy instruction and supportive teaching behaviors. Although existing research generally demonstrates the positive impacts on learner autonomy, overall the literature is fragmented, only lasts for a short research cycle and is limited to a single context. Future research can further focus on the long-term effectiveness of these teaching strategies, cross-cultural applicability, and the role of teachers' teaching in supporting learner autonomy.

Keywords: learner autonomy, language learning, second language acquisition, teacher strategy, literature review

1. Introduction

Learner autonomy has remained an important topic in second language acquisition for over four decades [1-4]. Holec defined 'learner autonomy' as 'the ability to take charge of one's own learning' [1]. Empirical studies have shown that learner autonomy is a key factor in second language acquisition: when students feel a stronger sense of autonomy, they are more likely to gain intrinsic motivation [5], adopt better learning strategies [6], and achieve greater success in language learning [7]. Teachers play a crucial role in cultivating students' autonomy through proper teaching strategies and well-designed classroom practices [8, 9]. The interdependent relationship between teacher autonomy and learner autonomy has been proven [4]; however, existing research mainly centers on individual learner behaviors, with relatively limited attention paid to how teachers promote students' learning autonomy. Therefore, this paper investigates the specific ways that teachers use to support the development of students' autonomy in the classroom, including strategy instruction and autonomy-supportive behaviors, and identifies the future directions for research in this area. A literature review approach is used to synthesize relevant empirical studies, aiming to

provide insights for both classroom teaching and theoretical development, and to expand the current perspectives on learner autonomy in second language acquisition. Additionally, this study is of significant importance in deepening our understanding of the mechanisms by which teachers cultivate learner autonomy through their instructional practices.

2. Strategy-based instruction

According to Chamot, strategy-based instruction (SBI) involves teachers consciously teaching students how to regulate their learning process through planning, monitoring, and evaluation [10]. It encompasses multiple dimensions from cognitive, metacognitive strategies to social and affective strategies [11]. In recent years, SBI has been widely regarded as an effective approach to promoting learner autonomy, as the internalization and understanding of strategies has been proved to facilitate the development of students' autonomous learning [11]. Oxford pointed out that effective strategy instruction helps students achieve better academic performance and encourages students to find learning styles that best suit their individual needs. Moyer also highlighted that SBI the key to strategy teaching is to stimulate students' self-regulation and learning engagement, which is of great importance to learners' long-term autonomous development [12]. Chamot argued that the focus of SBI should not be placed on simply asking students to use one or more strategies, but rather on explicitly instructing students to understand when, why, and how to use the strategies.

Recent empirical studies have further substantiated that explicit strategy instruction led by teachers has a positive effect on promoting learner autonomy in language learning. Nguyen and Gu conducted an eight-week metacognitive strategy training at a university in Vietnam. Students in the experimental group received explicit strategy guidance on how to plan, monitor and evaluate their learning, while the control group followed the regular curriculum. The results showed that students in the experimental group gained significant progress in self-initiation and self-regulation, which directly indicated the development of learner autonomy [13]. Similarly, Baleghizadeh and Jafari found that Iranian EFL learners who had received training in strategies such as brainstorming, writing outlines, and revisions performed significantly better in both argumentative and narrative writing than those who hadn't. Moreover, these students exhibited a stronger awareness of autonomous learning [14]. Senouci's study in Algeria confirmed that university students receiving SBI demonstrated higher levels of autonomous behaviors in multiple language skill tasks compared to those in the control group [15]. More recently, Vellanki, Khan, and Mond implemented explicit metacognitive strategy instruction (MSI) in the advanced preparatory program in Oman and found that students' strategic awareness in areas such as planning, evaluation, attention control, and problem solving was significantly deepened [16].

Overall, these studies provide strong empirical evidence for teachers to promote learner autonomy through explicit strategy instruction across different cultural and teaching contexts.

3. Autonomy-supportive teaching behaviors

In addition to strategy instruction, adopting autonomy-supportive teaching behaviors is another critical method for teachers to promote student autonomy. These behaviors originate from the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) which was proposed by Deci and Ryan in 1985 [17]. It highlights that three basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness- should be met in order to enhance the intrinsic motivation and optimal functional development. Unlike explicit strategy instruction, this kind of method centers on how teacher create a psychologically supportive environment, in order to fulfil their autonomy, competence, and relatedness [17]. In educational settings, teachers should create an autonomy-supportive classroom environment by encouraging

students to speak out their own opinions, offering meaningful choices, using less commanding expressions, and being open to students' opinions and so on.

The empirical studies in recent years have consistently proven the effectiveness of teacher using autonomy – supportive teaching method to promote learners' autonomy. Especially in a second language learning context. Cheon, Reeve and Marsh conducted an intervention study involving middle school teachers, training them in four core autonomy-supportive behaviors: offering choices, emphasizing meaningful learning, avoiding controlling language, and showing empathy and understanding. The research results exhibits that the change in teacher's style of behaviour has significantly improved student's inner motivation and class participation, and simultaneously decreased their anti-social behaviors [18]. This research emphasizes on the crucial effect of teacher's training in promoting autonomy-supportive education.

In the context of Chinese higher education, Wang et al, have shown autonomy supportive educator's indirect impact on student's academic English speaking behaviour through the structural equation model. The findings indicated that when student feel their willingness to decide and express has been respected by their teachers, their basic psychological needs are more easily fulfilled, which consequently stimulates a more active participation and more outstanding study behaviour [19].

Similarly, Miao and Ma investigated autonomy support in an online learning environment. Their findings revealed that autonomy-supportive teaching positively influenced students' self-efficacy and self-regulated learning, which indirectly enhanced learning engagement and persistence [20]. This suggests that even in virtual classroom which lacks face to face communication, the education style of teachers is still the key factor of triggering study motivation.

In addition, through a microscopic analysis based on education interaction, Reeve and Jang points out that through offering choices, encouraging expression and responding in an understanding tone would promote the inner motivation of the students and the tendency for active learning, which emphasizes that the way of communicating in classroom being the dominant factor in supporting students autonomous development [21].

To conclude, these research has cooperatively depicts that if teachers are able to constrict an autonomy-supportive teaching environment to respond to students' psychological requirements, it not only stimulates its learning motivation and regulation but also provide the basic needs for sustainable autonomous developments of the learners.

4.   Limitations and future directions for research

Although existing studies provide substantial insight into how teachers foster learner autonomy, several limitations remain. First, research participants have primarily been drawn from higher education settings, especially university-level English learners, and there is limited attention paid to other age groups such as primary and secondary school students. Second, most empirical studies have been conducted in face-to-face classrooms, where the area of how teachers support learner autonomy in remote or hybrid teaching environments is barely touched upon.

In terms of cultural scope, current research tend to be context-specific and focus on a certain region, lacking cross-cultural comparative investigations that explore how teachers adopt effective strategies to promote learner autonomy in classroom across diverse educational background. Additionally, most of the intervention studies last a short period without tracking the long-term impact of teaching strategies. Therefore, future research should prioritize longitudinal research, design long-term projects and systematically evaluate the sustained effects of teacher interventions on students' autonomous learning. At the same time, researchers are encouraged to explore younger learner populations, conduct more dynamic investigations, strengthen qualitative research from the perspective of teachers, and pay attention to the technology-integrated teaching environments.

Cross-cultural and context-sensitive research are also expected to enrich the theoretical understanding of teachers' roles in second language acquisition.

5. Conclusion

This review focuses on the core issue of promoting learner autonomy in second language classrooms through teaching strategies. Based on recent empirical studies, it identifies two key instructional approaches frequently employed by teachers: SBI and autonomy-supportive teaching behaviors. Research shows that explicit strategy instruction can effectively enhance students' metacognitive awareness and self-regulation skills, enabling them to develop autonomy in learning and thus achieve greater results. Meanwhile, autonomy-supportive teaching behaviors—grounded in Self-Determination Theory—help meet students' basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation and classroom engagement. In general, teachers' instructional strategies and interactional styles play a crucial role in promoting autonomous learning behaviors. However, the current literature remains limited in terms of learner populations, duration of intervention, and cultural contexts. Future research is encouraged to expand the coverage of research subjects, adopt longitudinal and cross-cultural approaches, and further explore this area under different classroom settings.

Although this review aims to provide a systematic synthesis of how teachers foster learner autonomy from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, it is not without limitations. First, the review mainly focuses on two types of teaching strategies and does not include other potentially relevant factors such as assessment practices, teacher–student relationships, or curriculum design. Second, the review relies largely on English-language literature, which may introduce a regional bias. Third, as a literature-based analysis, this review offers a macro-level synthesis but lacks close investigation into how these strategies are applied in real-world teaching contexts.

Future research should explore a wider range of instructional variables, examine diverse classroom practices across linguistic and cultural contexts, and incorporate case studies and teacher interviews to develop a more nuanced understanding of how teachers support learner autonomy in practice.

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