

An Overview of Learner Autonomy II: Researches, Methods, Instructional Issues & Assessment

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1. Introduction

In a number of recent books, international conferences and academic journals, learner autonomy has become one of the most heated topics (Holec, 1981; Dickinson & Wenden, 1985; Little, 1991; Dam, 1995; Permberson et al., 1996; Benson & Voller, 1997; Cotterall & Crabbe, 1999; Mackenzie & McCafferty, 2001; Barfield & Nix, 2003) and “few teachers will disagree with the importance of helping language learners become more autonomous as learners” (Wenden, 1991). Also as an educational target, it has been accepted for many language educators that the ability of learning to learn has become more important than absorbing knowledge (Finch, 2002). However, in spite of widespread agreement on the importance of autonomy, there remains a great deal of questions toward the definition, and bunch of uncertainty about applications for language education. Among so many researches concerned with aiming to improve learner autonomy in various learning contexts, empirical researches are not many as we expected (Dickinson, 1987; Little, 1991; Cotterall, 1995). Thus, in this paper, the author tries to summarize and clarify what she has ever read and attempts to give colleagues a general understanding on autonomous learning and teaching instruction. The related issues to be discussed in this article are as follows: (1) the researches of learner autonomy with related fields; (2) methods applied for researching learner autonomy and autonomous learning; (3) instructional issues; and (4) evaluation and assessment of learner autonomy.

2. Researches on Learner Autonomy and Autonomous Learning

For some people, learner autonomy is an ideal state, seldom actually achieved, where learners are fully responsible for decisions about their own learning. For others, it represents a set of skills that can be learned. And for others still, autonomy is an inborn capacity that it's suppressed as we go through the processes of institutional education (Benson, 1996). In the previous part of overview of learner autonomy and autonomous learning (see Yang, 2005b), theoretical

discussions on learner autonomy are introduced from three aspects: self-direction, capacity and cultural constraints. Typical misunderstanding on learner autonomy, some influential factors and qualities and characteristics are summarized as well (Yang, 2005b). Therefore, in the following part, more empirical researches on autonomy in the foreign language classroom will be given an emphasis. Surely, many of these become the mirror when we carry out our own researches. As Yang (2005b) mentions that from European perspective, learner autonomy development is a primary requisite of learning beyond school in democratic societies (Holec, 1981; Aoki, 2001a), on the contrary, in North America, learning strategies and learner training (the secret of the good language learner) has been emphasized more on. However, the difference will not be the main focus, rather research aiming at cultivating autonomous learners at ultimate target will be counted. What's more, various different terms which are used synonymously on autonomous learning, such as self-directed learning, independent learning is not differentiated from literal meaning.

3. Learner Autonomy Researches with Related Fields

In this part, researches on motivation, learners' belief, learning strategy, role of self-access center and teacher autonomy will be introduced.

3.1 Learner Autonomy and Motivation

Motivation and autonomy are clearly mutually related (Silva, 2002), because "autonomous learners become more highly motivated and that autonomy leads to better, more effective work" (Dickinson, 1995). Learner autonomy, however, not only entails a capacity for effective self-management of motivation; it also presupposes that the learner will bring a degree of motivation to the learning situation, since without motivation there is no autonomy (Dickinson, 1995; Ushioda, 1996).

For a long time, Gardner and Lambert's integrative and instrumental framework has dominated the field of motivational research (referenced from Takagi, 2003). Integrative orientation signifies the learner's desire to identify with the target culture, while instrumental orientation refers to the need to fulfill practical objectives such as getting a job. However, these two orientations cannot cover the complexity of all motivational components and gives little help on autonomous learning. Therefore, cognitive motivation should be paid more attention as Dickinson (1995) suggests. Two theories—self-determination theory and attribution theory are widely considered as being the most relevant to the task of encouraging learners to take control of their own learning. Self-determination theory is based on a distinction between intrinsic motivation (learners are interested in learning tasks and outcomes for their own sake) and extrinsic motivation (learners are interested in tasks for rewards). It claims that learners who are intrinsically motivated are better able to identify with the goal of their learning and more willing to take responsibility for the outcome. For example, Carroll (2002) tries to develop Japanese students' intrinsic interests toward

language usage by letting his students to collect, transcribe and analyze the discourse of their own English. Kim's study (2005) shows that for Korean students, participation in the target language community is the key factor for maintaining their intrinsic motivation.

Usuki (2003:11) defines learner autonomy as "learners' internal attitudes for self-motivation". She continues to state that "the main issue in promoting learner autonomy can be understood as the learners' internalization of their beliefs and attitudes for taking charge of their own learning" (Usuki, 2003: 24). Ushioda (1996: 2) gives a detailed explanation on self-motivation and learner autonomy, "in the age of learner-centeredness in education and of learner autonomy in particular, it no longer seems to be how can we motivate our learners, but how can we help learners to motivate themselves". Therefore, self-motivation is viewed as fulfilling an active functional role in promoting sustaining autonomous learning. In the same book, "autonomous language learners are by definition motivated learners".

Many people think lack of motivation is a big factor to cause low proficiency level, but Snyder (2002) points out that "it was not their motivation which was the causal factor of the poor performance, it was their learning disability which caused the lack of motivation. It is very hard to be motivated when students are finding the task overly difficult". For example, Lee (1996) also mentions the same problem to cause demotivation, that when students are facing with authentic materials sometimes they may feel bewildered and confused. Especially some low proficiency students would rather go back to pick up their ordinary textbook for their language learning.

3.2 Learner Autonomy and Learners' Beliefs

Usuki's study (2003) indicates that positive self-beliefs and metacognitive awareness can be considered as keys in promoting learner autonomy. Sixteen students majoring in English were selected for the interview on the basis of their TOEIC score improvement. Self-reports of their beliefs about language learning and transcription of the interview were collected as main data. She realizes that the main issue in promoting learner autonomy can be understood as the learners' internalization of their beliefs and attitudes for taking charge of their own learning (2003: 24). She insists that in stead of training her students to satisfy teacher's expectations, or simply giving students unbounded freedom to make decisions, learner development should be more concerned with the nature of both students' and teachers' learning as a path towards self-growth.

Tanoue (2003) gives a definition on successful language learner according to results of a research on learners' beliefs on language learning, and points some indication for educating autonomous learners.

3.3 Learner Autonomy and Learning Strategies

Many educators have indicated that language strategies encourage greater overall self-direction for autonomous learners (Oxford, 1990; Scharle & Szabó, 2000). Simmon (1996) reports on the effect of strategy training on the cognitive and metacognitive skills of four adult ESL learners

enrolled on a six-week Independent Learning Program. She focuses on the reported and observed learning strategies of individual learners. Three projects of Nunan, Lai & Keoke's collaborative research (1999) prove the effect of strategy training on learning process and answer a question "whether involving learners in the processes actually helps them become more effective learners" in a positive way. They also emphasize the importance of learning strategy training, "learners need to be systematically educated in the skills and knowledge they will need in order to make informed choices about what they want to learn and how they want to learn" (ibid.1999:70). Gu & Duan (2006) also state that strategies of autonomous study are necessary skills for developing students' ability in independent study and for life education. They try to develop students' ability in autonomous English study through a comprehensive training in metacognitive, cognitive, and social-affective strategies. There is a significant improvement in the students' ability in cognitive and social-affective strategies, however there is no significant improvement in the aspects of their self study supervision and self assessment, which may require more concrete directions from the teachers.

However, strategy training is still not widely accepted in Japan, as Wakida's study (2005) shows that college students are only interested in "English for fun" and there is almost no out-of-class study, therefore, instruction on how to study (effective learning strategies) and how to frame their self-image for the future are more practical for college English education.

In a word, we may come to a conclusion that strategy training does not guarantee increase in motivation and confidence in the learners, nor that they will continue to use the strategies they have learned, but by making the learning process more transparent, the learner is empowered to make his or her own. Just teaching new strategies to students will accomplish very little unless students begin to want greater responsibility for their own learning (Carver, 1984). After five empirical researches on reading strategies instruction, Ikeda (2005) also emphasizes in her conclusion that nurturing learner autonomy for cooperative learning will lead to more successful language learning.

3.4 Learner Autonomy and Self-access Center

Computer software for language learning is an example of a technology which claims to promote autonomy simply by offering the possibility of self-study (Benson & Voller, 1997: 10). Therefore, promoting learner autonomy in the classroom has taken on a new focus recently with the establishment of self-access centers in many institutes throughout the world (Miller & Ng, 1996). Self-access centers rely not only on well-planned implementation and good management, but also on the learners' ability and willingness to use them, because they may often be initiated and operated on the assumption that students find their way into autonomous practice and accelerate their progress at their own pace to achieve pre-set goals.

However, self-access centers can be considered to still be in the early stages of evolution, till there is very little evidence that self-instructional modes of learning are in themselves sufficient to lead to greater autonomy or independence (Benson, 1997; O'Dowd, 2002). It appears that

learners who are forced into self-instructional modes of learning without adequate support will tend to rely all the more on the directive element in the materials that they use. Doubt has been expressed in recent years about the effectiveness of self-access, some articles re-evaluate the relationship between self-access, self-instruction and autonomy in this light.

Lee (1996) examines learner perceptions of authentic and pedagogic materials in a self-access center. She concludes that authentic materials tended to be enjoyed more overall and to be preferred by higher proficiency students. However, they were in general not perceived to aid learning as effectively as textbooks especially by learners of comparatively low proficiency. Lee suggests at last “we should not avoid authentic materials, but rather help learners to use them more effectively”.

Stevens (1996: 281) reports on the quantitative analysis stage of an action research project investigating the use and abuse of help features in a CALL cloze program. His data show that students working on CALL programs in self-access mode may abuse help features to a greater extent than CALL developers realize.

Sheerin concludes the following in her study (1997), “although self-access does not necessarily ensure learner independence, it provides the practical means whereby learners can take a more active part in determining their own objectives and their own learning programs”.

Based on the statements above, careful observation and critical thinking about the outcome of self-access centers is necessary. Once problems can be identified and solutions found, the road to encouraging learner autonomy can be smoother. The role that teachers can play in self-access centers should be seriously considered.

3.5 Learner Autonomy and Teacher Autonomy

Many teachers notice the attempt to initiate learner development results their own development as a teacher. Stewart's article (2003: 41) mentions the importance of interplay between learner autonomy and teacher development. Through his exploration of learner autonomy, he has come to see that it is not just autonomy that he needs to investigate, but also his fundamental views on teaching these learners in this situation and learning about how he can do that best. In the process of autonomous language learning, clearly, the learner is central to the development of learner autonomy. This does not mean, however, that the teacher should be marginalized (Pemberton et al., 1996: 59). Teachers traditionally expect to be viewed as authority figures, identified with roles like instructor, director, manager, judge, leader, evaluator, controller, facilitator and mediator (Harmer, 1983; Riley, 1997; Scharle & Szabó, 2000; Wenden, 2002; Brown, 2002). Simonian & Robertson (2002) state four primary responsibility of the teacher as a facilitator: 1) create a space for reflective discourse; 2) provide the occasion for reflection; 3) guide the process; and 4) mediate between the classroom and the outside world. Scharle & Szabó (2000) point out that when teachers adapt to the new role and develop learners' responsibility and autonomy, they need to pay attention to the following aspects: motivation and self-confidence, monitoring and evaluation, self-evaluation, learning strategies, cooperation and group cohesion,

sharing information with the learner, consistent control, delegating tasks and decision.

If learners are to take more control over their learning, they will need a lot of assistance along the way, particularly if their previous experience has been overwhelmingly teacher-directed. Aoki (2002) mentions that teacher education needs to provide teachers with opportunities to experience autonomy-oriented learning in order to produce teachers with the capacity to support learner's autonomy. The following is Aoki's version (1999: 144) on teacher's capacity:

- knowing what benefits and drawbacks learning a second language could have in general
- knowing what benefits and drawbacks learning a particular language could have
- knowing what the nature of language and language learning is
- knowing what elements of the language need to be learned and to what extent for the purpose of one's study
- knowing what are the language elements, if any, that need to be learned regardless of one's purpose, and to what extent
- knowing in what order these elements can be learned
- knowing how much time it would normally take to learn a particular element
- knowing how these elements can be learned
- knowing how objectives can be set and study plans are made
- knowing what are the necessary resources and where they are available
- knowing what kind of language learner one is and how one learns
- knowing how the learning of a particular item can be evaluated as one learns and after one has learned

From the same article, Aoki (ibid.: 113) states some key points for teachers need to be able to do

- trusting students
- creating a psychologically safe learning environment
- providing choices
- leaving room for negotiation with learners
- allowing voice to learners
- providing information
- articulating the rationale of their decision made on behalf of learners so that those decisions are transparent to learners
- stimulating and supporting reflection on cognitive, affective and social aspects of learning

Breen & Man (1997: 145) list that some important factors required to be a teacher of autonomous learners: 1) the attributes which the teacher can bring to their relationship with their students; 2) self-awareness as a learner; 3) belief in each learner's capacity to learn and trust in each learner's capacity to assert their own autonomy; and 4) the desire to foster learner autonomy.

All in a word, teachers need to develop the helping skills of one-to-one therapeutic counseling in order to help learners undergo a transformation in their beliefs (Kelly, 1996). Dickinson (1987: 122) details the role of teachers as a helper.

The ideal helper is warm and loving. He accepts and cares about the learner and about his problems, and takes them seriously. He is willing to spend time helping. He is approving supportive, encouraging and friendly; and he regards the learner as an equal. As a result of these characteristics, the learner feels free to approach him and can talk freely and easily with him in a warm and relaxed atmosphere.

In the process of autonomous language learning, the role of the teacher is very important, however, we need to remember “whether it is possible to ‘teach’ learners how to be autonomous without at the same time denying their autonomy” (Benson, 1997b: 9). Therefore, partnership is a key word for autonomous teaching and learning. According to Bazzaz’s research (2005) on Iranian university teachers’ attitudes towards learner autonomy, it is certain that support for learner autonomy will increase in which the teacher and the learner are partners. The teacher is aware of his/her personality and his/her pedagogy, and acts as a manager, as a resource person, and as a counselor.

4. Learner Autonomy Research Methods

As mentioned earlier, it is said that effectiveness of instruction for autonomous learning has not been done enough and “very few of the present or past methods and techniques for language learning are solidly based on research results” (Dickinson, 1987: 1). Since learner autonomy is an internal factor which is hard to be observed, at present, there is no specific method to assess it, and we still lack global measures that allow us to judge whether a learner has become more autonomous or not (Benson, 2001). Due to some important factors influence the possibility of measuring degrees of autonomy as Benson (ibid.) points out: 1) autonomy is clearly a multidimensional construct; 2) the nature of autonomy is various for different people; 3) the nature of the acquisition of autonomy as a developmental process, autonomy is only being measured indirectly through performance by introspective methods, such as questionnaires collection, self-reports and learning journals writing, and interviews for getting learners’ experiences. Then, based on the reflection and reasoning or data analysis, researches on learner autonomy can be carried out.

4.1 Action Research

Data-based action research is one of the ways of studying learner autonomy. Although it is often considered a well used way for teachers to improve their teaching, in the context of autonomous learning, this teaching improvement should be regarded as improvement of teacher autonomy as

well. There are several action researches included in Benson's book (2001) for researching autonomy. Press's questionnaire research (2001) confirms her hypothesis that Asian students were likely to resist independent study and self-access. The best approach to learner training would be one that allows students to explore their own needs and preferences rather than one tailored to the assumed needs of different ethnic groups. Yap's case study (2001) on out-of-class learning shows that students in her study appear to value opportunities to speak English, but often lack confidence and opportunity to do so, so teachers might provide students with speaking opportunities. She applies a self-report questionnaire and conversation with her students, a semi-structured interview, which is based on the questionnaire results. Three conclusions are from this study: 1) all of the students created opportunities to use English outside; 2) no correlation between out-of-class use of English and proficiency; 3) both low- and high-proficiency students tended to value out-of-class learning equally. O'dowd's five case studies (2002) demonstrate some hidden problems of self-access center for autonomous learning. As stated earlier, although the goal of self-access centers is to enable each student to study at their own speed, "the reality is that not all students are equipped with sufficient self-management skills or awareness of learning strategies" and many may be willing to go back to their traditionally teacher-centered classrooms.

4.2 Portfolio

Portfolio use has great potential to promote learner responsibility and independence. It has different meanings to different teachers, and the basic three types are: showcase portfolios, collections portfolios, and assessment portfolios (Shimo, 2003). "Showcase portfolio" is typically used to display a student's best work to parents and school administrators. "Collection portfolios" contain all of a student's work and "assessment portfolios" are focused reflections of specific learning goals that contain systematic collections of student work, student self-assessment, and teacher assessment (referenced from Shimo, 2003). Basically, assessment portfolios are different from the others in that students go over their previous and present work, and choose items to put into their folder according to certain criteria. The items are usually not only the best work, as is the case of showcase portfolios, but include various kinds of work to show ongoing learning processes, too. One of the main benefits of portfolio assessment is the promotion of learner reflection. By having reflection as part of the portfolio process, students are asked to think about their needs, goals, weakness, and strengths in language learning, which enhances feelings of learner ownership of their work and increase opportunities for dialogs between students and teachers about curricular goals and learner progress. Council of Europe¹ has made "the European language portfolio" as an instrument to promote autonomous learning.

In most cases, portfolio as an assessment instrument is widely applied. Izumi's research (2003) applies portfolio self-assessment as a part of autonomous learning project. Coomber & Barlow (2004) uses portfolio as a measure of writing ability in two Arabian universities. Nunes (2004) reports portfolio use in a Portuguese high school. He suggests how the students' reflections can help the teacher make informed decisions and choices in the classroom, and also how portfolios

contribute to a greater student involvement in the teaching-learning process, and to more autonomous learners of English. Malone (2003) uses portfolio on a teacher training course for pre-service Japanese teachers of English. She asks her students to keep portfolios as a record of their developing understanding of what effective teaching entails. Shimo (2003) reports on the use of portfolio in students' native language. She shows that portfolio as a helpful instrument for encouraging learners to reflect on their own learning process, but at the same time she shows the limitations and constraints involved in implementing portfolio.

Although many programs are moving toward portfolio assessment as opposed to the traditional, holistic assessment, still portfolio use has not yet become a substantial assessment or instructional tool at any level of education in Japan. More qualitative exploration of portfolio is needed.

4.3 Learning Journals and Diary Study

Learning journals and diaries are seen as a useful means to help learners self-monitor, self-assess and become critically reflective (Cotteral, 1995; Nunan, Lai & Keobke, 1999; Usuki, 2001; Yang 2005a).

Barfield (2003) tries to explore the parallel development of teacher and learner autonomy through a student's learning diary. The student's diaries make him think closely about his own teaching assumptions and habits and "understand better ways to learn, research, and teach". Lor (2001) collects 12 students who write 10 entries or more reflection journals in order to answer: 1) what kind of things do students reflect upon; 2) to what extent could their journal entries be described as reflective. She analyzes journals from six categories of objects of reflection: learning events or situations, the learners' role in the learning process, the learners' feelings about learning and learning events, learning gains, difficulties encountered in the process of learning, decision and plans. Lor concludes that the students in her study found the process of reflection in journal writing difficult. They are often unsure what they should write and looked to her for guidance. With some exceptions, their journal entries are neither well integrated nor transformation. Teachers should aim to provide students with challenging experiences that provoke deeper reflection and with opportunities to discuss the processes of learning that arise from them. The study suggests, however, that for many language learners positive or negative feelings are often the starting point for conscious reflection. It also suggests that the process of planning independent learning activities is crucially affected by affect. Reflections upon positive feelings can confirm the learner's sense of the rightness of a plan. Negative feelings about learning experiences can become occasion for deeper reflection leading to changes in plan (Comments are referenced from Benson (2001: 207)).

Usuki (2001), Nachi (2002), Yang (2005a) also use a journal or diary system throughout the semester to allow students to record classroom activities and their reactions to those activities as well as their language learning in general. Some problems of journal writing practice in the Japanese EFL learning context which are pointed out by Yang (2005a: 91) are helpful for those

who are interested in the same field. She emphasizes that when we apply journal writing as a way to encourage learner autonomy, we must be aware of “learner individual difference, invisible effect, long-term practice, teacher’s working condition”.

5. Instruction for Autonomous Learning

In the following part, various practices for autonomous learning will be summarized.

5.1 Developing Learner Autonomy through Oral Practice

Britten (2002) helps his students to advance in a natural way of conversation by TALK learning system, which provides chances for learners to negotiate with each other. Nix’s research (2003) investigates approaches for fostering academic literacy and learner autonomy in group project work. Abe (2003) encourages her students to get used to speaking English by employing children videos in a period of 5 weeks, to raise their awareness of their own learning processes, and to facilitate their motivation to speak. Voller and Pickard (1996) describe a conversation exchange scheme in which there is minimal teacher involvement, and in which learner autonomy is developed, not through training or therapeutic dialogue, but through experience. Mizuki (2003) applies presentation activities to instruct the students in metacognitive strategies, and he helps his students to manage, direct, and regulate their own learning when they prepare and practice their presentations. He states that giving students choices and requiring them to be responsible for their own learning are the most important conditions for encouraging autonomy. In addition to these, developing critical reflection was a key issue in his study. He believes that students’ critical thinking is closely related to learner autonomy, and self-reflection promotes students’ awareness of being independent learners. Christopher & Ho (1996) report on a self-access film discussion project, in which learners watched and then discussed (in a group) a series of movies. The success of their project suggests that interaction in a non-threatening group situation can be a powerful way of building self-esteem—one of the preconditions for developing learner autonomy.

5.2 Developing Learner Autonomy through Projects and Activities

Project work has long been associated with learner-centered teaching. It plays a role of transferring responsibility for the management of learning from teacher to learners.

In Jones’s study (2002), she discusses how she has observed students’ learning strategies and made them aware of other strategies they are not employing that may be useful to them. She believes that autonomous learning should gradually progress from dependence on the teacher to interdependence and independence. Students-to-students dictation, student-controlled listening exercise and encouraging students to participate in material selection are activities she applies. Izumi (2001) applies a workstation and learner-centered project study. Senior high school students in her research are proved to be able to more actively involve in autonomous learning.

Workstation which focuses on cooperative learning after new lesson is a form of reviewing including five micro skills: reading, writing, listening, speaking, grammar and vocabulary. By means of learner-centered project study, participants in this study are able to use internet, write handouts, make presentation in English, understand the ways of asking and answering questions and evaluate their own study. Although students are more confident about their study than before and are able to understand their weakness, still they are far from being autonomous learners. Rome can't be made in a day.

The effects of project work on promoting reflection on language learning as well as increased motivation and improved English proficiency is improved by Stephenson & Kohyama (2003)'s research. Their students carry out a project of their choice outside of class over a semester, including watching news programs on TV, writing a diary or reading children's books. At the end of the semester, they give presentations on their projects.

Implementing project work, creation of cooperative learning environment as an important factor is mentioned by Takagi (2003). She discusses how cooperative learning works to promote student autonomy in her reading class. Judging from her observation and the students' comments in the interviews and journals, she can conclude that cooperative learning works well that it fosters the students' intrinsic motivation and encourages them to take responsibility for their learning.

Brown (2002) lists eight phases for project process: stimulus, definition of the project objectives, practice of language skills, design of written materials, group activities, collating information, organization of material, and final presentation.

5.3 Developing Learner Autonomy through Writing

There are some practice of relinquishing control and trusting students to be their best through various writing activities. Greenfield & Livingston (2003) ask students to practice writing arguments in order to enhance their ability to think autonomously and critically. Cunningham & Carlton (2003)'s newsletter project give students a chance to produce a professional-looking newsletter on Microsoft Publisher. Students choose positions either on reporter teams or as editorial staff. Students in this project become more motivated, rising to the challenge of accepting responsibility, and making their own decisions. Bollinger & Murray (2002) give students an opportunity to begin expressing themselves freely in English without focusing on correction in computer-based writing courses. There is a wide range of English proficiency levels and computer backgrounds, so students are strongly encouraged to work together and to help their neighbors if they need assistance. This cooperation builds confidence and promotes a positive group dynamic and students are motivated to take charge of their own learning.

5.4 Developing Learner Autonomy through Self-reflection

In most autonomy researches, reflection is another buzz word for autonomous learning, which helps students understand their learning goals, be aware of the learning process and learning

progress in general. Small's learning worksheet (2002) gives students the means to pay greater attention to the learning process, critique their own performances, and indeed sharpen their mental approaches to learning a language.

Carroll's discourse analysis research (2002: 117) helps students connect what they learn in the classroom with what they hear, or would hear, in real communication situations outside it by letting them to look at their own use of language.

Nunan's research (quoted from Nunan, 1996) finds that opportunities of learners to reflect on the learning process through the use of guided journals lead to greater sensitivity to the learning process over time. Six implications toward autonomous learning Nunan summarizes from this research is as follows: 1) there are identifiable differences in the ways in which different learners approach the task of learning another language and these will be reflected in the extent to which they either desire autonomy, or are capable of developing it; 2) autonomy is enhanced when learners are actively involved in productive use of the target language; 3) autonomy is enhanced when learners are given opportunities to select content and learning tasks and also when they are provided with opportunities to evaluate their own progress; 4) autonomy is enhanced when learners are given opportunities to activated their language outside the classroom; 5) autonomy is enhanced when learners are encouraged to find their own language data and create their own learning tasks; 6) autonomy is enhanced when learners are encouraged to self-monitor and self-assess.

6. Learner Autonomy Assessment

In the process of 'acquiring autonomy' or 'becoming more autonomous', there is still no specific assessment. In Benson (2001: 51), as mentioned above, the measurement of autonomy is problematic for a number of reasons: 1) the most important factor influencing the possibility of measuring degrees of autonomy is the factor that autonomy is clearly a multidimensional construct; 2) a second problem in the measurement of autonomy concerns the nature of the construct; 3) a third factor affecting our ability to measure degrees of autonomy concerns the nature of acquisition of autonomy as a developmental process. Riley (1996) also agrees with the complexity of learner autonomy assessment by using the blind man and the bubble story to show us the question whether "we possess the methodological and conceptual tools which are appropriate to the study of autonomy, self-directed learning and self-access".

In traditional educational context, evaluation is one of the primary functions and responsibility of the teacher. Learners' ability to monitor their learning and evaluate their success is not an issue because the teacher and the institution will determine when sufficient learning has taken place (Simonian & Robertson, 2002). Whereas in autonomous learning, self-evaluation could be a crucial skill for learners to acquire in order to maximize their learning and reach their potential as autonomous learners. For example, Shimabayashi & Okada (2004) ask their students to set up their own grading criteria. By setting their own goals and emphasis in learning, students' active participation in class is increased. However, Nachi (2003)'s quantitative and qualitative researches

show that attitudes towards self-assessment among teachers and students are complex and wide-ranging. Teachers in her research regard self-assessment slightly more positively than students, while students believe that students and teachers are looking at learning from different angles, using different knowledge and criteria. Therefore, the defining evaluative criteria is particularly important (Simonian & Robertson, 2002). Only when learners possess an understanding of the criteria used to evaluate their performance, may they take control and be responsible for their learning. Chihiro's self-assessment project (1996) indicates that self-assessment help learners establish adequate internal standards and develop identity as a successful learner. However she also raises a question about self-assessment on whether it is fair to use learners' self-rating as a part of the course mark when learners' gender, cultural, educational and developmental backgrounds are so diverse and self-ratings across the groups may differ significantly (*ibid.*: 89). After describing a project in which groups of undergraduate students designed and conducted tests to assess their peer's speaking ability, Miller and Ng (1996) however states that the attitude to the process and reliability of peer assessment are on the whole not positive.

Apart from self-evaluation, questionnaire is another way of autonomy assessment. Scharle & Szabó (2000)'s questionnaire on responsible attitudes is suggested to use to raise students awareness toward language learning. Yang (2006) constructs a 56-item inventory to measure learner autonomy degrees of her Japanese EFL students. The result of factor analysis of it indicates that Japanese learners are comparatively poor at activeness, making plans and flexibility, while they are quite good at self-control, taking actions and concentration. Similar with Yang (2006), five criteria proposed for the evaluation whether a practice more likely to support rather than suppress learners' ability to make their own decisions in Esch (1996) include choice, flexibility, adaptability, reflectivity and shareability.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, many researches connected with autonomous learning and teaching are critically summarized. However, since the concept of autonomy as it has developed in the field of language learning is complex and multifaceted (Benson, 1996), this brief overview of researches merely reflect some parts of this field. One of the famous saying well quoted to show characteristics of learner autonomy– “you can bring the horse to water, but you cannot make him drink”, indicates learning can only happen if learners are willing to do. In order for learners to be actively involved in the learning process, teachers' responsibility is not to patiently waiting them to be thirsty, but to show them the way to the water, and let them to be prepared to be able to drink by themselves.

Notes

1. Council of Europe: founded in 1946. Forty six countries, including twenty-one countries from Central and Eastern Europe joined. After 1989, its main job has become: 1) acting as a political anchor and human rights; 2) assisting these countries political, legal and constitutional reform in parallel with economic reform; 3) providing know-how in areas such as human rights, local democracy, education, culture and the environment (English translation is quoted from Dr. Michael Byram's special lecture in Kansai University in Sep.2005.)
2. The European Language Portfolio: it was developed and piloted by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, Strasbourg, from 1998 until 2000. It was launched on a pan-European level during the European Year of Languages as a tool to support the development of plurilingualism and pluriculturalism. It is a document in which those who are learning or have learned a language - whether at school or outside school - can record and reflect on their language learning and cultural experiences. The portfolio contains a language passport which its owner regularly updates. A grid is provided where his/her language competences can be described according to common criteria accepted throughout Europe and which can serve as a complement to customary certificates. The document also contains a detailed language biography describing the owner's experiences in each language and which is designed to guide the learner in planning and assessing progress. Finally, there is a dossier where examples of personal work can be kept to illustrate one's language competences. See the reference from: [http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/inc.asp?L=E&M=\\$t/208-1-0-1/main_pages/welcome.html](http://culture2.coe.int/portfolio/inc.asp?L=E&M=$t/208-1-0-1/main_pages/welcome.html)

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