

Enhancing Learners' Autonomy in Vocabulary Learning in EFL Libyan Classroom

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ABSTRACT

One of the most challenging issues that EFL learners encounter is vocabulary learning. Teaching methodologies, nowadays, take into consideration learner autonomy compared to the past that depends totally on instructors. The aim of the study is to address the importance of learning autonomy in teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in Libyan context as teachers can facilitate learning process by demonstrating certain strategies where necessary. This study also focuses on exploring how students experience out-of-class autonomous vocabulary learning. A questionnaire and interview were used in this study. The questionnaire is meant for the students and the interview is for teachers. The participants of the study were 15 students and 5 teachers. The findings reveal that learners are eager to be enhanced to learn vocabulary autonomously and need to be guided by their teachers using effective strategies. It is very important to apply autonomous learning to develop vocabulary knowledge as students lack lexical competence.

INTRODUCTION

Vocabulary, or word meaning, plays an important role in using the four skills: reading, speaking, listening and writing. It is one of the subfields of language learning (Nation, 2001; Richard and Renandya, 2002; Schmitt, 2010). Without understanding word meaning, students will not be able to comprehend any written or spoken discourse. Learners' prior experience is of a vital importance in developing vocabulary. They need effective ways to improve vocabulary size to be engaged in intensive and extensive vocabulary size. The necessity of learners' autonomy in education is highly acknowledged by some educators. Benson (2003) stated that motivated students who think and work strategically have self confidence in their own learning ability.

The role of the teachers is highly acknowledged in motivating students to take accountability to monitor, suggest, and evaluate their learning in cooperation with teachers. Ultimately, they will learn better because learning is controlled by the learners themselves (Almusharraf, 2018). Therefore, the importance of learners' autonomy is widely acknowledged. Many researchers and educators, over the last years, focused on Autonomous Learning and its implications for teaching and learning (Abdullah & Mohamed, 2015; Genç, 2015; Ezzaidi, 2020). Today, learners tend to be more autonomous learners, that is, they are responsible for their own learning (Imane, 2015). Moreover, learning autonomy gives the priority to learners to be free to plan and design their learning. They will be able to select what they learn, when and how accordingly. Learning autonomy changes its role from teacher-centered approach to learner-centered approach which reflects positively on the learning process (Boyadzhieva, 2016).

Many EFL Libyan students in secondary schools learn vocabulary limitedly, therefore vocabulary size is little, and so they do not realize vocabulary size that they have. This reflects negatively in understanding the number of words in their text books. They cannot express themselves due to the lack of vocabulary in Sebha secondary schools, because they do not have the chance to practice English outside the classroom. Through different research studies regarding autonomous learning, it was realized that there is very little work in this neglected area of research in Libya. The objective of this study is to enhance learners' autonomy in vocabulary learning in Libyan context as well as the role of the teachers to come up with different strategies that will pave students' path in terms of vocabulary learning.

This study seeks to answer the following questions:

- (1) How do secondary EFL students perceive out-of-class autonomous vocabulary-learning?
- (2) What sort of strategies that can be used to enhance autonomous vocabulary learning?

THEORETICAL REVIEW

What is Learner Autonomy?

In a common sense learning autonomy is when learner is responsible of his/ her own learning. Borg and Al-Busaidi (2012) and Humphreys & Wyatt (2014) referred learner autonomy (LA) as it is one of the major theoretical

constructs in language learning. Similarity, in English language teaching field, learner autonomy is widely acknowledged. It is considered by teachers as an approach that has a positive impact on EFL students when learning English. Ultimately, autonomous learning could enhance learners to make decisions for their learning.

Autonomous learning is widely defined by a number of scholars. "Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's learning" (Holec, 1981, p.3). It is noted that all the instructions being given in class remain theoretical and they failed to apply what they have learnt in the world beyond the classroom. Though, it is important to promote the sense of collaboration in and outside that classroom as to bring the theoretical points into practice. Collaboration with members of the community leads to successful autonomous learners.

Recently, in the field of language education, learner autonomy is considered a big change due to the fact that it stresses the role of learner rather than the teacher's role. As it is referred to by McGary (1995) in terms of autonomous learner, students who are occasionally instructed by giving them the chance to be responsible of their own work are likely to be able to develop strategies, evaluate and assess their own work, plan programs to deal with new and unforeseen situations. In general, they will be more realistic and learn from their own successes and failures in ways which will help them to be more efficient learners in the future.

The Significance of Vocabulary

In 1970s and 1980s, the concept of autonomy has been central to language teaching and learning. It is used by individuals to express their need and thoughts. Absolutely, autonomy is crucial because it provides learners to be responsible of their learning as the teacher's role is supportive to encourage the students to recognize the value of autonomous learning.

Similarly, Onozawa (2010) indicates three reasons for the significance of autonomy: (i) enhance the diversity of cultural and educational background, (ii) developing learner individuality and (iii) fostering a survival capacity to cope with rapid social changes. Students can take control of their own learning which helps in developing motivation that is important in learning (Benson, 2001). In short, Autonomy is a good indicator that enhances students' confidence, sense of responsibility, and motivation.

Autonomy in ELT Libyan Classroom

In the past, teaching English in Libyan schools starts from the fifth grade. Recently, it turns to start from the first grade. Grammar translation method in teaching vocabulary is used by a fair number of teachers in the class, although the curriculum is based on communicative approach. Therefore, English syllabus varied to serve the needs of the entire students. But teachers still use grammar-translation method to teach vocabulary.

In class, the focus is on teaching grammatical role more than teaching vocabulary as part of the school syllabus. The use of grammar-translation method was clearly seen in the English classroom in the past and still continues

to do so (Altaieb, 2013). From Libyan learners' perspective, the main focus is on memorizing English grammar rules compared to lexical items. What concerns vocabulary teaching in class is that it is simply restricted to giving learners a long list of English words together in Arabic translation. As a result, the outcome that students come up with is English word forms and their Arabic translation. Additional information about new words (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, English definitions etc.) is possible and all depends on whether or not each individual teacher provides this extra information. In this sense, realizing the significance of autonomy in learning is very crucial. Consequently, the students will not be able to make use of the available resources.

Autonomous Vocabulary Learning

The lack of opportunities to use the language can be compensated through autonomous learning (Sawan, 2016). Autonomy helps to foster Libyan students' vocabulary learning. For fostering autonomous learning, Benson (2001) recommended some approaches including technology-based approaches that enable learners to invest in their learning growth and encouraging independent communication in learning materials.

Mastering vocabulary is an indicator of success in English learning. Kaur (2013) states that EFL autonomous vocabulary gives a chance to learners gain learning goals. In vocabulary learning, the growth of lexical items lies in learners' hands and identifies the extent of success and failure. In this respect, a number of studies conducted to show what extent the notion of autonomous vocabulary learning is applicable. Khalifa & Shabdin (2016) have showed that students who fully depend only on classroom instruction will have problems in university. In terms of the relationship between autonomy and practice, it is found that the more motivated the participants are, the more autonomous they are (Sawan, 2018). Another study conducted investigated the teacher and learner practices and perceptions in relation to learner autonomy in a secondary school in Libya. The findings showed that teachers boost students' confidence and allow learners to be responsible and active by themselves and they generally perceived themselves as adopting such roles (Almahjoub, 2014).

Strategies to Learn Vocabulary Autonomously

Autonomous learner is the one who uses different learning strategies. Griffiths (2018) referred to a number of strategies used to assist learners in terms of vocabulary learning:

1. Memory Strategies

Memory strategies are those techniques used to remember vocabulary in a very effective way to create a mental link, group and place new words into a context (Oxford, 1996).

2. Cognitive Strategies

This type of strategies directly deals with language and promotes remembering and processing information (Griffiths, 2018).

3. Metacognitive Strategies

These strategies represent mental operations used by learners in the self-management of their learning such as planning, self-monitoring, self-management, self-evaluation, and directed attention (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

4. Compensation Strategies

Those strategies are selected by learners to overcome any difficulties faced by learners while learning such as synonym or even an antonym to keep communicating and learning (Oxford, 2017).

5. Affective Strategies

Affective strategies deals with the regulation of emotions and feelings while learning to reduce anxiety such as watching films, listening to songs, breathing and (Oxford, 2017).

6. Social Strategies

Oxford (2017) explained that these strategies make learners interact with each other for the sake of communication. They can ask for correction, question or explanation from their teachers, parents and friends. That creates a good atmosphere for cooperation and interaction with others. Generally, the role of vocabulary learning strategies cannot be denied as they facilitate and increase language learner's receptive and productive lexical knowledge as being the core of language learning. (Decarrico, 2001). Successful and Motivated learners are those who are responsible for their own learning and use suitable strategies to learn vocabulary autonomously compared to learners who do not use such efficient learning strategies are not so successful. In which case, the role of the teachers is to teach how to learn vocabulary autonomously (Shawwa, 2000).

In EFL classes, a number of studies have investigated the relationship between vocabulary learning strategies and autonomy. Findings of a research study conducted by Azimi Mohammad Abadi and Baradaran (2013) to trace the relationship between learning autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies showed that there was a positive correlation between learner autonomy and vocabulary learning strategies use in high proficient group, and a significant positive relationship between these two constructs in low proficient group. In line with this study, Little (1995) proposed that the relationship between learner autonomy and learning strategies is so close that one can conclude how autonomous learners are from the strategies they use in learning. He believed that emphasizing on language learning strategies will lead to learner autonomy.

Teachers' Role to Promote Autonomous Learning

On one hand, the teacher's role is restricted to be a facilitator in learner autonomous world of vocabulary learning. However, on the other hand, teachers' role is no longer passive during the learning process. The teachers can monitor, teach vocabulary in line with tasks in hand, and provide strategies which help retention. Moreover, teachers might guide the students by teaching them strategies to learn vocabulary autonomously such as deep vocabulary learning strategies that take more time but ensure greater retention and ease from memory. Those strategies include learning lists. Different reading texts on

the same theme ensure multiple exposure to relevant items. Murdibjono (2010) points out that it is very important to master reading skill. Reading authentic material in English seems to be, to some extent, unavoidable. Carrell and Carson (1997) indicate that extensive reading enables learners to read large number of texts in the target language and focus on meaning rather than on language. In this case teachers can activate the use of autonomous learning through a number of activities and the feedback given by the students. Hargreaves (2014) investigated that students' autonomous learning capacity can be developed by using classroom feedback. The findings showed a positive effect on students' learning. The findings revealed the more students are allowed to assess their work, the more students' learning outcomes improve.

Additionally, building up deep knowledge through word associations and revising to ensure retention and using dictionaries extensively. Teachers may have a clear and ongoing role both in using deep strategies in class work and the actual use of them. That is applicable for weaker learners who tend to use even shallow strategies ineffectively, do not read widely enough and they guess inaccurately from context and later do not modify their wrong guesses. In any case, the teacher's responsibility is to foster the student's ability of autonomous learning through numerous steps such as by creating positive atmosphere, designing class activities and making students who want to learn and know how to learn. Multi-level of students in class imposes teachers to develop autonomy because vocabulary learning is unique to each student. In addition, the class time for vocabulary should be devoted to acquire what they really need. With all these points in mind, it is a must for all the learners to study vocabulary on their own as well as the best techniques that the teacher can provide is to assist them be more autonomous (Scharle, 2000).

METHODOLOGY

Sixteen students were selected randomly from different classes to participate in the study from Fezzan Secondary School. Random sampling technique was used to select the participants, because this can provide a chance to the population to be a part of sampling process (Creswell, 2012, Taherdoost, 2016). They study English as a foreign language. Among the number of participants, there were 9 males and 6 females.

Five female teachers took part in this study. They were invited to be interviewed for about half an hour discussion. They are the only teachers in the above mentioned school. They are all teaching English as a foreign language.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To answer the first research question of how do secondary-school-students perceive out-of-class autonomous vocabulary learning, the following table represent the results obtained from the questionnaire.

Table 1. Participants' Feedback of Questionnaire

After class I will	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Find my own way of learning new words	2	11	1	1	0
Read many reading material to enlarge vocabulary size	3	8	2	2	0
Review newly-learned words	5	3	6	1	0
Check the meaning of any new words	4	4	6	1	0
Ask for help for the meaning of a new word	9	4	2	0	0
Set my own learning goals	6	7	1	1	0
Have a plan of accumulating words	3	4	0	0	0
Monitor my own learning progress	7	8	0	0	0
Go to the self-access center or library	4	4	1	5	1
Always encourage myself to speak English with new words.	10	4	1	0	0

As can be seen from the table above, the answers varied from one participant to another. The participants are not fully aware of autonomous leaning and how it can be applied when learning vocabulary. They are willing to learn but still need to have a push to the right direction. In line with these findings, it is believed by Candy (1991) that autonomy is one of the best ways of effective learning. She adds that there must be a sort of collaboration between the teacher and the students to meet students' needs.

In terms of asking help for the meaning of new words, the vast majority of the participants reported that they really seek help. It was found that students go to self-access center or library to widen their knowledge about vocabulary. That is because they insufficient amount of vocabulary. In terms of motivation, students need to be encouraged to do well in and outside classroom. For example, combining strongly agree and agree answer, 14 students reported that they encourage themselves to use the new words.

There are unsatisfactory answers from the participants regarding reviewing and checking new words that all their answers remain neutral. That is due to the fact either they are not highly motivated or do not have time as they are doing other courses besides that. This evidence shows that the participants rarely spend time out of class to learn vocabulary autonomously.

Learners should be assessed through different strategies to be aware of what they learn, when and how.

The students who filled the questionnaire were set by the researcher to a short discussion to freely give their feedback on a number of items related to autonomous vocabulary learning. The results obtained from the discussion revealed that some of the participants were not sure about what autonomous learning is or even its value. Some did not reflect on some questions because of their insufficient information about the topic under investigation. Regarding their opinion of autonomous learning, some reported that it is good to achieve one's goals; others replied that "it is difficult and one requires some sort of guidance from the teachers or peers. As for the socio-cultural factors that affect learning vocabulary, one said "English is a foreign language; it is not possible to use that language within the society. Besides that time is not enough to learn vocabulary after class due to the number of courses they study at school. Likewise, the community plays a vital role in motivating learners by providing facilities to learn out-of-class. To be successful autonomous learners, it requires collaboration with other members of the community. Additionally, Harmer (2007) states that group work facilitates collaboration and negotiation. It allows the students to make their own decisions within the group without the intervention of the teacher. The participants were not sure about the first step how to control learning themselves as the concept of autonomous learning is new to them. It is widely acknowledged by the participants that "the role of the teachers is highly recommended in supporting autonomous learning". Their feedback goes round the fact that "besides teaching the meaning of the words in class, they have to direct us how to do that autonomously out-of-class". In this case the students' use of the target language will improve. The findings of a study conducted by Little (2008) highlights this point. The findings have shown that learner autonomy has a positive affect the growth of target language proficiency.

Additionally, they referred to the dominant role of the teachers "to encourage the students as well as to put their finger on the weakness points regarding learning vocabulary". They all pointed that the teachers should help them monitor learning.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The overall objective of this study is to enhance learning vocabulary autonomously. For learners, learning vocabulary is not an easy task. It is suggested that learners can start with every day words to ease learning process. Teachers cannot teach all vocabulary to learners. However, teachers' role is to facilitate learning and instruct them regularly to depend on themselves by adopting strategies that go in line with students specific needs in learning vocabulary. With these strategies in mind, learners will find that vocabulary learning is effective when engaging in learning tasks. Rich context are a good source of vocabulary learning. Learners should set their own learning goals, go to self-access center to study, use the new words that they come across to recall

when necessary. Students should read many materials to enlarge size of vocabulary to be used in the written as well as the spoken discourse.

FURTHER STUDY

It would be more encouraging that this study would be implemented on a large number of participants and to see whether gender plays a vital role in learning vocabulary autonomously. The researchers of the present study would like to explore the relation between learners' autonomy and academic performance.

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