

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Promoting Autonomy for Solving Some Problems of Underachieving Language Learners**

For several years, foreign language educators have tried to assist the students who struggle to learn a foreign language. Moreover, there has been a worldwide increasing effort directed toward the study of language learners with learning difficulties (Ganschow & Sparks, 2001, p. 79). These learners are called, by foreign language (FL) educators, underachievers (Ganschow & Sparks, 2001, p. 82).

Several studies have found that affective factors, such as motivation, anxiety, and self-esteem, play a considerable role in underachievement (Dornyei, 1998; Stahl, 1999; Young, 1999). In addition, Barton's (1997) study revealed that poor performance of language learners was due to factors such as dependent study habits established at childhood, threatening classroom environment, and the absence of parental guidance. Thus, some educators have mentioned that new roles of

teachers should involve the promotion of autonomous learning among foreign language underachievers (O'Laoire, 1998; Yang, 1998).

Lee (1998) and Barbot (1997) say that in the last ten years learner autonomy has become a key issue in English language teaching and learning. Therefore, as they mention, language learners should be trained, by their teachers, to be autonomous. Furthermore, educators are recommended to introduce language teachers, through teacher-training programs, into the concepts and principles of autonomous learning (Tamme & Rosler, 2000).

Dias (2000) describes, metaphorically, the roles expected from FL teachers in autonomous learning saying that it should not be based on a "help yourself" concept. In the sense that if the host (teacher) leaves the guests (learners) to help themselves at the host's home (class), they may be confused because of their unfamiliarity of home equipments. Hence, Dias believes that the teacher's active presence in

autonomous learning is essential and effective.

### **A Problem faced by our students**

After the present author had explained to his university level students the characteristics of underachievers, a group of 16 students declared to him that they suffer from being underachievers supporting their declaration with the following statements:

1. We had problems in studying materials.
2. We just study for the exam.
3. We could have better scores in exams if they did much more effort.
4. We were not satisfied with our proficiency level, because we could have been better.
5. We thought that our professors should have directed us to be better language learners.
6. We found ourselves pushed to do efforts that could lead us only to pass exams successfully.

Obviously, the problems that those learners suffered

from could be labeled under "underachievement problems", which will be discussed later in detail. These problems impeded the students from achieving the linguistic and academic levels which coincide with their potentialities, intelligence, and language ability. A major reason for such problems might be the unfamiliarity of these students with autonomous learning which is considered essential for:

1. language learning (Stoller, White & Wong, 1998; Duquette & Renie, 1999; Littlewood, 1999),
2. studying at the university level (Noels, Clement & Pelletier, 1999; McDevitt, 1997; Walsh, 2001), and
3. preparing oneself to be successful teacher (Lee, 1998; Pothier, 1998; Yeung & Hyland, 2000).

### **Underachievers**

In their study on foreign language learning difficulties, Ganschow and Sparks (2001, p. 81) describe underachievers as those students who are unsuccessful in the study of foreign languages. They add that these students have specific learning disabilities in understanding and/or using language,

consequently, they have imperfect abilities to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations in English (p. 82).

Delisle and Berger (1990, p. 1) refer to underachieving students as those learners who do not perform as well academically as their potential indicates they can. Moreover, Brophy (1996, p. 140) defines underachieving students as the learners who are not oriented toward academic achievement and thus do the minimum required from them rather than their best work. As Brophy mentions, underachievers have a persistent tendency to work below their own abilities and they resist to increase their responsibilities of their own learning for the sake of being better achievers.

The history of language learning distinguishes between three types of learners who have difficulties in learning and who score unsatisfactory achievement progress:

- a. Underachievers** who have normal level of IQ but their academic achievement at school is remarkably lower than

their counterparts with the same level of IQ. Their learning disabilities are due to motivational problems,

- b. **Low achiever** who display poor retention and progress slowly because their IQ test scores are low, but they are within the normal range. They are not described as being retarded but rather slow learners who remain at, or near to, the bottom of the class,
- c. **Retarded students** who can not function in regular classrooms and need to study in special schools. (Adapted from Brophy, 1999, p. 61-66)

Underachieving learners are sometimes called at-risk students. Stoller, White, and Wong (1998, p. 150) describe at-risk students as those learners who have poor study skills, have difficulty studying at university level, and are immature in class behaviors.

### **The Characteristics of Underachievers**

Plewis (1991) declares that it is very difficult to determine certain major characteristics of underachievers since

each one of them has his/her own unique pattern of symptoms and casual factors. However, the following description presents some characteristics of underachievers as seen by specialized educators.

McCall, Evahn, and Kratzer (1992) list 23 personal and behavioral characteristics of underachievers some of them are: low self-concept, low perception of abilities, unrealistic goal setting, lack of persistence, responding impulsively, social immaturity and poor peer relations, aggressive response to authority, and tendency to make excuses for underachievement rather than to accept responsibility and make serious commitment to change.

Bruns (1992) explains that underachievers are "work inhibited"; in the sense that they are unable to engage consistently in the school work unless someone (authority) is standing over them.

The study of Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger, and Pressley

(1990) reveals that underachievers have deficiencies in study skills, self-regulation abilities, motivation, and other personality characteristics.

Furthermore, Brophy (1996, p. 136) illustrates that they can not completely avoid school tasks, thus, they minimize their duties as much as they can; are not challenged by school work; protect their self-concept by devaluing school work and achievement; and project blame for their failure on the teacher or other people.

### **The Treatment of Underachievers**

Delisle and Berger (1990, p. 4) explain that underachievement is a behavior which can be changed by time. They say that it is educators', as well as parents', duty to help underachievers progress. In addition, McCall, Evahn, and Kratzer (1992) think that most of treatment programs have been effective and successful in helping underachievers progress in their academic achievement.

Reviewing Brophy (1996), Bruns (192), and Thompson and Rudolph (1992), the following recommendations were suggested for treating underachievers:

1. Put them under pressure to stop finding excuses for their failure, or rejection to work hard,
2. Give them more responsibilities for their own learning,
3. Train them on study habits, self-regulation skills, and autonomous learning,
4. Encourage them by making classroom tasks more interesting or easier,
5. Help them to be persistent.
6. Be patient with the students who will resist your treatment,
7. Try to change their attitudes through persuasion, and
8. Follow successive approximation.

Furthermore, Delisle and Berger (1990, p. 4) illustrate that underachievers require from educators to alter the structure, and probably the content, of the offered program to meet with these students' specific needs. Hence, several educators indicate that autonomy promotion is essential and

effective in developing the competence of underachievers (e.g. Borkowski, 1990; Deci, 1992; Kohn, 1990; Williams & Burden, 1997).

The National Association for Gifted Children (2001) declares that successful achievers are independent learners who have the characteristics of patience, persistence, strong-will, calmness, and self-direction. Thus, they can be called, unlike underachievers, as autonomous learners.

### **Studies Related to Underachievement**

In their study, Hayes, Norris, and Flaitz (1998) analyzed the spoken narratives of 10 high-achieving and 10 under-achieving gifted adolescents. The results of the study showed that language problems were common in underachievers. These problems were concerned with the quality of their production such as: number of statements, referring to characters, number of complex grammatical sentences, and ending a story.

Noels, Clement and Pelletier (1999) conducted a study to investigate the roles played by intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation on improving achievement in a second language university course. Among other findings, the results of the study revealed that when the teacher put the students under excessive pressure their intrinsic motivation and self-regulation were reduced, consequently their achievement was reduced.

Porte's (1998) study aimed at training underachieving EFL learners to be competent writers. The sample of the study was 71 underachieving EFL graduates. The study focused on developing revision strategies through semi-structured interviews. These interviews took place over a 9-month period. The study recommended that teachers needed to give their underachieving EFL learners revision strategy training.

Place's (1997) study aimed at assisting underachieving learners of French and German. That researcher gave the learners homework to be accomplished at home as an

extension of classroom work for the sake of improving learners' speaking performance. The learners had to record the take-home tasks to revise their performance by themselves, and then to discuss them, later, with their teacher in the classroom. The study concluded that giving underachievers tasks to be accomplished individually at home was helpful in improving learners' speaking performance.

Mason and Krashen (1998) investigated whether, or not, bad students or failures in EFL could improve with extensive reading treatment. The sample of the study was a group of university-level students studying EFL in Japan. The study revealed that the bad students who received special care (experimental group) scored significantly better achievement than the subjects of the control group who were taught traditionally. In addition, the experimental group showed a clear improvement in attitude toward reading.

O'Laoire's (1998) research aimed at investigating the effectiveness of autonomous language learning on motivating

language learners to be better achievers. The sample of the study was a group of adolescent Irish learners. Among other findings, the results of the study revealed that promoting autonomy among underachievers were both necessary and effective.

### **Autonomy in Language Learning**

Aoki (1999, p. 142) mentions that Henri Holec introduced the term "learner autonomy" to the field of foreign language pedagogy in the 1970s, as an alternative to the traditional teaching of an FL. Benson (2001, p. 8) believes that the first autonomous language learning project was established in 1971 by the "Centre de Recherches et d'Applications en Langues" (CRAPEL). Yves Chalon was the founder of CRAPEL, consequently, he was the actual father of autonomy in language learning. However, Chalon died in 1972 and the leadership of CRAPEL was passed to Henri Holec who still remains a prominent figure of the field of autonomy until now. (Benson, 2001, p. 8)

Gremmo and Riley (1995) explain that Holec's, and his associates, work was a response to the political thoughts aroused in France in the 1960s. That period of time represented the ideological shift away from consumerism and materialism toward an emphasis on the meaning and value of personal experience, quality of life, personal freedom, and minority rights (Benson, 2001, p. 16). Thus, as Benson says, the notions of "student power", student-centered educational reform", and "locus of control" have begun to be considered by the movement of autonomy in language learning (p. 16).

### **Describing Autonomy**

Little (1990, p. 7) believes that autonomy is not a single easily described behavior. There are several definitions of the notions related to the term autonomy since it is corresponded with learning which has various forms, aspects, and levels.

Aoki (1999, p. 144) defines learner autonomy as a capacity to take control of one's own learning in the service of one's perceived needs and aspirations. Moreover, Aoki refers

to autonomy as the capacity to: (a) make choices concerning what, why, and how to learn, (b) implement the plan, and (c) evaluate the outcomes of learning (p. 144).

Some educators define autonomy from a political perspective. For example, Kenny (1993, p. 436) states that autonomy is not only the freedom to learn but also the opportunity to become a person. Meanwhile, Benson (1997, p. 29) defines learner autonomy as representing a recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems.

Dam et al (1990, p. 102) define an autonomous learner as (a) an active participant in the social process of classroom learning, (b) an active interpreter of new information in terms of what he/she already and uniquely knows, (c) someone who knows how to learn and can use this knowledge in any learning situation he/she encounters at any stage of life, and (d) someone with a readiness to take charge of one's own learning.

Littlewood (1996, p. 428) describes autonomy as a

capacity that involves two components: ability and willingness. As Littlewood explains, ability refers to the knowledge and the skills that the learners possess. Meanwhile, willingness depends on both learners' motivation and confidence to take responsibility in order to perform independently (p. 428).

Ho and Crookall (1995, p. 237) believes that autonomous learners are those students who work independently away from the teachers and this may entail shared decision-making, as well as presenting opinions that differ from those of the teacher.

Nunan (1997, p. 92) argues that autonomy is not an "all-or-nothing concept", but a matter of degree. Nunan adds that educators use terms such as "acquiring autonomy" or "becoming more autonomous" to describe efforts done to develop autonomy in learning.

McDevitt (1997) describes autonomy in language

learning as the learners' capacity to improve their own competence and manage their own learning process. In addition, McDevitt explains that autonomous language learners should perceive the teacher as an advisor and assistant rather than an authoritarian rule-giver.

Cotterall (2000) recommends curricularists to put into their consideration, when designing language courses which aim at emphasizing learner autonomy, the following areas: learner goals, language learning processes, tasks, learner strategies, and reflection on learning. Taking care of such areas, according to Cotterall, will contribute both to learners' control over their own learning process, and to developing their language proficiency.

### **Approaches to Encouraging Autonomy**

Gardner and Miller (1999, p. 8) mention that there are several approaches which could be used to minimize learners' dependence on their teachers, i.e., moving toward autonomy. According to Gardner and Miller, the most common terms to

describe the development of autonomy of language learning are self-directed learning, self-instruction, independent learning, and self-access learning (p. 8).

Benson (2001) classifies the approaches to developing autonomy into six main categories which are described, briefly, below:

**1. Resource-based approaches** which emphasize independent interaction with learning materials. The two major approaches of this category are:

- a. *Self-access* which is described by Gardner and Miller (1999, p. 8) as learners' selection of materials, and their organization of available resources to create a learning environment. The self-access center often acts as a quasi-independent unit where the learners can study in an outside classroom environment,
- b. *Self-instruction* which is described by Jones (1998, p. 378) as a long-term learning project planned and carried out by

the learner with little or no contact with the teacher. It is also called "teach yourself learning materials" (Rosewell & Libben, 1994, p. 668).

**2. *Technology-based approaches*** which foster the power of independent interaction with educational technologies such as Computer-Assisted Language Learning (CALL), and the internet.

**3. *Learner-based approaches*** which involve direct production of behavioral and psychological changes in the learner. They require providing the learners with opportunities to control their learning (such as training the learners on learning strategies).

**4. *Classroom-based approaches*** which seek improving learners' control over the planning and evaluation of classroom learning (such as self-planning, and self-assessment).

**5. *Curriculum-based approaches*** in which the learners are expected to make their major decisions concerning the content

and procedures of learning, in collaboration with their teachers, as well as their decisions related to planning and evaluation.

**6. *Teacher-based approaches*** which emphasize the role of the teacher and teacher education in the practice of fostering autonomy among learners. This category is mainly adopted by the present researcher.

### **Teachers' Roles in Autonomy**

Underhill (1999, p. 140) declares that student-teacher relationship has been changed and control has become more decentralized, democratic, and autonomous. However, Arnold (1999, p. 105) states that learner autonomy is a welcome goal for education but it does not mean the absence of the teacher in learning process.

Gardner and Miller (1999, p. 182) advise researchers, educators, teachers, and teacher-trainers to focus on changing traditional language teachers' roles to be language counselors'

ones. The following table shows some differences between the roles of traditional classroom teachers and language counselor, as described by Gardner and Miller (1999, p. 182):

**Table 2.** The differences between the roles of traditional classroom teachers and counselors of self-access language learning

<b>Teachers</b>	<b>Counselors</b>
the term student is used	the term learner is used
lead the students	collaborate with the learners
syllabus is pre-determined	there are flexible and negotiated pathways
use a textbook only	use an array of materials
assessors of students	help learners self-monitor themselves
instructors/organizers	reflective listeners
use teaching aids	train learners to use materials and equipment
look for common language problems	focus on individual language problems
give feedback on language learning tasks	assist learners to reflect on the outcomes of language learning tasks

*Source: Gardner and Miller (1999, p. 182)*

Kelley (1996, p. 95) lists some counseling skills that language teachers need to practice in order to help their students be more autonomous in their language learning. These skills are: initiating directions and options, helping the learners to set goals, guiding and giving advice, modeling the required behavior, supporting and encouraging the learners, giving feedback as a reaction to the learners' effort, evaluating achievement, linking learners' goals and tasks, and concluding the sequences of work.

### **Reflection**

Louden (1991, p. 149) defines reflection as a mental process which takes place out of the stream of action looking forward or, usually, back to actions that have taken place. Stanley (1999) describes reflection as a tool which involves not only thinking but also feelings, i.e. it is highly related to the role that emotions can play in the reflective process.

Aoki (1999) and Kohonen (1999) mention that autonomous learning requires from language learners to reflect

on their learning and their teachers' teaching processes and experiences in order to gain the benefits of autonomous learning. Furthermore, Gardner and Miller (1999, p. 207) explain that language learners are supposed to reflect on their goals, study plans, and progress.

Moreover, the studies of Candy (1991) and Lor (1998) reveal that reflection is essentially important in adult learning and professional education since experience of practice can serve as a crucial point in learning.

### **Studies Related to Autonomy**

The results of several studies, such as those of Allan (1997), Cresswell (2001), and Jones (1998), revealed that efforts done by educators to promote language learners' autonomy had a significant influence on improving these learners' achievement, language skills, linguistic performance, as well as self-dependence.

In addition, methods of researching autonomous

language learning, mostly depended on case study and action research techniques (e.g. Dam and Legenhausen, 1996; Markey, 1998; Press, 1996). The results of such qualitative studies indicated that promoting language learners' autonomy led to the improvement of their vocabulary acquisition in the first study, responsibility for learning in the second, and self-knowledge in the third.

Using qualitative techniques in researching autonomous language learning, Fowler (1997), Lee (1998), and Lor (1998) made use of students' notes, comments on news paper articles, and journal-writing entries, respectively, as measurement instruments in their studies. Through these instruments, these researchers collected data related to their learners' reflection on their autonomous learning of language.

In their studies, Alberio (2000) and Chevalier (1998) found out that independent learning situations were reported, by EFL users, to be difficult. Hence, language users declared that they needed some sort of a tutor's support and guidance

during their autonomous language learning.

Demaiziere's (2000) study showed that teachers' roles in autonomous language learning were affective, as well as cognitive. It was found out that teachers' positive relationship with learners, and their usage of guided independent learning programs significantly developed their learners' autonomy and their use of learning strategies.

## **Conclusion**

It could be said that the promotion of autonomous learning could improve the academic achievement of underachieving language learners. According to the study of Noels, Clement and Petllier (1999), the students are in need of having their self-regulation fostered in order to be better achievers. In addition, when the students are put under-pressure they start to be more serious, independent and motivated. They have to accomplish certain tasks at home which will lead them, as Place's (1997) study revealed, to improve of their academic achievement. Also, the findings of

the studies of Allan (1997, Cresswell (2001), and Jones (1998) indicate that the promotion of language learner's autonomy had a significant influence on treating language learners' deficiencies considering achievement, language skills, linguistic performance, and self-dependence.

Furthermore, one should realize that the promotion of autonomous learning does not mean the absence of the teacher. Rather, it means changing teacher's roles to be more guiding. Thus, researchers and educators are recommended to give more care to the notion of *teaching for promoting autonomy*.

Moreover, researchers are recommended to conduct further field studies in the area of autonomy in order to determine the approaches of promoting autonomy that are suitable to the Egyptian students, teachers, and learning environment.

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