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DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH.
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- To provide space for Nigerian scholars to report their works and to contribute to key debates in English Studies and General Linguistics.

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Assessing the Readiness of University Students for Autonomous English Language learning in the Nigerian Context

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Abstract

This project is an investigation into learners' readiness for autonomous English language learning in the Nigerian context. The study uses a quantitative research method to elicit responses from the Nigerian undergraduate students to examine their readiness for autonomous English language learning. The majority of students are 18 years old and above. A questionnaire with a 5 point Lickert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree in which all students had opportunity to take part was adapted from a study conducted by Cotterall (1995). The questionnaire was piloted to ensure its validity and later modified to suit this study. The results show that majority of Nigerian undergraduate students, though revealed diverse dimensions of autonomy in different ways, are not fully ready for learner autonomy in English language learning. rephrase this sentence

Introduction

In the Nigerian context, teaching is generally done using the traditional approach whereby students are expected to accept whatever their Lecturers tell them without questioning. Most of the students experience the process of rote learning which is highly teacher-centered. The authority is not spread out, individuality or creativity is not encouraged. The general belief is that this system of knowledge transfer does not trigger creativity and interest within the students since the Lecturers decide the whole learning process. Too many unsafe and unsubstantiated generalizations! This approach creates a passive rather than an active role, which hinders the target language learning. Since the students rely mainly on their Lecturers (with reference to study and research materials), they do not take individual initiatives to broaden their sources of study materials which could increase their English language proficiency. This is because passing exams have become the sole aim of

learning; hence the materials provided by the teacher are just enough to achieve this. This authoritarian mode of teaching does not make students express their thoughts or make a meaningful contribution to learning. It is however very crucial to produce students who are autonomous??? in today's competitive society. Therefore, against the backdrop that learner autonomy has been applied successfully in the English language learning in different parts of the world with positive results, it is believed that same effect could be achieved when applied to the Nigerian context since all language learners, irrespective of their culture or background are unique individuals with their own learning styles (Pierson, 1996). This introduction is too brief. Consider including your observations or motivation as background for the study.

Objectives of the Study

It could be not academic English said that the time is ripe to explore the opportunities of learner autonomy in the Nigerian English language classroom as a realistic option for the thriving educational system desired by the nation to boost her economic strength. In view of this, the objective of this study is to investigate the readiness of senior Undergraduate learners for autonomous language learning in Nigeria.

Research Questions

The research questions are:

- *Are Nigerian Undergraduates learners ready for autonomous English language learning?*
- *What are the learners' perceptions for autonomous language learning?*

Literature Review

What is Learner Autonomy?

Different studies vary on the meaning of learner autonomy. Many scholars, (Little 1996, Nunan, 1997, Benson, 2001), view autonomy as the ability for making decisions about personal learning while others view autonomy as a question of learners' rights and prospects for social transformation. Nevertheless, no matter how

Autonomy is viewed, most scholars agree with some aspect of responsibility transferred from teacher to student. Autonomous English language learning is seen by Little (1996) as a feature of sustained learning that leads to long-term success.

Similarly, Holec (1981) perceives learner autonomy as the learner's acceptance of responsibility for, and his ability to "take charge of his own learning". It involves planning for learning, being innovative in the process, monitoring the procedure and being able to evaluate that learning outcome.

Furthermore, Dickinson (1994) believes that learner autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all of the decisions concerned with his or her learning and the implementation of those decisions. Success as an autonomous learner occurs when he independently "set goals; chooses materials, methods and tasks; exercises choice and purpose in organizing and carrying out the chosen tasks; and chooses criteria for evaluating the learning outcome for the purpose of learning" (Dam 1995: P45). Autonomy involves skills and the attitudes that the learners have, and can be developed to certain degrees (P. Benson, 2006).

Although many researchers define learner autonomy from a different point of view, e.g., Little (1990: P7) suggests that "learner autonomy is essentially a matter of the learners psychological relation to the process and content of learning". That means a learner must be willing to learn and that "willingness depends both on the motivation and the confidence to take responsibility for the choices required" (Little, 1996). Likewise autonomy is not only the independence to learn, but also the chance to become a better individual (Kenny, 1993: P 436). However, autonomous English language learning is not only freedom from the control of the teacher, the constraints of the curriculum, or even the freedom to choose not to learn. In fact, the most important freedom that autonomy implies, is the "learner's freedom within himself, by the learner's capacity to surpass the limits of intrinsic motivation" (Berofsky, 1997: P 43). Subsequently, it is the work of the lecturers to create a conducive learning environment for learners by recognizing the learners' learning styles and using various

teaching techniques that can enhance the level of the students' autonomy (Namatapour, 2012).

Furthermore, there is a need for negotiation between the students and Lecturers, and among the students themselves as part of autonomy in the learning process (Little, 2007). This negotiation is perceived as a means of empowering the learners, their encouragement, and necessary improvement in their suitable choice of language. Therefore, the students should be given the opportunity to take part in the decision-making process through setting the learning objectives in partnership with the Lecturers (Nunan, 1997; Cotterall, 1999 and Benson, 2001). Moreover, to enhance their sense of responsibility and self-confidence, the students should be encouraged to choose the time and venue of the lesson and to bring their own materials to class (Little, 1991; Dam, 1995; Nunan, 1999 and Benson, 2001). Moreover, self-assessment is crucial in autonomous English language learning as this will enable the learners to think critically and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses in language learning (Benson, 2001).

The capacity for autonomy in language learning can encompass metacognitive knowledge of self as a learner (individual differences, etc.), subject matter to be learnt (language awareness), the context of learning (including environment, resources, political and social aspects) and processes of learning (knowledge of strategies) (Sinclair, 2000). We cannot expect the learners to be fully autonomous at once, especially in a context where autonomous English language learning is a completely new idea. It might not be that easy to persuade the learners to abandon the traditional approach to learning straight away. Autonomy is not easy to achieve since the freedom it needs might be limited by some factors (Little, 1990). However, autonomy can be developed gradually through learner training, with the major goal as "to help the learners to consider the factors that affect their learning, discover the best learning strategies that suit them and the strategies suitable to their learning context" (Sinclair, 2000: P66).

This development depends on the learner's readiness to take charge of his own learning, the availability of resources and on the teacher as the facilitator rather than the indisputable authority (Nunan, 1999). Subsequently, the teacher's central role in

students' lives is paramount as they represent the model of language learning, mentors and advisors to learners (Balcikanli, 2007).

Readiness of learners for Autonomous Language Learning

The study here discusses various research findings on autonomous language learning in different contexts.

Autonomous language learning is not widespread, but all language learners, irrespective of their context or cultural background are unique individuals that can be autonomous in their own way if given the opportunity (Pierson, 1996). Therefore, before any interventions that aim at promoting learner autonomy in the language classroom are implemented, it is important to investigate the learners' readiness for autonomous language learning from different points of view:

- Learners' intrinsic motivation level towards learning English,
- The use of meta_cognitive strategies by learners in language learning,
- Perception of Lecturers by learners and their own learning of English
- Ability of learners to contextualize their learning in the real world situation (Kocak, 2003).

Little (2004) further explains what makes a learner ready for autonomy through these key principles:

- Recognizing responsibility for one's own learning is the first step towards autonomy.
- This responsibility must involve participation in all aspects of learning, which are planning, implementing, evaluating etc.
- They are curious to ask the WHY, WHAT, and the HOW of learning which will continuously grow their autonomy
- The expansion of autonomy entails that the target language be used as a means of communication in and outside the classroom.

In a study conducted by Thang (2003), she compared three public universities in Malaysia, where she discovers that the students of the Malaysian public universities lack autonomy in learning English as a Second Language and they wanted a more teacher-centered method. Most students were low in English proficiency, despite learning it since primary school (Pillay, 1995). It was discovered that Malaysian undergraduate students were not autonomous in learning and they preferred to be spoon-fed by the Lecturers. This could be a result of socio-cultural factors or situational educational constructs.

Likewise, Holec's (1987) study ascertains that students were able to choose the materials, methods to be used, and techniques, but it was difficult for them to define objectives and evaluate learning progress. Likewise, in a study on learner attitudes towards self-direction conducted by Broady (1996), he discovers that students are partially ready for autonomous English language learning as they think the teacher should be guiding rather than controlling everything in the classroom.

Research conducted on autonomous language learning in Hong Kong by Pierson (1996) reveals a discouraging image of learners and their willingness for autonomy. It was revealed that the Chinese learners were not willing to be autonomous, as they preferred the traditional approach, they depended highly on the syllabus, and were unwilling and lacked initiative to take charge of their own learning (Pierson, 1996).

Cotterall (1999) reports that between 43-69% of students still want the teacher to take the central domineering role in teaching. They expect their Lecturers to offer help on issues and solve the difficulty, tell them how long they should spend on a task, explain why each task is being carried out and tell them what to do next. This shows that these students are not ready for autonomy as they expect the teacher to shoulder all the responsibilities meant for learners and this contradicts the central defining principles of autonomous English language learning.

The claim that African students could work autonomously in English language learning if given the chance was also supported by Harry Kuchah's personal experience with his students in

Cameroon. Kuchah's study shows that African students, despite the many challenges they face in learning English, also have a reasonably positive attitude for autonomous English language learning once a direction is initiated. Kuchah discovered that the students were creative enough to choose where to learn English. Although, one could suggest this may have been due to a physically uncomfortable classroom or harsh weather rather than trying to be autonomous. However, he reported that they also went out to get the materials of their interest which enabled them to negotiate the learning objectives with their teacher, and the teacher in return introduced various tasks and activities based on the learners' preferences.

Methodology

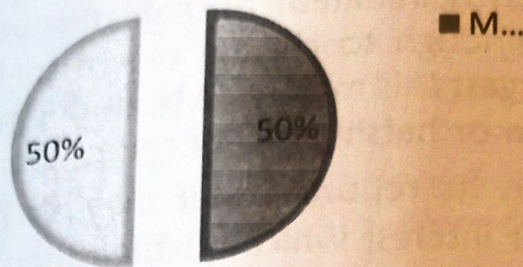
This study uses a quantitative research method to elicit responses from students of two Universities in Ilorin, Kwara State of Nigeria to examine their readiness for autonomous English language learning. The majority of students are 18 years old and above. The questionnaire used a 5 point Lickert scales ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree and was adapted from a study conducted by Cotterall (1995). The questionnaire was piloted among 20 foundation students at the University of Nottingham, Malaysia Campus to ensure its validity and later modified to suit this study.

The questionnaire, a participant information sheet, and a consent form were administered to 50 students from each of the schools. A total number of 100 questionnaires were returned.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed and interpreted as rigorous quantitative analysis with the use of SPSS to confirm the reliability of the study so as to give meaning to my research questions.

Gender of the respondents

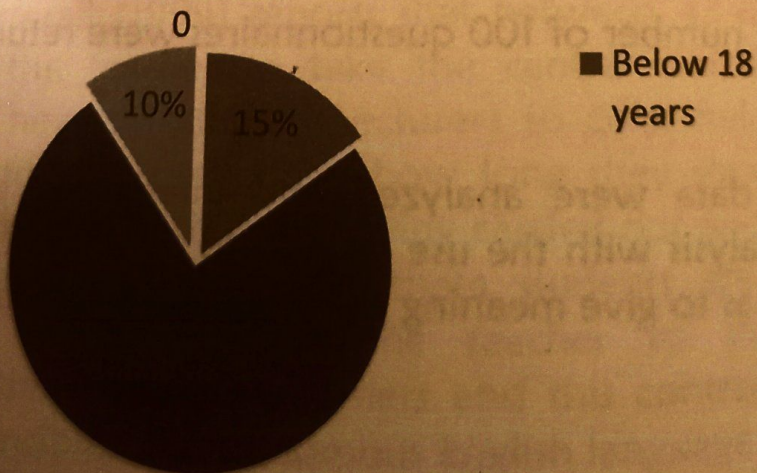


The chart above shows of the 100 students who took part in the study, 50 were male and 50 were female.

CLASS

Level of the respondent	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Total	100	100	100.0	

Age of the Respondents



The chart above shows that 75% of the respondents are 18 years and above, 10% of them are 20 years and above and 15% are under 18 years.

Responses from the Questionnaire

English learning techniques	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	25	34.3	25.0	35.0
Disagree	75	63.7	75.0	100.0
Agree	100	100.0	100.0	
Total				

I want lecturers to Explain everything	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	20	19.6	20.0	20.0
Disagree	10	9.8	10.0	30.0
Undecided	10	9.8	10.0	40.0
Agree	60	58.8	60.0	100.0
total	100	100	100.0	

I am ready to choose where and how to learn	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	80	78.4	80.0	80.0
Agree	20	19.6	20.0	100.0
total	100	100.0	100.0	

I am willing to choose materials	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	10	9.8	10.0	10.0
Disagree	55	53.9	55.0	65.0
Agree	35	34.3	35.0	100.0
total	100	100.0	100.0	

The lecturers should give guidance in the class	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	15	14.7	15.0	15.0
Undecided	20	19.6	20.0	35.0
Agree	65	63.7	65.0	100.0
total	100	100.0	100.0	

I am ready to set my learning objectives	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulative percent
Undecided	25	14.5	25.0	25.0
Agree	50	49.0	50.0	75.0
Strongly agree	25	24.5	25.5	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

I am willing to give my view in the class	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Strongly Disagree	20	19.6	20.0	20.0
Disagree	20	19.6	20.0	40.0
Agree	60	58.8	60.0	100.0
total	100	100.0	100.0	

I am willing to negotiate my english language learning with my lecturers	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Undecided	25	24.5	25.0	25.0
Agree	75	73.5	75.0	100.0
total	100	100.0	100.0	

I am willing to monitor my english language learning	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	55	53.9	55.0	55.0
Undecided	15	14.7	15.0	70.0
Agree	30	29.4	30.0	100.0
total	100	100.0	100.0	

I want the lecturers to include me in the decision concerning my learning	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Undecided	30	29.4	30.0	30.0
Agree	50	49.0	50.0	80.0
Strongly Agree	20	19.6	20.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

I need my tutorial notes to learn english courses	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Disagree	10	9.8	10.0	10.0
Undecided	25	24.5	25.0	35.0
Agree	65	63.7	65.0	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

A majority of the respondents, 75%, agreed that the Lecturers should expose them to more techniques that can assist them to learn English courses better, although 25% of them strongly disagreed. Placing a high level of responsibility on the lecturer to provide learning methods and structured processes is reflective of dependence rather than a desire to exercise more freedom. This supports the findings of Little's study (2004), mentioned here earlier. To ensure success in the autonomy building process it would be useful for learners to also have a greater understanding

of why autonomy is important and how it can benefit them in language learning.

Similarly, 60% of the respondents agreed that they want the Lecturers to explain everything to them in the English language classroom, while 10% of them disagreed, 20% strongly disagreed and 10% were undecided. Given such a higher percentage of dependent learners, it illustrates that they need a shift in beliefs and understanding of role structures before any further autonomy awareness can take place. Similar to Thang's (2003) comparison of three Malaysian universities on readiness for autonomy, the prevailing socio-cultural structure has traditionally been highly teacher-driven and is deeply entrenched in the minds of the learners.

Also, the majority of respondents are not ready to choose alternate venues or scheduling of classes – 80% of them disagreed and only 20% agreed that learners should partake in such a discussion in spite of many studies suggesting that a sense of responsibility for the learning process will be gained from having more opportunity to determine the time and place of study. (Little, 1991; Nunan, 1997; Benson, 2001).

Furthermore, 55% of respondents disagreed and 10% strongly disagreed with the notion of choosing their own materials for English language learning, although 35% gave their agreement. This is unlike the Cameroonian students in Kuchah's study who were confident to choose their own learning materials which further built their confidence.

This study also indicates that 65% of the students agreed that they still need a lot of guidance from the teacher to be able to learn English, while 15% of them disagreed, and 20% were undecided.

Additionally, a slight majority of the respondents, 50% agreed and 25% strongly agreed that they are ready to set their learning objectives if given the opportunity. However, 25% were undecided.

In response to the question regarding giving their own view in the English classroom, the study reveals that 60% of the respondents agreed with this notion, although 20% disagreed with

the notion of giving their view, and an equal number, 20%, strongly disagreed.

Similarly, 75% of the students agreed that they are ready to negotiate the English language learning process with the Lecturers if given the chance, while 25% of the respondents were undecided.

With regard to the learners' willingness to monitor their own learning process, 55% of the respondents disagreed with this, whereas 30% agreed and 15% were undecided. This is contrary to Pierson (2001) who views self-assessment as an important ingredient of autonomous English language learning that promotes learners' alertness to know their own self competence. This may be as a result of the learners' lack of learner training in the field of LA.

Similar to Little's argument (1994), classroom activity is one of the defining components used to promote learner autonomy as it gives the students the opportunity to know their weaknesses in the target language learning and how important it is to improve upon it. In view of this, a great number of the respondents, 50% agreed and 20% strongly agreed with the idea that Lecturers should include them in the decisions to choose classroom activities. However, 30% of the respondents were undecided.

Subsequently, a large number of the respondents, 65% agreed that they need their tutorial notes to be able to learn English, although 10% disagreed while 25% were undecided. This is similar to Pierson's Hong Kong study of 1996 which found that Chinese learners lack initiatives as they majorly depend on the syllabus to learn.

Conclusion

This study shows that Nigerian Undergraduates students are not yet fully ready for autonomous language learning. The majority of the questions were answered in a manner that showed disagreement with the principles of autonomous English language learning. Regarding the choice of materials, a majority of the respondents disagreed that they should have input to this process. The students probably view the choice of learning materials as the domain of Lecturers and the higher authority in the Nigerian context. Furthermore, the issue of place and time of learning was not agreed upon by the majority of respondents. This can also be

attributed to a belief that this is under the control of the school management and they do not have options, or a say in such crucial matters. Besides, the management would be reluctant to relinquish control over such decision making.

Students in the Nigerian context rely highly on the lecturer for direct input. As the majority of them want their tutorial notes and they want the Lecturers to explain everything to them, this shows that most respondents are still teacher-dependent. This is partly ingrained in the localized educational context and students are unable to alter their view of traditional roles in the classroom as passive recipients of knowledge.

However, on an encouraging note, respondents are willing to be more involved in decision making on their learning activities and processes. They are willing to learn through negotiation and teamwork. Although, they are not sure about their ability in managing the learning, they have the initiative to learn well if given the chance.

They also stated that they wanted the lecturers to provide more techniques to learn English courses better. This demonstrates a degree of openness to learner training, if given the opportunity. Although, the Nigerian undergraduates students from this study are not currently fully ready for autonomy in their English language courses there are promising indications of willingness to adapt a different approach in language learning provided that proper training and support is given. Since learner autonomy is a gradual process, it could be achieved over time by learner training and exposure to alternatives.

Implications for Language Teaching and Recommendations

This study is a starting point towards creating awareness to develop autonomous English language learning among the Nigerian Undergraduates students. Due to parental insistence whose major focus is for their children to pass the national exams, autonomy could be age-dependent. This shows that lack of readiness on the part of the learners in the Nigerian context is reflective of the Nigerian educational system where autonomy is not supported by government and educational stakeholders such as parents and school managers especially at the Undergraduates level. Therefore,

the concept of autonomy language learning should be gradually introduced at the local and regional levels in schools' curricula with learner training techniques and workshops on language awareness that would make the learners progressively understand the concept of autonomy. Besides, the major goal of education is more than just transmitting knowledge, rather "the end product of education is an independent learner" (McDevitt, 1997).

Furthermore, due to the constraints of the government and stakeholders, policies need to be conducive to changes that incorporate autonomous English language learning. Also, the learners should be sufficiently motivated to be responsible for any actions they take. The school management should offer the kinds of learning techniques which lead to autonomy in the student English language courses (Benson 2007).

It is worth noting that learner Autonomy is not a one-sided process, but one that has to be negotiated and developed between the Lecturers and the learners; therefore, teacher autonomy needs to occur in tandem with learner autonomy. Although it is not realistic for Lecturers to practice autonomy except they have the knowledge of teacher training (Dam, 2007). In view of this, most Lecturers might not be aware of this autonomy concept in the Nigerian context, consequently, it would be helpful to further investigate the Lecturers' perceptions towards autonomous language learning, and the challenges of implementing it in the Nigerian schools.

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