

## MAKING SENSE OF PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN CONSTRUCTING GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS OF KERALA

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**Abstract:** *English language learners in secondary education institutions believe that acquisition of grammatical concepts is difficult and complicated. At the high school level, learners are forced to become autonomous and make conscious effort to construct grammatical structures in the classroom simply because exposure to the target language is limited. Consequently, the autonomy of the learners plays an important role in developing the skill of acquiring of grammatical structures. This paper aims at finding out the effect of learner autonomy in constructing grammatical structures by selecting a sample of 100 secondary school students from three districts in the state of Kerala. The result was significant revealed through one way ANOVA. The investigators also made an attempt to analyze the perception of teachers on to what extent does learner autonomy contribute to the construction of grammatical concepts through a questionnaire given to 30 secondary school English teachers and the results are described qualitatively. With the help of a structured interview the investigator identified the challenges do English teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous.*

**Key words:** *learner autonomy, constructing grammatical structures, secondary school students*

### INTRODUCTION

When students learn a language, they often expect the teacher to spoon-feed them bits and chunks of language and grammar until they are ready to use these and communicate. More often than not, students never open their books in between lessons in order to review, practice or expand the language they've learned. No wonder that becoming fluent takes a very long time for most learners, if it ever happens at all. It is very important that teachers not only teach their pupils the language prescribed in the curriculum, but also guide them to become autonomous learners so they don't need the teacher's help at every single step. Over the last two decades, the concepts of learner autonomy and independence have gained momentum, the former becoming a 'buzz-word' within the context of language learning (Little, 1991). It is a truism that one of the most important spin-offs of more communicatively oriented language learning and teaching has been the premium placed on the role of the learner in the language learning process. It goes without saying, of course, that this shift of responsibility from teachers to learners in constructing grammatical concepts seeks further attention in the present scenario. The issue of learner autonomy is of general concern in the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) community. The International Association of Applied Linguistics (AILA) Review has recently dedicated a special issue to learner autonomy in second language (L2) learning, demonstrating the validity and

benefit of autonomous learning environments (Dam 1995). Importantly, learner autonomy is conceptualized not as simply setting learners to tasks such as interactive computer tasks, or as declaring the instructor obsolete, but as a pedagogical ideology in favor of teaching that ultimately turns control of the task of learning over to learners so that they become empowered to engage in learning independently (Benson and Voller 1997).

## **NEED AND SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Learner autonomy in constructing grammatical structures is becoming a necessity for English language learners in secondary education institutions that adopt either traditional or open education nowadays. It plays a prominent role in developing the learners' language acquisition and achievement. The new trends in education that emphasize the learner's needs and motivations deserve more attention from teachers of English language because they constitute the foundations of the learner's language learning acquisition. Students enter the secondary education with different experiential backgrounds and learning achievements, but unfortunately they have few autonomous dispositions which higher education requires in learning. They lack the knowledge of how to achieve by themselves, which requires some guidance and assistance from their teachers and tutors. So enhancing learner autonomy in grammar learning is a must for the great impact that it causes on learning process. Some educators as Holec (1981), Dickinson (1992), Little (1991), Dam (1995) and Benson (2003) attached great importance to the necessity of autonomy in education. They stated that students who think and work strategically are more motivated to learn and have a higher sense of self-efficacy or confidence in their own learning ability. Then students who depend on themselves in constructing grammatically correct sentences are more able to succeed academically and more motivated than those who do not have effective strategies in learning by themselves. Therefore learning how to acquire grammar autonomously by the learner is a very crucial component that English language teachers have to take into account when teaching English language

## **OBJECTIVES**

- To find out whether there exist significant effect of learner autonomy on the acquisition of grammatical concepts among the secondary school students
- To analyze the perception of teachers on to what extent does learner autonomy contribute to the construction of grammatical concepts.
- What challenges do teachers face in helping their learners become more autonomous?

## **HYPOTHESES**

- There exists significant effect on learner autonomy on the acquisition of grammatical concepts among secondary school students

## **DESIGN**

The study followed both quantitative and qualitative design. A survey method is used to find out the effect of independent variable on the dependent and also to analyze the perception of teachers on implementing the autonomous learning in language classroom. The data was

collected from 100 secondary school students and 40 secondary school teachers, selected randomly, from Malappuram, Kozhikode and Thrissur districts of the state of Kerala.

### TOOLS AND TECHNIQUE

- Learner autonomy inventory
- Questionnaire on constructing grammatical concepts
- Questionnaire for analyzing teachers' perception
- Structured interview for analyzing the challenges faced by teachers

### STATISTICAL TECHNIQUES

- One Way ANOVA
- Scheffe test of multiple comparison
- Percentage analysis

### ANALYSIS

## INVESTIGATION OF THE EFFECT OF LEARNER AUTONOMY ON CONSTRUCTING GRAMMATICAL CONCEPTS AMONG SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS

Data and result of the Effect of learner autonomy on constructing grammatical concepts among Total sample is given in Table 1.

**TABLE 1 Summary of one-way ANOVA**

Source of variation	Sum of squares	Degrees of freedom	Mean square of variation	F-value	Level of significance
Between group	3758.88	2	1762.58	34.53	0.01
Within group	9002.62	97	49.345		
Total	12761.50	99			

This implies that learner autonomy has significant effect on the constructing grammatical concepts among Secondary School Student. It is helpful to teachers to direct the learners towards a healthy autonomy and thereby enhancing their performance in constructing grammatical structures. The result of the analysis emphasizes that learner autonomy is pivotal in constructing grammatical structures in order to master English standards; also the investigator would like to clarify that teachers should enhance learner autonomy for acquiring grammatical structures.

### POST-HOC ANALYSIS – MULTIPLE COMPARISONS

This part of analysis was done as a post hoc comparison of mean scores of relevant groups of the independent variable showing significant main effect on the dependent variable.

**Table 2. Scheffe's Test of Multiple Comparison Based on Three Groups of learner Autonomy for Total Sample**

Sample	Group compared	F	Mean	Value of	Level of
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(N)			M 1	M 2	F'	significance
Total	Average – High	10.89	35.80	38.30	9.66	0.01
Sample	Low – high	15.45	25.85	38.30	9.66	0.01
(N=100)	Low – average	38.76	25.85	35.80	9.66	0.01

As per the Table; it is revealed that there exists significant difference among three pairs (high, average and low levels of learner autonomy) of learner autonomy for secondary school students. The result reveals that the learner autonomy of secondary school students among three pairs of groups are dissimilar and their mean scores vary with difference in learner autonomy.

### PERCEPTION OF TEACHERS ON TO WHAT EXTENT DOES LEARNER AUTONOMY CONTRIBUTE TO THE CONSTRUCTION OF GRAMMATICAL CONCEPTS.

On analyzing the questionnaire it was found that 94 percentage of secondary school teachers opined that learner autonomy has a positive effect on the construction of grammatical concepts. Based on the responses of the teachers to the items in the questionnaire and on further analyzing the investigator elaborated the positive effects which are mentioned below.

- **Acquire grammatical concepts in an easier way:** Learner autonomy as perceived by teachers helps the learners to take responsibility of their own learning. They may rectify their errors and acquire the concepts and structures in an easier way. Conscious awareness of the learning process, conscious reflection and decision-making are promoted through learner autonomy.

- **Learn with their own pace:** Learner autonomy enhances the learner's motivation and leads to more effective learning. Learner autonomy provides learners with more free opportunities for English communication in a non-native environment. Learner autonomy caters to the individual needs of learners at all levels and has a lasting influence. It enhances the learner's willingness towards active learning. Learner autonomy enables the learner to master the basic skills that are required to lasting learning.

- **Identify their strength and weaknesses:** Autonomous learners take an active approach to the learning task. They apply English grammar rules consciously. Choose the materials they like to study and identify their weaknesses. Use a grammar book effectively and identify their strengths. They choose which skill of language to focus on when they study something and decide when to do their homework. Identifying their learning style is an added advantage of learner autonomy.

- **Committed:** Rather than the teacher just imposing on the students what they thought, that actually involving the students meant that they were more committed to it that they could identify with what they were doing because they'd decided it. They are showing the eagerness to participate in activities to improve their language and use it fluently without grammatical mistakes.

- **Focused:** language learners who are independent, they're the ones who are much focused. More focus is given by autonomous learners on the forms and structures of grammar. They are focused on the difference in the grammatical rules of the first language and the target language. Always showing the eagerness to develop skills and trying to ensure more clarity.

- **Risk taking:** Autonomous learners take more risks and they often were much more risk taking. They would decide to do things that maybe the teacher would never have dreamed that they could do, and they would make a stab at it, maybe it wasn't perfect, but they would, it showed that in the long run they seemed to have, developed a much more sophisticated use of the language.

- **Motivated:** Lerner autonomy is very important and has a huge effect on motivation. And, the more autonomous the learners are, the more motivated they are. And then of course that affects their ability to learn the language, to learn the language well.

- **Happy and tension free:** If the learner is in charge they know what they're doing and on a day-to-day basis, or task-by-task basis understand why they're doing something, why it's important to them, then they're going to be happier learners and they're going to be more motivated, and more willing to do what's necessary to reach their goals.

- **Learn from opportunities outside:** Autonomous learners benefit from learning opportunities outside the classroom. Classroom time is not enough, and if use some additional opportunities outside the classroom, like watching TV, reading books, reading the website, and just communicating with people, just involving themselves in different activities, so just working autonomously, it will have a more positive effect on them as language learners, so definitely it will bring them to a successful career as language learners.

- **Gain the confidence to evaluate one's own learning:** Autonomous learners have the ability to monitor ones learning which is central to learner autonomy. To become autonomous, learners need to develop the ability to evaluate their own learning. Confident language learners are more likely to develop autonomy than those who lack confidence. Motivated language learners are more likely to develop learner autonomy than learners who are not motivated.

## WHAT CHALLENGES DOES TEACHERS FACE IN HELPING THEIR LEARNERS BECOME MORE AUTONOMOUS?

The teachers highlighted a range of factors which limited the extent to which they felt they were able to promote learner autonomy. These related to learners, the institution and teachers, though learner-related factors were those most widely cited by the teachers. Again, there are parallels here with the findings of Reinders & Lazarou (2011), where teachers felt that learners did not understand the importance of developing autonomy, lacked the skills to learn independently, and were not accustomed to being asked to take responsibility for their learning.

- **Limited space within the curriculum:** Teachers are having less academic freedom. The curriculum is not flexible for the teachers to make practice their own strategies and innovations. Every one behind the challenge of covering the syllabus.
- **Learners' lack of previous experience of autonomous learning:** When giving an orientation of autonomous learning, learner's not able to cope with this new approach as they lack previous experience. They are having the feel that they can't do anything without the help and assistance of the teachers. They feel that they proper understanding of the grammatical structures may not take place when they themselves engage in their own way of learning.
- **Learner reliance on the teacher:** Learners are more dependent on the teacher. They always feel reluctant to engage in active learning by themselves without the help of

concerned teachers. Teachers opined that while conducting a debate or a discussion in the classroom learners behave passively and keenly looking for the teacher's to do something for the session to be continued.

- **Limited learner contact with English outside the classroom:** Learners are hearing English language only in English classrooms. In the opinion of most of the teachers, English newspapers, books, articles, movies etc. are far away from secondary school students. Few learners are using internet for learning English language even though many of them have personal computers.
- **Learners' focus on passing tests:** English is perceived as a content subject rather than a skill subject by most of the students. They are learning the language just for the sake of passing the examination. They don't want to communicate in this language properly without grammatical mistakes. According to the teachers learners have the false notion that why should they learn some other language when they have their own language. It further directs us towards the issue of attitude of secondary school students towards English language.
- **Lack of relevant resources for teachers and learners:** Learner autonomy to be established requires sufficient resources of variety of books, internet facilities, newspapers, CD, contact with the native speakers etc. which are lacking in the schools.
- **Limited learner proficiency in English:** Proficiency of learners in the language is very much limited to be autonomous. Most of the basic knowledge on which new structures are constructed is not well acquired by the language learners. Nothing could be developed in such a situation. This is one of the serious problems that the teachers are facing in the English classroom as opined by most of the teachers.
- **Prescribed curricula and materials:** We have a well said and well organized curriculum frame work for the benefit of developing communicative competency in language learners. It gives a lot of opportunities for the learners to develop their skills. But still teacher's assistance and by heart learning is the only learning strategy developed by most of the learners and there is less flexibility in the curriculum and the teaching materials.
- **Lack of teacher autonomy:** A few teachers even mentioned that they themselves are sometimes not having the feeling of autonomy and depending on guides and other resources or even the traditional method of teaching in the classroom for teaching English language. They also revealed the fact that they are not using internet facilities or innovative strategies in the classroom.
- **Teachers' limited expectations of what learners can achieve:** In the opinion of teachers they are compelled to meet the demands of the society and the school management authorities. They want their learners to get through the examination. Whether the learner is able to communicate in the target language is not their matter of consideration. Covering the syllabus and passing the examination is the only motto. So teachers are highly conscious about making the learners pass in the examination and they are not expecting much from the learners through autonomy.

## CONCLUSION

To conclude, it is not the teachers' responsibility to teach all grammatical structures to the learners. Learners should depend on themselves by adopting strategies that suit their abilities in



learning grammar. Acquiring grammatical structures is not always easy. But with practice and time, learners should find that they are making progress. Learners should study items that appear in many contexts. Learners will feel that constructing grammar is effective when it entails active engagement in learning tasks. Computer technology can be used effectively in constructing grammar autonomously. Autonomous learners in constructing grammar should have a continuous desire of learning grammar and they should develop their strategic ways of learning. Learners should choose a private way that stimulates their enthusiasm and motivation. The learner who learns grammar autonomously should choose the objectives of his/her learning then he/she should choose the materials that will be used to reach the objectives chosen. He/she has to decide upon the methods and techniques he/she wants to use. All the previous decisions are usually taken concurrently with decisions about materials since means and ways are closely interdependent. The outcome is assessed and more decisions are made as to the degree of appropriateness of the chosen objectives, materials, methods and techniques.

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