

**PROMOTING LEARNER AUTONOMY AMONG TERTIARY INSTITUTION
STUDENTS FOR EFFECTIVE TEACHING-LEARNING PROCESS**

DR. (MRS) MBAH, BLESSING AKARAKA

Department of Educational Foundations
Ebonyi State University, Abakaliki,
Ebonyi State

ABSTRACT: *It is generally believed among educationists that learning obtained by self through activity-oriented teaching-learning strategy is quite effective and retentive. Hence this paper calls for promotion of learner autonomy in teaching-learning process among students in tertiary institutions. The strategies for creating learner autonomy elucidated in this paper include: giving students learning materials with instructional objectives prior to teaching; peer teaching; cooperative and competitive learning; teacher, taking a complete facilitator's role; involving students in making choices about learning process; giving individual and group projects to students; and use of self-assessment procedure.*

KEYWORDS: Learner Autonomy, Tertiary Institution, Kstudents, Teaching-Learning Process

INTRODUCTION

Tertiary institution is the level of education saddled with the responsibility of furthering the education of students who have undergone secondary education. In Nigeria, tertiary institutions include: Universities, Colleges of Education, Polytechnics, monotechnics and other institutions that offer correspondence courses. According to Federal Government of Nigeria (2004), the goals of tertiary education among others include: training of high level and relevant manpower and inculcation of proper values for the survival of the individual and society; development of the intellectual capability of the individuals to understand and appreciate their local and external environments; and acquisition of physical and intellectual skills to enable individuals to be self-reliant and useful members of the society. These goals are laudable and require commitment in effective and efficient curriculum delivery at the tertiary education level.

There seems to be over-reliance on lecture method of teaching in Nigerian tertiary institutions and this could be the reason for not producing the calibre of graduates with high level and relevant manpower training; proper values; and physical and intellectual skills for self-reliance. Increased cases of examination malpractice, and carrying over of courses among Nigerian tertiary institution students are indicative of the fact that the lecture method of teaching prevalent in tertiary institutions is inadequate in helping the students learn and retain the ever expanding knowledge and skills in various disciplines in recent times.

Curriculum delivery in Nigerian tertiary institutions has to be tailored towards the realities of our contemporary world and society. There is need for drastic shift in pedagogy from teacher-

centered approach to a more learner-centered kind of learning. This calls for redefining of the role of the teacher and the students in teaching-learning process. The teacher should no longer be seen as a repository of knowledge who supplies the students with all that they need to know, but as a facilitator, a guide, one who helps the learner learn. The learner should therefore, be an active initiator and participant of his own learning. He ought to be an autonomous learner under the guidance of the teacher.

According to Little (1991) autonomous learners are those who accept responsibility for their own learning. Kohonen (1992) avers that autonomous learners take proactive role in the learning process, gathering ideas and availing themselves of learning opportunities, rather than simply reacting passively to various stimuli of the teacher. Learner autonomy is congruent with the theory of constructivism which posits that individuals reorganize and restructure their experiences rather than internalize knowledge. In other words constructivism posits that learning is not a matter of rote memorization but a constructive process in which the learner actively seeks meaning out of events. Advocacy for learner autonomy in recent times accrue from the discovery that learning which is done by self is better assimilated than a memorized one (Nweke, 2001).

There is need to build confident and intrinsic motivated students in the tertiary institutions who will form a formidable resource for national development. One of the ways of achieving this is by promoting learner autonomy. Promoting learner autonomy among tertiary institution students involves exposing them to various opportunities through which they can gain self confidence and take control of their own learning which is the focus of this paper.

Strategies for Promoting Learner Autonomy among Students in Tertiary Institutions

Learner autonomy can be achieved through the following ways:

Giving students learning materials with Instructional Objectives Prior to Teaching

In order to make students have greater control over their own learning, lecturers in tertiary institutions could give their students the learning materials for the next class in advance. The instructional objectives should be well specified in the material. The students so equipped can study in advance and even source for other related materials for in-depth self-study of the learning content. This type of teaching-learning strategy gives students the self confidence with which to confront new tasks with a determination to succeed. According to Tobias (1994) pre-exposing students to learning content and instructional objectives can aid learning by providing students with clear goal which they can use to organise their own learning. It helps students to study more effectively and reduce time wasted on irrelevant activities. Tobias stressed that prior knowledge of instructional objectives provides students with the criteria with which to evaluate their own progress objectively. In support of giving students learning materials and instructional objectives for autonomous learning Alexander, Murphy, Buchl, and Sperl (1998) stated that when students know specifically the competences expected of them in a lesson, and the condition under which they are expected to exhibit the competences, they will have a sense of security in the learning process and work harder to attain the competences.

Encouraging Peer Teaching among Students

Peer teaching involves using students in the same group, class or course to teach themselves. It is a reciprocal teaching-learning approach among peers. This teaching-learning strategy provides strong learner autonomy when properly utilized in tertiary institutions. The lecturer could share the different aspects of a learning material to the students to study and teach his or her peers in the same class while the teacher observes and makes necessary inputs and corrections. Lending his support to peer teaching, Dornyei (2007) stated that learners are very resourceful about finding ways to convey new material to their peers, if only to show that they can do a better job than the teacher. To create learner autonomy through peer teaching, the lecturer can distribute the course outline to the students and leave it to their own device on how to source relevant materials, study and peer teach. Afterwards, the lecturer summarizes and fill up necessary gaps in the students' peer teaching.

Encouraging Cooperative and Competitive Learning among Students

Closely related to peer teaching is cooperative and competitive learning. Cooperative learning in education implies a teaching-learning approach in which classroom instruction is organized in such a way that students work together in small groups to achieve a common goal, thus taking their own learning in their own hands. According to Northern Province Department of Education (2001), cooperative learning is the concept based on group work in which learners are responsible for others' learning as well as their own learning. This type of learning which can build autonomy in learning among students is embedded on the philosophy that knowledge is essentially social in nature, in which learners interact with one another through communication and cooperative effort. Nwachukwu and Chukwunke (2006) observed that when learners exchange ideas with peers through cooperative learning, they develop shared meanings that allow group members to communicate effectively with one another. In cooperative learning strategy, students work in small groups, making consensus decisions, complete class work and assignments together, seek for assistance primarily from group members and are rewarded as a team, not individual persons (Johnson and Smith, 1999).

Teacher taking a Complete Facilitator's Role

The traditional mode of teaching is such that the teacher is seen as a repository of knowledge, and the students as empty vessels that need to be filled with the teacher's knowledge. In order to allow increased learner autonomy among students, tertiary institution teachers need to adopt a non-traditional teaching style of which the teacher takes a complete role of a facilitator; the teacher as a facilitator does not "teach" in the traditional sense but works as a facilitator, a guide and a helper, and an instructional designer who helps the students to discover and create their own meaning about the world. Heron (1989) identified three modes of facilitation that a teacher can adopt in order to create learner autonomy. These are: hierarchical, cooperative, and autonomous modes of facilitation.

In hierarchical mode of facilitation, the teacher as a facilitator exercises his power to direct the learning process for the students, thereby, taking full responsibility and making all the required major decisions.

In cooperative mode of facilitation the facilitator shares the responsibility of organizing learning with the students. Here, the facilitator (teacher) encourages the students to be more self-directing

in various forms of learning. The autonomous mode requires that the facilitator gives total autonomy or independence to the students in making major decisions concerning their learning.

Involving Students in Making Choices about the Learning Process

Learner autonomy can be created among tertiary institution students by the teacher involving them while making certain decision about the learning process. The teacher can involve the students in organizing the learning process and making decisions on choice of learning materials and learning activities. The teacher therefore shares the responsibility of determining the trend of learning with the students. This strategy will help to create in the students, the feeling of being partly in control of how they learn the content presented to them. According to Dornyei (2007), involving students in organizing the learning process will enhance the self-esteem of the students and serves as a strong motivational factor for effective learning.

The students could be involved in deciding the learning materials for learning a particular content, the type of learning activities, the place of learning, and evaluation process. The teacher however, should guide the students in making the best choices among many alternatives. Involving the students in making choices on the learning process could help to cater for individual differences among the students since each student will make choices that suit his/her ability and temperament. A conscientious and sensitive teacher will therefore select amidst the students' choices the options that cater for the individual differences of the learners as well as options that will effectively and efficiently help in achieving instructional objectives.

Giving individual and group project to students

Project as a learner-centered method, is a natural life-like learning activity, which involves investigation, problem solving, manipulation of physical materials and production of required product (Okorie in Mbah, 2011). To promote learner autonomy, project related to a learning content can be given to individual students or small groups of students. The teacher while using the project method to promote learner autonomy, acts as a guide and facilitator while the primary responsibility of executing the project rests on the students.

Project mode of learning provides the students opportunity to explore and apply their initiative and creativity. It leads to skill development, reliance and creativity (Eya, Ugwu and Alu (2001). When projects are given to students, it enables them to function in autonomous way by taking initiative on how and with what to carry out the project in order to achieve the desired goal. At the end of the project, the students, individually or in their small groups, decides on the most appropriate way to report their findings to the class, and answer the questions that may arise in the cause of the report.

Use of self-assessment procedure

Learner autonomy can be promoted by devising means through which the students can assess their learning by themselves. Self assessment can be carried out at certain segments of the learning process through the use of study questions at the end of each segment of a learning content. According to Ekbatani and Pierson (2000), self-assessment procedure helps to raise learners' awareness of their mistakes and successes in their academic work. It also provides the learner with deep sense of participation in the learning process. Learner autonomy promoted

through the use of self-assessment helps to create stronger autonomy among students by helping them to take responsibility of remedying their defects and mistakes. Self-assessment helps the students to keep record of their own progress in the learning process.

CONCLUSION

Educationists are always on the quest for teaching methods and strategies that will bring about more effective learning. In recent time learner autonomy is gradually gaining recognition as one of the teaching-learning strategies that holds a lot of promises for more effective learning. It is believed that when this strategy is properly harnessed and applied in classroom instruction in tertiary institutions, it will go a long way to creating more confident and proactive students.

REFERENCES

- Alexander, P. Murphy, P.K., Buehl, M.M. & Sperl, C. (1998). The influence of prior knowledge, beliefs, and interest in learning from persuasive test. In T. Shanahan, and F. Rodriguez-Brown (eds) *Forty-seventh year book of the national reading conference*. Chicago: National reading conference.
- Dornyei, Z. (2007). *Motivational strategies in the language classroom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University press.
- Ekbatani, G. Pierson, H. (2000). *Learner-directed assessment in ESL* Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Eya, L.O., Ugwu, J.C., & Alu, B.E. (2001). *Adult Education: it's nature and purpose*. Nsukka: Prize Publisher.
- Federal Republic of Nigeria (2004). *National policy on education*. Lagos: NERDC Press.
- Heron, (1989). *The facilitator's handbook*. London: Kogan page.
- Johnson, D. W. & Smith, W. (1999). *Circles of learning curriculum innovation in classroom Nigeria high school geography*. Ibadan: University Press.
- Little, D. (1991). *Learner autonomy: Definitions, issues and problems*. Dublin: Authentik.
- Mbah, B.A. (2011). Effects of prior knowledge of instructional objectives and study questions on secondary school students' achievement in literature-in-English in Abakaliki education ozone. *Unpublished Ph.D Thesis Ebonyi State University*.
- Northern Province Department of Education (2001). *Learning how to learn*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Nweke, O. (2001). The activity method in the teaching of English in primary schools. In S.N. Agwu (ed) *Teaching in Nigeria: A dynamic approach*. Enugu: Cheston Ltd.
- Tobia, S. (1994). Interest, prior knowledge and learning. *Review of Educational Research*, 64(1), 37-54.