The Relationship between Interactive Teaching and Learners’ Autonomy

A research submitted

Prof. Dr. Fatin Khairi Mohammad Saeid
Instructor. Ayah Mohammad Jasim
University of Baghdad / College of Education

Abstract:
The present paper aims at shedding light on the relationship between interactive teaching and learners’ autonomy. Interactive teaching means involving learners in the lesson through increased use of higher order questions and encouraging them to ask questions, to answer them, and to justify. It is exposing learners to new ideas. It values students’ prior ideas and aims at empowering students to be independent learners. It demands teachers to take less dominant role and the learners are encouraged to be responsible managers of their own learning. It should be seen as a whole approach to integrating episodes of teaching into a lesson. One factor, among others, that focuses on interactive lessons is an increase in the level of autonomy. The relevance of the notion of learner autonomy as a goal in formal education contexts has in turn produced a need for teachers to develop expertise in pedagogy for autonomy.

Autonomy in learning means people taking more control over their learning in classrooms and outside and taking more control over their purposes for which they learn language and the ways in which they learn them. A student becoming autonomous means gradually and individually acquiring the capacity to conduct his own learning program, progressively becomes his own teacher and constructs and evaluates his learning program himself.

Keywords: Interactive, Empowerment, Autonomy, Interaction, Hypothesis.
Introduction

The first thing to realize about interactive teaching is that it is not something new nor mysterious. Any teacher asks question in class, assigns and checks homework, or holds class or group discussion, then he already teaches interactively. Interactive teaching is just giving students something to do, getting back what they have done and then assimilating it by the teacher himself, so that he can decide what would be best to do next.

Interactive teaching is achieved through a balance of directing; telling, demonstrating, and explaining. A good lecture may result in significant personal cognitive engagement and intraactivity, resulting in personal learning.
Interactive teaching recommended for a shift from high level of teachers’ control towards more self-directed learning, greater student’s autonomy and the co-construction of knowledge.

Becoming autonomous learner depends on deriving a system through which students have the choice of learning in their own way. Learners gradually replace the belief that they are 'consumers' of language courses with the belief that they can be 'producer' of their own learning program and that is their right.

This paper consists of two parts. The first part sheds light on interactive teaching while the second deals with autonomy.

2. Views of Second language Acquisition/Foreign Language Learning

There are three principal views concerning second language acquisition:

1- The structural view treats language as a system of structurally related elements to code meaning.

2- The functional view sees language as a vehicle to express or accomplish a certain function, such as requesting something.

3- The interactive view sees language as a vehicle for the creation and maintenance of social relations, focusing on patterns of moves, acts, negotiation and interaction found in conversational exchange. This view has been fairly dominant since 1980 (Chastain, 1988: 12; From kin, 2003: 383; Wikipedia, 2009: 1).

There is an agreement among linguists, psychologists and educationalists that learning a second / foreign language is a long and complex undertaking. The learner's whole person is affected as he struggles to reach beyond the confines of his first language and into new language, a new culture, a new way of thinking, and acting. Many variables are involved in the acquisition process. Language learning is not a set of easy steps that can be programmed in a quick do - it yourself kit. Courses in foreign languages are often inadequate training grounds for the successful learning of a second language (Brown, 2000: 1).
This paper will concentrate on the third view of second and foreign language acquisition/learning.

3• Communication, Interaction and Interaction Hypothesis

Teaching activities involve complex sets of relationships between teachers and learners, the most important being those resulting from communication. The teacher's conscious manipulation of conditions is best reflected in these relationships, in order that the students might achieve desired objectives (Curzon, 1985: 69).

In teaching situations, communication is seen as "an interactional process in which meaning is stimulated through the sending and receiving of verbal and non-verbal messages." It is intended by the teacher to influence the learner's behaviors. That situation, which will determine the mode of communication, will reflect the lesson's objectives. To that end, communication, in the class, may be verbal or non-verbal, formal or informal, one-way or two-way, and designed to elicit learners' verbal or non-verbal responses. Its primary function in the teaching process is the creation and maintenance of a community of thought and feeling which will lead to learning. Ibid

Effective presentation of stimuli is, in itself, a form of communication in class teaching. When the teacher is pointing to a chart, tapping a ruler on a disk to attract students' attention or asking a subtle question which requires interpretation and insight for its solution, he/she is engaged in the process of communication. Social scientists apply the term interaction to refer to the act of communication between two people or more. It is the "collaborative exchange of thoughts, feelings, or ideas between two or more people, resulting in a reciprocal effect on each other" (Brown, 2001:165). So, people interact, a two-way process is involved. As for classrooms, which are inevitably so social, the teacher may open a lesson by asking a question. When a student answers, interaction occurs. So one of the various ways which enables students to enter into the communication patterns of
the classroom is answering teachers' questions. Other ways include asking questions of their own, volunteering information, and chatting with other students or the teacher (Hudgins, 1971:71).

In fact, interaction reflects the essentially interactive nature of communication. It is seen as "the heart of communication, it is what communication is all about" (Brown, 2001: 165). It is an important word for language teachers whose students had been accustomed to recitation and mechanical output. It is through interaction students become able to use their language store while they read or listen to authentic linguistic material. When they are interacting, students use all they possess of the language-all they have learned or causally absorbed-in real-life exchanges. In this way, they learn to make use of the elasticity of language (Rivers, 1981: 4-5).

Semantically speaking, when two people speak, the extent to which the speaker's message is received is a factor of both the speaker's production and the listener's reception. Most meaning is a product of negotiation, of give and take. So the communicative purpose of language forces teachers to create opportunities for genuine interaction in the classroom. Of course, interactive techniques will provide for such negotiation. It has been found that learners' communicative abilities are enhanced as they interact with each other through oral and written discourse. This can be considered as one principle underlying "Interaction Hypothesis" of second language acquisition of Michael Long (1996, 1985) (as cited in Brown, 2001:48).

The Interactive Language Teaching Approach emphasizes interaction and group learning. This involves the exploitation and interpretation, jointly by teachers and learners, of meaning or message-bearing aspects of communication. Thus, it would be assumed that most of the learning tasks that are encouraged will certainly contain problem-solving elements and that learning will be considered social in nature (Brumfit, 1984: 69).

Taking these two points together, psychologists such as Vygotsky (1962) have pointed out that language use has an important position in most complex learning activities. So expressing one's thoughts, through interaction with others, provides a means of processing and controlling these thoughts.
Barnes (1976: 101) states: "Through language we both receive a meaningful world from others and at the same time make meanings by reinforcing that world to our end".

Depending on an experimental situation, Lunzer (1968) (cited in Barnes, 1976: 103) has concluded that learners achieve greater insight into problem-solving tasks the more they are able to (i) rehearse aloud the demands of the tasks (ii) verbalize what they were doing with the data and with what purpose, and (iii) do so in response to the prompting of others.

Learners are led, by the teacher, to the use of communicative processes as interaction and negotiation of meaning with others. To achieve this, teachers should concentrate on what Brumfit (1984: 57) calls "accuracy" and "fluency". This dichotomy should be the aim of language courses so that to ensure the development of the learner's capacities to interact and communicate successfully. The difference between accuracy and fluency is not between "what is good and bad language teaching". The difference is methodological rather than conceptual. Fluency to Brumfit is the activities which encourage the use of language in natural way. In other words, fluency activities should focus on developing language interaction. The focus in such activities is always on meaning rather than on form. On the other hand, accuracy activities are those in which the learners discuss certain aspects of language due to the pedagogical situation organized by the teacher (ibid.).

According to the Interactive Approach, learning is viewed as dependent on both internal and external factors. The first factor recognizes the basic requirement of cognitive development, i.e. the new information is interpreted in relation to what is already known thus requiring the reconstruction or modification of the knowledge which is already possessed. The second factor on which learning depends is interaction and negotiation with others so as to promote learning. This factor is an external one. (ibid.)

Therefore it is not surprising, then, that despite the effective imposition of particular teaching strategies; teachers vary in their interpretation of interactive teaching. Hargreaves etal, as cited in Tanner etal (2010: 63), derive nine different types of interactive teaching from teacher's descriptions of how they
interpret interactive teaching. He divides interactive teaching styles in two main types: Surface forms and deep forms. Surface forms have the purposes of engaging students, students Practical and active involvement, broad students participation, collaborative activity, and conveying knowledge. The deep forms have the purposes of assessing and extending knowledge reciprocity and meaning making, attention to thinking and learning skills, attention to student's social and emotional needs and skills. These were less well developed in practice.

To sum up, the Interactive Approach is compatible with the new ideas which relate language to communication.

4• Moving to Empowerment of Learners

Providing empowerment of learners involves the relationship between the teacher and the learner, as most classrooms encounters are embedded in the roles and power of the teacher.

If the objective is to develop learner's internalized language then one needs to see how teachers create the climate so that learners want to learn and enjoy learning, while in environment managed by one in a position of respect and power. Simple dichotomy of such power is that of coercive power, reward based power, and referent power.

Coercive power involves punishment. Rewards in a classroom may involve marks, an encouraging word or a tick in the exercise book. Referent power is where individual appeal to the commitment and interest of others to create intrinsic interest. This is proactive and effective power building and in classroom terms means that authoritative statements. The use of punishment and obvious rewards need to change to the learners wanting to learn (Cook, 2011: 42).

With more frequent referent power approaches, direct classroom management is superseded by task facilitation through changes in teacher behavior. Referent power also involves varied learning arrangements and specific use of group work. Such changes in teacher behavior from transmission of knowledge mode to facilitator require confidence, language skills and workable techniques to move towards more open tasks and open interaction.
Yet as motivational research shows, change will only come if one is confident enough to move out of the safe and known to share the power of learning (Ibid: 2).

5 • What Needs to Be in Place for Interactive Teaching to Happen?

Initiation of interaction by the teacher is considered the most important key to creating an interactive language classroom. By initiation of interaction teachers provide the stimuli for continued interaction. These stimuli can be:

1- A task or lesson which offers challenge and gives students something to think about.
2- A positive learning ethos which fosters confidence and respect enabling learners to give and accept constructive criticism and see errors as stepping stones to success.
3- Appropriate resources in the right place—for example an electronic whiteboard may be more valuable in a classroom where it can be integrated into the whole curriculum.
4- Leadership vision that anticipate the needs of teacher and students.
5- Questions raised by the teacher himself give students opportunity to produce language comfortably without having to risk initiating language themselves (Brown, 2001:169)

6 • Why Interactive Teaching?

There are three distinct reasons for interactive teaching:

1- It is an attempt to see what actually exists in the brains of the students. This is the ‘summative’ aspect. It is the easiest aspect to understand, but it is far from being the only perspective.
2- The second reason is ‘formative’, where the teacher aims through the assigned task to direct student's mental processing along an appropriate path in 'concept - space'. The intent is that, as students think through the issues necessary in traversing the path, the resulting mental construction that is
developed in the students' head will possess those properties that the teacher is trying to teach. As Socrates discovered, a good question can accomplish this result better than just telling the answer (Abrahamson, 2010:1)

3- The third reason may be termed ‘motivational’. Learning is hard work, and an injection of motivation at the right moment can make all the difference. One motivating factor provided by the interactive teacher is the requirement of a response to a live classroom task.

This serves to jolt the students into action, to get his brain off the couch, so to speak. Additional more subtle and pleasant events follow immediately capitalizing on the momentum created by this initial burst. One of these is a result of our human social tendencies. When teachers ask students to work together in small groups to solve a problem, a discussion ensures that not only serves in itself to build more robust knowledge structure, but also to motivate.

The anticipation of immediate feedback in the form of reaction from their peers, or from the teacher is a very strong motivator. If it is not embarrassing or threatening, students want to know whether their understanding is progressing or just drifting aimlessly in concept space. Knowing that they are not allowed to drift too far off track provides tremendous energy to continue (ibid: 2).

7• Factors of Interactive Lessons

Teaching is considered to be interactive when students’ contributions are encouraged, expected and extended. This would seem to imply a deeper participation by students with a far higher degree of autonomy than found the traditional recitation script of initiation response - feedback.

Interactive teaching should be seen as a whole approach to integrating episodes of teaching into lessons. Some important factors and unifying themes must be taken into consideration when focusing on interactive lessons. These factors are:

1- Reciprocal opportunities for talk which allow students to develop independent voices in discussions.
2- Appropriate guidance and modeling when the teacher
orchestrates the language and skills for thinking collectively.
3- Environments which are conducive to students’ participation.
4-An increase in the level of student autonomy (Little, 1990:56)

8• How to Be an Interactive Teacher?
Teachers can play many roles in the course of teaching. Facilitator of the process of learning might be one to these roles by which they make learning easier for students. The facilitating role requires that teachers step away from the managerial role and allow students with their gentle prodding to find their own pathway to success. Interactive teachers must strive towards the non-directive of the process of learning, gradually enabling the students to move from total dependence upon the teacher, the class activities, the textbook, to relatively total independence. (Brown, 2001: 167).

For interaction to take place teachers must create a climate which assesses:
1- The spontaneity of the students;
2- Unrehearsed language can be performed;
3- The freedom of expressions given over the students;

These make it impossible for teacher to predict what their students will say and do. As students engage in such climate, it is the teacher's job to keep the process flowing smoothly and efficiently. The unique aim of the teachers is to enable students to engage in the real-life situation. Ibid.

The vision of a teacher using an interactive approach is to develop classrooms were students are helped to make sense and reflect on their experiences, evaluate their work and set future learning goals. In such classrooms students are encouraged to articulate how they learn, they should be able to express what the problem they are working on, what questions and prior ideas they have, they should also know they are going to evaluate and present their findings. (Arends, 1997:87)

A radical approach to learner autonomy is called the process syllabus which is introduced by Breen and Candling (1984). This approach states that what is covered in the classroom should be decided not by the teacher or the curriculum designer in advance
but by a continuous process of negotiation between the teacher and the students. Nothing is imposed and pre-defined. In a cycle, the teacher and students discuss what they want to know, choose the types of activities and tasks to carry it out, and then evaluate how successful they have been (White, 1988: 97).

According to this approach the teacher is an experienced helper which has a difficult job to assist in establishing goals, working out a schedule within the learners constraints and turning the students' initial preconceptions of language and of language learning into those attitudes that are most effective for the students as well as introducing the range of materials and methods available (Schmitt, 2000: 175).

The relevance of the notion of learner autonomy as a goal in formal education contexts has in turn produced a need for teachers to develop expertise in pedagogy for autonomy. This centrality requires new teacher education / development efforts that address way of aligning teacher education programs with the new demands of education systems. These attempts need to tackle the resistance of pedagogical innovations that assign a new role to them (Raya (b), 2009: 1).

9•What Is Autonomy?

Autonomy means people taking more control over their lives individually and collectively. Autonomy in learning means people taking more control over their learning in classrooms and outside them and taking more control over their purposes for which they learn language and the ways in which they learn them.

Autonomy learners are capable of setting their own learning objectives, defining the contents and progressions of learning, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the learning process, and evaluating learning outcomes.

Autonomy can also be described as a capacity to take charge of or take responsibility for or control over someone's own learning. So autonomy involves abilities and attitudes that people possess, and can develop to various degrees (Benson, 2006: 1).

The notion of autonomy in learning has long been part of a wide range of educational philosophies and it is identified as
being crucial to the development of lifelong learning in the learning society. Piaget (1965) for example, maintains that the ultimate aim of education is for the individual to develop the autonomy of thought, to create new original ideas rather than just recycle old ones. As an educational aim, the development of autonomy is the development of a kind of person whose thought and action in important areas of his life are to be explained by reference to his own choices, decisions, reflections - in short his own activity of mind (Raya(a), 2009: 1).

Learner autonomy is a problematic term because it is widely confused with self-instruction. It is also a slippery concept because it is difficult to define precisely. This is because whether learner autonomy should be thought of as capacity or behavior; whether it is characterized by learner responsibility or learner control; whether it is psychological phenomenon with political implications or political right with psychological implications; and whether the development of learner autonomy depends on complementary teacher autonomy. (Little, 2009: 2).

10 • Factors Affecting Learner Autonomy

There are many factors affecting the promotion of EFL learner autonomy. These factors include: motivation, learning style and learning strategies.

10.1. Motivation

Motivation is of great importance to the autonomous learning. Only if students are highly motivated, they are willing to take responsibility for their own learning and adopting a cooperative way of learning in the classroom (Reid, 2007:15).

Brown (2001: 20-28) states that motivation is the extent to which learners choices about goals to pursue and the effort they will devote to that pursuit. It is a key factor in successful learning. Ideally motivation should be intrinsic - that is, a learner is self-motivating. To achieve this, however, a learner needs to have a desired goal and some determination to succeed.
Besides, Dickinson (1978: 168) finds a strong link between motivation and autonomy, in that the two constructs share certain key concepts: these are learner independence, learner responsibility and learner choice.

The relationship between motivation and autonomy in language learning has been a very controversial issue, the controversy being on whether it is autonomy that enhances motivation or it is motivation that produces autonomy.

Spratt et al (2002: 250) argue that "motivation may lead to autonomy or be a precondition for it, which is significant for the task of language learners' training, as it indicates where teachers should choose to place their teaching priorities. In situation where learners resist autonomous practices or reject or avoid learning unities, teachers may encourage autonomy by developing students' motivation to learn (Deci & Ryan, 1985: 245).

10.2. Learning Styles

Kinsella (1995: 170) states that a learning style refers to "an individual's natural, habitual, and preferred ways of absorbing, processing, and retaining new information and skills which persist regardless of teaching methods or content area" Some learners like doing grammar and memorizing; some want to speak and lay; others prefer reading and writing, while avoiding speaking. But language learning means to be able to use language, that is to say, listening, speaking, reading, and writing are all necessary.

In addition, a learner style is a biologically and developmentally inborn set of characteristics that make the same teaching method wonderful for some and terrible for others. It might be the product of the learner's personality, experience, socio-economic and/or cultural background

10.3. Learning Strategies

Chamot and Kupper (1989:13) define learning strategies as "techniques students use to comprehend, store, and remember new information and, Richards & Schmidt (2002: 301) define learning strategies as "the ways in learners attempt to work out the meanings and use of words, grammatical rules, and other aspects of the language that they are learning". Learning strategies refer to mental and behavioral steps, techniques, approaches, or
deliberate actions that are taken by learners in order to facilitate and enhance their own learning (Oxford, 2003:80).

11. How Can Teachers Promote Learners' Autonomy in Classrooms?

Dickinson (1992:2) identifies many ways in which the teacher can promote learners' autonomy.

1- legitimizing independence in learning by showing that teachers approve and by encouraging the students to be more independent;
2- convincing learners that they are capable of being greater independence in learning- giving them successful experiences of independent learning;
3- giving learners opportunities to exercise their independence;
4- helping learners to develop learning techniques (learning strategies) so that they can exercise their independence;
5- helping learners become more aware of language as a system so that they can understand many of the learning techniques available and learn sufficient grammar to understand simple reference books;
6- sharing with learners something of what teachers know about language learning at they have a greater awareness of what to expect from the language learning and how they should react to problems that erect barriers to learning.
7- asking students to keep a diary of their learning experiences . Through practice, student may become more aware of their learning preferences and start to think of ways of becoming more independent learners.
8- giving the students projects to do outside the classroom. Such projects may raise motivation.
9- encouraging the students to use only English in class. Tell the students that this chance for them to use only English and few opportunities like this exist for them. Part of the role of the language teacher is to create an environment where students feel they should communicate in the target language and feel comfortable.
10- stressing fluency rather than accuracy.
11- allowing the students to use reference books, including dictionaries in class.
12-helping learners raise their awareness of responsibility and motivation;
13-helping learners monitor and evaluate their learning; and
14-helping learners acquire skills and knowledge.

12. Importance of Learner Training to manage their own learning

According to Wenden (1998: 5), the importance of learner training lies in the fact that it enables learners to become effective agents of change within their educational context. She further indicates that learner training is likely to bring changes in the learner's role by helping language learners acquire the ability to take responsibility for their own learning processes through planning, and evaluating, thus making them aware of meta cognitive and effective factors in learning.

The goal of learner's training is to facilitate language learning by providing a wide range of strategies to choose from during their learning and use (Cohen, 1998:65).

Little (1996:136) states that learner training is conceived of as a way of equipping learners with learning tools and insights into their learning styles and strategies. It also attempts to increase learners' awareness as what language is, what learning is, and especially what role a learner should play in the learning enterprise. Learner training can only be feasible if the teachers take account of the importance of language learning strategies and styles.

Conclusion

It is clear that the transformation of pedagogy towards more students' autonomy and personalization of the learning experience suggests that it would be fruitful to focus on strategies which gave students most confidence in gaining knowledge.

Nevertheless, autonomous learning is not yet widely used, nor is it clear that it would fit in with many mainstream educational system.

It seems likely that the promotion of learner autonomy in language learning is an area that will continue to grow given
post - critical awareness of the need to recognize learners' personal voices and identities. This path may lead to ways of learning that are apparently traditional and teacher centered but can still be seen as reflecting autonomy in that they represent learners' choice.

After all, in becoming ever easier, all of us have to take on the role of self-directed learner, searching, selecting, evaluating and filtering this mass of communication into our personal knowledge base. For teachers, the most relevant advice that may be given is 'we cannot teach students to become more autonomous but we can create the atmosphere and conditions in which they will feel encouraged developing the autonomy they already have.

References
