

Self-assessment and Learner Autonomy: Challenges in Foreign Language Teaching in India

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Abstract

Learner autonomy is becoming increasingly important in the context of language education, so much so that it has moved from being a mere option to assuming an entirely legitimate status by itself. Self-assessment is recognized as an important tool towards autonomy in the Western world, but there is relatively little evidence to assess the employment of autonomy in India. This paper attempts to shed light on the question of self-assessment and autonomy with regard to the Indian education system and foreign language learning. Specifically, I attempt to determine a) the importance given to self-assessment in the restrictive Indian context, and b) how the scope for assessment practices can be expanded in the Indian foreign language context. In order to study this, I surveyed a sample of 20 teachers and 30 students and their assessment practices and ideas relating to it. The findings point strongly to language assessment patterns currently in use in India that prove inimical to autonomy. There is an absence of discourse on self-assessment in India and the learner is more comfortable being assessed than assessing himself. Pre-service and in-service trainings need to incorporate this fundamental concept on an immediate and continual basis, to enable metacognitive language learning, intercultural skills and reflective practices. Given that introducing self-assessment would require changing mindsets and transforming the education system, I conclude that giving self-assessment a permanent place among Indian learners and teachers could prove to be a great challenge.

Keywords: Autonomy, self-assessment, language, India

Introduction

Autonomy is today a key word in language learning (Benson, 2001; Little, 1991, 2007; Reinders, 2010; Smith, 2013). Self-assessment stems out of autonomy and finds its place in relation to it. Helping a learner develop self-assessment skills is to help him affirm his identity. Encouraging the learner to assess himself and take initiatives, is to lead him towards the path of autonomy. In this sense, allowing a learner to self-assess is to recognize him as a subject; it is a recognition of his identity that allows him to grow.

In attempting to evaluate the role of self-assessment in the Indian system, here are some issues I try to bring to light. Do students play an equal part in their learning? Are they being guided to assess their own success in language learning? Are they offered a chance to evaluate their own progress, build on their strengths and weaknesses? Are learners even thinking about their learning, their obstacles and their achievements? Do classroom practices reflect such concerns? How do teachers react to these mechanisms? Do they use self-assessment? Can foreign language learning in India incorporate these techniques? These are some of the questions that form the framework of this article that researches on self-assessment, learner autonomy and teacher discourse in the Indian context of French language learning.

Literature review

Autonomy and self-assessment are strongly related to one another and support each other in the learning process. It might be practical to define the perspective in which these terms are understood in this paper before we proceed further.

The concept of autonomy gained importance in language learning with several studies, one of the foremost being that of Holec (1981). Holec's definition came from his practical work with students at the Centre de Recherches et d'Applications Pédagogiques en Langues (CRAPEL), University of Nancy, France, in the early 1970s. Holec defines learner autonomy as follows:

“To take charge of one's learning is to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, i.e.: determining the objectives; defining the contents and progressions; selecting methods and techniques to be used; monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking (rhythm, time, place, etc.); evaluating what has been acquired.”

The Common European Framework for Languages (2001) also largely influenced the place of autonomy as vital to language learning. Autonomy is not to be construed as a self-generated capacity. It is inherent in learners, but not spontaneous and needs to be developed (Barbot, 2000). However, it is not always to be perceived as something that learners lack and need to be taught. To some measure, autonomy exists in all learners and they are able to participate in their own learning (Smith, 2003). Autonomy is a well-used and well-referred term, which has been subject to different perspectives and understanding (Dervin, Badrinathan, 2012). However, we will keep Holec's definition as “taking charge of one's learning” (Holec, 1981). Based on this definition, in this paper we refer to autonomy as a concept which allows the learner to proceed towards autonomous practices and ways of learning. That is, when the learner takes charge, he also takes responsibility. In taking responsibility, he unravels hidden areas of his learning and develops an opportunity to work upon them, which otherwise would not happen in a teacher-driven learning mode. Hence, autonomy also signals an approach which is student-centered, where the learner pursues his personal learning goals, has a range of learning strategies at his disposal, and exercises thought-about choices to fulfill his goals. Although achieving

complete autonomy is difficult, one can gear towards autonomy, step on the path of autonomisation and autonomous practices, whose efficacy is largely dependent on variables like context, educational systems, work culture, and situations of learning, to name a few.

Self-assessment is strongly related to learner autonomy as many studies have proved (Bachman, 2000; Dornyei, 2001; Haughton & Dickinson, 1988; Oscarson, 1989; Strong-Klause, 2000). Self-assessment can be used both for a formal certification or as a self-check tool (Gardner, 2000). It can also be constructed in = diverse ways, e.g. rubric-enhanced self – assessment, collaboratively, individual portfolios etc. In all cases, it refers to assessment by the learner of himself, hence the modality of administration, which is by oneself. We shall look at self-assessment in this article from a formative perspective, leading towards skill development in learners, rather than a summative perspective, which signifies end of learning and certification. Self-assessment is also about training the learner in order that he may be capable of evaluating and judging himself, a process which is indispensable not just for the individual learner, but also so that he may better appreciate the assessment from the teacher and use it for his own learning growth.

Looking at self-assessment from the above mentioned self-development perspective has three distinct advantages. It makes it pleasurable for the learner and the teacher relieving both of the travails of creating and undertaking a sophisticated mechanism for assessment (like the final examinations). Secondly it allows for a creation of interesting learning activities. Lastly, self-assessment is a process of reflection, of appreciation, a capacity to make an argued, objective judgement about oneself (Legendre, 1993).

We are interested in formative assessment, that focuses on self-development and which includes self-assessment as one of its key components. It is difficult to aim for autonomy without considering self-assessment, which by virtue of its technique and its psychological element, helps an upward learning curve (Barbot, 1990).

Holec established that self-assessment is an indispensable element of the learning process and even argues that all learners engage in it (Holec, 1985). Dickinson (1987) shows how self-assessment is an important tool, particularly for language learners.

Language Assessment in the Indian context

The Indian educational places a lot of importance on marks and examination. The teacher holds the responsibility for assessing and determining progress; performance is precious for the student who puts the onus on the grades obtained than on the learning achieved. (Badrinathan, 2011, 2013). They are test takers, rather than test-participants and assessment is the sole responsibility of the teacher. There is also a tendency to engineer the outcomes based on the final evaluation in order to procure best results in learners. Hence, practices favouring a climate of autonomy could well be sacrificed or not even considered, in this framework. One therefore lives in a vicious cycle where examinations determine learning, and learning gears towards examinations. For example, when the examination system of the university of Mumbai moved towards a credit-based continuous evaluation system, it was a matter of a piling up tests and projects in view of obtaining the ‘final good outcome’. In this set-up, important elements for language learning such as spoken skills, listening skills, intercultural explorations get second hand status. In such an environment, there is a tendency to forego autonomous practices in evaluation and maintain traditional practices.

Methodology

20 higher secondary and university teachers of French from Mumbai were part of this study on self assessment in the year 2013-14. A questionnaire allowed us to look into the assessment techniques in use in their practices and thereby understand the extent to which self-assessment was being employed in the classroom. The questionnaire investigated their representations about assessment in general and self-assessment in particular. In the same year, first year 30 university level students of French from Mumbai were administered a questionnaire, at their entry point into the bachelor's programme in French to understand their ideas on self-assessment and on assessment in general. The questionnaires were studied through content analysis in order to arrive at results.

Findings

The questionnaire for teachers asked about the forms of assessment they used; , whether they used self–assessment as a tool to help students improve their language skills. They were further asked to justify their response. Through the questionnaires, four main findings were revealed.

The responses overwhelmingly revealed that: a) Self-assessment was not used by the teachers. b) Teachers did not realize the value of self-assessment or perceive it as important. c) The current restrictive educational system was disallowing teachers from moving towards self-assessment. Nineteen out of twenty teachers provided responses in the form of: “/ “It is not possible at all”, / “It is the teacher’s job to assess”/ “We have always been doing it”/ “They cannot do it”/ “Then, what are we here for?” / “ We have the expertise for it”/”How can the student judge his own progress like that?”/ “They find it hard to pronounce French words- how they can assess themselves?” Traditionally in the Indian system, the teacher has been the one who assesses and the learner is the one who is assessed. Inverting this paradigm would not be simple, for it would mean parting with the symbolic power of assessing and delivering a verdict, as 95% of the responses revealed.

There is also the question of reliability of assessment when it is handled by learners that comes out through this discourse. “How can the student assess himself?/ “ They will always rate themselves well”/ “They will not write the truth” “They will overestimate their capacity”/ “How do you know they will tell the truth?” These opinions revealed by respondents cast doubt on the reliability of self-assessment in the Indian setting. As Dickinson (1987) says, teachers after all, have the expertise to make more accurate and reliable assessments. However, the variables in question are many and one cannot make a blanket statement in either direction, concerning the reliability of self-assessment.

There is a resistance towards new practices. Only a small handful of teachers were willing to try out ‘new recipes’ for assessment within the class. The majority is comfortable retaining the ‘study-exam-study’ cycle which has been handed down to them. “There is no time for all that”/ “The current exam schedule itself takes up our time”/ “There is already too much to do”/ “Completing the portion is itself a challenge”.

Many teachers are attached to the “sanctity” of current assessments, and see newer techniques as being in conflict with existing ones. A test or an examination is a formal event and cannot be messed with. It is organized, planned and scheduled and needs to be respected. “*They need the exams, it’s the only way to assess them*”/ *I regularly conduct tests in class/ Almost every fifteen days, I organize class tests/ “With regular tests, they are doing better”/ They are forced to*

prepare regularly for the tests, its helpful for them.”/ “They know when the final exams are, it allows them to prepare well.

The educational heritage which the teachers and the students have inherited does not prepare them for autonomous learning and self-assessment. There is a firm attitude of ‘ this is the way it was, this is the way it will be’, which will need to be shaken in order to bring change. Disturbing this set order is not an easy task. In the case of self-assessment, it appears to represent “*subversive changes that challenge the transmission of interactions, of symbolic possessions, of the very function of a teacher and the perceptions of the learner*” (Barbot, 1990).¹

The inhibitions of transfer of power were evident. Losing power and sharing the space with the student represents a scaling-down in the eyes of some teachers. There is also the distrust about the student who will overestimate his skills or even not be honest about his progress. On the other hand, it also unveils the fact that students may probably not know the techniques of self-assessment and would require to be trained in it. The responses, however, also clearly indicate that the responsibility for learning resided with the teacher and the student had no part to play in it, except take the administered tests. The traditional pedagogy that has been in practice still prevails for most of the teachers.

At a parallel level, the student questionnaire did not reveal startlingly different results. This questionnaire attempted to understand whether the students had used self-assessment before and what they thought about it.

“ I would like to be assessed by the teacher”/I don’t think I am capable of doing that”, “How can I assess myself?/”I cannot do it”/“It’s a waste of time, anyway it’s the teacher who has to give the marks”/ “Does it make a difference? The teacher has to assess anyway”/The marks are given by the teacher finally, so its better if she decides my progress”. “I have never assessed myself before”/ “Tests, exams and more exams, is what we are used to doing.”

These statements reveal that the student plays the role of the assessed and that clearly the one who assesses needs to be the teacher. There is also a conflict of interest, which comes out clearly, because finally the grades rest with the teacher and the student has little or no part to play in it and hence finds self-assessment to be meaningless. Besides, there is also a tendency to underestimate one’s capacity. The majority of the learners did not seem to judge themselves as capable of assessing their own progress. At no point has any of the 30 students been exposed to alternative methods of assessment as the questionnaires reveal, or invited to play an active part in his learning. It is therefore natural for them to think in these terms. However, if the learner is guided towards self-assessment, it could be motivational. When learning a foreign language, there are moments of anxiety and despair, as often students express within the classroom, especially with respect to pronunciation or spoken skills. Self-assessment could help them see what they have gained, and help them increase their self-worth. Holec (1981) reminds us that learning cultures are an indispensable element for consideration. “What does acquisition imply for the learner? Is it simply learning by rote, retaining words and letters? What is learning? (Being taught?) Or what is teaching? (Making someone learn?).” The situation of the learner has to be taken into account entirely. This is not easy by any standards, because learning cultures are imbibed, less thought-of, difficult to re-examine. But it is important to consider and acknowledge this aspect, because this is what can be an impediment towards autonomy. What is important therefore, is to put in place a pedagogy that would allow space and time for such changes.

Such a shift is certainly not easy, as it implies a transfer and sharing of power. The teacher, who all along has been the one who assesses, needs to share space with the learner.

¹ My translation

Moreover, the learner needs to share his time with preparing for the grades, which are an indispensable part of learning. Self-assessment is also about handling both these aspects without stress or conflict. Being able to prepare oneself for the graded assessment, and being able to assess oneself for self-progress. Achieving this goal is not simple. It is also important to note that a teacher cannot guide the student towards self-assessment and autonomous practices if he or she has not been sufficiently guided himself, and in which case would require greater ‘assessment literacy’ (Benson, 2015). To achieve this, it is vital, that teacher professional training incorporate autonomy as a key factor through reflection on classroom practices and pedagogies. A balanced integration of theory and practice, student-centered approaches, analysis of context and situation in which learning takes place and sharing of experience with peers will go a long way in establishing a reflective approach.

If autonomous learning practices and a culture of autonomy is not in practice, both learners and teachers will need support in order to set it in place, to raise awareness about the importance and usefulness of self-assessment and to appreciate its worth. Even then, one has to be wary of the pitfalls. Ideally, developing self-assessment as a skill and a habit should go hand in hand. The teacher and the learner have to be on the same page, sharing values about assessment. Finally, the teacher has to be a model himself, practicing self-assessment in order that one may be an effective spokesperson for the learner self-assessment model.

An educational system cannot undergo a change if one does not modify evaluation. While the discourse on learner-centered approaches in language learning is becoming increasingly important, the teacher still holds the key to success in mainstream curriculum in the Indian context. The responsibility is on the teacher; there is constant assessment, grading, pointing out of errors either formally or informally. In such a context, it is not realistic to expect learners to move automatically towards autonomous learning, take charge of their learning and develop responsibility. The responsibility still largely lies in most cases with the teacher. In the behaviourist mode that is largely in practice, there is seldom a role for the learner to play in analyzing his errors, or even gauging his progress. It is often an open-shut case, leaving very little choice to the individual learner. This situation is in contrast to the learner-centered theory. It is more of the teacher gearing towards what he wants the learner to learn and achieve, than the learner himself wanting to achieve what he wishes to achieve. A shift in paradigm is needed in order to reverse the process from the prescriptive to the analytical and to help the learner gain responsibility. The learner needs to become the subject, instead of the object like what Oskarsen envisaged in 1978 itself when he defined self-learning questionnaires “I know... I am capable of...”, paving the way for developing positive learning strategies. The learner needs to undergo a deconditioning that allows him to perceive assessment not just as an external factor that is decisive, but as a tool that allows him to control and measure his own learning. Self-assessment is not just a method of signaling error, but it is also a tool that is motivational, remedial, that helps develop learning strategies. For which, error perceptions need to change and error needs to be held as a means to regulate and improve learning. Therefore, one needs to take the bull by its horns, change the evaluation pattern, so that learning can undergo a positive paradigm shift. The challenge only begins here.

Conclusion

If self-assessment is recognized as an important tool for learner autonomy and language learning, a long-term project has to be envisaged in order that teachers may be trained and involved in this line of thinking. This is essentially to help them modify their beliefs and perceptions concerning assessment and to allow them to consider self-assessment as a tool

towards autonomous learning. This medal has two sides to tackle: one, understanding autonomy and its worth; two, understanding self-assessment and its role in autonomous language learning. Language learning should not be envisaged as an end in itself, but rather should take into account strategies that would lead towards improved learning. Keeping in line with the effective socio-constructivist paradigm, teachers should encourage learners to self-assess, construct knowledge collaboratively with their peers and make them active partners in the learning process. It is also a question of enabling the learner to give value to what he knows, identify what he does not know or lacks and make progress. The challenge, as Holec reminds us, is that “the first demon to exorcise is the lack of capacity of learners to appreciate their knowledge” (Holec, 1981). Well-thought about teacher training initiatives that bear in the mind the specificities of the context, the learning culture of teachers and learners, will propel a step forward in this direction. An ongoing research in which we are engaged, with learners using self-assessment techniques for French language learning will perhaps yield further inputs into the efficacy of self-assessment in this context.

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