ORIGINAL ARTICLE

SHAPING AUTONOMOUS LEARNERS: STRATEGIES FOR LONG-TERM GRAMMAR RETENTION

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Abstract: Learner autonomy plays a crucial role in language acquisition, particularly in mastering grammar, as it enables students to take responsibility for their learning. This article explores the significance of learner independence in language learning, highlighting its benefits such as increased motivation, critical thinking skills, and long-term retention of grammar rules. The discussion emphasizes the role of grammar in communicative competence and presents effective strategies to promote autonomous grammar learning. Discovery-Based Learning, Socratic Questioning, Task-Based Grammar Learning, and Corpus-based Exploration are examined as strategies that encourage learners to actively engage with grammatical structures rather than passively memorize rules. By fostering critical thinking, self-reflection, and problem-solving, these approaches help students internalize grammar more effectively and develop long-lasting learning habits.

Learner independence, often referred to as **learner autonomy**, is the ability of students to take responsibility for their own learning by making decisions about their study methods, goals, and progress. According to **Holec (1981)**, autonomy in language learning means "the ability to take charge of one's own learning." This includes setting learning objectives, selecting appropriate strategies, and evaluating progress without excessive reliance on teachers.

Scholars such as **Benson (2011)** argue that learner independence is not simply about learning alone but involves **self-regulated learning**, where students actively plan, monitor, and assess their language development. While some linguists distinguish between **autonomy and independence**, others use them interchangeably, recognizing that both emphasize **personal responsibility and self-direction** (Najeeb, 2013).

Acquiring learner independence in learning languages is important because of the several factors listed below:

1. **Enhances Learning Efficiency** – Independent learners take initiative in their studies, which leads to more **effective language acquisition** compared to passive learning (Little, 1991).

2. **Develops Critical Thinking and Problem-Solving Skills** – When students take control of their learning, they develop the ability to analyze, evaluate, and apply language knowledge more effectively (Benson, 2011).

3. **Encourages Motivation and Confidence** – Learner autonomy fosters intrinsic motivation as students feel a sense of ownership over their progress, which boosts their **confidence in using the language** (Ushioda, 2008).

4. **Prepares Learners for Real-Life Communication** – Independent learners seek **authentic language exposure** (e.g., reading books, watching films, using online resources), which enhances their real-world communication skills (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

5. **Supports Lifelong Learning** – Language learning is a continuous process, and autonomous learners are more likely to **keep improving** their language skills beyond formal education (Benson, 2011).

6. **Helps in Mixed-Ability Classrooms** – Encouraging learner independence allows students with different proficiency levels to work at their own pace, maximizing their potential (Al-Subaiei, 2017).

Incorporating **learner independence** in language learning empowers students to take an active role in their learning, specifically in learning grammar which provides learners with the framework needed to understand and produce meaningful communication. As grammar is the system of rules governing the structure of a language, including **morphology (word formation), syntax (sentence structure), and semantics (meaning)** (Richards & Schmidt, 2010), it is one of the essential aspects of language serves to construct meaning.

Grammar is of great importance of in language learning due to the following reasons:

1. **Enhances Language Accuracy** – Grammar instruction helps learners avoid errors that may lead to misunderstandings (Ellis, 2006).

2. **Supports Fluency and Expression** – Mastering grammar allows learners to express ideas more precisely and naturally (Larsen-Freeman, 2015).

3. **Facilitates Comprehension** – Understanding grammatical structures improves listening and reading comprehension, aiding overall language proficiency (Richards & Schmidt, 2010).

4. **Essential for Academic and Professional Success** – Proper grammar usage is crucial in formal writing, speaking, and standardized language tests (Celce-Murcia, 2007).

5. **Bridges the Gap Between Accuracy and Communication** – Grammar enables learners to construct **coherent, meaningful, and contextually appropriate** speech and writing (Canale & Swain, 1980).

Grammar is fundamental to **both language acquisition and communicative competence**. While fluency and communication are key goals in language learning, a strong grammatical foundation ensures **clear, effective, and contextually appropriate communication**. Therefore, a **balanced approach**—combining explicit grammar instruction with communicative practice—maximizes language learning outcomes.

There are two major perspectives of teaching grammar:

- **Formal grammar instruction** focuses on explicit rules, accuracy, and structure (Ellis, 2006).

- **Communicative grammar instruction** integrates grammar into meaningful interactions, prioritizing fluency alongside accuracy (Larsen-Freeman, 2015).

To foster learner autonomy in grammar acquisition, educators can implement a variety of strategies incorporating the two perspectives stated above that encourage students to take an active role in their learning process. Alongside with these strategies learners will be able to develop critical thinking skills, problem-solving abilities, and long-term retention of grammatical structures.

One of the strategies that foster learner autonomy is **Discovery-Based Learning.** Discovery-based learning (also called **inductive learning**) is a teaching approach where students **observe examples and infer grammatical rules** instead of being given explicit explanations. This method aligns with **constructivist theories** of learning (Bruner, 1961; Vygotsky, 1978), which emphasize that knowledge is best acquired through **active exploration** rather than passive reception.

According to **Ellis (2002)**, inductive learning allows students to **internalize grammar rules more effectively** by engaging with authentic examples and drawing their own conclusions, making learning more **meaningful and memorable.** Also, this approach helps learners develop **self-reliance, analytical skills, and deeper understanding** of grammar structures.

There are several ways implement this approach. One of the strategies is **"Find the Pattern"** which is illustrated below:

o Provide learners with authentic texts or dialogues containing the target grammar structure.

o Ask guiding questions (e.g., What do you notice about verb endings in these sentences?).

o Encourage students to formulate rules based on patterns they observe.

o Use **Socratic questioning** – a **series of thought-provoking questions** to help them arrive at conclusions independently to refine their understanding before confirming the grammar rule.

o Allow students to compare their findings with grammar explanations from textbooks or teachers.

For example, instead of telling students **"This is the rule for past simple,"** teachers provide **real-world sentences, dialogues, or texts** containing past simple verbs and guide learners in identifying patterns.

For example:

o Sentence 1: I walked to school yesterday.

o Sentence 2: She played the piano last night.

o Sentence 3: They visited their grandmother on Sunday.

Students analyze these examples and notice that:

- The past tense often ends in -ed.

- Specific time markers (yesterday, last night) indicate past events.

Through **discussion and reflection**, students arrive at the grammar rule on their own, rather than memorizing it from a textbook.

The same strategy can be used for a great variety of grammar items, such as conditional sentences, clauses, punctuation, degrees of comparison of adverbs, differentiating adverbs from adjectives and so on.

The next strategy "**Grammar Detective**" develops critical thinking and self-correction skills which plays an important role in developing independent learning skills (Ur,2012; Thornbury,1999).

Procedure:

1. Give students a set of **sentences with errors** based on a target grammar structure.

2. Ask them to **identify and correct** the mistakes.

3. In pairs, they **justify their corrections** by explaining the grammar rule behind them.

4. Compare their answers with the correct version and discuss why certain structures are used.

Example:
Incorrect: "If she will study, she will pass."

Correction: "If she studies, she will pass."

Guiding Question: Why is "will" incorrect in the first clause?

Moreover, corpus-based exploration enables the learners to study grammar independently. In this case, the learners are tasked to analyze how a specific grammar structure is used in real-life contexts to discover grammar in real use. The students are provided with **authentic examples** from online corpora (Boulton & Cobb, 2017). For example, the students are asked to find the Structures - Present Perfect vs. Past Simple, and look for patterns, and make out the rules for their use.

Another strategy that helps the learners to develop independent learning is implementing **Socratic Questioning** in grammar discussions. Just asking a question "Why is this correct?" encourages deep thinking and rule discovery as well as builds confidence in both understanding and explaining grammar independently (Paul & Elder, 2013; Scrivener, 2011). For example:

Sentence: "She has lived in Paris since 2010.

Guiding Questions:

- o Why is "has lived" used instead of "lived"?

- o How does "since 2010" affect the verb choice?

Besides these, Task-Based Grammar Learning helps to learn and understand grammar in real communication. Thanks to this strategy, the learners will be able to connect **grammar to real-life communication** and be exposed to **self-evaluation and metacognition** (Ellis, 2003; Willis & Willis, 2007). It involves the following procedure:

1. Assign students a **task-based activity** that requires natural use of a target grammar structure.

2. They complete the task (e.g., writing an email, conducting an interview) **without prior grammar instruction**.

3. Afterward, they **reflect** on their use of grammar and analyze what worked well or needed improvement. For example**:**

Target Grammar: Future Tenses

Task: Plan a trip and write an itinerary using "will," "going to," and Present Continuous for future.
Guiding Question: Why did you choose each tense?

The above-mentioned strategies foster **learner autonomy** by shifting the role of the teacher from "explainer" to "facilitator." By **encouraging pattern recognition, critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-reflection**, students gain **long-term retention** of grammar rules and develop **independent learning habits**. Through these strategies the learners' engagement and motivation will be increased, learners **actively construct knowledge**, instead of being passive recipients.

In conclusion, encouraging learner autonomy in grammar acquisition is essential for fostering long-term retention, critical thinking, and self-regulated learning. By shifting from traditional teacher-centered instruction to discovery-based and inquiry-driven methods, students develop the ability to analyze language structures independently and apply them effectively in real-life communication.

The strategies outlined—Discovery-Based Learning, Grammar Detective, Corpus-Based Exploration, Socratic Questioning, and Task-Based Grammar Learning—support learners in taking ownership of their learning process. These approaches promote engagement, motivation, and confidence while ensuring that grammar is not merely memorized but deeply understood and actively used.

Ultimately, empowering students with the tools to explore, analyze, and internalize grammar rules autonomously leads to more effective and meaningful language learning experiences. As

educators, fostering this independence equips learners with the skills necessary for lifelong language acquisition and successful communication.

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