


Chapter 2

Autonomous Learning in Distance Education Theories: Autonomy in Foreign Language Learning

Şenol Orakcı

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1534-1310>
Aksaray University, Turkey

Yücel Gelişli

Gazi University, Turkey

ABSTRACT

Individuals who live in the information age need to know the ways to access information to be able to use the information they have accessed and to produce new information. In order for individuals to have these qualities, they need to learn how to learn. Within this context, learner autonomy is very important in distance education system and lifelong learning. This research focuses on autonomous learning skills in foreign language learning in the context of distance education, which is widely discussed in the 21st century education system. The main purpose of this study is to investigate the autonomous learning skills that enable learners to learn on their own in terms of distance learning learners as well as aiming to examine the emergence of the concept of student autonomy in distance education within the framework of basic theories discussing language learning autonomy in this context. For these purposes, “Autonomy in Foreign Language Teaching,” “Autonomous Learner Features in Foreign Language Learning,” “Teacher and Student Roles in Autonomous Learning,” “The role of Teacher in Autonomous Learning,” “The Role of the Student in Autonomous Learning,” “Autonomous Learning in Distance Education,” “Areas and Approaches in Foreign Language Learning in Which Autonomous Learners Can Improve Themselves,” and “Distance Education Theories” in the field of open and distance education were addressed. Finally, the chapter presented recent technologies to foster autonomous learning in distance education.

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INTRODUCTION

Autonomous learning, as defined by Knowles (1995), entails individuals willingly accepting responsibility for their own learning, reflecting the self-directed nature of the process. However, Dickinson (1992) further distinguishes autonomous learning from self-directed learning by emphasizing that autonomous learners not only assume responsibility but also act upon it, making informed decisions and implementing them, aligning their goals and strategies. Moreover, the interdependent nature of human society, as Little (2009) suggests, challenges the misconception that autonomous learning is a solitary endeavor, recognizing that individuals can benefit from collaborative and social learning experiences. Benson's (2001) delineation of the essential components of autonomous learning, including self-management, self-evaluation, and self-observation, underlines the multifaceted nature of this process. Harmer's (2001) perspective in the context of language learning extends the concept to encompass an individual's ability to independently navigate obstacles and challenges, emphasizing self-reliance. Ultimately, Holec's (1981) widely accepted definition encapsulates the essence of autonomous learning as the learner's active and self-driven involvement in every facet of the learning journey, embodying its central tenet. In fact, when the learner takes responsibility for learning, all stages of learning are mentioned. These:

- Setting goals,
- Defining content and progress,
- Choosing the methods and techniques to be used,
- Observing the acquisition process,
- The evaluation of what has been acquired.

In order to carry out his/her own learning, the individual must go through all these stages. In these stages, the individual needs some knowledge and skills. Holec (1985) described these stages in detail. While defining a goal,

- an individual should know that the activities to be implemented will help define his/her own learning goals,
- he/she should define and analyze these activities, even if they are very general,
- he/she should create a method and its sub-steps according to him/her,
- he/she should divide its main goals into smaller units,
- he/she should know how to use assessment results in transforming them into new goals.

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