Chapter 1
A Framework for the Assessment of Learner Autonomy in Language Learning:
Establishment of a Measuring Scale and Bands

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ABSTRACT

This research reports on the assessment of the improvement in the language learner autonomy (LLA) of a group of Saudi medicine students at tertiary level following an intervention that aims to examine and enhance their LLA in a blended course. Thus, this study proposes a research model for the assessment of LLA in the 21st century and establishes a scale for its measurement. Because LLA is a combination of observable and non-observable behaviors, quantitative and qualitative methods were triangulated in a mixed method research to look at it through the learner voice and metacognition (process perspective) and through the learner gained test scores (product perspective). To overcome the problem that LLA is an unsteady state, the assessment model integrates summative and formative assessment methods. Findings show that the assessment of LLA helps to better understand the process of LLA enhancement and the potential factors that might influence learners' LLA.

INTRODUCTION

The current chapter focuses on the assessment of language learner autonomy (LLA) in a blended Self-Access Language Learning (SALL) environment. It is argued that one of the main changes that teachers need to undertake when they aim to empower their learners is to change assessment practices within their classroom (Everhard, 2015a). This requires exerting time and effort. Assessment of LLA is one of the most difficult tasks for the teacher and the researcher in SALL because other variables are in play including the use of technology (Reinders and Lázaro, 2007). Assessment is often undertaken using 'underdeveloped methodologies and assessment tools' (ibid: p. 1). Therefore, this research was carried out to propose a model for the assessment of LLA in the twenty-first century based on the assumption that there are several components underpinning the concept of LLA and that the lack of any one of these components may influence the level of students' LLA. It also aims to establish a scale for the measurement of LLA in a self-access learning environment. The word 'measurement' is used to refer to the quantitative work which provides numerical evidence on the level of learners' LLA; and 'assessment' is used for the broader process of assessment of LLA including the use of quantitative and qualitative data collection methods.

The study in this chapter is based on an experimental mixed-method research which investigates the measurement and the development of LLA of a group of Saudi students at tertiary level in a blended course and proposes a comprehensive framework for LLA assessment in the twenty-first century. This paper aims to answer one research question based on its design of a LLA scale: How can the development of LLA be measured within a blended learning environment?

First, the chapter gives the definition and constituents of learner autonomy, and its relation to assessment. Next, it draws attention to the gap in the literature of LLA assessment and establishes a LLA measurement scale. Ultimately, based on the research on this scale, it shows findings, solutions and recommendations along with further considerations.

BACKGROUND

Defining Learner Autonomy

Learner autonomy has been discussed and defined in the literature of second and foreign language learning. Because of the multidimensionality of learner autonomy, there have been attempts to define it from several perspectives (Smith, 2008). The definitions given by different theorists tend to differ slightly. It is only in the 1990s that learner autonomy was linked to language learning and the development of second language proficiency (Little, 2007; Smith, 2008).

Little (1991, p. 4) significantly contributes to the notion of autonomy with his definition of autonomy as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision making, and independent action". Since LLA is often considered to be multidimensional, Benson (2001, 2011) suggests that Little adds another (psychological) dimension to the Vygotskyan view of learner autonomy. In this view, autonomy is looked at as a phenomenon that includes both 'individual-cognitive' and 'social interactive' notions, involves 'interdependence', and adopts freedom and choice (ibid). By 'detachment', Oxford (1999) explains that Little does not mean detachment of learners from their communities, institutions, or materials. He rather

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