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## LEARNER AUTONOMY IN FOUNDATION PROGRAMME: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract:

This paper examines critically learner autonomy in the foundation programme implemented by the Ministry of Health, Oman. The foundation programme prepares the students to pursue their studies in nursing and allied health sciences. The objective of this paper is to demonstrate how learner autonomy can be practiced effectively within a structured course like the foundation programme. The focus is on those components in which learner autonomy can be implemented effectively in order to enhance the competence of the learner. It also takes into account the actual application and practice of learner autonomy within the context of a class consisting of not less than twenty students. Finally, this study analyses the theoretical foundations and the practical implications of learner autonomy within the context of the foundation programme through a critical analysis of the outcome of a sample survey among the students. In addition, the practices of these students are subjected to close observation and analysis in order to examine the effectiveness of learner autonomy in the classroom context.

Keywords: learner autonomy, foundation programme, learners, teachers & critical thinking.

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### Introduction:

According to Smith (2008) 'Autonomy' is a multifaceted concept whose meaning has been discussed in an increasingly academic fashion and widely referred to in the field of ELT only over the last decade. Therefore it is necessary to define the term and its applications in the EFL/ESL context. Therefore autonomy in the EFL/ESL context can be described as the learner's capacity to take responsibility for and control over his own learning (Benson, 2009). According to Holec (1981), this ability is not inherent. He explains that it need not be 'inborn but must be acquired' mostly by formal education practices. The foundation course implemented by the Ministry of Health offers ample scope for incorporating learner autonomy within the programme.

### Learner Autonomy:

Learner autonomy in second language learning is very beneficial because it gives space and freedom to the learner to experiment with and enhance his available linguistic resources by interacting meaningfully with his peers who are similar to him in language skills. Hence in an academic context, learner autonomy has been regarded as the ultimate goal of education. In traditional classroom conditions usually, learners do not get enough opportunity to express themselves and explore their potentials. According to Lamb (2009) freedom, choice, and negotiation are often identified as crucial environmental factors for learner autonomy development. In a peer group situation, such an environment is created which is conducive for the development of behavioral and cognitive elements which allow the learners to initiate, monitor and regularly evaluate their learning process. (Little, 2003).

### The Foundation Programme:

A brief overview of the foundation programme is necessary to find out the scope for implementing learner autonomy within the course. The foundation programme has two semesters. Each semester consists of 15 weeks of teaching and instruction culminating in final examinations at the end of the semester. The course begins in September and ends in June. English is the main component in Foundation programme with 12 credit hours. Information Technology, Mathematics, statistics, and First Aid are some of the smaller components included in the course. English has 4 main components consisting of 3 credits each taught throughout the course. General English I (Grammar) and Academic English I (Language Skills) are taught in semester one. The other two components are General English 2 (IELTS) and Academic English 2 (Language skills- Debate, Oral presentations, and Project) taught in semester 2. The following table illustrates clearly the credit hours and semester allocation.

Semester 1	General English 1	135 hours	3 credits
	Academic English 1	135 hours	3 credits
Semester 2	General English 2	135 hours	3 credits
	Academic English 2	135 hours	3 credits

Academic English 2 in semester 2 is specially designed to increase the students' involvement and participation in the learning process. It helps them to be active learners who are responsible and accountable for carrying out their learning. The components like Project, Oral presentation and Debate offer ample opportunities for learner autonomy within the course. The teaching strategies outlined in the course overview emphasize a student-centered approach in which students take responsibility for their learning and teachers to function only as facilitators. Students are provided opportunities to complete their tasks individually or in a group with review sessions managed by the teacher. Therefore, it is clear from the course overview that the aim and objective of Academic English 2 are to make students active learners who are responsible for their learning. In effect, this component constitutes 25% of the whole course. A detailed analysis of Academic English 2 will highlight how learner autonomy is incorporated in a structured course like the foundation programme.

#### Project Component:

As shown above, most of the components in Academic English 2 offer space for practicing learner autonomy. Among these, the project is the main component which offers complete learner autonomy. It has one full credit hour spread throughout the semester with 25% of the total marks allotted for Academic English 2. It adopts a fully student-centered approach with the teacher in a supervisory role, acting as a mere facilitator. Students are given complete freedom in choosing their topic. The only clause attached to the choice of topic is that it should be related to Omani society and life in some manner. This can actually help the learner to come out with original ideas which can foster critical and analytical thinking. For example, one group chose GONU and its after-effects as their topic. After two days they changed it to Basic education in Oman. Therefore, it offers the students enough space for learner autonomy in choosing their topic and framing their hypotheses to continue with their research. There are 5 distinct stages in the project component which are specifically designed to promote learner autonomy and critical thinking in students.

1. Introduction ( choosing the topic and framing the hypothesis)
2. Literature review ( exploring the topic through research from various sources)
3. Method of investigation ( Survey, interview, statistics)
4. Result and Discussion ( findings of their research and vindication of the hypothesis)
5. Conclusion ( a summary of the result or the findings of the research)

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The initial step of choosing the topic and framing the hypothesis is followed by a literature review. Even at this stage, the learner gets enough opportunities for autonomy in selecting and paraphrasing relevant information based on their hypothesis. After this, the students are required to explain in detail their method of investigation. This crucial stage offers the learners greater autonomy and scope for critical thinking as they have to frame suitable questions in order to go forward with their investigation.

The method of investigation can be a survey, an interview or an analysis of statistics. Whatever be the method of investigation, the result or the outcome of the investigation should sustain and support the hypothesis. The final stages of the result and discussion are also oriented towards fostering critical thinking and autonomous learning activities. The elements of learner autonomy are ensured in all stages of the project by giving the learners complete freedom to proceed along their line of investigation. There is no direct intervention from the teacher at any stages of the learning process. The teacher only holds discussions with the learners to make sure that they are proceeding on the right track of investigation. This is done periodically by holding review sessions and asking them questions and giving his feedback on their work which aid them in moving forward in the right direction.

The final stages of results and discussion can be really challenging for the learners as they have to vindicate their hypothesis through critical and analytical answers based on their investigation. At this stage, the learners begin to appreciate the group dynamics in bringing to complete their project which spans over 13 weeks. This group dynamics is further enhanced by asking the students to make a poster and to give an oral presentation to the whole class. Hence the different stages of the project are designed in such a way as to promote maximum learner autonomy as well as critical thinking.

The development of academic skills:

Academic skills such as reading, writing, research, and critical thinking are an integral part of the project component. The learners achieve these essential academic skills in an effective manner within the larger framework of learner autonomy. In all the stages of the project component, learner autonomy and academic skills move in unison. For example, in the first part of choosing a topic, the students activate their critical and analytical thinking power for the appropriate selection of a topic. After a review session with the teacher about the selection of the topic some groups (consisting of three or four students) may want to change their topics. It could be due to various reasons such as finding relevant information or problems with doing their investigation or framing a proper hypothesis. Whatever be the reason, they indicate that students have been successful in activating their critical thinking power which enables them to exercise their autonomy regarding the learning content. This is normally an impossible task in a traditional language classroom situation.

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In the second stage of the project when the students do a literature review, they get practical experience in research by short listing useful information related to their topic. Moreover, these materials need to be read carefully to elicit relevant information and paraphrase them properly to build up the theoretical foundation for their topic. Through this process, the learners acquire the skills of research, reading and writing in an effective manner because they are integrated into the single component of literature review which demands task fulfilment within a specified time. When these skills are taught in isolation for a term-end examination without continuous assessment or task achievement within a specified time, the learners tend to ignore these skills because there is no immediate practical application or real-time need. Similar is the case with any language skills taught in traditional classroom settings for the purpose of a term-end examination. This is due to the fact that practice sessions in reading or writing for an examination purpose is not given due importance by the learner as opposed to the use of these skills for the purpose of a real-time task achievement which forms part of a continuous assessment.

The third stage of the project is the method of investigation. At, this stage the students are required to identify the research sample or the participants in the survey or interview. Secondly, they need to explain clearly the methods they use such as the explanation and analysis of the questions framed for the survey or the interview. Thirdly they need to explain the procedure in detail to show how they obtained the data. The fourth stage is a discussion of the results to vindicate and verify the hypothesis they formed in the beginning. Finally, they arrive at certain conclusions based on the result of the investigation.

#### Poster and Oral Presentation:

Learner autonomy is further enhanced by two additional activities integrated into the project component. The first is a poster presentation in which the students are required to make a poster that can exhibit their findings in a simple and easy to understand format. The students are given only the broad outline of the poster such as the size and the format of the poster. As a result, an effective application and coordination of the critical and creative thinking power of the team members are necessary for the task achievement. Similarly, the group oral presentation, which is done along with the poster presentation offers the learner opportunities to explore his skills in group dynamics through the performance of his task effectively within the group to achieve the best output. All these activities which are integrated into the project component offer the learners real opportunities to explore their potentials through learner autonomy.

#### The Role of the Teacher in Learner Autonomy:

According to Wright (1987), the role of the teacher is multiple in autonomous learning situations. In the process of language education, teachers take up the responsibilities as counselors, facilitators, coordinators, and organizers. A good teacher in order to promote learner autonomy usually takes up the role of a learning advisor and spends time asking

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questions to find out exactly the problem of the learner rather than giving suggestions (McCarthy, 2009). Therefore, the role of the teacher is much more than transmitters of knowledge. They are counselors, evaluators, organizers, and administrators. They help the learners to choose the learning content and the learning method as well as their learning strategy. According to Maynard (2011) in a regular language class, a teacher can plan the objectives, materials, and homework and they can usually plan and predict how a class will run but in an advising session he needs to adapt and be responsive to what the learner brings to the session.

It has been noticed that some of the team members do not utilize group activities in an effective manner. They need to be counseled by the teacher in order to bring out their potentials by providing them with constructive feedback in the review sessions. As outlined in the course overview, the role of the teacher is that of a facilitator. Therefore, he has to encourage critical thinking and autonomous learning skills in the students by asking analytical questions about the topic of their research and stimulate them to go forward by devising their own strategies to find answers to their hypothesis or the statement of the problem. In order to effectively promote autonomy, identifying needs and possible courses of action through negotiation and interaction is very essential (Mozzon-McPherson, 2000).

Survey among students:

In order to understand the effectiveness of learner autonomy, it is necessary to get feedback from the learners themselves. Therefore, a survey was conducted in a foundation class consisting of 22 students. The first 2 questions in the survey were designed to get the opinion of the students about the usefulness of the component and whether they enjoyed doing the component. The next two questions were based on the aims and objectives of the component. The responses of the participants indicated how far these objectives have been met. The last four statements (5-8) were comparative in nature. They were designed to get the responses of the participants regarding traditional classroom lecture versus autonomous learning. The focus was mainly on group discussions among the team members and the effects of review sessions with the teacher. In this context, the result indicated which mode of learning is preferred by the participants.

Survey Questionnaire for the foundation students

1. Do you think that the project component is useful?
2. Did you enjoy working in groups?
3. Did you improve your critical thinking by working in groups?
4. Did you become more confident & independent by working in groups?

(E.g. giving answers in review sessions and taking decisions about your learning)

5. Working in a group is more interesting than listening to a lecture.
6. Completing a task in a group is better than doing it alone.
7. I improve my skills better when I work in a group than doing it alone.
8. I learn skills and understand ideas better in group activities than by listening to lectures.

### Survey Result

Questions	Yes	No	Yes	No	Q. 1-4	Yes	No
Q1	14	8	63.6%	36.4%		73	15
Q2	19	3	86.4%	13.6%			
Q3	21	1	95.5%	4.5%			
Q4	19	3	86.4%	13.6%			
Q5	19	3	86.4%	13.6%	Q. 5-8	Yes	No
Q6	15	7	68.2%	31.8%		66	22
Q7	13	9	59.1%	40.9%			
Q8	19	3	86.4%	13.6%			

Number of students participated in the survey: 22

The result and discussion:

The above table shows the result of the survey. 22 Students from the foundation course from North Batinah Nursing Institute participated in the survey. 4 Yes,/No questions and 4 comparative statements were administered to them to find out their responses to evaluate the effectiveness of learner autonomy in Foundation course. Question one is very general in nature. Only 64% felt that the project component is useful to them, but 86% enjoyed working in groups. Question 3 and 4 were about the main objectives of the component. 95% percent of the respondents said their critical thinking improved by working in groups. Similarly 86% said they have become autonomous learners with more confidence. Questions (1-4) were formulated to find out if the course benefited the learners positively. The overall responses to questions (1-4) indicated that 83% benefited by the component and only 17 % did not benefit as shown in (Figure 3)

Items (5-8) were statements comparing traditional classroom lecture and autonomous learning based on group activity and teacher review sessions. Statements 5 and 6 were comparative in nature. They were related to classroom lecture and autonomous group activity. 86% percent of the respondents enjoyed group learning activity, but only 68% said completing a task in a group is better than doing it alone. Similarly, for statement number 7,

only 59% said they improved their skills better in a group activity. On the other hand, for the 8<sup>th</sup> statement, 86% said they understood ideas better in group discussions than by listening to lectures. Items (5-8) were designed to measure students' preference for learner autonomy over traditional classroom lecture. The overall responses to items (5-8) indicated that while 75% liked autonomous learning activities, only 25% showed their preference for traditional classroom lectures as shown in (figure 4)

Chart showing students responses to the survey questions

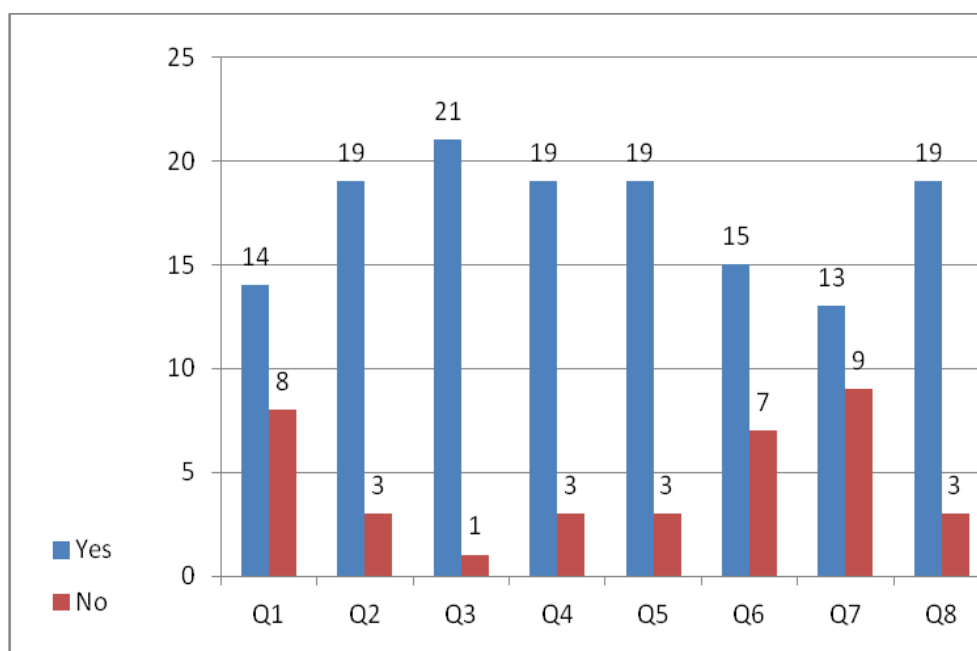


Figure 1

Chart showing answers to the survey questions in terms of percentage.



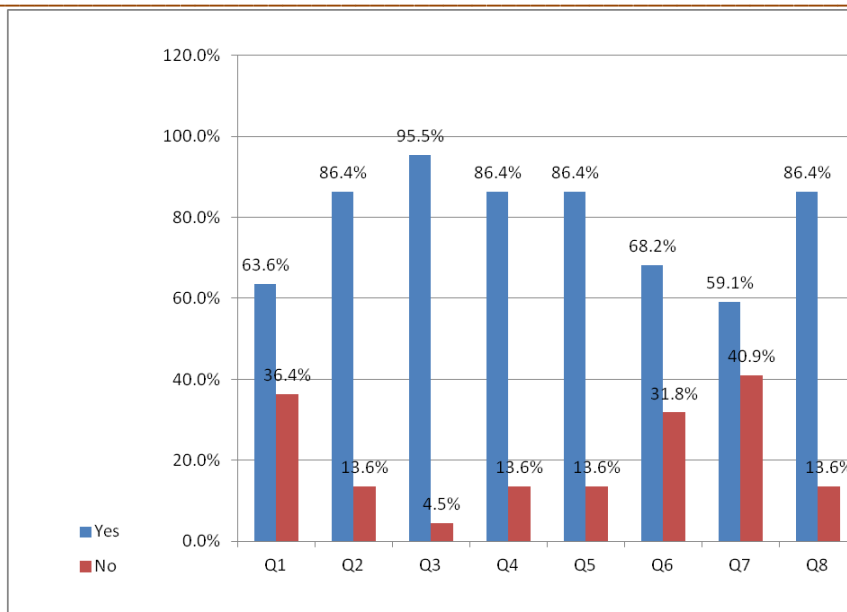


Figure 2

Chart showing students preference for the project component.

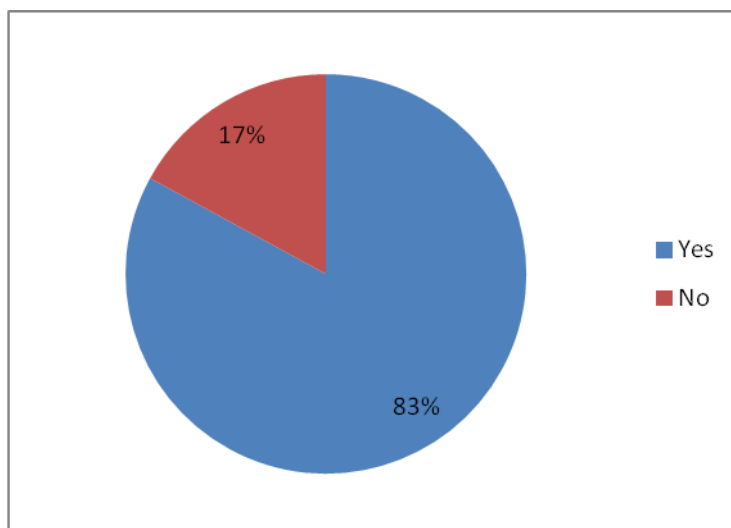


Figure 3

Chart showing a preference for autonomous learning versus traditional classroom lecture.

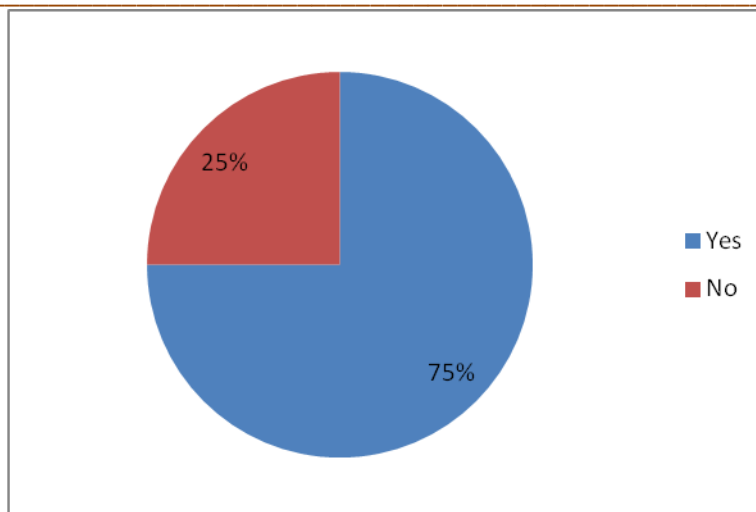


Figure 4

**Conclusion:**

The result of the survey among the learners clearly indicated that learner autonomy and critical thinking envisaged in Academic English 2 has been effectively met in the Foundation Programme because almost 90% of the respondents answered questions (3&4) in the positive as shown in the chart. Therefore, the project component has clearly shown that learner autonomy can be effectively practiced even in a structured course like the Foundation programme. The teacher observation on the learning process and its outcome also vindicate the above finding. For example, it is found that the task allocation by the team members within the group and the peer discussions at various stages of task implementation help the weak students in the team to catch up and move along with their teammates. The group activity is a positive trigger especially for the weak students who feel more comfortable in a smaller peer group.

A major challenge in learner autonomy in a structured course is the assessment of learners and an objective application of the assessment tools. The skill development of an individual learner in a team can only be assessed in relation to the performance of his group. Since different tasks are performed by different members in a team, the objectivity and accuracy of assessments can be questioned in spite of using the same tools of assessment. For example, one member of the team may be allotted the work of finding relevant sources. Another member may do the reading and paraphrasing of the selected material and a third member may do the typing activity in the Multimedia Lab. One solution is to ensure an equitable distribution of the task among the members as most of the tasks are repeated at different stages of the learning process. In short, learner autonomy in a structured course like

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Foundation Programme can be very beneficial to the students especially the weaker ones as there are many instances of weak students becoming more confident in situations when they work together with peer groups in an atmosphere of freedom as provided in the project component.

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