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Autonomy in teaching and learning English at the advanced level – between theory and practice

ABSTRACT. The present article concentrates on the concept of learner autonomy as an increasingly popular trend in language learning and teaching. The paper discusses the importance of language awareness training, the new roles of the teacher and presents the forms of evaluation typical of autonomous learning environments. It also suggests some solutions for the classroom practice which seem most effective in promoting learner autonomy at the advanced level of language proficiency and briefly examines the research findings in the field.

Keywords: learner autonomy, language awareness, self-assessment.

1. INTRODUCTION

The idea of autonomy in teaching and learning is by no means a new phenomenon. Its origins can be traced back to the views of humanistic philosophers. Later on the main assumptions of this philosophical movement were adopted by the representatives of an influential psychological school, namely humanistic psychology. Moreover, the idea of autonomy is in perfect harmony with the essentials of social constructivism as it stresses the importance of the individual creation of meaning within defined social and situational contexts.

The interpretation of autonomy in teaching and learning, as discussed in recent publications on the topic, does not focus on complete autonomy. This situation is possible, to some extent, at technologically advanced self-access centers equipped with audiovisual libraries and test banks. Students choose individual syllabuses according to their personal needs, expectations and

abilities. Yet, even there they may rely on the help of tutors who are ready to offer their advice on the most appropriate choice of course type and selection of materials.

The present article concentrates on the concept of autonomy understood as one of the elements of institutional language learning and teaching. Such an approach, frequently referred to as semi-autonomy (Wilczyńska 1999), can be most successfully implemented in language teaching at the advanced academic level. Learners who have already developed certain learning strategies, who have the ability to critically assess their own strengths and weaknesses and, perhaps most importantly, who have established their lifetime goals and are facing the prospect of graduation, seem to be most adequately prepared for active participation in deciding about the form and quality of their learning process.

The article discusses the main characteristics of autonomy as a trend in language learning, offers some practical solutions for classroom practice and briefly examines the selected research findings in the field, in particular those which refer to different aspects of autonomy in language learning in the reality of Polish university education.

2. DEFINING AUTONOMY

Defining autonomy is not an easy task. In the light of many available definitions, it seems necessary to choose those which provide a realistic framework, achievable goals and which incorporate different dimensions of autonomy, particularly in connection to language learning.

Autonomy is often defined as the ability to take charge of one's own learning. However, it must be stressed that the term describes "a potential capacity to act in a given situation – in our case – learning, and not the actual behaviour of an individual in that situation" (Holec 1981: 3). Such an approach assumes that learners need to discover that potential in order to take responsibility for personal decisions concerning all aspects of individual learning. This requires developing the ability to:

- determine the objectives of learning;
- define appropriate content and expected progress;
- select the methods and techniques;
- monitor the process of learning;
- evaluate progress in relation to previously established goals.

Dam (1995: 1) understands autonomy as "a readiness to take charge of one's own learning in the service of one's needs and purposes. This entails a capacity and willingness to act independently and in cooperation with oth-

ers, as a socially responsible person". In other words, autonomous learning within an institutional context takes place in situations in which the teacher provides "a learning environment where the learners are given the possibility consciously to be involved in their own learning and thus become autonomous learners" (Dam 2000: 49).

Such an interpretation clearly indicates that the development of autonomy can be pursued only as a matter of conscious intention since autonomous behaviour is mainly shaped by personal reflection and developed through practice (Little 2000: 15). Thus, autonomous students, in order to be effective, need a particular approach towards their own learning which is characterized by (Wilczyńska 2008):

- positive emotional attitude to learning;
- understanding of what learning a language involves;
- developing appropriate and individually suitable learning methods and techniques.

Additionally, researchers point to the importance of preserving the student's individual communicative style which builds up his or her identity as a user of the target language and allows for authentic communication in it.

The above definitions and assumptions constituted a point of reference for more detailed descriptions of autonomy. In an attempt at strengthening its theoretical basis, Sinclair (2000: 7-12) distinguished the most essential aspects of learner autonomy, now broadly recognized and accepted by language teachers:

1. Autonomy is a construct of capacity;
2. Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning;
3. The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessarily innate;
4. Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal;
5. There are degrees of autonomy;
6. The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable;
7. Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be independent;
8. Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process, conscious reflection and decision making;
9. Promoting autonomy is not simply a matter of teaching strategies;
10. Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom;
11. Autonomy has a social as well as an individual dimension;
12. The promotion of learner autonomy has as a political as well as a psychological dimension;
13. Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures.

The above statements show clearly that the concept of autonomy in teaching and learning, with all the constraints and limitations posed by institutional education, requires a great deal of effort in its practical implementation. Yet, it can also be seen that autonomy, as an approach, allows different interpretations and has the quality of being universal. The degree of autonomy and forms of realization need to be defined each time within an existing social and cultural context. The choice of the most appropriate interpretation has to be based, however, on the systematic and critical evaluation of the hitherto teaching/learning experience and concentrate on the areas of expected change and development which this evaluation helps to define.

3. AIM – DEVELOPING LANGUAGE AWARENESS

Being a construct of capacity and intention, autonomy requires a certain degree of language awareness and knowledge about learning in students. Making informed decisions about one's own learning process is possible only if learners have acquired some explicit awareness of the processes which learning a language consists of.

Papaefthymiou-Lytra (1987: 14-15) distinguishes the following types of language awareness:

- **metalinguistic awareness** – the ability to think about and reflect upon the nature and function of the linguistic code of one's language;
- **metacognitive awareness** – knowledge of cognition or applying thoughts about the cognitive operations of oneself or others and regulation of cognition or planning, monitoring and evaluating a learning or problem-solving activity;
- **metacommunicative awareness** – a language user's ability to plan and monitor communication as well as to solve problems of communication on the spot.

It is obvious that a personally significant meaning of language awareness, built on previously acquired knowledge, skills and concepts from other areas of learning, is necessary for developing learner autonomy at any stage of language training. However, out of the three, the metacognitive awareness seems to be the most crucial element in the construction of the autonomous approach to language learning at the advanced level.

Here, at least three important areas of metacognition have to be taken into consideration (Sinclair 2000: 9):

- **learner awareness** – attitudes, beliefs, cultural context, expectations, learning approach, learning style, motivation, needs, political context, preferred environment;

- **subject matter awareness** – language systems, language varieties, similarities and differences between first and target languages, social and cultural appropriacy;
- **learning process awareness** – activity evaluation, strategy evaluation, self-assessment, goal-setting, monitoring process, organizing (time, resources, environment), exploitation of available resources.

This interpretation of metacognitive knowledge indicates that introducing autonomy must involve careful examination of the particular cultural, social, political and educational context in which it happens.

The practical implementation of the above elements into the classroom practice is not possible, however, without a general methodology for developing learners' metacognitive awareness. Ellis (2000: 76) suggests a framework (the so-called plan-do-review model) which incorporates opportunities for students to:

- think about what they already know and what they need to do to prepare for a particular activity;
- experiment, that is, to do the task;
- engage in the further reflection on what has been done (reviewing and assessing).

Despite the simplicity of the model many teachers may find it unconvincing because of their own beliefs and attitudes to the nature of the learning process. Such an approach may result from the fact that they are not encouraged to promote students' reflection on their own learning due to the lack of time and appropriate materials, or they have not been offered an adequate coverage of the issue on their teacher training courses. Nevertheless, changing the attitude and incorporating the idea of language awareness into one's teaching repertoire may undoubtedly prove valuable for teachers' professional development in a broader sense.

To sum it up, the presented understandings of the concept lead to a general conclusion that language awareness and metacognition are the keys to successful learning. Effective learning requires the awareness of learning strategies and the processes underlying individual learning. Yet, the growth of learner awareness, as seen in the autonomous perspective, is not a goal in itself, but rather an essential support in developing autonomy in language learning and use.

4. THE NEW ROLE OF THE TEACHER

As stated above, the new role of the student in the learning process entails changes in the role and position of the teacher in the language classroom. However, expanding the students' role and offering them new pre-

rogatives (but at the same time new challenges and duties) does not mean limiting the responsibility of the teacher for the actual outcome of classrooms proceedings. In fact, the autonomous learning scheme requires reshaping the teacher-student relationship by adding new dimensions to the more traditional forms of cooperation.

In order to create the most efficient conditions for autonomous learning, the teacher needs to ensure or allow for (Billington 1998):

- safe learning environment and individual support for students;
- learners' intellectual freedom;
- positive view of students' learning capability based on past their experience;
- self-directed planning;
- setting attractive but realistic goals;
- activity;
- regular feedback.

Additionally, it seems obvious that the promotion of learner autonomy is not possible without teacher autonomy. As Little (1995: 180) claims both are interdependent and teachers are likely to succeed in the task only if their own educational process or teacher training program prepared them to act autonomously.

There are several attributes of the autonomous teacher such as self-awareness as a learner, belief in learners' capacity to act independently and the desire to foster autonomous behaviour in students. These attributes are closely linked to the ways of acting in the classroom which characterize the autonomous teacher (Breen and Mann 1997: 147):

- being a resource person and a guide;
- sharing the process of decision taking with students;
- promoting and facilitating collaborative evaluation;
- managing the risks and being able to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty;
- being an opportunist;
- getting support and help from other teachers.

The new roles increase the scope of teachers' responsibility and change their position in the language classroom. They do not, however, reduce the importance of more conventional teacher's functions such as the need to complete a syllabus or the necessity of providing the reliable evaluation of the students' progress required from the educational institution.

To conclude, introducing autonomy in formal learning environments usually means establishing a new relationship, in comparison to the traditional one, between the learner and the teacher. To allow autonomous behaviour on the part of the learner, this relationship has to be based on mutual respect, trust and tolerance. Teachers are expected to give students at least

partial freedom in the selection of materials, topics, methods and techniques of learning, and later, ways of achieving individual goals as well as forms of assessment. Such an attitude seems more likely to be effective with experienced learners who are able to define their goals and are ready to take responsibility for the decisions and commitments they make. However, as the research shows, autonomy can be successfully practised with learners of all ages and at any level of language proficiency.

5. FORMS OF EVALUATION IN AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

Evaluation in autonomous language learning is understood as a process which consists of three equally significant stages: assessment, interpretation of its results and applying these conclusions to the learning process in the form of modifications or improvements. In principle, every element of the learning process is open to evaluation (Dam 2000).

The following formats of evaluation are commonly used in the autonomous classroom (Dam 2000: 50):

- self-evaluation;
- spontaneous, oral evaluations between peers and/or between the teacher and learner(s) during or after an activity;
- written evaluations - in diaries or in response to questionnaires;
- planned and prepared oral evaluations in groups or whole class with or without the teacher;
- combinations of the forms above.

In each of the above formats the learner is expected to actively participate in the evaluation procedure and his or her opinion should count as being equally valid and meaningful as the teacher's. In practice, learners take part in evaluation by means of self-assessment, where they take over the traditional teacher's role and become the assessors of their own progress in learning.

Similarly to evaluation, learner self-assessment comprises three phases (Wilczyńska 1999):

- self-observation;
- assessment (results of self-reflection on one's achievements, problems, drawbacks);
- consequences (conclusions leading to modifications in individual learning).

Thus, learner self-assessment should be interpreted as a continuous process, in which the outcomes of each particular phase directly affect the form of the following one as illustrated in the diagram below:

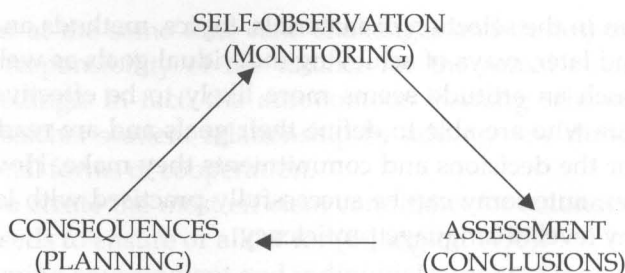


Diagram 1. Self-assessment as a process

Seen as a dynamic phenomenon, learner self-assessment is highly flexible, the decisions taken by the learner can be revised or refined according to the changing conditions or requirements of the individual learning (Holec 1981).

There are some conditions which have to be fulfilled if self-assessment is to be treated as a reliable element of general evaluation of the student:

- learner acceptance for this form of evaluation;
- reasonable choice of the form of self-assessment (made individually by the learner or in cooperation with the teacher);
- careful selection of criteria for assessment;
- active participation of learners in constructing a self - assessment tool (chart, form, questionnaire, recording, etc.);
- interpretation of results in accordance with previously established goals;
- defining what should be done next.

In general, self-assessment aims to add a new dimension to the teacher's or institution's evaluation of the learning process and the learner's progress. It allows a more individual interpretation of the problems that students experience and a better understanding of their needs and expectations. Its main advantage seems to be a clear indication of what a particular learner should do next in the course of language training. In other words, it provides useful information, both for the teacher and the learner, about the self-perception of student progress, difficulties and expectations. As a result, it gives insight into specific, individual elements of the learning process and facilitates a more personal choice of the forms and contents of further learning.

Moreover, self-assessment may positively influence students' attitudes to evaluation in general. Being actively involved in evaluation, learners no longer treat it only as a necessary but painful element of the learning process but rather as well-founded feedback and useful hints on how to work more effectively. Last but not least, self-assessment promotes self-reflection and sharpens metacognitive awareness in students.

Introducing self-evaluation into the language classroom may entail a number of problems if it happens too rapidly, without preparation, the necessary consciousness-raising training or clear criteria selection. Learners' acceptance for this form of evaluation usually develops as a result of systematic but gradual practice. Moreover, the chances of success increase if self-assessment is not restricted to one or two practical language classes but when it functions as a common form of classroom activity or as an important supplement for general evaluation of the student's progress in learning a language.

The best way of introducing students to self-evaluation is probably peer-correction and peer-assessment. These forms of student activity are more willingly accepted by learners than self-assessment, particularly in their first encounters with autonomous learning techniques. Additionally, they prepare students to the role which many of them take on soon after graduating, namely evaluating others.

6. PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS AND RESEARCH FINDINGS

There are some techniques and forms of classroom practice which seem to be particularly effective in promoting autonomy among advanced and intermediate students:

- **task - based learning** and other open forms of learning (Karpeta-Peć 2001) - goal-oriented communicative activities with a specific outcome (in written or oral form), the overall aim of tasks is to elicit language, students are supposed to exchange meanings, not produce specific language forms; task-based learning involves group work, it teaches learners how to successfully cooperate with others and negotiate meanings and objectives;
- **peer- and self-correction** (Wojciechowska 2002) - activities which aim at developing the ability to monitor the accuracy of particular aspects of written or oral discourse;
- **peer- and self-assessment** (Wiśniewska 2007; Trepczyńska, 2005; Aleksandrak 2002) - the learner assesses some chosen aspects of his or her learning with the objective of defining the most effective forms of work and practice;
- **strategy training** (Michońska-Stadnik 1996) - students are encouraged to learn and use a variety of language learning strategies, the aim of strategy training is to facilitate the process of individual learning and heighten learner awareness - students are taught to identify, practise, evaluate and transfer the most effective strategies to new learning situations;

- **role plays and simulations** (Surdyk 2004) – creating situations which allow learners to practise different forms of oral discourse, such activities focus on the relationship between language and the social, cultural or political context of communication;
- **argumentative discussions** (Górecka 2002; Nowicka 2002) – activities that help students to develop the skills of constructing, presenting, interpreting, criticizing and revising arguments in a discussion, they serve the purpose of reaching a shared position on a particular issue;
- **presentations** – this activity helps learners to practise the skill of public speaking (using appropriate discourse forms, effective use of notes, multimedia, audiovisual aids, nonverbal signals) and overcome the stress related to formal speaking in public situations, students usually choose the topic of the presentation individually and are given time to prepare it.

The reports mentioned above present the findings of action research projects conducted in Poland in the years 1996 – 2007. The detailed analysis of their results is beyond the scope of the present article, however some general conclusions can be drawn on the basis of the collected data and its interpretation as the authors chose the same methodological framework, similar techniques of data collection typical of qualitative research (diaries, questionnaires, interviews, audio recordings, participant observation) and different aspects of learner autonomy as the subject of the individual project.

The analysis of the research findings indicate that students generally accept techniques which require their active involvement and self-dependence. However, such acceptance takes time and can be achieved only through systematic and gradual practice. Autonomous techniques have to be introduced step by step and new tasks need clearly defined criteria of success or failure.

Interestingly, the main problems are caused by certain learning habits which students have already developed in the course of their language learning, including too close a reliance on the teacher's instruction and a lack of individual initiative in one's own learning (in psychological literature such an attitude is defined as the syndrome of learned helplessness). Nevertheless, even in this situation a new attitude can evolve as a result of self-reflection and applying its conclusions to individual learning.

To sum it up, the analysis of the recent Polish publications (Pawlak (ed.), 2004; Pawlak (ed.), 2008; *Języki Obce w Szkole*. Numer specjalny 6/2008. O autonomii.) reveals that the researchers' interest and their theoretical reflection concentrate mainly on the following aspects of learner autonomy:

- the efficiency of particular tasks and forms of classroom activity in promoting autonomy;
- critical evaluation of autonomy in institutional language learning and teaching;

- peer-correction and self-assessment of selected language skills and micro-skills;
- self-evaluation of the individual learning process;
- cooperation between the teacher and learners in autonomous learning environments;
- consciousness-raising tasks in developing learner autonomy;
- the effectiveness of learning strategies employed by students to achieve specific learning goals;
- computer – enhanced language learning as a factor fostering autonomy;
- the role of the European Language Portfolio in encouraging students' reflection on language learning.

7. CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to introduce and briefly examine the concept of learner autonomy in the light of selected literature, research reports and the author's reflections on the topic. Self-direction and autonomy in language learning have recently become the popular objects of research interest and have come to play an increasingly important role in institutional language learning and teaching. The elaboration of theoretical perspectives and the exploration of those perspectives by empirical means (Little 2000) is, however, still not sufficient in regard to the needs and expectations of practitioners who make an effort to incorporate autonomy into formal learning settings.

One of the possible solutions to this problem is establishing conversational learning environments which allow articulating and sharing observations and problems, the other – teacher education in the field, initiated and sustained by educational authorities. Teachers, as well as students, need to reflect on different aspects of autonomy in an explicit and systematic way. A key issue in modern language learning and teaching is a more extensive examination of the existing schemes and procedures which eventually should lead to modifications in syllabuses, forms of student activity in the classroom and beyond, and finally, as a long-term goal, the forms of institutional evaluation of the student.

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