

LEARNER AUTONOMY AND FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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The present paper outlines some of the issues raised and the conclusions the most influential theoreticians came to in the area of learner autonomy in foreign language learning. It refers to some approaches that led to the changing role of the learner and that of the language learner. Also, since all theories are measured against the practices they lead to, important empirical research and experiments are introduced, those of Leni Dam and David Little. Their ideas culminated in the European Language Portfolio of the Council of Europe, the beginning and the applications of which are also introduced.

Keywords: learner autonomy, foreign language learning, European Language Portfolio

To involve the learner more into the learning process has been an endeavour for a long time in education. Like other changes, it does not stand unrelated to other phenomena and can be closely related to developments in society. The last century can be seen as one where communities gradually got more and more fragmented, the emphasis switched on the individual and resulted in a growth of respect for the individual in society. A strengthening appreciation of the learner as a more significant participant in the learning process has been supported by the acknowledgement of the fact that each learner is different. Catering for all the different needs, styles and personalities also challenges traditional teaching ideas.

These recognitions launched different steps. In one, to make sure that learners get the appropriate attention, school systems introduced the system of team-teachers in the classroom, especially in the early classes in the US and in England, where two teachers shared the workload. Although this means improvement in the number of teachers present in the classroom, it is still not enough – both teachers do work on the planning, implementation and evaluation, it is only in-class attention that is shared/divided between the two of them.

Another way to tackle the problem of individuals with different needs is differentiation, suggesting a solution where it is not the number of teachers that is multiplied, but the division of the class itself: the learners put into different groups work on different activities. Although with careful planning and very concentrated effort some teachers can work very well like this even for longer periods of time, this way of dividing one's attention cannot be a requirement for all teachers: some teacher personalities are simply not ready for this kind of work.

However, a very convincing answer for the need of catering for the variety of needs in our classrooms should be to educate our learners in becoming teachers for themselves.

One way to achieve this is seen as making learners more conscious of themselves as learners by making them understand how it is best for them to learn, choose ways and activities that help them achieve their goals. For this, they need to be informed about different cognitive and metacognitive strategies, which means being trained in *study skills*.

Study skills training in other education systems has a longer tradition: in societies where “making yourself” is the key to success, providing the individual with methods that foster this attitude has been part of education. In the United States, e.g., even in the first grades emphasis is placed on thinking skills training, or even on preparing first and second graders on how to answer different type test questions.

Research into the effectiveness of strategies training was carried out in the eighties by J. Michael O’Malley in the eastern metropolitan areas of the United States. He examined whether certain groups of students, after being trained in different metacognitive and/or cognitive strategies, performed better or not than students without learning strategies training. The minority language students were trained in vocabulary learning, listening comprehension and in making an oral presentation.

The study showed some interesting results: in vocabulary learning students trained in vocabulary learning strategies (grouping and imagery strategies) were less efficient than those without any training. The researchers put this down to the difficulty of adopting new strategies: existing strategies seemed to be too persistent. In listening, although not significantly, the experimental groups did score better after being trained in selective attention as a metacognitive strategy and on note-taking and cooperation as cognitive strategies. In speaking the experimental groups scored again slightly higher than those in the control group (the strategies used here were functional planning and cooperation strategies – students gave their presentations to and gave/received correction from their peers).

The authors claimed that the slight difference in favour of the experimental group may have been caused by lack of “time to gain familiarity with the strategies“ (O’Malley, 1987:141) (students didn’t have enough time to really consolidate the newly learnt strategies, nor to work on the particular tasks – study time was limited). This, with the weak results of vocabulary learning, supposedly caused by the persistence of earlier familiar strategies seems to point to the importance of timing: any change in wanting students to use different learning strategies should happen early enough and gradually enough. This seems to call for an early training in learning skills and a consistent work on them.

Although being trained in study skills is vital and in fact should be carried out in all school programs, it just forms one part of learner education as they themselves do not help the learner in becoming truly independent – neither in his or her learning, nor in any other areas of life.

This study, took up only a part of what is expected of an autonomous learner: the students were trained in some study skills but decision on what they should do and study came from the instructors. The students were not expected to make decisions about their own learning, did not need to plan their work, did not implement their plan, nor did they evaluate the usefulness of the strategies. These elements are vital in learner autonomy.

The idea of learner autonomy started to appear in English in the sixties (“self-directed learning”, Knowles, 1975; Tough, 1979). It has its roots in humanistic approaches and also in tendencies of individualization – as

referred to earlier. Beside the theoretical foundation of autonomy the development of different technologies of the 20th century (computers, the information available on the Internet) made it also possible for attention to turn to autonomy.

In the interpretations of learning itself features supporting autonomous learning have also appeared: conscious attention on the process of learning, an endeavour for a better understanding of the process, learners' self evaluation in Carl Rogers' ideas, student centred learning and teaching as opposed to intuitivism in Karl Popper's thoughts.

The idea of self-directed learning appeared as a concept by Malcolm Knowles, who used it within his context of adult education. He saw self-directed learning as a process when the individual outlines his learning needs without other people's help, decides his aims, chooses his teachers and the necessary learning materials, and evaluates his learning performance (Pordány, 2008:82).

Within foreign language teaching earlier approaches also turned their attention towards the learner by taking the teacher out of focus and by outlining new teacher roles. The basis of Community Language Learning goes back to Charles Curran's Counseling-Learning approach. While examining adult learning Curran found that change inherent to learning threatens learners, who feel that they might appear foolish. Curran thought that adults could fight this threat if their teacher acts as a learning counsellor, as somebody who understands what struggle learners go through while internalizing another language. A teacher who can understand her learners, who helps them overcome their negative feelings, who can help learners turn their negative energies about learning into positive energies helping their learning can accept her learners.

Caleb Gattegno's Silent Way is also based on the principle of subordinating teaching to learning, with the students taking an active part. Cooperation in learning, teacher-learner partnership also appears in the direct method (Larsen-Freeman, 1986).

However, these methods just started shifting the emphasis on the learner and still had the teacher as the manager of learning. A fuller understanding of the learner's growing participation first appear in the eighties among publications about language learning with "learner autonomy" (Moore, 1986), "learner training" (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989), "self-instruction" (Dickinson, 1987). Behind the process of learners becoming their own teachers Ellis and Sinclair also see social changes like individualization, trends in foreign language teaching (see above) and the change of teacher roles, greater language awareness, a conscious use and development of study skills, a greater emphasis on learner choice and initiatives (Ellis & Sinclair, 1989).

Definitions of learner autonomy

Theoreticians of LA define the term with different focus: autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Henri Holec); learner autonomy is the learner's psychological attitude to the process and content of learning and the ability to keep a distance, to make decisions and to act independently (David Little); autonomy is the situation where the learner is fully responsible for his decisions about his learning and for applying them (Leslie Dickinson); and: autonomy is acknowledging the learner's rights within systems of education (Phil Benson). Taking charge, distancing ourselves, independence, responsibility and human rights are quite distant elements

appearing in these definitions. Practitioners tend to be more convergent when describing what characterizes learner autonomy: learners realize their responsibility over their learning (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991); they take on this responsibility in all stages of their learning: planning, implementation, assessment (Holec, 1981; Little, 1991); their autonomy continually grows as they try to understand what, how and why they learns (Dam, 1995).

For all this to happen learners need to be prepared in different areas: *psychological preparation* (“activities to build confidence for experimenting with language”, also to be ready to take the responsibility for being one’s own manager of learning); *methodological preparation* (“learners understand meta-language” and understand how classroom activities work); and *practice in self-direction* (“e.g. activities which provide learners with opportunities to make choices about their learning) (Dickinson & Carver, 1980, cited in Ellis & Sinclair, 1989:7).

Learner autonomy in practice

As early as at the end of the seventies attempts to raise learner autonomy were carried out in Denmark by Leni Dam, who has since then become one of the most central figures in learner autonomy. She also started using this approach in foreign language classes, namely in her English classes with 11-16 year-old children. She says that “greater influence / responsibility on the part of the learners in planning and in conducting teaching-learning activities will lead to a greater degree of active involvement and better learning in the actual teaching-learning situation” (Dam, 1988:23). The most important features of her program are using the target language from the beginning as the medium of teaching and learning, providing the learners with a growing set of learning activities and ongoing evaluation carried out by the teacher, the individual and peers.

Working by the above principles Leni Dam managed to have students who were actively involved and motivated, who could use the target language outside the classroom as well.

The fact that this idea cropped up in Denmark is probably not by chance. The general Schools Act of 1976 stated that “The planning and organization of teaching, including choice of classroom activities and methods and content of teaching should be as far as possible be made in cooperation between teacher and learners.”

Since Dam’s examples several schools have adopted this approach and work successfully. Hanne Thomsen’s classes are examples of it, too. She works with 18 5th graders, who earlier were taught according to traditional methods: teacher-directed and course book-based. Now their classes start with agreeing on what is to be done (prepared and negotiated prior to class), then learners carry out the plan and then they evaluate events in class. They keep a notebook where plans, decisions, comments and all materials worked on are put down. They also use a course book (Project English), mostly for homework and students’ personal resource. Picture wordbooks, language magazines (Click and Crown), published and learner-made materials are also available and used in class. On the classroom walls there are lists of ideas and activities –they are also written down in students’ notebooks – to choose from. Students interact with each other with ease, and their notebooks also show that –although with mistakes and limitations – they are fluent in communicating their ideas.

Leni Dam’s approach has proved to be more successful than teacher-led approaches and started other programs, one of which was carried out in

Sweden in 1992 by two schoolteachers, Barbro Blomquist and Ingrid Sandström as the second part of a Council of Europe project. The second part of this project consisted of developing teaching methods in the direction of learner autonomy. The two teachers worked with 79 children altogether, years of 10-12 and 12-13 for one year. Their aims were that children should plan, carry out and assess their work; think about how they learn, what strategies they use and the result of these strategies, and also to take responsibility for their own and their peers' learning (Blomquist & Sandström, 1992:7).

At the beginning they discussed why and how they learn languages and what they should do to know a language. Children were also asked what they found difficult to learn in English and what they would advise to someone with the same difficulties, with this focusing attention to initial awareness raising about learning strategies. They were also asked about how they could be responsible for their learning. The answers are as follows. Children

- ✓ think language is important;
- ✓ have clear motives why it is useful (useful when abroad and when talking to immigrants and visitors)
- ✓ think that it is important to be able to understand and speak (clear emphasis on the oral skills for them)
- ✓ think that you learn best when it is fun;
- ✓ think that it is fun if you yourself can choose what to do and with whom to work (Blomquist & Sandström, 1992:9).

The lessons always started with rhymes, game and communicative activities, then children chose a text to work on. After that they were given a choice between two or three activities where they worked with a classmate. (There was a list of activities on the classroom wall to choose from). They also kept a logbook called "My English Book" where they put down what they were working on (rhymes, words, etc.) and they also took notes on their learning: who they are going to work with, what they plan to do, and what they have done. They also evaluate events with smiles. Self-assessment took place 10 minutes before the end of the lesson.

Their report shows the following. Most children developed positive attitudes about language and language learning, and they have become more active and independent in working. They dare to use language in various situations outside the classroom, show greater curiosity and are less inhibited in acting in English in class. They seem to show a faster development than other groups, and they choose more difficult texts than their teachers would have chosen for them. Their language is richer and more varied. They also remarked that their teacher is kind- probably appreciating the encouraging and supportive facilitator, decoding the difference with the above adjective.

These results are convincing enough. However, it must not be forgotten that both the Danish project and the Swedish project were carried out in a language environment where English is widely and more naturally spoken by everybody. The ease and willingness of the learners' language production would unfortunately be more difficult to achieve in an environment less supportive in this respect.

The ELP

Still, with all the reasons listed above, developments in learner education seem quite urgent. A different attitude to learning, the larger number of learners with the appearance of lifelong learning, a more suitable attitude towards catering for different learner needs justify starting to educate our

learners in becoming self-directed learners. It also seems in accordance with the Council of Europe's European Language Learning Portfolio, which requires "regular goal setting and self-assessment".

The European Language Portfolio is a document developed by the Council of Europe, fostering learning and teaching through a gradual development of learner autonomy. It documents its holder's language experience and intercultural skills.

The European Union, as a multilingual and multicultural organization, aims at both working for unity and for keeping and fostering this versatility. The Council of Europe has a double aim with the introduction of the Portfolio: it should follow the process of language learning, and document language learning achievements and experiences, including intercultural relations.

The ELP was preceded by the CEFR, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, developed between 1989-1996, and was launched to define levels and standards for language levels. The six levels are accepted in most countries and are used in the ELP as well.

The ELP has two functions: a pedagogical – which is more important for our present context – and a reporting function. The pedagogical function is to help learners and make language learning transparent for them, and develop their ability in reflection and self-assessment, thus make them take more and more responsibility over their learning.

Its reporting function is to supplement degrees and diplomas by documenting the owner's foreign language experiences and language achievements.

The three parts are the language passport, the language biography and the dossier. The language passport summarizes the owner's language identity and includes the learner's assessment of his/her own language proficiency. This part sums up the owner's language skills listening, reading, speaking and writing by languages, using the CEFR standards, a detailed description of language proficiency documents (issuing institution, date of issue), and a detailed description of the holder's foreign language experiences (e.g. a list of jobs where the foreign language was used, experience in the foreign language countries). In the biography the learner can monitor his learning and document his foreign language learner autonomy. It includes the aims, a regular assessment of the progress, a description of the daily language experience, and a record of intercultural experiences and language learning strategies.

The dossier is the part that mostly resembles traditional portfolios, since it contains the owner's selection of work that best documents his progress and represents his foreign language capacities. The part "Courses" holds details of the course, an individual learning plan, a documentation of attendance. Beside this, it is a collection of essays, photos, projects or letters prepared by the owner.

Although the above parts are the same, there is considerable difference between different versions, which were developed to better meet the requirements of different contexts, needs and expectations. At present there are almost one hundred different versions. All are validated by the Council of Europe.

The portfolios were piloted between 1997 and 2000, in 15 member states, on all levels of education from primary schools to vocational schools, in different target languages (English, German, French, Italian even Chinese and Japanese in the Russian pilot project). Depending on the language environment the context was a foreign language or a second language context. Similarly, the language learner could study in a monolingual environment or in a multilingual environment. Each project was different in its aim and

range: they took place in a school's context or nationwide, could aim at introducing a foreign language into primary education, at integrating immigrant children into the host country, at using the portfolio as a language learning tool, or at dealing with language needs in border areas of member states.

Results of the pilot projects show the following results. Results of the reporting function of the portfolio were reported in two projects: in Finland when students left secondary school they developed their previously informal assessment of their portfolio into a more formal document significant in their further studies or employment. Their language proficiency was summarized according to CEFR levels. The other significant document emphasizing the reporting function of the portfolio was the Irish one: the Standard Adult Passport held detailed information about its holder's proficiency.

Most of the reports, however, described the pedagogical function of the portfolio. The most significant result shown in all projects is the fact that the portfolio enhanced motivation: learners were more interested in learning, they showed more confidence. The portfolio approach proved that learner initiation and reflecting on language learning has a fundamental role in enhancing learner capacities. Using the portfolio made learning more efficient in all cases, and it proved especially convincing in the case of lower achievers.

The portfolio approach showed significant progress in improving learner awareness: students had a positive experience realizing their knowledge. The teachers of the Czech project reported 8-10 year old pupils being able to decide what had been learnt. This way the portfolio is a tool to improve self-consciousness, since it strengthens the capacity of self-reflection, which is a key element of learner autonomy.

On the whole, the most important achievement resulting from the pedagogical function of the portfolio is the positive effect on motivation, and the development of the ability to reflect. Reflection is present in all parts of the learning process starting with planning, through monitoring the process to assessment. This way it is not only the learner's language awareness that improves, but his decisions are more informed, his choices are more focused, which means a more efficient learning.

One major result of the use of the portfolio is bridging the gap between using the language in the classroom and using the language outside the classroom. By reflecting about his own learning and activities, about assessing his own progress in class in the target language the learner does use language naturally. As Little says: in formal language learning the development of learner autonomy requires the learner to use the target language as a means of classroom communication, as a channel of learning and as a means of reflection (Little, 2000). Also, "as [the autonomous language learner] is becoming more autonomous in his language learning, he will also be more independent in his language use" (Little, 1991).

However, as referred to earlier, learner autonomy and the portfolio approach do not only change traditional learner roles, but also transform teacher roles. Little, and also other researchers emphasize that the role of teachers is significant in creating and maintaining learner autonomy. Even Holec (1981) claims that the learner is unable to prepare for this new attitude, not only what regards the methodology of learning, but also in a pedagogical-psychological sense. This is why the continuous dialogue between teacher and learner – as underlined by Little – is very important, as is the declaration of the change in teacher roles. According to this the most important task of a teacher is to create the right environment where the learner can successfully manage his learning.

For this the teacher needs to understand the dialogic processes that characterize language and form learning; to have the knowledge necessary to

model all the communicative and learning behaviour aimed to develop in his learners (Little, 2004).

Summary

Since the beginning of attempts at involving learners more in the learning process different results have been shown. Some of these have offered techniques that put more responsibility on the learner by training them to become more conscious managers of their own learning activities. However, the more a student is included in this process, the more convincing the results are.

Although at first the work of educating learners to be the managers of their own learning might seem too laborious and tedious, on the long run it certainly pays off: the learner develops a more conscious attitude in making decisions and gradually manages all stages of his/her learning. Experience with autonomous learners show that autonomy results effective learning and supports the whole learning process.

However, to take up autonomy, both the learner and the teacher need to take up attitudes different from the traditional roles in the learning process. Traditional teacher tasks are taken over by the learner. Teachers also need to learn how to offer support to the learner without stepping too far into their learning space, trusting the learner to make decisions about their own learning. The responsibilities are there on both sides.

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