

LEARNER AUTONOMY IN LANGUAGE LEARNING AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

The notions of learner autonomy and independence have acquired significant influence in the process of English learning in the past decades. These concepts study such matters as learners' responsibility for studying, their right to specify the way of their individual learning, the skills which can be acquired and applied in self-directed learning.

The term "Learner autonomy" was first used in 1981 by Henri Holec, the "father" of learner autonomy. Many definitions have been given to this designation, in relation to the scholar, the context or the level of debate educators have come to. It has been viewed as a personal human trait or as an educational move because of the fact that autonomy is seen either (or both) as a means or as an end in education. Some scholars use synonymic terms: learner independence, self-access learning, self-paced learning, self-regulation and distant learning to accentuate learner-oriented approach in language learning. Henri Holec himself defined it as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" [1, p. 14]. "Ability" is sometimes replaced by "capacity", while "take charge of" is replaced by "take control of" one's own learning. The key point in definitions is the idea that autonomy is a characteristic of a learner, rather than learning situations.

Constructivism has considered that learners can have a more memorable and effective learning process if they take control of it and if they can adapt it to their own needs and expectations. This concept has been applied to almost every academic subject and it is also applied in languages, where learners want to render their ideas, opinions and feelings and they want an instant and real interchange in the target language. Autonomy is seen as part of an individual process where the teacher is mostly an observer or a classroom guide; but it also affects much more: it includes raising learner's awareness of the responsibility for language studying process and understanding the goals of their work inside and outside the classroom.

Henri Holec, believes that the autonomous language learner takes responsibility for the totality of his learning situation. He does this by determining his own objectives, defining the contents to be learned and the progression of the course, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring this procedure, and evaluating what he has acquired. Objectives are specific to the learner, and the learner's communicative needs determine the verbal elements chosen. His selection is based on the objectives set and its applicability to internal and external constraints. The learner evaluates his achievements through his objectives, and this evaluation helps him to plan subsequent learning [3, p. 216].

Within the context of education there seem to be seven main attributes characterizing autonomous learners:

- 1) autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies;
- 2) take an active approach to the learning task at hand;
- 3) are willing to take risks, i. e., to communicate in the target language at all costs;
- 4) are good guessers;
- 5) attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriacy;
- 6) develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply;
- 7) have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language.

While studying autonomously in the classroom, learners can apply some of the main compensatory or learning (cognitive or metacognitive) strategies. Cognitive strategies operate directly on incoming information, manipulating it in ways that enhance learning. Learners may use the following cognitive strategies:

- 1) repetition, when imitating others' speech;
- 2) resourcing, i. e., having recourse to dictionaries and other materials;
- 3) translation, that is, using their mother tongue as a basis for understanding and/ or producing the target language;
- 4) note-taking;
- 5) deduction, i. e., conscious application of foreign language rules;
- 6) contextualization, when embedding a word or phrase in a meaningful sequence;
- 7) transfer, that is, using knowledge acquired in the native language to remember and understand facts and sequences in the foreign language;
- 8) inferencing, when matching an unfamiliar word against available information (a new word etc);
- 9) question for clarification, when asking the teacher to explain, etc.

As for metacognitive strategies which by definition "include all facts learners acquire about their own cognitive processes as they are applied and used to gain knowledge and acquire skills in varied situations" [2, p. 24]. In this sense, metacognitive strategies are skills used for planning, monitoring, and evaluating the learning activity.

They embrace:

- 1) directed attention, when deciding in advance to concentrate on general aspects of a task;
- 2) selective attention, paying attention to specific aspects of a task;
- 3) self-monitoring, i. e., checking one's performance as one speaks;
- 4) self-evaluation, i. e., appraising one's performance in relation to one's own standards;
- 5) self-reinforcement, rewarding oneself for success.

It is essential to know and comprehend the principles of learner autonomy before using it. Applying it in particular teaching context counts on teacher's preparation, and on learners' evolution of their own educational process and their perceptions around it. It is a demanding option, yet, the benefits obtained are long lasting and they can be applied to all kind of learning.

Autonomy prepares cadets to deal with everyday situations and to find solutions avoiding frustration. Learner autonomy is about learning to learn and developing assessment for learning. Cadets think over their experiences and can make up their own meanings and challenge ideas. It requires a teacher to trust cadets' abilities and to promote the use of learner-directed approach. Also, cadets are allowed to take some control of the content and process for learning which is highly effective in helping them understand the content.

References

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3. Wolff, D. Content and language integrated learning: A framework for the development of learner autonomy / D. Wolff // In Little. – 2003. – P. 211–222.