

تنمية قدرة طلاب اللغات الأجنبية على التعلم الذاتي

Development Of Foreign Language Students'
Learning Autonomy

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Abstract:

To ensure high level of university language education it is important to rely on students and encourage their autonomy. For the first time the concept of learner autonomy appeared in late 1970s, and since then the idea has been developed and implemented into a broader learner context. In numerous publications devoted to learner autonomy authors often suggested their own view on the problem adding something new to the concept of autonomy. In general autonomy is viewed as the capacity to be in charge of one's learning and its results which includes setting individual goals, critical reflection, decision-making, taking initiative. The article considers the psychological factors influencing the development of autonomy (motivation, self-regulation, social and learning environment) as well as the relations between the level of autonomy and language proficiency. It is concluded that the task of university education is to develop both students' language proficiency and their autonomy. The article grounds the main principles of developing students' language proficiency and their autonomy and considers the characteristics of an independent learner.

Key words: learning autonomy, university students, independence, language proficiency, principles, motivation, self-regulation.

الملخص

لضمان مستوى عال من التعليم اللغوي الجامعي، من المهم الاعتماد على الطلاب وتشجيع استقلاليتهم. ولأول مرة وفي اواخر سبعينات القرن الماضي ١٩٧٠، ظهرت خاصية استقلالية المتعلم ومنذ ذلك الوقت تم تطوير الفكرة وتنفيذها وتطبيقها للمتعليم. وفي العديد من المنشورات المكرسة لاستقلالية المتعلمين، غالبا ما اقترح المؤلفون وجهة نظرهم الخاصة حول المشكلة مضيفا شيئا جديدا إلى مفهوم الاستقلالية.

عموما، ينظر إلى الاستقلالية على أنها القدرة على أن تكون مسؤولا عن تعلم الفرد ونتائجه التي تشمل تحديد الأهداف الفردية، والتفكير النقدي، وصنع القرار، وأخذ المبادرة. تتناول الدراسة العوامل النفسية التي تؤثر على تطور الاستقلالية (الدافع والتنظيم الذاتي والبيئة الاجتماعية والتعليمية) بالإضافة إلى العلاقات بين مستوى الاستقلالية والكفاءة اللغوية.

وفي الختام، أن مهمة التعليم الجامعي هي تطوير الكفاءة اللغوية لكل من الطلاب واستقلاليتهم. حيث تستند المقالة إلى المبادئ الرئيسية لتطوير الكفاءة اللغوية للطلاب واستقلاليتهم حيث تعتبرها اهم خصائص المتعلم المستقل.

For many years there have been attempts to find effective ways, develop theories of language learning and ground useful approaches to foreign languages teaching. Discussions have often been focused on the the role of learners and teachers, course design frameworks, applications of theories and approaches into practice, learning and acquisition, motivating learners etc. Despite the achieved results, scientists and practitioners are still working in this direction (in line with theories of educational psychology) (Pachler & Field, 2003).

Teaching university students is rather challenging as the task of the teacher is to ensure the appropriate level of students' proficiency within limited time and opportunities. The way out is relying on students and encouraging their autonomy. However, the literature analysis (Pachler & Field, 2003) and our own experience show that despite the level of language proficiency, students are often not ready to be independent learners.

For the first time the concept of learner autonomy appeared in late 1970s and was influenced by learner-centred theories in education which emphasized the necessity of meeting individual needs of students taking into account their motivation and individual characteristics. The concept was connected with adult education and students learning on their own (Little, 2007). In his report *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, published by the Council of Europe in 1979, Holec proves the idea that adult education should develop abilities of being more independent (Holec, 1981) and promote the language learner autonomy environment by making shift from teaching to self-directed learning thus enabling learners to manage their progress (Little, 2007).

However, since that time the idea has been developed and implemented into a broader learner context. In the 21st century textbooks on foreign language teaching began to include a chapter about learner autonomy (Little, 2007). Learner autonomy now is regarded as a central area of interest in the field of foreign language learning (Borg & Al-Busaidi, 2012). Moreover, the idea of learner autonomy has been devel-

oped, and now it means not only students doing things by themselves, but also for themselves (Little, 2007).

In numerous publications devoted to learner autonomy authors often suggested their own view on the problem adding something new to the concept of autonomy.

Holec focused not only on the way how the learning is going on, but also on the kind of knowledge. In his view, the learner must determine the goals and also at least some aspects of content of learning, then individual knowledge constructed by the learner substitutes for objective knowledge. As a result learner's initiative and control guarantee better academic results. Holec supposes that autonomy entails active learning which helps to construct individual knowledge on the basis of provided information (Holec, 1981). However, Holec has been criticized for somehow separating language learning and developing learners' autonomy though his idea of getting individual knowledge proves that he admitted their relation (Little, 2007).

It is important to explore these relations and find ways how they can be used in language teaching.

According to Sinclair (2000) learner autonomy: 1) can be regarded as capacity; 2) means that learners are ready to be in charge of their learning and its results; 3) is not necessarily an inborn capacity; 4) is a complex phenomenon, and putting learners in situations where they have to act independently is only a part of it; 5) incorporates learners' reflection and decision-making; 6) can take place not only outside the classroom, but also inside it; 7) has social, individual, political and psychological dimensions; 8) has different degrees (Sinclair, 2000).

Some of the above-mentioned aspects need clarification. Thus, the claim that autonomy as a capacity is not necessarily innate means that it can and should be developed. Its complexity is determined by sociological, individual, political and psychological aspects, which explains different views on autonomy in different countries (Sinclair, 2000). The individual factors include the age of the learners, individual needs, educa-

tion etc. (Little 1991).

Little (1991) focuses on the psychological aspect considering it to be in the centre of learner autonomy. Autonomy in language learning entails critical reflection, decision making, independent action (Little 1991); ability to determine learning goals, pace, content, methods, monitor own progress, assess the results (Holec 1981).

D. Werbińska describes autonomy as the construct that includes a capacity to act independently, take initiative, consistently enhance one's motivation, realize the selected goals, develop identity through independent language learning and use (Werbińska, 2017).

The analysis of literature showed that the notions of autonomy and independence need clarification. There have been attempts to differentiate them. For example, Little (1991) states that autonomy is interdependence rather than independence. For Dickinson (1994) independence is responsibility for learning results while autonomy is connected with learning alone. Lamb and Rainders (2006) suggest that independence is connected with language learning whereas autonomy — with the way the learning is organized (Najeeb, 2013). However, further analysis of the interpretation of the notions make us agree that it is natural to use them as synonyms or near synonyms (Fisher et al., 2006, Najeeb, 2013).

In general autonomy is viewed as the capacity to be in charge of one's learning and its results which includes setting individual goals, critical reflection, decision-making, taking initiative.

Analysing university students' levels of autonomy Zadorozhna distinguishes pedagogical and psychological aspects. The former is connected with the organizational peculiarities, students' awareness of their learning style, preferable strategies, methods used etc. The latter is determined by students' motivation and self-regulation. Self-regulation includes students' ability to determine individual goals, focus on the educational context, select methods and aids, manage time, assess the results, change

the approach if necessary (Zadorozhna).

There are different views on the link between autonomy and motivation. Spratt, Humphrey & Chan (2002) consider motivation to be an important factor which promotes autonomy. Dickinson (1995) and Ushioda (1996), on the other hand, consider taking responsibility by the learner to be an important factor that enhances motivation. Developing self-determination theory Deci & Ryan's (2000) emphasised the role of intrinsic motivation and the significance of a sense of autonomy in its development. Since then autonomy has been often viewed as one of the factors of motivation. Ushioda thinks that motivation is linked to selfregulation (Ushioda 2007), and social environment plays a special role as it supports students' sense of autonomy as well as intrinsic motivation (Benson, 2006). We can also add learning environment which is the result of application of pedagogical principles. Figure 1 demonstrates the links between motivation, self-regulation, social environment and autonomy.

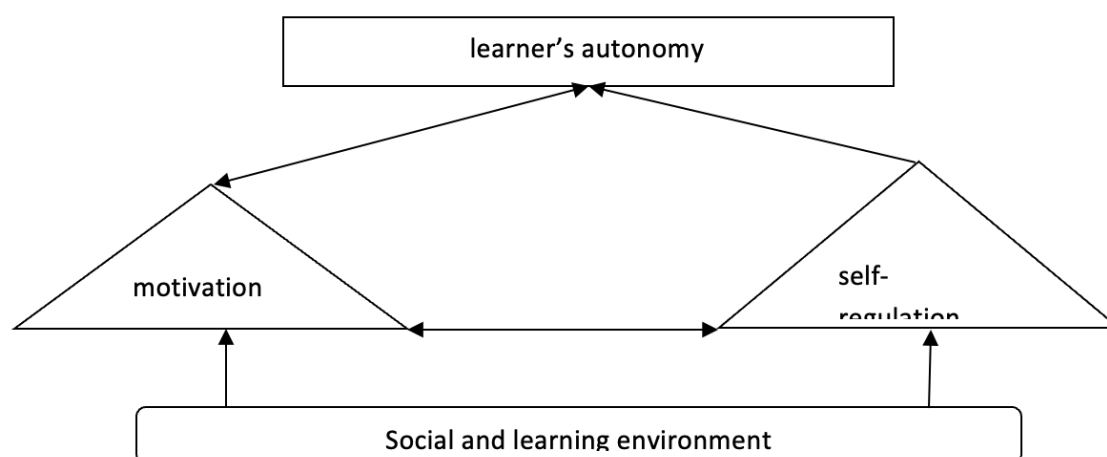


Figure 1. Factors influencing the development of autonomy

Thus, psychological aspect of autonomy entails the development of students' will and ability to work unsupervised (Sheerin, 1997), and these factors are interconnected in the way that autonomy promotes motivation and vice versa, motivation contributes to developing students' autonomy.

Sinclair claims that completely autonomous learners seem idealistic, and students may have different levels of autonomy which can change (Sinclair, 2000). Nowadays there are different approaches to determining them. Nunan suggested five levels of learner autonomy — 'awareness', 'involvement', 'intervention', 'creation' and 'transcendence', which correlate with the stages of language learning. At the awareness level learners should realize the learning goals they acquire the content, identify learning strategies they give preference to, analyse their learning style (Nunan, 1997). At the level of involvement, they are actively involved in acquiring the material. Intervention means that they intervene into the learning process moving to the creation of some new knowledge, tasks etc. At the transcendence level students usually find links between what is learned in the classroom and the world around (Benson, 2006).

Littlewood (1997) stepped beyond just the framework of language learning suggesting a three-stage model which includes language acquisition, learning approach and individual development. In the framework of language acquisition autonomy in-

cludes ‘an ability to use the language independently to communicate in real, un-prepared situations’ (Littlewood, 1997: 81). Learning approach is connected with classroom organization and is aimed at developing willingness to take responsibility for the process and results of their own learning, utilise personally appealing learning strategies. Another aspect is individual development of an autonomous personality (Benson, 2006).

Macaro’s model (1997) is very similar to the one presented by Littlewood and includes: 1) ‘autonomy of language competence’, 2) ‘autonomy of language learning competence’ and 3) ‘autonomy of choice and action’ (Macaro, 1997:170—172).

Scharle & Szabo (2000) offered a three-stage model embracing ‘raising awareness’, ‘changing attitudes’ and changing roles (Scharle & Szabo, 2000:1). In the suggested model the first two stages deal with the psychological aspects while the third one — with organizational.

Littlewood (1999) also distinguishes two types of autonomy: proactive and reactive. The former focuses on individual preferences, styles, interests etc. and thus involves learner’s participation in creating the direction. The latter takes place when the students select and work with the resources independently within the established direction. Reactive autonomy is viewed as the step to reach the proactive autonomy (Littlewood, 1999) and shouldn’t be neglected.

Benson’s model of learner autonomy focuses on “learning management, cognitive processing and the content of learning” (Benson, 2006:24).

Depending on models of interaction between the teacher and pre-service English language teachers and thus focusing mainly on the pedagogical aspect (which does not mean that psychological aspect is totally neglected) Zadorozhna (2016) determines four levels of autonomy: partial autonomy, semi-autonomy, partially dependent autonomy and relative autonomy. She considers complete autonomy to be hardly possible in the university context while relative autonomy still admits some role of

the teacher. Partial autonomy implies strict teacher's management (teacher defines objectives, contents, methods, aids; controls and evaluates the results); semi-autonomy means that students' together with the teacher define their objectives, select methods, aids; teacher selects the contents, assesses the outcomes); in partially dependent autonomy students can also select materials, assess their results; relative autonomy implies students' setting individual objectives with regard to program requirements, creating individual learning trajectory for achieving the goals, self-control, self-correction, self-evaluation (Zadorozhna, 2016).

Thus, though there are different views on the levels of autonomy, researchers support the idea of its development.

A very important question for us is the relations between the level of autonomy and language proficiency. Though Zadorozhna manages to find some correlation in the context of prospective English language teacher training (Zadorozhna, 2016), many researchers still think that it is not so unproblematic. Kumaravadivelu (2003) claims that the attempts to correlate degrees of autonomy (initial, intermediary, advanced) with the levels of language proficiency (beginning, intermediate, advanced) are not always correct because linguistic and communicative demands of the assignment often influence the degree of autonomy.

The question of the correlation between learner's autonomy and language proficiency still needs further research. However, our teaching experience shows that the ability to act independently increases with the rise in language proficiency. Students get some experience, become more confident language learners and users, acquire new efficient learning strategies, become ready to manipulate the language, communicate with more people, negotiate meaning etc. Thus, the task of education is to develop both students' language proficiency and their autonomy.

The above-mentioned considerations led us to the conclusion about the necessity of grounding the main principles of developing students' language proficiency and their

autonomy. The analysis of modern publications helped to distinguish the following interconnected principles which are important to ensure simultaneous development of foreign language proficiency and learner autonomy:

- students involvement in learning process (Little, 1999, 2001);
- developing learner reflection (Little, 1999, 2001);
- target language use (Little, 1999, 2001);
- creating appropriate atmosphere conducive to learning (Pachler & Field, 2003);
- methodological diversity and multi-resourcing (Pachler & Field, 2003);
- teaching learners to use strategies (Pachler & Field, 2003, Little, 2007)

The first one is students involvement in learning process (Little, 1999, 2001), which requires that the teacher constantly encourages students to participate actively in the learning process choosing learning activities and materials, monitoring interaction, evaluating learning outcomes. Such encouragement should last during the whole course of study and be done in small steps lifting learners to new levels of effort which will gradually develop their self-management skills. Encouraging students to take their own decision does not mean that teachers cannot intervene when the learners' actions can lead to some kind of failure. It is also very important if learners can negotiate their learning paths. In case of university education, it is of course the electives that students can choose to satisfy individual needs. However, within a single subject students can also be involved in discussion how much independence they can get, what their personal objectives are and how the learning path can be made as individual as possible.

Another principle is developing learner reflection (Little, 1999, 2001). Reflective practice can help students determine their individual needs, preferences, efficient individual strategies for different purposes, develop critical thinking skills (Zadorozhna et al., 2018). Among the easiest and most effective practices are self-assessment checklists of different types which can help learners determine problematic areas, needs,

achievements, gaps, strong and weak points etc. At the beginning learning tasks can be broken into small parts which should be evaluated by students with the help of a checklist which will demonstrate how to evaluate different stages of learning process, make thematic links, develop skills transfer (Pachler & Field, 2003).

Reflection usually results in change of behavior as it helps to examine problematic areas, find reasons for failure; examine the problem from different perspectives, re-focus the learning; analyse internal and external influences, even develop emotional intelligence which is sure to influence academic results (Zadorozhna et al., 2018). Self-assessment should cover all range of language skills and can involve different aids, e.g., video and audio to assess speaking skills. A wide range of modern gadgets widely used by students can be efficiently incorporated in the assessment process.

Students should also participate in analyzing the effectiveness of the methods, materials, activities that are used, and how they match their learning styles. In this case they will be actively involved in the evaluation of the learning process as a whole (Pachler & Field, 2003).

One more principle is target language use (Little, 1999, 2001) both inside and outside classroom. The more experience students get in language use in a meaningful context, the more independent language learners and users they become. Besides, the principle implies that the language is the medium through which all classroom activities (organizational, communicative, reflective etc.) are conducted (Little, 2007).

Students' achievements greatly depend on the teacher's ability to create appropriate atmosphere conducive to learning. Such an environment will help students to be emotionally and cognitively involved in active learning. Moreover, there is a view that successful learning is the result of "interrelationship between cognition as well as affective and emotional factors" (Raya 1998: 21) which are involved if students are provided with opportunity to negotiate, explore and initiate, experiment, research (Nunan & Lamb, 1996) and if learners' interests and needs are taken into account.

Teachers are expected to create supportive atmosphere, act as facilitators, students' partners, value learners and tolerate their mistakes which are inevitable in a risky environment of autonomous learning when there is scope for students to use language creatively (Pachler & Field, 2003) and to study independently. Teachers should guide learners towards independence.

The principle of methodological diversity and multi-resourcing (Pachler & Field, 2003) entails the use of different modern methods, aids and resources. As for methods, preferences should be given to the ones which provide more opportunities for students to act independently, demonstrate their creativity and develop all the necessary language skills. Among such methods there are simulations, role plays, problem solving, task based activities, project work, web-quests, case studies etc. which end with the production of some output (a story, report, presentation, script, short play, dictionary, song, video etc.). They all imply the effective use of group work which can involve students in intensive and interactive use of the foreign language. Language, which is produced interactively, gradually transforms into individual learner's mental resources (Little, 2007, Pachler & Field, 2003). Such independent activities can give learners the opportunity to apply the knowledge and skills, demonstrate creativity, test what they can do with the language, how autonomous they can be (Pachler & Field, 2003). They may end in peer evaluation, which is important for the development of both language and reflective skills.

The use of different resources may help to organize the learning process appropriately. Taking into account P. Kahl and T. Unruh's ideas (1993: 13), we have put forward the following requirements to materials selection, development and use:

- there must be a wide range of materials, which will allow students to choose among the given those which are more interesting for them or which they need to improve some skills;
- teacher should prepare additional exercises, tasks which students can use on their

choice if they feel they must refine some skills;

- students can also be involved in developing tasks and sharing them with other students;

- resources must correspond to the level of students' language proficiency, exceeding it a little to give them the opportunity to further develop skills;

- material should preferably include self-assessment components;

- material should correspond to students' needs, interests and abilities;

- a range of modern resources including media, fiction etc. should be involved.

It is quite possible for the teacher to negotiate with learners some materials used (for example, for intensive reading or listening), discuss their effectiveness.

A very important aspect of learner independence is teaching students how to learn, in other words how to use learning strategies. Students should acquire a wide range of strategies and choose the most appealing to the individual learning style. According to Oxford classification students must actively utilise memory (e.g. regular reviewing, grouping etc.), cognitive (e.g. practicing, analyzing etc.), compensation (e.g. guessing the meaning of unknown words from the context, paraphrasing etc.), metacognitive (e.g. planning, evaluating, seeking help from others etc.), affective (e.g. using background music while learning) strategies (Oxford, 1990, Zadorozhna, 2016).

Finally, it is the student who is always in the centre of education. Thus, it is important to develop the characteristics of independent learners among which U. Rampillon emphasises the following (1994: 456–9):

- like to learn;

- know their weaknesses and try to overcome them;

- are ready to discuss the factors impeding their learning;

- understand the importance of learning the language;

- organise their own learning;

- are aware of their own needs;

- use learning strategies efficiently;
- learn through communication;
- are able to negotiate meaning.

It seems important to add the following features to the above-mentioned:

- are aware of their learning style;
- are able and want to reflect on the process and results of their learning;
- are able and willing to learn out of class;
- take initiative.

If we really want to prepare students for lifelong foreign language learning, we need to encourage and help them to develop these characteristics.

The results of education will greatly depend on the teacher who should also be autonomous. Teacher autonomy includes the ability and willingness to establish a personal meaning, challenge individually-made assumptions, face challenges and uncertain situations, introduce new pedagogical solutions (Gabryś-Barker, 2017). Only a truly autonomous teacher can create an autonomous learning environment.

Learner autonomy is a result of purposeful pedagogical influence of the autonomous teacher who gradually involves students in managing the content and the process of their language learning and thus develops students individual characteristics which help them to be effective long-life language learners.

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