

LEARNER AUTONOMY IN ESL CONTEXT

The article aims at a closer study of learner autonomy within the framework of foreign language teaching. Autonomy is viewed here as a specific construct, rather than a method or a form of work in English as a second language context. Learner autonomy may be defined as a student's attitude to the discipline studied, which will result in building a new kind of a learner's identity capable of acquiring any necessary knowledge, making relevant choices, thus enhancing the formation of a learner's complete professional competence. This, in its turn, will secure the achievement of the ultimate goal of foreign language teaching, i.e. forming an identity able and ready to participate effectively in intercultural communication that might take place in various social and situational contexts.

This suggests a dramatic shift in teaching foreign languages, involving transition from the traditional teacher-centered paradigm to the paradigm of collaborative learning, which in its turn should give way to a learner-centered environment. It is speculated that foreign language learners' identity is affected by this transformation: turning a compliant unenterprising student into an independent and highly motivated full-fledged participant of a broad educational process allows to create a new identity capable of adequate social interaction in intercultural situations.

With learners directing the process of education, learner autonomy can be viewed as a basis for self-development within the currently proclaimed framework of life-long learning. This will enhance the formation of a student's communicative competence, improving the average level of university graduates. The notion of learner autonomy is constructed in terms of a decision-making process while a student's conscious and responsible attitude to the discipline taught is emphasized. However, autonomy should not be confused with self-instruction or less responsibility or attention on the part of a teacher.

Key words: *autonomy, communicative competence, foreign language acquisition, language identity.*

Constant transformation of the educational process all over the world, in general, as well as in Ukraine, in particular, calls for reviewing the approaches and methods currently used in ESL classrooms.

The regular aim of foreign language acquisition is the formation of a student's foreign language communicative competence, which can provide a graduate student with the ability and readiness to participate effectively in various situations of intercultural and scientific communication.

However, a general shift towards learner-centered education, as well as the on-going reduction in classroom hours allocated for mastering a foreign language, has already taken effect causing an increased attention of educationists to investigating and working out relevant principles of structuring and enhancing students' individual work.

Regarding these circumstances, it is considered to be essential to develop a scientifically grounded framework for the newly emerging principle of work.

The issue of students' individual work, along with the notions of learner autonomy, autonomous or self-sustaining work, has already been approached by a number of scientists worldwide (P. Benson, H. Holec, D. Little, W. Littlewood, P. Voller), who have investigated various aspects of the above-mentioned forms of educational work. Notwithstanding the amount of research available in this area, there is still a need for structuring the conceptual field of this new direction in the theory of education and for eliminating ambiguity in the related notions, which constitutes the topical value of the research.

Thus, the present study intends to analyze and clarify the concept and structure of learner autonomy, while distinguishing its basic meanings and characteristics against the background of the global processes taking place in the sphere of education.

As the famous saying by Benjamin Franklin goes, "Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn", it is a clear reminder from long ago that successful teaching should not involve mere communication of knowledge from teacher to learner, but include learner's personal and active participation in the educational process.

In the course of time the traditional teacher-centered paradigm (in which a teacher is regarded as the ultimate authority on the topic and the main source of information) gave way to the paradigm of collaborative learning (in which both teacher and learner were regarded as equal participants of the educational process, with the latter having obtained more freedom in expressing their opinions, assessing the process, suggesting forms of work, etc.).

Nowadays, due to the objective reasons of present-day diversification of sources of information, this paradigm is also undergoing transformation, which means a shift towards a learner-centered environment or, should we say, a learner-driven process. In this case, if learners direct the whole process of education, we can speak of learner autonomy, viewing it as the basis for self-development within the currently proclaimed framework of life-long learning.

Let us first consider the term of autonomy. Generally, learner autonomy is viewed, following the early and influential definition by Henri Holec, as "the ability to take charge of your own learning... to have, and to hold, the responsibility for all the decisions concerning all aspects of this learning" [7, p. 3]. The term learner autonomy may mean independent setting of independent aims or an activity carried out independently while applying effective strategies to reach the set aim. It also includes the idea of taking responsibility for the result of studies, as well as confidence in one's own ability and readiness to make unconventional decisions and overcoming obstacles on one's own [2, p. 191-192].

In order to clear up the notion, we can summarize it into five meanings:

- situations in which learners study entirely on their own;
- a set of skills which can be learned and applied in self-directed learning;
- an inborn capacity which is suppressed by institutional education;
- the exercise of learners' responsibility for their own learning;
- the right of learners to determine the direction of their own learning [4, p. 1-2].

David Little summarizes it into a wide variety of behaviors as "a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making and independent action" [8, p. 81]. However, it is easier to define what autonomy is not. It is not:

- a synonym for self-instruction (as it cannot be limited to learning without a teacher);
- a synonym for abdication of responsibility on the part of the teacher (as students cannot be allowed to get on with studies as best they can);
- a synonym for a new teaching method (teachers cannot do it to learners) [8, p. 81].

Thus, in short, learner autonomy can be summed up as insight, a positive attitude, a capacity for reflection, and a readiness to be proactive in self-management and in interaction with others [8, p. 82].

H. Holec also listed the specific decisions to be made by autonomous learners [7, p. 5-7]:

- determining the objectives;
- defining the contents and progressions;
- selecting methods and techniques to be used;
- monitoring the procedure of acquisition;
- evaluating what has been acquired.

Having made correct decisions, learners succeed in developing autonomy, "they not only become better language learners but they also develop into more responsible and critical members of the communities in which they live" [5, p. 1].

For foreign language learners, autonomy has to do with the degree of independence that learners have from traditional teacher fronted classroom approaches and their ability to advance and progress as independent learners [6, p. 254].

Under such circumstances, the identity of a learner is also changing: from a compliant unenterprising student awaiting a teacher's approval to an independent and highly motivated full-fledged participant of a broad educational process.

All the above-mentioned can be added up to define learner autonomy as an ability to independently obtain knowledge relevant for a future professional activity, using authentic information sources in foreign languages, as well as an ability to independently solve cognitive, communication, organizational and other problems in different situations of intercultural professional communication.

These characteristics are absolutely true for students doing their Master's degrees, while students working on their Bachelor's degrees should stay within the educational paradigm of collaboration where a teacher should involve them into managing the educational process and gradually render part of responsibility for achieving educational goals. On the other hand, Master students should already have all the relevant skills and be highly motivated to take responsibility since they wish to master a deeper level of the future profession [1]. All this will allow them to learn to steer the educational process at every level as active participants, resulting in making them autonomous independent individuals.

To sum up, it should be stated that learner autonomy is not simply a method or form of education, but a psychological quality, a student's attitude to a discipline, which presupposes taking responsibility for mastering a particular subject.

In this way, learner autonomy allows for not just grasping the essence of a subject, but for getting a complete picture of the inner structure of the subject taught, as well as its all possible interrelations with other relevant subjects.

Thus, learner autonomy promotes building a new learner identity, who will be capable to acquire not only knowledge of a subject (however deep and thorough it might be), but also to acquire skills in obtaining any

relevant information, processing it, making conclusions and incorporating it into their bank of knowledge. All this is bound to enhance a learner's competence in the particular field of knowledge, allowing for a drastic improvement in the average level of university graduates who are to face new intellectual challenges in the new millennium.

Characteristics and peculiar skills necessary for creating such a new identity of a learner may be a topic of a further investigation.

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НАВЧАЛЬНА АВТОНОМІЯ СТУДЕНТА В КОНТЕКСТІ ВИВЧЕННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ЯК ІНОЗЕМНОЇ

Стаття присвячена розгляду поняття навчальної автономії у процесі вивчення іноземної мови. Приділяється увага аналізу визначень поняття "автономія". Зміст поняття "навчальна автономія" конструюється з точки зору процесу прийняття рішень. Розглядається трансформація освітніх парадигм, що обумовлює перехід до навчальної автономії. Наголошується важливість відповідального ставлення студента до предмету, що вивчається, у процесі формування комунікативної компетентності.

Ключові слова: автономія, мовна особистість, іноземна освіта, комунікативна компетентність.

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УЧЕБНАЯ АВТОНОМИЯ СТУДЕНТА В КОНТЕКСТЕ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКОГО ЯЗЫКА КАК ИНОСТРАННОГО

Статья посвящена рассмотрению понятия учебной автономии в процессе изучения иностранного языка. Уделяется внимание определению понятия "автономия". Содержание понятия "учебная автономия" конструируется с точки зрения процесса принятия решений. Рассматривается трансформация образовательных парадигм, что обуславливает переход к учебной автономии. Подчеркивается важность ответственного отношения студента к изучаемому предмету в процессе формирования коммуникативной компетентности.

Ключевые слова: автономия, языковая личность, иноязычное образование, коммуникативная компетентность.

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