

Some remarks on learner autonomy in ESP classes

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Abstract

Nowadays, new approaches and methods are used in the field of foreign language teaching and learning. The approaches and methods take into consideration individual differences among students and support their independence in the process of foreign language acquisition. These individual approaches are based on respecting learners' specific features, developing their personality and supporting their activity in the classroom. Learner autonomy is also considered to be one of the above mentioned approaches. The article presents the results of the experiment based on integrating the principles of autonomous approach into ESP (English for Specific Purposes) classes at the Department of Languages, Faculty of Economics and Management, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra.

Key words: *authentic texts, ESP, experiment, learner autonomy, learner training, vocabulary*

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1 Introduction

Nowadays, attention of the member states of the European Union is also paid to the language policy. Promoting language learning is considered to be a must because of the growing mobility of citizens of the European Union within Europe. The key attention is paid to lifelong learning as well.

One of the main goals of foreign language teaching and learning is to use such methods and approaches which support independent thinking, opinions and performance of individuals and which are based on motivation, needs and wants of learners. As a result, learners and their individual needs should be in the centre of teachers' attention.

The above mentioned change has also resulted from the critical approach of teachers to traditional methods which fail to involve learners in the teaching and learning process. The teachers have gradually come into conclusion that if they want their students to learn more effectively, they have to know them better because only then they will be able to adapt the conditions of the educational process to the students' individual needs. Therefore, individual approaches to learners have been introduced into the context of foreign language teaching and learning.

The individual approaches are reflected in self-directed learning, self-instruction or learner autonomy. These approaches are focused on individuals who are taught to take responsibility for their own learning in order to become more independent of teachers and thus, to be prepared for lifelong learning.

The article presents the results of the experimental research conducted at the non-philological university – the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra. Within the research, the students of the selected ESP classes were acquainted with the principles of learner autonomy through learner training and activities based on authentic texts. The main aim was to teach them how to

learn the English language more effectively in order to take more responsibility for their own learning and thus become independent of their teachers.

1.1 Learner autonomy

There are several definitions of autonomy but we completely agree with the one presented by Scharle and Szabó (2000). According to them, “*autonomy is the freedom and ability to manage one’s own affairs, which entails the right to make decisions as well*” (Scharle & Szabó, 2000, p.4). Benson (1997) recognizes three versions of learner autonomy in the field of language education:

1. technical version – “*the act of learning a language outside the framework of an educational institution and without the intervention of a teacher*” (Benson, 1997, p. 19);
2. psychological version – “*a capacity – a construct of attitudes and abilities – which allows learners to take more responsibility for their own learning*” (Benson, 1997, p.19);
3. political version – ability which “*allows learners to control both their own individual learning and the institutional context within which it takes place*” (Benson, 1997, p. 19).

In 1979, the first official document connected with learner autonomy in the context of foreign language learning was written by Holec for the Council of Europe and was called *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning* (in Holec, 1981). In this document, Holec (1981, p.3) outlines that learner autonomy is the ability of an individual to take charge of his/her own learning. In other words, learner autonomy represents a situation in which a learner is responsible for all the decisions concerning all aspects of his/her own learning, e.g. determining the objectives, defining the contents, selecting methods and techniques and evaluating what has been acquired (Holec, 1981, pp. 3-4).

The ability of taking charge of one’s own learning is not inborn and therefore, “*(it) must be acquired either by ‘natural’ means or (...) by formal learning, ie in a systematic, deliberate way*” (Holec, 1981, p. 3). The acceptance of responsibility for one’s learning can be done with or without the help of a teacher. As it is stated by Dam (2001, p. 49), learner autonomy „*can be described as what takes place in situations in which the teacher is expected to provide a learning environment where the learners are given the possibility consciously to be involved in their own learning and thus become autonomous learners.*“

It is clear that fully autonomous learners are able to formulate their own learning objectives, use appropriate learning strategies, monitor their own learning, organize their time and exploit the available language learning resources. But there are only a few learners who are completely autonomous of their teachers. Therefore, the main task of teachers is to help their students become autonomous, i.e. to teach/train them how to learn. Also Dickinson (1992) claims that “*the ability to learn independently is a proper outcome of teaching, and has long been the concern of the teacher.*” As a result, the main objective of learner training conducted by teachers is to improve the effectiveness of one’s learning, because effective learning is part of being autonomous.

1.2 Learner training

Williams and Burden (1997) stress that “*learner training (...) is concerned with ways of teaching learners explicitly the techniques of learning a language, and an awareness of how and when to use strategies.*“ Also Tudor (1996, s. 37) defines learner training as the process “*by which learners are helped to deepen their understanding of the nature of language learning,*

and to acquire the knowledge and skills they need in order to pursue their learning goals in an informed and self-directive manner.“ So, through learner training students are taught how to learn and are acquainted with such skills and strategies which can help them reach their learning objectives. This fact is also supported by Ellis and Sinclair (1989, cited in Dickinson, 1992) who claim that *“learner training aims to help learners consider the factors that affect their learning and discover the learning strategies that suit them best. It focuses their attention on the process of learning so that the emphasis is on **how** to learn rather than on **what** to learn.”*

Thus, the main objective of learner training is to:

1. make everyone a better learner;
2. make everyone more capable of independent learning and
3. prepare everyone to become partly or wholly autonomous in his/her learning (Dickinson, 1992).

Learner training consists of the following areas:

- a) learning styles,
- b) multiple intelligences,
- c) learning strategies,
- d) autonomous assessment and self-assessment,
- e) language awareness and
- f) language learning awareness (Dickinson, 1992; Ellis & Sinclair, 1993).

In our experiment, the main emphasis was put on training learners how to use learning strategies effectively; therefore, other areas of learner training are not discussed in the chapters which follow.

1.2.1 Learning strategies

According to Reid (1998, p. ix), learning strategies are *“external skills often used consciously by students to improve their learning.”* O’Malley and Chamot (1990, p. 1) characterize learning strategies as *„the special thoughts or behaviors that individuals use to help them comprehend, learn, or retain new information.“* A similar definition of learning strategies is presented by Oxford (1990, p. 8) who claims that *„learning strategies are operations employed by the learner to aid the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and use of information...All appropriate language learning strategies are oriented toward the broad goal of communicative competence. Development of communicative competence requires realistic interaction among learners using meaningful, contextualized language. Learning strategies help learners participate in such authentic communication.”* Also another author who deals with learning strategies states that these are *„mental steps or operations that learners use to learn a new language and to regulate their efforts to do so. They are one type of learner training content that should be included in plans to promote learner autonomy”* (Wenden, 1991, p. 18).

According to O’Malley and Chamot (1990), learning strategies are divided into:

- a) cognitive strategies,
- b) metacognitive strategies and
- c) social/affective strategies.

On the other hand, Wenden (1991) recognizes only:

- a) cognitive strategies and
- b) self-management strategies (= metacognitive strategies according to O'Malley & Chamot, 1990).

Oxford (1990), who deals with learning strategies in detail, divides them into two main groups:

- a) direct strategies and
- b) indirect strategies.

On the one hand, direct strategies are those which are directly connected with the target language and which “*require mental processing of the language, but the three groups of direct strategies (memory, cognitive and compensation) do this processing differently and for different purposes*”(Oxford, 1990, p. 37). On the other hand, indirect strategies are those which “*support and manage language learning without (in many instances) directly involving the target language*”(Oxford, 1990, p. 135).

These two main groups of strategies are further subdivided into subgroups as follows (Oxford, 1990):

- a) direct strategies:
 - i. memory strategies (e.g. creating mental linkage; applying images and sounds; reviewing well; employing action);
 - ii. cognitive strategies (e.g. repeating; getting the idea quickly; analyzing; translating; taking notes; summarizing; highlighting) and
 - iii. compensation strategies (e.g. guessing intelligently; getting help; using mime or gesture; avoiding communication; selecting the topic);
- b) indirect strategies:
 - i. metacognitive strategies (e.g. paying attention; arranging and planning your learning; finding out about language learning, organizing, identifying the purpose of a language task, planning for a language task; evaluating your learning: self-monitoring, self-evaluating);
 - ii. affective strategies (e.g. lowering your anxiety; encouraging yourself; taking your emotional temperature: writing a language learning diary, discussing your feelings with someone else) and
 - iii. social strategies (e.g. asking questions; cooperating with others; empathizing with others) (Oxford, 1990).

In our experiment, we aimed at those learning strategies which are necessary for learning new vocabulary and reading authentic texts.

1.3 Authentic texts

Activities designed around authentic texts (in some books the expression ‘authentic materials’ is used, e.g. Homolová, 2003)) can play a major role in promoting learner autonomy, i.e. “*in enhancing positive attitudes to learning, in promoting the development of a wide range of skills, and in enabling students to work independently of the teacher*” (McGarry, 1995, p.3). Authentic texts also “*provide students with bridges to the real world of the target language community*” (McGarry, 1995, p.3).

Little (1997, p. 225) states that the authentic text is „ (i) *the record of any communicative act in speech or writing that was originally performed in fulfilment of some personal or social*

function, and not in order to provide illustrative material for language teaching and – by extension – (ii) any communicative event that can easily become such a record, for example, radio and television broadcasts and certain forms of electronic communication.” It means that authentic texts are not only materials from newspapers, magazines, or books but also materials from radio broadcasts, television programmes, films, etc.

In the experiment, a portfolio of authentic texts from newspapers, magazines, books, and online newspapers and magazines was prepared for the language learning purposes. Then, activities involving different learning strategies were designed by the teacher (Holúbeková, 2007). The main idea was to meet specific needs and requirements of the students and offer them unique opportunities for promoting learner autonomy.

2 Experimental research

The aim of our research was to answer the research question to what extent learner autonomy, especially the principles of learner training, can be implemented into the ESP classes at the Faculty of Economics and Management, Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra.

Three hypotheses were used to verify the main research question. The first hypothesis was connected with the implementation of principles of learner autonomy, especially learner training, into the ESP classes. It was stated that the final exam results of the students of the experimental group would be significantly better than the results of the students of the controlled group. The second hypothesis was focused on investigation of the impact of strategy training (training of strategies connected with learning vocabulary) on the results of the final vocabulary tests of the students of the experimental group. The last hypothesis was aimed at investigating how strategy training concerning reading comprehension (authentic texts) can influence the results of the final tests of the students of the experimental group. The first two hypotheses were further subdivided into two, one comparing the results of the experimental and controlled groups at the end of the experiment (posttests) and the second one comparing the results of the experimental group at the beginning and at the end of the experiment (a pretest and a posttest within this group). The last hypothesis referred to comparing the posttest results of the students of the experimental and controlled groups.

Research question 1

How can the implementation of the principles of autonomous approach to learning influence the results of the final exam tests of students?

Hypothesis 1

H₁: If the students of the experimental group are acquainted with the principles of the autonomous approach to learning, then they:

- reach better posttest results than pretest results (H_{1a}), i.e. the difference between the pretest results and posttest results will be statistically significant;
- reach better posttest results than the students of the controlled group (H_{1b}), i.e. the difference between the posttest results of the experimental group and the controlled group will be statistically significant.

Research question 2

How does strategy training connected with learning vocabulary influence the results of the vocabulary tests?

Hypothesis 2

H₂: If the students of the experimental group are acquainted with the strategies connected with learning vocabulary, then they:

- reach better posttest results (vocabulary testing) than the students of the controlled group (H_{2a}), i.e. the difference between the posttest results of the experimental group and posttest results of the controlled group will be statistically significant;
- reach better posttest results (vocabulary testing) than pretest results (H_{2b}), i.e. the difference between their posttest results and pretest results will be statistically significant.

Research question3:

How does working with authentic texts influence the results of the final exam tests of learners?

Hypothesis 3

H₃: If the students of the experimental group are acquainted with the strategies aimed at reading authentic texts, then the difference between their posttest results and pretest results will be statistically significant.

Three research methods were used to prove our hypotheses: an experiment with pretests and posttests, questionnaires and an analysis of texts. The experiment with pretests and posttests was the main research method.

Duration of the experiment: winter term and summer term

Number of lessons: winter term – 13 weeks (two teaching units a week, one teaching unit = 45 minutes), summer term - 13 weeks (two teaching units a week, one teaching unit = 45 minutes); together 52 teaching units.

The following experimental plans (see Table 1, Table 2 and Table 3) were prepared for the purpose of the experiment:

Table 1: Experimental plan 1

	pretest	procedure	posttest
controlled group A	yes	p ₁ – methods and approaches proposed by the textbook p ₂ – learner autonomy	yes
experimental group B	yes		yes

Source: Author’s ideas

Table 2: Experimental plan 2

	pretest	procedure	posttest
controlled group A	yes	p ₁ – acquisition of vocabulary without strategy training	yes
experimental group B	yes	p ₂ – acquisition of vocabulary with strategy training	yes

Source: Author’s ideas

Table 3: Experimental plan 3

	pretest	procedure	posttest
controlled group A	yes	p ₁ – texts from the textbook	yes
experimental group B	yes	p ₂ – authentic texts	yes

Source: Author’s ideas

The research was conducted at the Slovak University of Agriculture in Nitra. The second grade students (75 learners) of the Faculty of Economics and Management were the subjects of the experiment. In the course of the school year (two terms), the learners were prepared to take more responsibility for their own learning through learner training and use of authentic texts.

The experiment began at the outset of winter term and finished at the end of summer term. The students were divided into two main groups: an experimental group (two ESP classes, 38 students) and a controlled group (two ESP classes, 37 students). The experimental group was taught through autonomous approach of ESP instruction proposed by Nunan (1997). The approach consists of the following stages: awareness, involvement, intervention, creation and transcendence (Nunan, 1997, see Appendix A). As for the controlled group, the students followed the traditional syllabus designed for the selected ESP classes.

The students of both groups underwent the same tests at the beginning of the experiment (pretest) and at the end of the experiment (posttest). Then, the paired t-test was used to test the hypotheses: H_{1a}, H_{2b}, H₃ and the unpaired t-test was used to test the hypotheses: H_{1b}, H_{2a}.

3 Results and discussion

On the one hand, it has been confirmed that the final test results of the students of the experimental group, who underwent strategy training connected with learning new vocabulary, were significantly better than the results of the students of the controlled group. Also the results of the vocabulary posttests of the students of the experimental group were significantly better than the results of their pretests.

On the other hand, the remaining hypotheses were not confirmed. There are several reasons for that. Firstly, the principles of learner autonomy and learner training were introduced to the students of the experimental group for the first time during their studies at university. Therefore, it was too difficult for them to accept new styles of teaching and learning as well as to take more responsibility for decisions connected with their learning, e.g. determining the objectives, defining the contents, selecting methods and techniques and evaluating what has been acquired. They thought that a teacher should be responsible for all the decisions. Secondly, we agree with Straková (2003) who states that the results of tests of the students, who are trained to be autonomous, cannot be verified in the same way as the results of their knowledge tests. When evaluating the results of autonomous training we should also take into account different levels of students’ autonomy. Therefore, further research aimed at finding out how to measure different levels of students’ autonomy is needed.

4 Conclusion

To sum it up, learner autonomy is one of the language learning approaches which takes into account individual characteristics of learners. Its main aim is to promote responsibility of an individual who is encouraged to learn as independently of a teacher as possible. Learner training based on strategy training and reading authentic texts was the key in promoting learner autonomy in the above mentioned experimental research.

Despite the fact that three of the proposed hypotheses were not confirmed, we could state that the experiment was successful because the students of the experimental group learnt how to:

- determine the objectives of their learning,
- exploit different learning styles and multiple intelligences,
- use different learning strategies,
- work with authentic texts, and
- monitor their learning process.

To conclude, the knowledge of the learner training principles learnt during English lessons can also be transferred to other subjects and help students take more responsibility for their learning.

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Appendix A

Table 4: Autonomy: levels of implementation

Level	Learner action	Content	Process
1	Awareness	Learners are made aware of the pedagogical goals and content of the materials they are using.	Learners identify strategy implications of pedagogical tasks and identify their own preferred learning styles/strategies.
2	Involvement	Learners are involved in selecting their own goals from a range of alternatives on offer.	Learners make choices among a range of options.
3	Intervention	Learners are involved in modifying and adapting the goals and content of the learning programme.	Learners modify/adapt tasks.
4	Creation	Learners create their own goals and objectives.	Learners create their own tasks.
5	Transcendence	Learners go beyond the classroom and make links between the content of classroom learning and the world beyond.	Learners become teachers and researchers.

Source: Nunan (1997, p. 195)