IMPORTANCE OF AUTONOMY IN ADULT LEARNERS OF ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Abstract. *Modern ESP methodology puts learner autonomy as one of its basic postulates because learners should be able to continue their learning even after the course itself has ended. Autonomy represents a necessity in the society that values lifelong learning and since teachers cannot provide learners with all the skills and knowledge they would like to have, it is much more helpful to establish strategies preparing them for effective use of English. The first step towards autonomy is taking responsibility for learning. The responsibility is fulfilled through learners' participation in all aspects of the teaching process-planning, application and evaluation. In order to become successful learners, students must perceive their own needs and develop awareness about their learning. The successfulness of learning depends on joint efforts performed by both students and teachers from their different perspectives.*

Key words: *ESP methodology, teaching process learner autonomy, lifelong learning*

1. INTRODUCTION

Long-term learning is an essential element in the area of higher education. Modern society imposes certain demands on higher education in terms of developing students' abilities to function in society, and concepts of flexibility, communicative, teamwork are highlighted (Bernett, 1994). Students should be transformed into critical consumers of dynamic knowledge and partners in the pedagogical relationship perceiving their teacher as a facilitator of their learning (Vieira, 1999).

The term *learner autonomy* was first defined by Holec. According to his definition an autonomous learner is capable of determining the objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedure of acquisition properly speaking and evaluating what has been acquired. Autonomous learners have the capacity to determine realistic and reachable goals, select appropriate methods and techniques to be used, monitor their own learning process, and evaluate the progress of their own learning (Holec, 1981, p.3).

Since students usually transfer their knowledge of specialized subjects to English language course they can help planning the course, which makes introduction of autonomy in English for specific purposes course feasible. The most widely accepted model is the one consisting of five levels of learner actions: *awareness, involvement, intervention, creation, and transcendence* (Nunan, 1996, p. 195). At the awareness level, for example, learners would be *made aware of the pedagogical goals and contents of the materials*, *identify*

strategy implication of pedagogical tasks, and *identify their own learning styles* (p. 196). At the transcendence level, *learners would make links between the content learnt in the classroom and the world beyond* and *become teachers and researchers* (p. 200). It is also important to offer them strategies that will help them function independently by training them to use language learning strategies effectively in their language learning process, thus taking the responsibility to control, evaluate and monitor their language learning process (Van Esch, 2003).

What should be taken into account is the very nature of learning. This is personal process and effective only if a learner wants to learn. The first step towards autonomy is taking responsibility for learning. This responsibility is realized through full participation of learners in all aspects of learning and teaching-planning, implementation and evaluation (Little, 2003). Responsibility for learning is no longer just on the teacher but also on the student. Students have control over their own learning, because the teacher does not know what is best for each student individually and cannot define the process of learning and its outcome in advance. Thus, students should be aware of their needs in order to be successful listeners, and teachers should provide favorable conditions for learning the language and necessary material for acquisition of knowledge. Learning depends on the joint research carried out by teachers and students from their different perspectives. The concept of students' autonomy and successful learning are closely linked. Also there should be a balance between curriculum structure and direction so that teacher can respond to different learning needs and create necessary pedagogical changes. Some of the strategies for promoting autonomy include constructive dialogue between teachers and students, preparation of adequate teaching materials, collaboration with teachers of specialised subjects, and continuous assessment.

2. APPROACHES TO FOSTERING LEARNER AUTONOMY

2.1. Resource-based approach

Resource-based approach emphasizes independent use of learning materials (Benson, 2013). These materials include guided self-discovery tasks based on authentic data, questionnaires designed to help learners clarify or challenge their beliefs about language learning, study guides for language practice activities not based on didactic materials, fluency activities for pairs and groups together with checklists and guidelines for self and peer evaluation, suggestions for different ways of using learning materials, student-generated materials, and standard reading and listening exercises designed for a particular genre rather than a particular text. These materials depart from the pedagogical model of transmission and testing of language content commonly underlying commercial materials. In fact, the most effective materials may be those that help learners exploit opportunities for learning that are external to the materials themselves.

In the model for assessment and evaluation of learners' competences for autonomy, Tassinari (2012, p.28) offers 24 components such as learners' competencies, skills, choices, and decision-making process, and account for their mutual relationship. For each component, the researcher developed descriptors in the form of statements, which are intended to serve as a tool for raising learners and advisors awareness of what could be worth focusing on in autonomous learning processes (p. 31). The role of the advisor should be to train the learners and to create the environments or opportunities for their learners.

2.2. Technology-based approach

Technology based approach includes computer-assisted language and computer mediated communication (CMC). Computer-assisted language learning (CALL) is term that refers to the area of technology and second language teaching and learning. (Chapelle, 2001, p.3). It may also be defined as the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning (Levy, 1997, p.1). In some wider terms, it implies any process in which a learner uses a computer and as a result improves his or her language. Materials for CALL include those that are purpose made for language learning and those which adapt existing computer-based materials, video and other materials (Beatty, 2003, pp.7-8). Some of the most important CALL activities include: multiple-choice and true/false quizzes, gap-filling exercise/cloze, matching, re-ordering/sequencing, crossword puzzles, games, simulations, writing & word-processing, concordancing, web quests/searching, web publishing, online communication.

2.3. Computer-mediated communication (CMC)

This approach is defined as any human communication that occurs through the use of two or more electronic device (McQuail, (2010). While the term has traditionally referred to those communications that occur via computer-mediated formats (e.g., instant messaging, email, chat rooms, online forums, social network services), it has also been applied to other forms of text-based interaction such as text messaging (Thurlow et al. 2004). Research on CMC focuses largely on the social effects of different computer-supported communication technologies. CMC is widely discussed in language learning because CMC provides opportunities for language learners to practice their language (Abrams, 2006). For example, Warschauer (1998) conducted several case studies on using email or discussion boards in different language classes. Warschauer (2006) also claimed that information and communications technology *bridge the historic divide between speech... and writing*. Thus, considerable concern has arisen over the reading and writing research in second language learning due to the booming of the Internet.

2.4. Curriculum-based approach

This approach is characterised by developing learner involvement in decision making. Fostering learner autonomy represents an important and appropriate goal in language course design (Cotterall, 2000, p.109). The five principles which emerged from the course design process relate to learner goals, the language learning process, tasks, learner strategies and reflection on learning. The key issue that a designer must take into consideration is to make learners aware of the need for identifying goals, learning options, and strategies. Thus, the potential for learner autonomy increases as an individual's learning awareness grows. Teachers' concerns are to make learners aware of all the issues related to curriculum design and learning process.

According to Richards (2013) there is connection between new trends and proposals in methodology and a focus on learning objectives. In order to explain this connection he uses the terms forward design, central design and backward design. These three approaches were compared regarding to input (linguistic content), process (methodology), and learners productions (outcomes). Forward design starts with the planning of the syllabus and then goes forward to methodology and followed by the outcomes. In central design, the process

is the starting point and syllabus and the outcomes are mentioned specifically. The backward design starts from the specific details of learning outcomes and methodology and syllabus are developed from them.

2.5. Classroom-based approach

In this approach cooperative learning within classroom contexts is emphasised, that is, learners are able to be responsible for their learning via working with their peers or teachers (Benson, 2001). Teachers' role is to negotiate control and responsibility with their learners in the setting of goals, the learning process and determining evaluation and assessments Benefits of peer assessment: are that students may perceive that they can get fairer assessment from peers than with traditional assessment. Moreover, peer assessment can improve students' understanding and attitudes towards assessment. Some researchers advocate the use of portfolio assessment (Little, 2009). Portfolio assessment involves the teaching learning process, supportive feedback, fostering meaningful learning, and students' own participation. Portfolios are actually composed of two major components, the process and the product. Portfolios provide authentic evidence for evaluating language learning. A resulting advantage of this is that learners are better able to set realistic goals and direct their own learning. Bullock (2010) also stressed the need for self-assessment to be practical in terms of time and resources in the classroom-based approach. For example, the teacher needs to integrate self-assessment and peer-assessment into everyday classroom activities.

2.6. Learner-based approach

This approach focuses on training learners to develop learning skills and strategies, that is, training learners' metacognitive knowledge and skills in order to develop learner autonomy (Benson, 2013) and motivation (Ushioda, 2011). Researchers in the field of learner autonomy in language learning agree that autonomous learners are motivated learners. This involves understanding learners' needs and goals, communicating trust and respect to them, acknowledging diversity of needs and learning styles, giving feedback on their learning in ways that help develop their confidence and self-esteem. The following features reflect the teachers' ability to achieve a learner-focused approach to teaching: the degree of engagement learners have with the lesson, the quantity of student participation and interaction that occurs, learning outcomes the lesson produces, the ability to present subject matter from a learner's perspective, how well the lesson addresses learner's needs, how the teacher reshapes the lesson based on learner feedback, how the teacher responds to learners' difficulties.

Benson also (2001) argues that learner-centered teaching is practically more effective than other modes of teaching for several reasons because:

- sensitive to individual needs and preferences,
- encourages construction of knowledge and meaning,
- draws on and integrates language learning with students' life experiences,
- generates more student participation and target language output,
- encourages authentic communication,
- breaks down barriers between in-class and out of class learning,
- opens up spaces for discussion of motivations, learning preferences, and styles,
- encourages students to take more personal responsibility for their learning and challenges the views that learning is equivalent to being taught.

2.7. Teacher-based approaches

The teacher-based approaches place the focus on teacher autonomy, teacher education, and teacher's role as facilitator. The underlying principle this approach is that there is a relationship between learner autonomy and teacher autonomy, but that the promotion of learner autonomy depends on the promotion of teacher autonomy (Benson, 2001). Littlewood (1997) identified *self-awareness* as a key element in fostering teacher autonomy as it leads to a better understanding of ourselves as learners and professionals, of our strengths and weaknesses. Powell and Powell (2010) claimed that teachers with high degrees of self-awareness know their strengths and their limits. They are able to make an accurate appraisal of their own talents and weaknesses, they are reflective and are able to learn from experience, they take responsible risks and, when they fail, they treat the incident as an opportunity for growth and learning. While students are encouraged to develop their capacity and readiness to control their own learning, they will eventually reach the point where they will be able to acquire their own independent learning skills and, consequently, will begin to reflect on their own experiences (Brown, 2001, p. 89-90).

When helping learners to develop their autonomous learning skills, teachers should also encourage them to make their own learning decisions. Gaining decision-making ability is an important step for learners to start setting their own goals. This ability may also reflect positively on their motivation. Stiggings and Chappuis (2005) suggest that, by including goal setting and self-monitoring in the daily classroom routine, a teacher can create a learning environment that increases student involvement and motivation. Having students set their own goals can be a fairly challenging task.

3. CONCLUSION

Fostering learner autonomy may be defined in simple terms as helping learners to become more independent by training them to use language learning strategies effectively in their language learning process, thus taking the responsibility to control, evaluate and monitor their language learning process. Some of the strategies include approving, and encouraging students to be more independent, convincing them that they are capable of greater independence in learning, giving them successful experience of independent learning; providing them with opportunities to exercise their independence, helping them to become more aware of language as a system so that they can understand many of the learning techniques available and learn sufficient grammar to understand simple reference books.

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