

## **BUILDING LEARNER AUTONOMY THROUGH STRATEGY TRAINING**

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A language student who is self-reliant and able to manage his own learning is regarded as autonomous. The concept of language learning autonomy has been viewed from different angles: psychological, social, and didactic, dependent on whether it is regarded as an educational method that leads to a goal (learning a language) or as an objective in itself (making the learner autonomous) or as both. According to Smith (2008: 395), autonomy is a complex phenomenon whose meaning has been viewed from many sides and in an increasingly academic fashion. Consider a few most popular definitions proposed in the literature (taken from Gardner and Miller, 1999):

- Autonomy is the ability to take charge of one's own learning (Henri Holec);
- Autonomy is essentially a matter of the learner's psychological relation to the process and content of learning (David Little);
- Autonomy is a situation in which the learner is totally responsible for all the decisions concerned with his [or her] learning and the implementation of those decisions (Lesley Dickinson);
- Autonomy is recognition of the rights of learners within educational systems (Phil Benson).

It is worth noting that all these definitions imply that it is the learner that language pedagogy should focus on, not the teacher, which supports the idea of the learner-centred approach. They also suggest that autonomous learning is synonymous (at least to some extent) with self-directed language learning.

Autonomy is now commonly assumed to be “a capacity to take charge of, or responsibility for, one's own learning” (Benson, 2001: 47). This means that autonomous learners are able to manage their learning on their own. How-

ever, as applied to individual learners, the concept allows for different interpretations; it has been observed, for example, that the concept “has acquired many different shades of meaning, which have sometimes caused confusion about what learner autonomy might entail” (Aoki, 1997: 136). The concept has evolved with the developments in the fields of applied linguistics and second language acquisition concomitantly with the growing interest on the part of language teachers and methodologists. Komorowska (1999: 219) has noted that autonomy derives from the student’s ability to fulfil tasks

- independently (either individually or collectively in a group),
- in a novel context, i.e., other than the one in which skills were originally learned,
- non-stereotypically but flexibly, i.e., according to the type of task.

Current understanding of learner autonomy and of its significance for successful language learning is based on the recognition of the accepted belief that contemporary life requires making individual contribution to the development of life-long learning skills. It follows that, among other things, the language learner is supposed to cherish freedom in making use of self-access facilities; moreover, the idea of teaching a language has consequently been replaced by the idea of learning a language, whereby the learner himself occupies the central place in language pedagogy.

The remark above is essential for proper understanding of the concept of language learning autonomy. Since “autonomy” is commonly associated with self-government, independence, freedom, and the right to decision-making, one might assume that it also relates to the learner’s complete self-governing his own learning, full independence of and freedom from the teacher. This view would certainly be a gross exaggeration and, in fact, a serious mistake, just because formal language learning takes place in a situation where its participants necessarily depend on one another; – it is a situation which necessarily determines that the participants learn from one another (I will return to the question of the indispensability of teacher guidance in an autonomous language classroom). Thus, autonomy involves redistribution of power but does not mean that autonomous learning can proceed without a teacher (Voller, 1997; Wenden, 1996).

If it is assumed that instilling and increasing autonomy is feasible the question arises whether it is possible to measure its level and extent. The answer seems risky, if possible at all. This is so because autonomy manifests itself in a number of forms and depends on various factors, such as, e.g., learning experience, level of language proficiency, the learner’s age, etc. Apart from these factors, autonomous behaviour is also determined by the learner’s perception of his ability to act independently – some learners necessarily need a certain sort of assistance as they do not want or hesitate to make responsible decisions by

themselves. However, in spite of the problems, it is tempting to try to describe a learner's degree of autonomy because it is quite possible to make comparisons between individual learners. Moreover, it can also be concluded that a learner who displays the ability to control his learning is more autonomous than the one who does not display such ability.

In general, autonomy is a characteristic of a good, effective learner who understands the necessity of adopting an active stance in learning and is willing to get involved in learning tasks and who, independently of the teacher, initiates his learning by attempting to use and apply various means to develop his language skills and abilities: this kind of learner controls his own learning.

Various authors indicate a number of features that characterize an autonomous learner. For example, Dickinson (1993: 330) points out that such a learner:

- knows what the teacher wants to teach him (is aware of the teacher's goals); a non-autonomous learner does not always understand what is going on during a language class;
- defines his own learning objectives; he does so not in spite of the teacher, but rather in collaboration with him, in addition to his actions;
- chooses and uses learning strategies that he finds suitable for him; he often does this consciously;
- controls the efficiency of these strategies (assesses their usefulness);
- identifies strategies that he finds useless for him and rejects them (an autonomous learner has a relatively rich repertoire of strategies).

With regard to autonomy, language pedagogy expects currently that due attention should be given to tying it closely with language learning strategies. Hence, it is postulated that autonomous learners should be able to:

- realize that they use certain strategies (many learners are not aware that they use some),
- identify strategies,
- learn and use more strategies.

Similar opinions about autonomous learners, which also act as recommendations for autonomizing the learning process, can often be found in the literature. However, a great number of problems have been identified concerning their actual implementation in the language classroom. For example, Pawlak (2004: 4) points out that the problems derive from varied approaches to the question of autonomy. Its current status, at least in contemporary Polish schools, demonstrates "how variously autonomy can be interpreted, how diverse are the ways of developing it in the classroom, how serious are the obstacles encountered in implementing approaches of the autonomous character in the Polish educational context and how much there is still to do about it" (*ibid.*, transl. J.Z).

Benson (2001:2) explains that autonomy should simply be understood as "an attribute of the learner's approach to the learning process". Ascribing this

particular quality to an autonomous learner stems rationally from the assumption that the learner is naturally predisposed to monitor his own progress. This predisposition is a natural consequence of curiosity (typical of good learners) concerning one's actions ("is my effort effective?"; "what's the outcome of my action?"). It may thus be concluded that autonomy, seen as a learning characteristic, empowers the learner to cope either individually or collectively with his/her learning problems. It is worth adding that cognitive psychology provides substantial evidence to testify that most learners prefer choosing their own paths to attain goals – doing things on one's own triggers energy that stimulates the learner to a more intensive effort.

The quotation from Pawlak above demonstrates that serious confusion exists among language teachers with regard to understanding the idea of learner autonomy. Nevertheless, it needs emphasizing that autonomy certainly does not involve delegating entire responsibility for learning to the learner and giving him total freedom and initiative to decide how and what to learn. This would obviously be absurd. Clearly, the teacher is indispensable for the learner because autonomous learning means collaboration between the learner and the teacher rather than self-instruction (cf. Little, 1990).

Thus, full autonomy in formal language learning is quite inconceivable. Present-day understanding of the processes of language acquisition justifies the claim that a learner who is left entirely to himself and deprived of the opportunity to receive interactive feedback has no means to verify whether what he has learned reflects actual linguistic reality as both language forms and the meanings that he attributes to the forms may be based on his completely false hypotheses. In order to learn rules of language use he needs to check his hypotheses and this necessitates appropriate feedback. Language learning requires interaction and language development necessarily involves some dependence on authority and guidance (cf. Boud, 1988). In the learning situation it is the teacher that not only provides input but also suggests available possibilities of coping with learning problems so that the learner should not treat his own subsequent hypotheses arbitrarily or axiomatically. It follows that not only is the teacher necessary but also that interactive cooperation between him and the learner is naturally indispensable.

Moreover, the sense of autonomy on the part of the language learner fosters his motivation for learning. If learners are not involved in making decisions about learning "they are unlikely to develop personal responsibility for their own learning or long-term motivation to continue" (Ur, 2001: 279).

Apart from the above considerations, full autonomy cannot be expected of a school learner for some other reasons. The pupil is unable to take over full responsibility for all the decisions related to language learning just because of his young age and little experience – it is argued that autonomy should only be considered as a characteristic of adult learners (Dickinson, 1993); concerning the

school situation, where learners are only being prepared for autonomous learning beyond school, we should rather talk of half-autonomy (Michońska-Stadnik, 1996: 16).

The wide interest in autonomous learning and the arguments for fostering it in the classroom are based on the conviction that it promotes the learner in his learning efforts and supports consolidating the already acquired language skills. Its advocates argue that the comparison of the results of the research into autonomous and non-autonomous language learning clearly indicate that developing autonomy is both rational and feasible.

The plea for promoting autonomy in the sense presented here is based on the conviction that a human being is able to learn a lot by himself (though not everything or completely), including a foreign language. It is this conviction that has created a popular demand for various “teach-yourself” course-books and phrase-books which, not surprisingly, have found a wide audience. Undeniably, one can master a language quite well without external help, but to do so at school, i.e., in an educational institution, seems inconceivable for the reasons that are so obvious that they are not worth mentioning. Still, self-instruction, which involves autonomy, can and does lead to excellent results as is proven in a significant number of cases.

The benefits of autonomy are numerous: autonomous learners attempt to satisfy their needs according to their individual learning styles and personalities; this means that they study at their convenience and pace; moreover, they decide what to focus on, when, in what manner, and also how often to approach the material being studied. Consequently, they also choose how much effort to invest in their learning to achieve desired goals.

There remains the pedagogical question of how to raise autonomous learners. Dörnyei (2001) provides a number of practical suggestions for teachers to follow in creating learner autonomy. Among them there are two that he finds particularly significant. The first one concerns learner involvement in organizing the learning process; the second one emphasizes the teacher’s role as a facilitator (for details see pp. 104–108). However, David Little’s comment: “For a teacher to commit himself to learner autonomy requires a lot of nerve” (in Dörnyei, 2001: 105) alerts the teacher to the fact that autonomy development is a difficult and complex endeavour.

The practice of language teaching clearly indicates that autonomy development is enhanced in the learning situations that promote individualization and cooperation between teachers and students and between students themselves. Good teachers encourage learners to exert effort and provide guidance by helping them to devise their goals and providing proper feedback. Cooperation reflects the social aspect of autonomy which has led one writer to define it as “a capacity and to act independently and with others, as a socially responsible person” (Dam,

1995: 1). This kind of learning fosters assertiveness in individual students and develops the general feeling of independence in accomplishing and fulfilling tasks. Moreover, in some specific classroom situations autonomy heartens the learner against adverse external circumstances, such as, for example, peer pressure.

In a more pragmatic perspective it can be assumed that teachers' "frustration of investing endless amounts of energy in their students and getting very little response" (Scharle and Szabó, 2000: 1) can be removed substantially from their experience if they can make their students more responsible and autonomous. This implies that both students and teachers have to change their traditional attitudes to learning and teaching, respectively. Students have to realize that it is their own contribution to learning (by both individual and cooperative learning) that determines success. On the other hand, teachers must not only recognize students' individual learning needs and preferences but also accept a (possibly) new role in the teacher-learner relationship: that of a counsel or and facilitator. Thus, the first step to do so is for the teacher to consider whether her current teaching orientation is teacher-centred or learner centred. The teacher can easily judge herself if she frankly considers the following statements:

Teacher-centred	Learner-centred
I have all the information	The syllabus, the exam, and the information are here for us to share
It is my job to transmit knowledge to you	I am not the fount of all knowledge
I am responsible for your learning	You are responsible for your learning
It is my job to make sure that you work	I am here to facilitate your learning by providing resources and support
As the adult, and the professional, I have the expertise to make the right judgments and decisions about your learning	I trust that you want to learn and will take responsibility for your own learning

(Adapted from Scharle and Szabó, 2000: 6)

In the light of what has been said so far the following crucial question needs to be put forward: what can the teacher do to enhance the development of learner autonomy so that students can rely on and make use of their own learning potential? First of all, as is commonly argued, they can be involved deeper in the leaning process if, e.g., they are consulted on the selection of learning materials and/or learning tasks. However, more importantly, it is worth emphasizing (which is in no way revealing) that one of the pedagogical means that leads to better learning is training students in the use of language learning strategies. The interdependence of learning autonomy and strategy use has already been men-

tioned. There is no need to prove the legitimacy of this statement either – available literature provides abundant evidence in its support. It may suffice to provide just one sound observation: “awareness of how to learn facilitates and influences what is being learned and gives an improved insight into how to learn” (Dam, 1995: 2).

As said earlier, autonomy seems best enhanced when the learner is able to identify and choose the learning strategies that are useful for him and use them in his own learning – the study presented below was stimulated by the desire to substantiate this belief.

## **Research aim**

The major aim of the study was to confirm the assumption that training learners in strategy use can trigger language learning autonomy and is an effective way to developing it.

## **Subjects**

237 students, both female and male (no gender discrimination was made in the counts), participated in the experiment: 115 students formed the control group (Group C), while the experimental group (Group E) included the remaining 122 students. All the participants were considered post-beginners (first graders in the lower secondary school), 14 years of age.

## **Procedure and instrumentation**

The research was confined to examining the students’ autonomy in learning the Present Simple Tense used for everyday activities and the acquisition of relevant vocabulary.

The experiment itself was preceded by assessing the subjects’ competence in their use of the selected grammatical point (i.e. the Present Simple) and their mastery of appropriate vocabulary that had been taught prior to the experiment. For this, a diagnostic test was administered. The results of the test were not disclosed to the students, nor discussed with them.

Within the span of two and a half months the students in both groups continued regular learning of English in accordance with the syllabus. During this time the experimental group was involved in the experiment during which its members received substantial training in the use of language learning strate-

gies. The teaching objective was to obtain support for the belief that the most efficient way of language teaching is involving students in performing tasks and in their active participation in classroom activities, which, according to Brown (1994: 42), help students develop their autonomy and creativity. Thus, in the experimental group classroom activities included explicit teaching of selected learning strategies. On the other hand, the students had to do some heuristic self-study of texts containing appropriate and formally relevant material. The tasks were done by the students individually or co-operatively in pairs or groups and were monitored by the teacher. Once a task was completed, a class discussion followed to review the various techniques that the students employed to complete a task or solve a particular problem. All this was done to raise their grammatical consciousness and to illustrate the range of practical learning possibilities that students had at hand. The practical outcome of this was that they realized their own learning potential. They clearly took advantage of it: in the subsequent discussions they easily identified the steps they had undertaken in the assigned tasks; moreover, they were proud of having accomplished the tasks on their own, independently of the teacher.

The experiment concluded with an evaluation of its utility for developing students' skills in language learning that is based on strategy use, which, consequently, makes learning more autonomous. The initial assumption that strategy use leads to autonomy required verification. This was done on the basis of the achievement test that included the material taught in the meantime and was administered to both groups. The results were compared with those of the diagnostic test to reveal the current competence of both groups.

Apart from the tests a questionnaire (see Appendix) was given to both groups to compare the students' autonomy. It intended to find out what strategies the subjects employed in learning English (questions 1–2) and whether and how autonomous the students were (items 3–6); their answers were to be indicative of whether they correlate it with their achievement. The questionnaire was administered to students in both groups before the experiment started. It was given again at the very end of the school year (almost 5 months later) but this time only to group E to find their current level of learning autonomy and to verify the assumption that their higher scores were attributable to higher autonomy and strategy use.

## Results

### Part I. Grammar and vocabulary

A. The diagnostic test consisted of two parts; the first one checked the students' command of the Simple Present in constructing clauses (affirmative,



negative, and interrogative), the second test checked their knowledge of vocabulary that was introduced in the first semester.

For the grammar test the maximum possible score was 25 points (= 100%); in group C the average score was only 9.7 points (38,8%) and in group E 10.3 points (41,2%). These results show that both were of the same initial level. Individually, the students differed more substantially, their scores ranging from 6 to 18 points in both groups.

For the vocabulary test, the maximum score was again 25 points. The results were higher (16,9 points = 67,6% and 15,7 points = 62,8% in groups C and E, respectively) but, again, proved that both groups were very similar.

### B. The achievement test

The grammar part, which involved the Present Tense in the three aspects covered during the semester preceding the test showed a striking difference across the groups. For the maximum score of 50 points the average in group C was less than a half, i.e. 22,1 (44,2%) and in group E the average obtained was 39,7 (79,4%). Calculated in percentage points the gain in group E was 38,2% against 5,4% in group C resulting in 32.8% advantage of the experimental group over the control group..

In the lexical test the maximum score was 25 points. The differences between the results obtained by both groups were as visible as in the grammar test. In group C the average score achieved was 15,1 (50,4%) and in group E 21,4 (85,6%). Thus, for vocabulary learning in group C we witness a decrease by 7,2%, while in group E the actual gain was of 22,8%.

## **Part II. Autonomy and strategy use**

The figures in the Table below show the numbers of students who marked suitable answers to the questions provided in the questionnaire (see Appendix). Columns C and E indicate that students in the respective groups were equally little autonomous initially. However, a comparison of the results in columns E and E' reveals that group E developed a more independent and active approach to language learning during the experiment: this is evident in column E', particularly in their answers to questions 1c (more students solved their problems individually) and in 1d and 2 (fewer students stayed passive and many attempted to test novel things). Answers to the remaining points in the questionnaire display a significant increase of their awareness concerning the utility of particular learning strategies.

**Table.** Initial (C and E) and final (E') results

Question no.	C	E	E'
1a	45	50	57
1b	23	23	18
1c	9	10	26
1d	39	39	12
2	3	5	21
3	31	38	65
4	13	10	82
5	10	10	78
6	10	11	81

## Limitations

It is assumed that motivation and autonomy develop together and affect each other. Thus the experiment should have both begun and ended with investigating the students' level of motivation to check whether it increased in the course of the experiment. In consequence, it can only be hypothesized that the significant gains obtained by students in the experimental group are attributed to the training in using language learning strategies that they received.

Concerning language learning strategies the study did not include investigating individual differences and situational factors that certainly influence learners' choices of strategies – this issue has been researched extensively in the past; for example, O'Malley and Chamot (1990); Oxford (1990); early studies on strategies are discussed in Skehan (1991), and more recently, Dörnyei (2005). The small scope of the present study attempted to look into the putative influence of strategies on autonomy development (for the value of training learners in strategy use see Dörnyei (2005: 173–178).

## Final remarks

Some students develop learning autonomy on their own but most do not. However, if it is taken that the latter can develop it when they are adequately aided by their teachers, then their task should be to train them to learn how to learn; one of the ways to develop autonomy is training students in strategy use.

Due to a number of reasons, of which some are discussed in the paper, it seems natural that teachers should promote autonomy development through encouraging all students to make learning decisions by themselves. This suggestion

is based on the fact that in classroom language learning some students often do display initiative and prove that they supervise their learning. This fact should definitely and necessarily be taken advantage of. On the other hand, research in foreign language acquisition has also documented that those learners who are confident about their actions and are self-reliant surpass those who are not; according to Brown (2000: 352), “self-assured and self-reliant learners are most successful”. Thus, it is reasonable to believe that learning autonomy is a feature much desired in language learning/teaching. The rationale for autonomy development is that it reduces the learners’ dependence on the teacher and at the same time strengthens their motivation for learning. Furthermore, it fosters their feelings of competence and self-efficacy, which, undoubtedly, are constituents of motivation. Moreover, it helps learners realize they have a number of appropriate means (i.e., strategies) to use to accomplish particular tasks.

Investigating autonomy should involve not only students but also teachers – the learning success depends very much on what teachers actually do to promote (not kill) autonomy. One of the advantages of learner-centred teaching is that it enables learners to become autonomous: they follow their own learning styles and preferred ways of obtaining knowledge, which is characteristic of self-directed learning. This, certainly, does not imply that learner autonomy excludes the teacher from the learning process – on the contrary, his involvement is necessary, as is emphasized in numerous works (cf., e.g., Richards and Lockhart, 1994; Nunan and Lamb, 1996; Harmer, 2001). The teacher-learner interaction is beneficial for the learner in that he obtains suggestions on how he can maintain learning in out-of-class situations (Gross, 1992).

It is also worth remembering and emphasizing that autonomy is culture-bound. This is beyond teachers’ control but their guidance is both possible and necessary – in the traditional systems of education learners are unable to assume responsibility for learning (cf. Boud, 1988; Voller, 1997; Aoki, 1999). It follows that teachers need to help learners by providing adequate tools and create opportunities to use them. Experienced teachers know that their basic function in the classroom is to act as providers of language learning materials and creating conditions for learning; on the other hand, the students’ task is to take responsibility for their own motivation and accomplishment.

It is hoped that the results of the research not only corroborate its initial assumption but, first of all, provide an additional argument for implementing it in the classroom. Therefore, this paper is addressed particularly to the teachers who are skeptical about the value of autonomous language learning and of strategy training. Actually, the research was undertaken not so much to examine whether there exists a relationship between autonomy development and strategy use, but to substantiate the belief that progress in language learning is best ensured, if not guaranteed, through strategy training.

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## Appendix

1. When you have a learning problem (do not understand, are not sure, etc.) you:
  - a) ask a friend
  - b) ask the teacher
  - c) try to solve it yourself (consult the course-book, a grammar book, a dictionary, etc.)
  - d) do nothing (wait until later)?
2. Do you attempt to use new structures, words, etc. in a different context?
3. Do you usually know what aspect of language is being taught during the lesson?
4. Are you aware that you actually use various ways of learning new things?
5. If you are, do you choose these ways consciously?
6. If you do, do you know why you do it? (provide a comment/explanation, if you can).

Comply with the basic psychological principle of effective learning – it is commonly accepted that learning is more effective when effort is invested in processing new information.

### Success breeds success

Thus, in the pedagogical perspective learning strategies should be more important to teach than adhering to particular teaching methods.