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МОДЕЛИРОВАНИЕ ПРОЦЕССА АВТОНОМНОГО ОВЛАДЕНИЯ АНГЛИЙСКИМ ЯЗЫКОМ В СИСТЕМЕ «УЧИТЕЛЬ – УЧЕНИК»

MODELING THE PROCESS OF AUTONOMOUS EFL ACQUISITION IN THE TEACHING-LEARNING FIELD

Предлагаются к обсуждению стратегии, тактики и инструменты автономизации процесса профессионально-языковой подготовки будущих учителей английского языка в аудиторное и внеаудиторное время. Дается теоретическое обоснование и описание моделируемой автором программы-алгоритма, которую можно использовать в качестве методического руководства по развитию навыков и умений учебной автономии учащихся и студентов по овладению иностранным языком на основе смешанной модели. Данная программа позволяет переосмыслить наполнение методологического компонента содержания иноязычного образования на 4 уровнях: целеполагания, отбора содержания и способов обучения, оценочной рефлексии.

К л ю ч е в ы е   с л о в а: *учебная автономия*; *автономное учение*; *смешанное обучение*; *овладение иностранным языком*; *обучение английскому языку*.

The article discusses teaching/learning strategies, tactics and tools to be implemented for fostering English major undergraduate students' learner autonomy in and out-of-college environment. It provides theoretical justification and description of the EFL learner training program that can be used as a methodological guideline to facilitate learner autonomy in compliance with the concepts and prerequisites of a blended teaching-learning model, thus giving new methodological insight into the main structural components of the EFL teaching-learning process, such as goal-setting, content and learning/teaching methods selection, and reflective evaluation.

K e y   w o r d s: *learner autonomy*; *autonomous learning*; *blended learning*; *foreign language acquisition*; *TEFL (teaching English as a foreign language)*.

Introduction

Nowadays, learner autonomy-related problems have gained a special focus mainly due to the demands of equipping people with 21st century skills, including learning skills, such as critical thinking, creativity, collaboration and communication [1]. These four skills can be crucial for different careers, especially those ones that are spread in the teaching-learning field.

In TEFL context, the 21st century learning skills manifest themselves vividly in the self-directed mode of learning, which is deprived of meaningless activities or practices (swotting, drilling, or mere reproduction), offering conscious and reasonable pathways of the language acquisition. Therefore, what is well-welcomed in the EFL teaching-learning framework is the shift towards reflexive-creative type of language education culminating in the enforcement of the four above-mentioned intangibles. Additionally, the impact of technological breakthroughs on the education development empowers teachers to apply different technological tools and education technology services that can also be used in promoting students' independence.

Unfortunately, learner autonomy development is not under the common practice yet, neither in the secondary, nor in the tertiary education. In particular, the educational process in higher institutions that offer teaching degrees calls for a better management to help undergraduate students achieve both learner and teacher autonomy. In order to advance this idea, a university EFL teacher should implement appropriate autonomous practices that challenge undergraduate students to plan, implement, monitor and assess their activities in mastering English so as to further apply the learnt skills to planning, delivering and evaluating EFL lessons at school. Consequently, to foster an integrated perspective in the teaching-learning field, it is highly demanded that learner and teacher autonomy be developed hand-in-hand in pedagogical institutions.

The suggested article aims to solve the following two objectives: 1) to analyze the concept of learner autonomy and specify it with reference to TEFL context; 2) to develop, substantiate and describe an autonomous learning mode enabling EFL teacher candidates to acquire English alongside with English teaching methodology.

Among the main research methods used for solving learner autonomy cultivation issues are as follows: educational literature review, observation and modelling.

Results and Discussion

Henri Holec (1981) was the first scholar to propose the theory of autonomous learning, and his definition of autonomous learning as "the ability to take charge of one's own learning" is widely recognized and cited [2, p. 1]. Another researcher, David Little, gave clarification on how learner autonomy reveals itself in formal educational

contexts: notably through "reflective involvement in planning, implementing, monitoring and evaluating learning" [3, p. 3]. As for formal language learning, David Little makes it obvious that "the scope of learner autonomy is always constrained by what the learner can do in the target language." [ibid] He insists on exercising the following basic pedagogical principles to specify the concept of language learning autonomy: 1) *learner involvement* – all students are to share responsibility for learning ("metacognitive and socio-affective dimensions"); 2) *learner reflection* – all students are expected to think critically when planning, monitoring and evaluating their learning ("metacognitive dimension"); 3) *appropriate target language use* – both students and the teacher are obliged to use the target language for learning ("communicative and metacognitive dimensions") [3, p. 3]. If these two scholars bring to the fore self-sufficiency in organizing all stages of self-directed learning, Malcolm S. Knowles highlights the necessity of letting students be active when passing them [4].

Based on literature review that disclosed a lack of precision in defining learner autonomy, we decided on the following three dimensions to partially describe it: 1) *psychological* (the considered phenomenon is defined by Little as a "capacity – for detachment, critical reflection, decision-making, and independent action") [Quoted after: 5, p. 13]; 2) *social* (according to Benson, learner autonomy implies focusing "on the learning content", in particular "what and why of language learning", as well as readiness "to negotiate learning content, goals, purposes and resources with others") [ibid]; 3) *technical* / *methodological* (referring primarily to learning management, with the acknowledgment of when, where, and how to learn) [ibid]. In TEFL context, we also need to recognize the linkage between learner autonomy and effective language learning and teaching methodology.

It follows that the concept of learner autonomy can be mainly seen as an acquired ability for a sober-minded, self-regulated and self-reflective learning provided by a full play of cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective skills. This definition is far from being comprehensive, but it gives insight into the core nature of the defined notion.

David Nunan (1997) offers a learner to follow a sequence of five steps to move up to a higher level of autonomy: 1) awareness; 2) involvement; 3) intervention; 4) creation; 5) transcendence [6]. Let us comment on them with regard to teaching fourth-year undergraduate students majoring in English for professional communication.

Awareness in relation to content implies that learners are made aware of *what* and *why* they are taught. For example, undergraduate students may face the topic *Brain and its potential*, which opens scientific (physiological and psychological) and pseudo-scientific perspectives for studying, analyzing and interpreting brain-related issues. Knowing these issues ahead of time, especially with the focus

on the interplay between nature and nurture, can be enlightening for educating pupils in the future [7, p. 6–79]. Learners should also be able to identify the teacher's strategies and their own learning strategies and styles (visual, auditory, read & write, and kinaesthetic). The EFL teacher allocates tasks and offers activities and forms of work in accordance with the learning style preferable by each student. Ideally, you may form a group of four to complete the task that consists of four sub-tasks in four different ways, thereby giving the space open for working in synergy. This approach is optimally applicable for project work [7, p. 150] or dramatic production [7, p. 27]. *Involvement* suggests that learners are exposed to a range of alternatives to choose from when making choices about each aspect of learning. For instance, one and the same task like *Explore the true potential of the human brain* may be accomplished in alternative ways: 6 students may work on it using DeBono's Six Thinking Hats method [7, p. 12], whereas others may make a mind map to present their findings in a summative manner, either with the use of online mind map software or with the use of paper materials (a broadsheet / promotional flyer / flip chart, etc.) [7, p. 13]. *Intervention* means that learners are deeply immersed in the process of adapting the goals and content of the curriculum; but more important, they can drastically modify the tasks. Learners can be given a list of video podcasts devoted to different aspects of the topic in order to choose the favourite one for deep exploration (for example: *How neuroscientists study the brain*; *Left and right brain's inner workings*; *Mysteries about the human brain*, etc.). *Creation* refers to the situations where undergraduates frame their own goals, objectives and tasks: *"Supposing you are a High School English Teacher. Devise memorable and interesting follow-up activities for your students"* [7, p. 21]. Finally, *transcendence* implies that learners move beyond the classroom activities used to complement curriculum, rising above them: they make connections between the learning content and the real world [6]. It can be manifested either in the final stage of the lesson called *Personalization in Writing* (where undergraduates ponder one of the questions on the learnt content, thus making life decisions verbally) or in the out-of-class group work on a project [7].

Susan Sheerin (1997) also designed a model representing a hierarchy of activities involved in independent learning. According to Sheerin, learners pass the six stages on their way to independence: 1) revealing language learning needs; 2) setting targets through weighing up personal strengths and weaknesses; 3) planning a program of work to achieve the goals set; 4) opting for exercises, materials and activities; 5) working without supervision; 6) evaluating individual progress [8, p. 54–65]. Any lesson may be structured, at least partially, around the above-mentioned sequence that visualizes the progression of practices across different lesson phases.

In an attempt to simulate the process of EFL learner autonomy development, we are inclined to use Nunan's and Sheerin's models as theoretical prototypes.

In an English class, regarded as one learning session, autonomous learners are expected to diagnose their learning needs and cognitive interests, determine conscious goals, make targeted selection of learning materials and resources, choose and apply individual learning strategies, critically observe their peers' learning strategies and styles in interaction with them, reasonably evaluate self-learning process and its results through auto- and group communication. So practising autonomy necessarily includes sharing knowledge / skills and making collaborative decisions in goal-setting, content-reflection, decision-making, problem-solving and self-evaluation.

The EFL teacher's role is thought to be limited to creating and maintaining a system for professional communication around headlining topics that can waken relevant to life educational concerns. There are two very important points in this context – selecting the content and building a learning community. To be more precise, the EFL teacher training and development ought to stem from social and pedagogical issues defined as troublesome and asking for alternative solutions. It is a good idea to have teacher candidates exposed to such critical topics as *Trouble / Gender in the Classroom*, *Juvenile Crime*, *Parenting and Child Safety Issues in the Modern World*, etc.

At the initial stage, it is significant to set the direction of class communication: undergraduate students should respond to a well-rounded set of questions individually (in writing), then collaboratively (orally). Topics should be formulated in compliance with an eclectic / interdisciplinary approach to develop teacher candidates' language proficiency alongside with the development of interpersonal skills and methodological competencies. For example, with reference to the topic *Is Criminality Inborn or Acquired?* you may address this series of questions: *Do you believe that children are **naturally offensive**? Will you give some examples of **problem behaviours** (dangerous, abusive, or even violent) typical of children who are **at risk of offending**? Who is more likely to cause trouble: boys or girls? Why? Could the **criminality** of parents be transmitted to their children? Is there abundant evidence **to support this premise**? Will you name **risk factors for offending** at a young age? Are they mainly biological or social? What may serve as **precursors to** some children's later **involvement in delinquency**? Is **truancy** among them?* etc. The most valuable words and lexical chunks to be trained at a lesson are to be highlighted in bold.

Based on the findings, we designed a guideline to foster learner autonomy of undergraduate students majoring in English through the use of meta-cognitive, cognitive and socio-affective strategies in one learning session. In designing the program, we applied an eclectic approach. The dimensions and structure of the program are predetermined by psychological, social and technical perspectives on learner autonomy described previously in this article (Table).

Dimensions and structure of EFL Learner / Teacher Training Program for Fostering Autonomy

I. MOTIVATIONAL-TARGET COMPONENT	
The self-directed learner's practices	*Teacher's strategies and tools*
a) identifying personal needs	through inviting undergraduates to observe their meta-experience, hopes and aspirations
b) setting and modifying learning goals if they are not achievable	through regular undergraduates' exposure to a set of lesson questions; through nurturing goal-setting
c) defining personal intentions	through giving space for personal interpretation of the lesson goals; through introducing to a broader life context
d) verbalizing one's own communicative needs	through immersing undergraduate students verbally into the lesson communicative scenario
e) planning a route to achieve learning goals and intentions set	through explaining the planning process
II. COGNITIVE-STRATEGIC COMPONENT	
The self-directed learner's practices	*Teacher's strategies and tools*
a) defining the contents to be learnt	through engaging undergraduate students in the learning environment; setting information-gap tasks; giving access to content resources (paper and digital), and providing links to various sites
b) reflecting on the learnt content	through monitoring assignments and encouraging undergraduate students to concentrate on areas where they can improve
c) making links between the known and unknown	through graphical organizers; fostering sharing knowledge in groups
d) enriching and transforming the learnt content	through creating a system for personally important authentic communication, public or private, digital or paper
e) generating ideas and making final decisions	through maximizing opportunities for meaningful participation in discussions; setting up a wide range of interactions
III. PROCEDURAL-TACTICAL COMPONENT	
The self-directed learner's practices	*Teacher's strategies and tools*
a) selecting methods and techniques to be used for mastering language aspects in speech activities	through monitoring students' preferences in selecting learning pathways; providing links to various test sites

Ending of table

b) diagnosing and consciously exploiting preferred learning style and learning strategies	through accommodating to the student's learning style and strategy
c) incorporating different strategies into individual way of learning through cooperation	through welcoming students to negotiate learning strategies with peers in groups
d) developing better learning strategies (plans)	through welcoming learners to reflective journaling in order to let them critically analyze strengths and weaknesses of the chosen learning pathways
IV. EVALUATION-DIAGNOSTIC COMPONENT	
The self-directed learner's practices	*Teacher's strategies and tools*
a) evaluating the quality and usefulness of the knowledge/skills acquired (if they correlate with the goals set and contribute to personal development)	through delivering assignments designed for self-check and self-assessment; offering worksheets to compare expectations and outcomes
b) monitoring the efficiency of preferred learning styles and tactics in individual work	through observing the learner's constraints in following the learning pathway, offering new pathways by accompanying a partner
c) monitoring the efficiency of preferred learning styles and tactics through working collaboratively	through inviting internal and external partners (in real and virtual classes) with different levels of language proficiency for collaboration
d) putting personal judgement on one's own learning outcomes	through handing out questionnaires to assess learners' self-satisfaction; by fostering self-advocacy skills
e) reconceptualizing the acquired skills; reconsidering learning techniques to improve learning; initiating conferences with the teacher	through facilitating undergraduate students' self-reflexion; giving advice on how to plan subsequent learning; through remote sessions
f) carrying out voluntary communicative tasks in spare time to test and evaluate personal language ability	through initiating undergraduate students to do tasks on various learning platforms, using digital tools that help in self-checking, self-correction, and self-assessment

As seen from the above table, the guideline conceptually represents **the policy framework for the autonomous EFL learning mode**, on the one hand (the first column), and **the policy framework for the autonomous EFL teaching mode**, on the other hand (the second column). The former encompasses the self-directed learner's sequential activities, or practices initiated by the teacher, while the latter embraces a set of teacher's strategies and tools used to promote learner autonomy, both policy frameworks revealing interrelationships between their components.

The structure of the guideline is formed by the four pillars, each of them pointing out the direction for fostering learner autonomy: 1) ***motivational-target*** (implies goal-setting and making plans); 2) ***cognitive-strategic*** (determines the choice of the content, the way and time of mastering it); 3) ***procedural-tactical*** (indicates the choice and modification of learning styles); 4) ***evaluation-diagnostic*** (refers to the evaluation of the current state of self-learning ability and self-learning program revision). These pillars are in correlation with the four meta-cognitive strategies associated with the four methodological concepts: setting goals (aim), selecting materials (content), planning learning activities (methods), and assessing self-progress (evaluation).

Therefore, the guideline provides the development of the four major groups of **EFL learner autonomous skills** through speech activities in one learning session by employing autonomous learning strategies, tactics and tools. Teachers' role ascribed by the guideline is to manage a class by instructing how to go through this methodological cycle with respect to individual learning styles and pathways.

Conclusion

In clear, easy-to-follow language, learner autonomy is mainly associated with independence, self-direction and self-reflexion in learning. The concept of learner autonomy in a TEFL context reveals additional components, such as language and communication awareness, language and speech skills, reflective language acquisition. The autonomous learning mode is adaptive, selective, competitive, and cooperative, allowing learners to develop according to their aptitudes and expectations.

With the acknowledgement of the fact that autonomy is a multidimensional concept mainly represented through psychological, social and technical perspectives, we may suggest the following general strategies for organizing, monitoring and assessing learner autonomy practices in TEFL context.

To become independent in studies, EFL undergraduates should start with identifying their learning needs, and seeking out motivational vibes. The teacher's role at this stage is to outline cognitive and communicative space of the lesson, mainly by *Starter Activity Ice-breakers* logically embracing various thematical issues. The mechanisms of selecting the learning content ought to be unblocked by relevant to life personal intentions, not only by the necessity to follow a highly prescriptive curriculum content. Through fulfilling tasks, including professional teaching-related assignments, and recognizing pitfalls in selected learning pathways, students develop the ability to critically perceive and self-judge their learning with the aim to relearn, if necessary. Working alone alternated with working in cooperation is a perfect way to reveal personal strengths with the purpose to move up to a higher level of learner autonomy. So the development of undergraduate students' autonomy in the

EFL classroom is carried out through helping them to recognize current learning needs and set achievable learning goals; to properly and reflectively select learning materials and self-manage the learning process by setting an individual plan, by identifying, applying and modifying learning pathways, by self-monitoring learning procedures and techniques to independently keep track of one's own progress.

What is really urgent is to increase the flexibility of the syllabus so that teachers have more autonomy in choosing motivational learning materials for class work to reinvigorate students' imagination and speech productivity. We are also keenly aware of the need to teach English-related subjects in such a way as to let teacher candidates acquire both learning and teaching strategies, explicitly and implicitly respectively. Second, an EFL classroom should change for an authentic place conducive to independent learning at different levels of autonomy through independent work and cooperation opportunities (negotiation, discussion, and conferencing). University administrators, for their part, are to hold symposiums, seminars, training sessions on the learner autonomy issues. Third, independent study time is to be increased at the expense of classroom teaching time. Finally, self-evaluation and mutual-evaluation methods should be improved based on the language learner autonomy evaluation standards, which still call for thorough development.

As for the EFL teacher, he/she is expected to engage learners in making decisions about why, what and how to learn and how to assess the learning outcomes, to give support and constructive feedback for every learner in a timely manner. To meet these requirements, EFL teachers should employ a blended learning/teaching mode, which may be exploited through different paper and digital resources. Besides the classroom, suitable places to implement EFL learners' autonomy practices can be libraries, self-access centres and home. Online learning platforms, e-books and websites are especially recommended as self-directed learning tools, for they noticeably transform the way teachers deliver curriculum and optimize learning time, offering an individual timeframe and other opportunities for completing and checking each task.

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