

Issues of promoting learner autonomy in EFL context

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Abstract. The paper is focused on investigating the phenomenon of learner autonomy, which has mostly been explored in Europe and the USA and is now attracting attention of researchers and academics in many other countries including Russia. Learner autonomy through a focus on learner reflection and taking responsibility for one's own learning processes has become a central concern in the recent history of language teaching. However, many language teachers, who are committed to concepts of learner-centredness and autonomy, struggle with the ways to foster learner autonomy or at least to encourage the idea of learner autonomy in language classroom. The study aims at investigating what the most important issues which have a great impact on developing learner autonomy are. Having given special attention to conditions which can insure development of learner autonomy, a model covering seven issues relating to the subject matter has been designed. The authors state that such aspects as choice, goals and needs, support, emotional climate, learning strategies, learner attitude and motivation, and self-esteem should be considered as the goal to promote learner autonomy in EFL context.

Introduction

Recent changes in the field of science, industry, education and information technologies as well as greater integration of Russian institutions of higher education into the world system of education provoked significant changes in requirements to qualification of a modern engineer. Nowadays, the desired attributes of engineering graduates include not only professional knowledge, but also high-level communication skills which allow them to be competitive on the global labour market and function successfully in their professional life. The importance of learning foreign languages and ability to apply them in technical communication has increased dramatically in the last decade. [1]

The intensive globalization of the engineering society has led to significant changes in Russian educational standards. Adopting a two-tier system of higher education in the Russian Federation has laid special stress in all areas of educational activity. Institutions of higher education are trying to solve the problem of engineer training in two ways: the first way is connected with the optimization and intensification of teaching academic subjects; the second way is connected with developing flexible teaching systems aimed at promoting learner autonomy which plays the key role in terms of life-long education.

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recent history of language teaching. However, many language teachers, who are committed to concepts of learner-centredness and autonomy, struggle with the ways to foster learner autonomy or at least to encourage the idea of learner autonomy in language classroom. Nowadays the common phenomenon among learners is a passive role they assume in the process of learning – they rely heavily on teachers and are reluctant to develop a sense of responsibility for the outcome of their learning. This is relevant to other subjects as well as to foreign languages.

Definition of learner autonomy

Learner autonomy has caught the attention of many scholars and practitioners in the past few decades. A great deal has been said and written about learner autonomy by foreign and Russian researchers. Various definitions are used in the literature to refer to learner autonomy with nuances based on versions of it such as *learner autonomy*, *learner independence*, *self-direction*, *awareness*, *andragogy*, *autonomous learning* and *independent learning*.

The term "learner autonomy" was first introduced in 1981 by Henri Holec, the "father" of learner autonomy. Many definitions have since been given to the term, depending on the writer, the context, and the level of debate educators have come to. According to Holec, "learner autonomy is an ability to take charge of one's own learning". [2] This means that students take

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responsibility for learning process in terms of determining the objectives, choosing the content material to study, selecting strategies and methods of study, monitoring and evaluating their learning [3].

Another expert, David Little, defines autonomy as "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" [4]. In this respect autonomous learners use meta-cognitive skills which relate to capacity for critical reflection, decision-making, independent action and transferring what they have learnt to other context of learning.

To give a broader description, B. Sinclair comes up with thirteen aspects of learner autonomy which "appear to have been recognised and broadly accepted by the language teaching profession" [5]. These aspects are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Thirteen aspects of learner autonomy

1	Autonomy is a construct of capacity.
2	Autonomy involves a willingness on the part of the learner to take responsibility for their own learning
3	The capacity and willingness of learners to take such responsibility is not necessary innate.
4	Complete autonomy is an idealistic goal.
5	There are degrees of autonomy.
6	The degrees of autonomy are unstable and variable.
7	Autonomy is not simply a matter of placing learners in situations where they have to be dependent.
8	Developing autonomy requires conscious awareness of the learning process – i.e. reflection and decision-making.
9	Promoting autonomy is not a matter of teaching strategies.
10	Autonomy can take place both inside and outside the classroom.
11	Autonomy has a social as well as individual dimension.
12	The promotion of autonomy has a political as well as psychological dimension.
13	Autonomy is interpreted differently by different cultures.

In fact, such understandings are generally accepted by academics and researchers working in the field of learner autonomy. There is broad agreement that autonomous learners are indeed effective learners. Summarizing all the ideas it is possible to conclude that autonomous learners are responsible, flexible, and curious; they see the need to learn, hold positive attitude towards learning, set their own objectives, plan their own learning, explore available learning opportunities and resources, use a variety of strategies, interact effectively with others, monitor their progress, reflect on and evaluate their learning, rationalize their actions, are aware of alternative learning strategies, are aware of their cognitive abilities and learning style, transfer what they have learned to wider contexts and, finally, appreciate that their own efforts are crucial to progress in learning and behave accordingly. [6]

Conditions for learner autonomy

This paper is not aimed at answering the question whether learner autonomy works or not. We should not

confuse "autonomy", which works by definition, with attempts at "autonomisation", which can take many different forms and may or may not succeed [7]. In addition, it should be mentioned that autonomy is not "an article of faith, a product ready made for use or merely a personal quality or trait" [8]. Most researchers in the field of learner autonomy claim that learner autonomy cannot be learned or taught but it can be developed through conscious awareness of the learning process.

There is a great amount of literature on how to foster learner autonomy. Moreover, each scholar approaches the issue from a slightly different angle. While the theories differ from one another in their perspective and offset, they also have a lot in common and even have features that overlap greatly. That is why, for this present study, the important issues in each theory are gathered as a compilation, the aim of which is to provide a comprehensive idea of what needs to be taken into account when promoting learner autonomy in foreign language teaching [9].

Having scrutinised different theories and approaches to learner autonomy (by H. Holec, D. Little, D. Nunan, D. Thanasoulas, H. Reinders, B. Sinclair, M. Usuki, A. Ikonen, etc.), the most important issues have been identified. They are as follows:

1. *Choice*. Although theories on the promotion of learner autonomy focus on different aspects, the matter of choice is a fundamental feature they all share. Since learner autonomy is supposed to be the ability to take charge of one's own learning it means that the learner makes independent choices about their own learning. Consequently, learner autonomy cannot exist without the possibility to make choices about learning. Choices can be made on multiple levels ranging from what activity to do first to taking part in course design. [9, 10, 11]

2. *Goals and needs*. Since learning is goal-oriented behaviour, autonomous learning means that learners have to set their own goals according to their own needs. One important aspect in promoting learner autonomy is to negotiate with students the processes that underlie learning, such as problem identification, so that they become aware of their own needs and can set their own goals. [9, 11]

3. *Support*. It combines two aspects. Firstly, when promoting learner autonomy, the teacher and the course structure must provide guidance and support to learners when their abilities are still developing. Secondly, support refers to the multiple resources and contexts the learner can make use of when necessary. Thus, support refers to something that is offered to students in their learning and development of learner autonomy, and something they are guided to make use of independently [9].

4. *Emotional climate*. Since adopting a pedagogy for autonomy requires a major shift from teaching into learning, both teachers and learners have to turn on new roles and responsibilities. The teacher is in charge of creating an atmosphere in which students feel willing and secure enough to accept that change. This can be done by expressing trust and appreciation in the students' abilities and viewpoints. This may help them

gain a feeling of ownership and responsibility of their own learning. On the other hand, the teacher should also be ready to accept the shift and be willing to share responsibility. As a result, everything should be based on mutual trust and appreciation. [6, 9]

5. *Learning strategies.* Learners need to become aware of the ways they learn best, which involves their learning styles and strategies. When learners are equipped with this knowledge, they will be able to understand their own thinking and learning process and accordingly, they are more likely to oversee the choice and application of learning strategies, plan how to proceed with a learning task, monitor their own performance on an ongoing basis, find solutions to problems encountered, and evaluate themselves upon task completion. It is important that teachers strive to develop students' own metacognition and teach them how to use strategies that they find effective for the kinds of tasks they need to accomplish in the process of language learning. Metacognitive learners who take conscious steps to understand what they are doing when they learn tend to be the most successful learners. [14, 15]

6. *Learner attitude and motivation.* Language learning is more than a cognitive task. Learners do not only reflect on their learning in terms of the language input or the optimal strategies they need in order to achieve the goals they set. The success of a learning activity largely depends on learner attitude and motivation. The term motivation in a second language learning context is seen as "referring to the extent to

which the individual works or strives to learn the language because of a desire to do so and the satisfaction experienced in this activity [16]". The more the learner sees him or herself as doing well, the more he or she wants to do even better. To learn a second language one needs to put in a great amount of effort, time and energy, and motivation and a positive attitude are equally important to this process. [17]

7. *Self-esteem.* The concept of self-esteem is closely related to attitudes and motivation. It is the evaluation the learner makes of his or her own worth with respect to the target language or learning in general. Self-esteem serves as an influential predictor of certain outcomes, for example, as academic achievement. A learner with high self-esteem is unlikely to be influenced by any negative assessments given by the teacher. Conversely, a lack of self-esteem can make the learner question his or her capability as a learner or even make them believe to be incapable of learning. [8]

Having identified the most important issues which have a great impact on developing learner autonomy the following model has been designed. It can be presented in the following way (see Fig.1 below).

The proposed model covers seven issues which relate to the development of learner autonomy. They are interrelated and affect the degree of learner autonomy in language learning ranging from less successful to more successful. All seven aspects should be considered as the goal to promote learner autonomy for successful language learning.

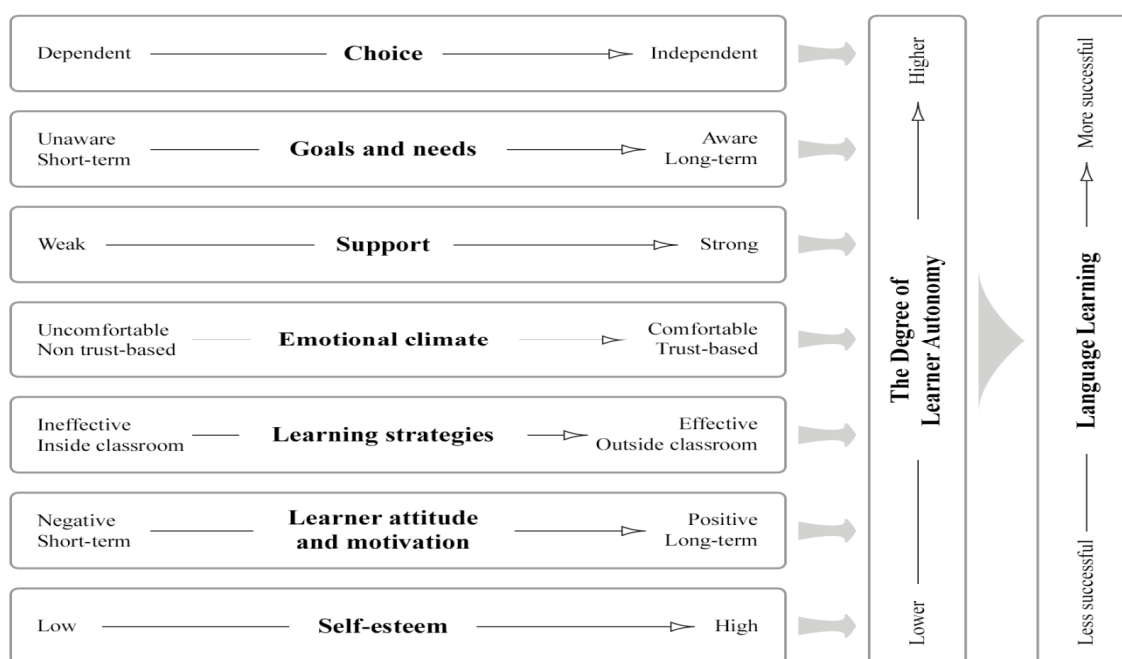


Fig. 1. A model for developing learner autonomy in ELT context

Results and discussion

Today, university autonomy and academic freedom are emphasized in many national education documents and initiatives, such as National Doctrine of Education in the Russian Federation 2000-2025, Federal Law on

Autonomous Institutions of 2006, Federal Law on Education in the Russian Federation of 2012, and even in the third generation State Educational Standards [18]. Modern educational documents state that one of the primary goals of the higher education reform is to introduce a new method of teaching focusing on the students' needs, interests and demands and considering their diversities. In order to achieve these goals teachers may have to contribute significantly to creating the appropriate conditions necessary for the development of learner autonomy.

Developing learner autonomy is a lengthy process and the successful implementation of the model described above therefore depends, to a large extent, on the persistence of the teacher. It is not realistic to expect students to take responsibility for their learning from one day, or even month. Autonomy develops gradually and seems to be not only about the development of a set of skills, but is rather about developing a certain "mind set" [19] that sees learning as an active process of discovery.

Although implementing the model suggested above will not guarantee students develop autonomy, the activities do involve a shift of focus from the teacher onto the learners. Knowing that they are valued as individuals and are supported in their learning will mean that students are more likely to develop this mind set, and knowing this, teachers are more likely to consider the importance of student ownership of the learning process.

Conclusion

Learner autonomy is relatively a new concept in EFL context and is still being investigated and debated by researchers all over the world. The paradigm is shifting from the mainstream methods of teachers lecturing students to the novel idea of assisting students to teach themselves in today's world of language learning. "Students are now being transformed into autonomous learners assuming more responsibility for their own learning as teachers are becoming facilitators, advising more and lecturing less" [6]

The model suggested for promoting learner autonomy is far from comprehensive, as we have only had a brief look at the subject matter. As can be seen, the boundaries between the issues considered are rather blurred. This vagueness of the issues relating to the promotion of learner autonomy is caused by the vagueness and multidimensionality of the concept of learner autonomy itself. Furthermore, due to the fact that empirical studies on the promotion of learner autonomy are still lacking, it is possible that this compilation is still inadequate.

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