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Teachers for the Knowledge Society

# Developing Learner Autonomy in Higher Education in Macedonia

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## Abstract

Learner autonomy is a new trend in education which emphasizes students' engagement in their own learning. Macedonia is a country in transition and many changes are needed to improve Higher education. One of main challenges that language teachers face is helping learners move toward becoming responsible for their own learning. This paper examines the techniques that can promote learner autonomy in a Higher Institution in Macedonia, South East European University in Tetovo. The study will reveal the learners' responsibility for their learning, and it shows that the use of different techniques can promote learner autonomy in Higher education in Macedonia.

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*Keywords:* learner autonomy; student engagement; learning strategies; teaching techniques; higher education

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## 1. Introduction

Learner autonomy is frequently debated among English language teachers and scholars around the world. Since 1970 many studies have been done on how teachers can promote learner autonomy and increase learner independence. Holec (1981), who is considered a father of autonomous learning, defines it as “the ability to take charge of one's learning”. Similarly, Little (1991, p.4) is of the opinion that autonomous learners are cast in a new perspective, have a capacity for detachment, critical reflection, and decision-making, take independent actions and are expected to assume greater responsibility for and take charge of their own learning. While, Thanasoulas (2000) suggests that autonomous learners have insights into their learning styles and strategies; take an active approach to learning the task at hand; are willing to take risks, i.e., to communicate in the target language at all costs; are good guessers; attend to form as well as to content, that is, place importance on accuracy as well as appropriateness; develop the target language into a separate reference system and are willing to revise and reject hypotheses and rules that do not apply; and have a tolerant and outgoing approach to the target language. According to Harmer (2007, p.396) “What may feel appropriate from the teacher's point of view may not seem so appropriate for students. What is appropriate for one student may not be appropriate for all”. He further states that it is possible that some learners will be keen to take the responsibility for what they do. When teachers train the learners to be autonomous, they need to offer them choices in learning strategies. Finally, Scharle and Szabo (2000) suggest that it is very important to find out students' level of knowledge and attitudes, their level of motivation, the learning strategies the students use and to get students to think about their own learning style. They believe that becoming an autonomous learner is a process which is divided in three stages: Raising student awareness, changing attitudes, and transferring roles. While Dornyei (2001, p. 131) believes that learner autonomy can be fostered using these types of practices: resource-based approaches, which emphasize independent interaction with learning materials, technology-based approaches, which emphasize independent interaction with educational technologies, learner-based approaches,

which emphasize the direct production of behavioral and psychological changes in the learner, classroom-based approaches, which emphasize changes in the relationship between learners and teachers in the classroom and curriculum-based approaches, which extend the idea of learner control over the planning and evaluation of learning to the curriculum as a whole.

The different definitions of learner autonomy shed light on the complexity of achieving autonomy with the learners because it is a long process which cannot be done immediately. It is the teachers' responsibility to provide students with best practices and to take into consideration all the above mentioned aspects in order to help them become autonomous learners.

In environments such as Macedonia, language teachers have used old teaching methodology in which the students rely heavily on their teachers. Learning from the teachers as the only source of the information is not enough to spark autonomous learning. Instead, language teachers should change their teaching and move towards learner-centred classrooms. The ultimate goal of any language teacher should be to prepare students for life-long learning and this can be done only if they become autonomous learners. At the South East European University where the present study was done, language teachers use new teaching methods which increase learner involvement in the learning process. They struggle hard to find the most effective ways of promoting learner autonomy.

## 2. Purpose

Promoting learner autonomy in a Higher education in Macedonia is challenging for all language teachers because the students were educated in a traditional classroom where they were passive learners. Learner autonomy was not encouraged and individual learning styles were not taken into consideration. The teachers at SEEU struggle hard to make students more autonomous by using different techniques in the classes and by doing different activities. The main aim of this research is to identify learner strategies that are used by SEEU students and teaching techniques that can promote learner autonomy. Finally, by doing this research we can figure out the level of autonomy that the learners at SEEU possess and suggest further steps for further developing learner autonomy.

## 3. Method

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- 1) What learning strategies do SEEU students use when learning independently?
- 2) Which teaching techniques best promote learner autonomy?

The first instrument used in this study is a student questionnaire which contains items concerning the participant's language level, and different opinions about learner autonomy. The second instrument used is a learner diary which offers students a chance to reflect, plan and monitor their own learning. The third instrument is a teacher questionnaire which gives new insights into the actual use of teaching techniques in developing learner autonomy in a Higher Institution.

### 3.1 Participants

There were eighty participants involved in the study and twenty language teachers, teaching English, German, Albanian and Macedonian. The students' ages range from 18-23 years, and they are both male and female and with varying ethnic backgrounds, Albanian, Macedonian, Turkish and Roma.

### 3.2 Procedure

The participants were first given a students' questionnaire which aimed to figure out their attitude towards autonomous learning and the strategies used. A learner diary served to explore students' capacity to *monitor* their own learning. A teacher questionnaire was given to all teachers and its purpose was to find out the use of teaching techniques that can promote learner autonomy.

#### 4. Findings and Results

*4.1 Phase One* - The first data collection method revealed interesting answers because 85% of the participants believe that learner autonomy is very important but they mostly do as the teacher instructs. For 46% the most complicated issue in learning English is learning grammar, for 38% it is learning vocabulary, while the rest, 16%, do not report specific difficulties. Around 85% of the participants believe that they should learn to manage their learning more effectively while 15% believe that it is the teacher's job to do that. Finally, 35% of the participants believe that autonomous learners are good language learners, 25% of the participants believe that autonomous learners take responsibility for their own learning, 17% believe that autonomous learners are willing to take risks and 13% believe that autonomous learners are aware of their learning styles and strategies. The second part of the questionnaire is a strategy questionnaire which asks about the most-used and the least-used strategies by SEEU students. The results are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1: The most-used and the least-used language learning strategies reported by the participants**

Ranking	Strategies	Percentage
1.	Note-taking helps me learn new words	78%
2.	I ask questions to get the information I need	65%
3.	I read books to improve my English	45%
4.	I use the internet to get the information I need	42%
5.	I use translation from the target language to mother tongue and vice-versa	35%
6.	I control my learning through keeping diaries	30%
7.	Guessing from context helps me to develop my learning	28%
8.	I usually highlight key words and practice them	25%
9.	Paraphrasing texts help me improve my learning	12%
10.	I watch TV shows or movies spoken in English	9%

The results show that the participants use some good strategies but I believe that they should be exposed to more strategies. A teacher should offer them a list of learning strategies, experiment with new ones, and help them choose the ones that are best suited to their learning style.

*4.2 Phase Two* - A Learner Diary was the second method used. Thirty participants were included in this phase. The diaries are very useful because students can reflect on their learning, identify learning difficulties and suggest possible solutions. Let us look have a look at the following excerpts from diaries written by some participants.

*S1: Dear diary, I want to learn English a lot and I try to do many things. I think that I need to learn more words because I need them for communication. I think grammar is the most difficult part to learn.*

*S2: Dear diary, I try to learn English by reading books, watching movies but I always ask my teacher for more complicated issues. I dislike writing essays because I need to know many words. I prefer to study alone not with the others.*

*S3: Dear diary, the most interesting thing in learning English is the ability to communicate. Even though I prefer to study alone, I still need my teacher to explain many things to me.*

*S4: Dear diary, the most challenging thing for me is the English grammar because you can make comparison with your native language. When I prepare for an exam I ask my teacher to help me.*

The learner diaries clearly show that students are motivated to learn English. It seems that grammar and vocabulary are the most challenging issues for them but all of them have pointed out that they always ask a teacher for help. This show that the level of student anatomy is not high and they should spend more time and effort to achieve that.

4.3 Phase Three - The third instrument, the teacher questionnaire, shows that language teachers use different classroom activities to promote learner autonomy. Three common teaching techniques were found in responses to teacher questionnaires. First, they believe that using portfolios can increase learner autonomy because portfolios may encourage students to take more initiative and control of learning and to reflect on their learning. The second technique is learner diaries and the teachers believe that students should regularly reflect, monitor, and track progress on their learning. This is one step closer to becoming autonomous learners. Finally, since the some learners find vocabulary learning difficult a good technique in vocabulary learning is the vocabulary notebook.

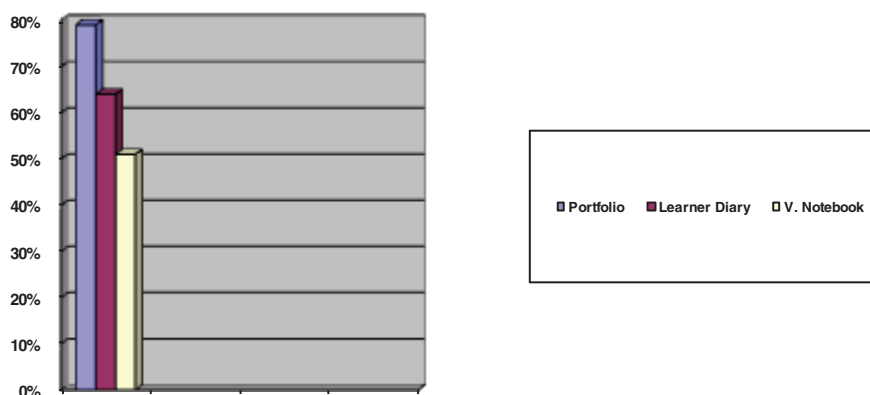


Figure 1: The results obtained from the teacher questionnaire

## 5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Based on the study results and their analysis, the following conclusions can be drawn: majority of the study participants believe that learner autonomy is very important but they rely on a teacher in many occasions. The most-used strategy by the participants was reported a note-taking strategy and it was used for learning new English words. I believe that it is the teachers' responsibility to show the students ways towards achieving learner autonomy and offer them a wide repertoire of the language learning strategies. A strategy program can improve student learning effectiveness but it should be planned very carefully and be part of the overall curricula of Higher Institutions in Macedonia. It was suggested by Cohen (2000) that teachers should act as change agents in the classroom – shifting the responsibility for learning more onto the shoulders of the students themselves, and taking on a series of roles as diagnosticians, learner trainers, coaches, coordinators, language learners and researchers. Learner diary results show that students should reflect and react to learning experiences and difficulties. In their diaries, participants also wrote down several strategies that they use to learn English. Finally, teachers, participants of the study, believe that the use of portfolio, learner diaries and vocabulary notebook are powerful tools to promote learner autonomy.

Promoting learner autonomy is a complex process especially in an environment such as Macedonia where many changes are needed to shift from traditional to contemporary in teaching. Due to this traditional methodology students have difficulty in changing their style of learning but they need classroom strategy training and become autonomous learners. Therefore, teacher's support is highly demanding to develop students' awareness, to identify learners' needs in terms of strategy use, and to adopt different ones they will become autonomous learners and remove many barriers that exist in education. This study can serve as a starting point for further discussions on learner autonomy.

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