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DEVELOPING LEARNER AUTONOMY IN AN EFL CLASSROOM

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Rezumat: *Autoarea acestui articol pune în discuție problema autonomiei în procesul de învățare a limbii străine și rolul acesteia în procesul de însușire a limbii străine. În articol se examinează un șir de definiții elaborate de savanții din domeniul pedagogiei limbilor străine. Autoarea își propune să delimiteze între termenii de „autonomie” și „independență” în procesul predării și învățării, precum și să identifice modalități de a utiliza aceste calități pentru a eficientiza procesul de studiere a unei limbi străine. Scopul principal al acestui studiu este de a identifica modalități de a integra autonomia elevului în procesul de predare/ învățare a limbii străine, ținând cont de cerințele curriculumului național al Republicii Moldova. Adițional, în articol găsim recomandări atât pentru profesori cât și pentru elevi cu privire la dezvoltarea abilităților de învățare autonomă pentru a preda și/ sau însuși o limbă străină.*

Cuvinte-cheie: *autonomia studentului, învățare auto dirijată, învățarea pe parcursul vieții, responsabilitate, competență, curriculum.*

Introduction. Originally, the concept of *learner autonomy* was mainly associated with adult education and self-access learning systems and seemed to be a matter of learners doing things on their own. However, in 1990s, partly under the impact of learner-centered theories of education, more and more national curricula came to include learner autonomy (often called ‘*independent learning*’, ‘*critical thinking*’) as a key component. This brought an important shift of emphasis: learner autonomy now seemed to be a matter of learners doing things not necessarily on their own but for themselves. These developments were accompanied by a steady increase in the number of academic publications dealing with one or another aspect of learner autonomy. By the turn of the century, textbooks designed for use in language teacher education had begun to include chapters or sections on learner autonomy.

Theoretical background. Trying to analyze the increasingly diverse literature in this field, we can identify a single common thread that runs through it, it is that *the essence of learner autonomy is the ability to take charge of one’s own learning*. According to Holec, this ability is acquired rather than in-born. This foundational definition was provided by Holec in *Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning*, a report that was first published by the Council of Europe in 1979 [9, p.2]. While Benson (2011) provided a similar definition of learner autonomy (LA), describing it as *the capability to take control of one’s learning*. According to the author, autonomous learners are known to show responsibility, act independently, understand the purpose of their learning, set reachable and realistic goals, select appropriate techniques and methods to use, assess the development of their learning, and monitor their learning process [3, p.41]. Another important aspect of AL is outlined by Doğan and Mirici (2017), who emphasized that autonomous learners learn not only *in classrooms but also out of classrooms*; they are aware that learning occurs anytime and anywhere and that it is not isolated in the classroom atmosphere. In addition to that, learner autonomy is based on the idea that if learners are involved in decision making processes regarding their own language competence, “they are likely to be more enthusiastic about learning” (Littlejohn, 1985, p. 258) and learning can be more focused and purposeful for them [11], [4]. Thus, in order to contribute to the development of learner autonomy in language classrooms, it is vital that learners be involved in making decision about their own learning. There is an important role for teachers in this process since ‘the ability to behave autonomously for students is dependent upon their teacher creating a classroom culture where autonomy is accepted’ [1, p. 3].

According to several authors, in-service language teachers struggle with the ways to promote learner autonomy, or at least to encourage the idea of autonomy in language classrooms [7, p.112]. Promoting learner autonomy refers to encouraging learners “to determine the objectives, to define the contents and progressions, to select methods and techniques to be used, to monitor the procedures of acquisition and to evaluate what has been acquired” [9, p. 3]. Through this process, eventually, the

autonomous learner establishes “a personal agenda for learning” (Little, 1994) by setting up directions in the planning, pacing, monitoring and evaluating the learning process.

Autonomy and independence. There is plenty of evidence from EFL classrooms to suggest that learners are often reluctant to take charge of their own learning. They are accustomed to the passive role that school traditionally assigns to learners and distrustful of the idea that they should set learning targets, select learning materials and activities, and evaluate learning outcomes. Salmon argues that this passive role coincides with the widespread idea that children are not yet ready for social responsibility, which she contrasts with domestic reality:

to parents, even babies seem to have a will of their own; they are hardly passive creatures to be easily molded by the actions of others. From their earliest years, boys and girls make their active presence, their willful agency, their demands and protests, very vividly felt. In every household that has children, negotiations must be made with young family members: their personal agendas have somehow to be accommodated. [14, p. 23]

In other words, it is in our nature to be autonomous, to be proactive in exploring our environment and to persist in following the goals we set for ourselves. Any parent knows how difficult it can be to distract a small child from a course of action that is socially undesirable or physically dangerous.

According to the American social psychologist Deci, autonomy is one of three basic needs that we must satisfy in order to achieve a sense of self-fulfillment. We are autonomous, he proposes, when we are ‘fully willing to do what [we] are doing and [we] embrace the activity with a sense of interest and commitment’ [6, p. 2]. The other two basic needs are for *competence* and *relatedness*. We have a feeling of competence when we confront and successfully overcome ‘optimal challenges’ [6, p. 66]; and we experience relatedness when we love and are loved by others [6, p. 88]. It is sometimes assumed that the need for relatedness conflicts with the need for autonomy, but as Deci points out, that is to confuse autonomy with independence:

Independence means to do for yourself, to not rely on others for personal nourishment and support. Autonomy, in contrast, means to act freely, with a sense of volition and choice. It is thus possible for a person to be independent and autonomous (i.e., to freely not rely on others), or to be independent and controlled (i.e., to feel forced not to rely on others). [6, p. 86]

Applying this theory to contexts of formal learning, it turns out that learners who are autonomous (volitional in their learning) will be fulfilled and thus motivated learners. It also predicts that their autonomy will be undermined, if they do not feel that their learning effort is paying off.

Having analyzed the above definitions and notions, we can come to the conclusion that learner autonomy involves taking responsibility for one’s learning process; learning takes place both in a classroom environment and outside it; showing responsibility, acting independently, understanding the purpose of learning, setting reachable and realistic goals, selecting appropriate techniques and methods to use, assessing the development of their learning, and monitoring their learning process. Thus, we see that learner’s involvement and motivation have a crucial role in developing learner autonomy.

Taking responsibility for one’s learning. Learning becomes autonomous when the learner takes responsibility for their learning, i.e., what they want to learn and how they are going to organize their learning, including how to find the resources and any other help they will need. It should be noted that autonomous does not mean done alone (i.e. without help). Learning is about interacting with the world and finding the resources we need to learn – which includes ‘help’.

Malcolm Knowles, one of the most influential researchers in adult education, defined autonomous learning (which he calls self-directed learning) in these words:

In its broadest meaning, self-directed learning describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes. [10, p.:18]

As a description of how autonomous learning actually happens in real life, Knowles’ five-step model (i.e. diagnosing learning needs, formulating goals, identifying resources, implementing strategies and evaluating outcomes) offers a starting point – one we can draw on to help us think about the learner competences that might underpin self-directed learning.

The self-directed learner

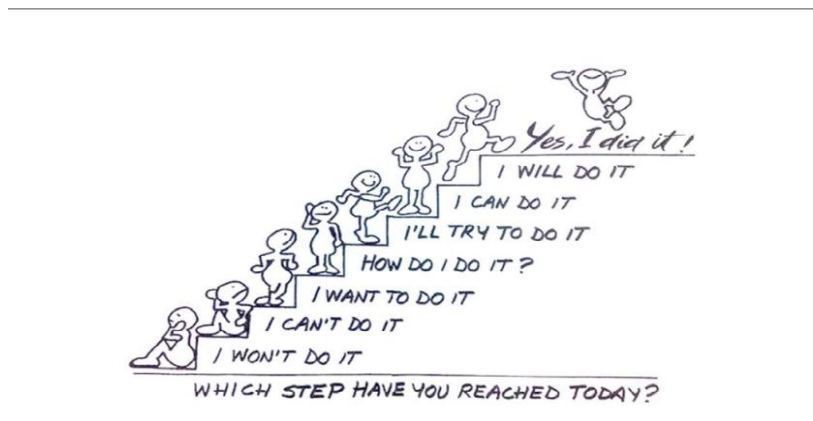
1. Diagnoses his or her learning needs

2. Formulates learning goals to address those needs
3. Identifies human and material resources available to help achieve those learning goals
4. Chooses and implements appropriate learning strategies
5. Evaluates learning outcomes.

Draft core competences for autonomous/ self-directed learning

1. Learning management and awareness. The learner (a) understands that they are primarily and ultimately responsible for their own learning; (b) recognizes that they must take a proactive role in the learning process and (c) is able to do so.
2. Problem-posing and goal setting. The learner can identify and describe the problems they encounter related to literacy² and set realistic goals related to solving those problems.
3. Planning. The learner can plan steps in a learning project in order to achieve his or her own learning goals.
4. Selection and realization. The learner can find learning resources and can select from a variety of learning strategies in order to achieve his/her individual learning goals.
5. Monitoring and evaluating. The learner can monitor his/her own learning processes; can evaluate his/her own learning progress; and can draw conclusions for further learning.

Learners' confidence. Confidence is widely acknowledged as an important factor in all learning. In relation to language learning, this obviously includes having the confidence to interact with other people in English, particularly when you are likely to make mistakes and look/feel foolish. Less obviously, but quite as importantly, it also includes having the confidence to take responsibility for your own learning (rather than shifting that responsibility onto e.g. a teacher) and having the confidence to persist, especially in the face of difficulty. In this regard, the teacher can show to their students the picture given below, asking them to identify their current position, and explaining the role of confidence. Learners' confidence can be developed by providing well-thought feedback and careful directions to help the learner improve.



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Pedagogical implications and practical recommendations for teachers. The principle of learner involvement requires that the teacher draws their learners into their own learning process, making them share responsibility for setting the learning agenda, selecting learning activities and materials, managing classroom interaction and evaluating learning outcomes. Of course, learner involvement is not the result of a single pedagogical act, it's a process that requires constant attention from the beginning to the end of the course of learning. Few learners will arrive at their first class ready to take complete responsibility for their own learning; for most, self-management in learning will be something they have to learn, to begin with by taking very small steps. The teacher's task is to identify those areas in which they can require their learners to take decisions from the first day; but they must also be quick to relinquish control as soon as the learners are ready to take over in other areas.

In some contexts, it is possible for the teacher to negotiate a curriculum exclusively on the basis of learners' perceived needs, this would be the example of courses for adults who enrolled following their learning needs. However, in most national schools, teachers face the necessity to follow the nation-

nal curriculum that is mandatory for all schools. In this case, much depends on the teachers and the teaching strategies that they adopt. Although the curriculum sets the general requirements that teachers must comply with, it leaves much room for teacher's independence, for instance they have the freedom to select textbooks, the materials they use in the classroom, as well as the teaching methods. Given this, we can assume that teachers can consider the option of putting in place learner autonomy. Although it would require much preparation and patience. Learner autonomy will be introduced gradually, depending on the learners' age and level of preparation. The teacher should also be ready to switch from their traditional role of teachers (being in the center of the classroom both directly and indirectly) to the role of a coach or someone who facilitates the learning process. This provides for asking for learners' opinions in taking decisions, giving them the freedom to choose the type of tasks they can do, the type of materials they will use in their class (*written text vs audio version of the text*), asking for their opinion when selecting grammar material for the next lesson. Seeing this, learners will understand that their needs, interests and opinions matter and will take an active part in these discussions. Thus, the teacher will ensure learners' involvement in their own learning process.

Another important aspect of autonomous learning that the teacher needs to take into account is the learning style and strategies of the student. Very often, following the standard curriculum and recommendations developed for its implementation, we set the same tasks for all of the students. Thus, we ask all of the students to work in a similar way, forgetting that some of them are good listeners, others prefer to do things with their hands, another category of students learn by watching videos, or by singing, acting, etc. Giving the learners the autonomy to choose the type of activity they want to engage in, the teacher gives them the possibility to improve the degree of their productivity. In such situations, learners assess their own strength and weakness, would try to improve the situation.

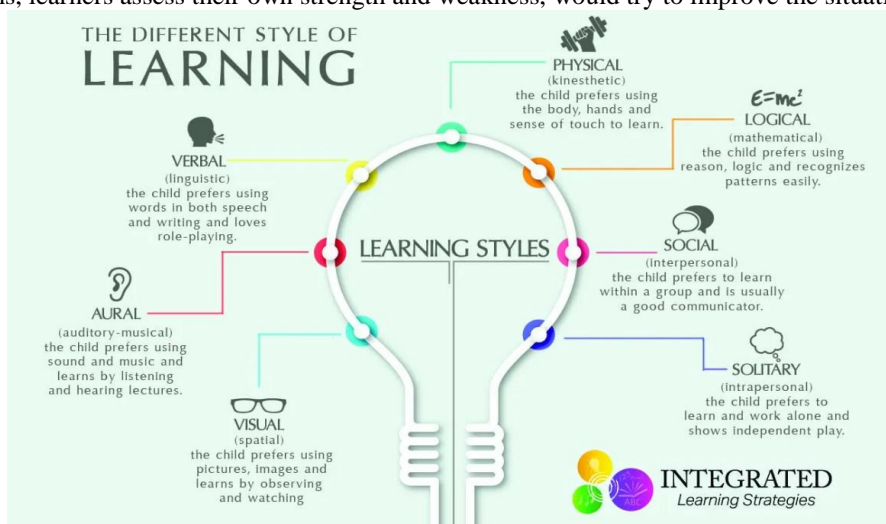


Table 1. *Integrated learning strategies*

Source: <https://ilsllearningcorner.com/2016-02-learning-styles-one-size-fits-all-doesnt-work/>

Recommendations to students. Developing learner autonomy is not a matter of one day or a week, it is a long process that requires work and commitment from both teachers and students. Based on the theories presented in this article, I can sketch the portrait of an autonomous learner. Autonomous learners:

- know their own learning style and are self-reliant,
- can make informed decisions about their learning,
- know their strengths and weaknesses,
- take responsibility for their own learning,
- plan and set goals,
- connect classroom learning to the 'real world',
- are motivated by making progress in learning,
- reflect on the learning process and their progress,

One can become an autonomous learner by:

- being a more confident learner
- making learning enjoyable
- making decisions about one's own learning
- developing better time management skills
- learning to take responsibility
- learning how to study more effectively
- becoming a more successful student overall.

What can one do to become an autonomous learner?

- Look at what they need help with
- looking at what they are good at
- learning to 'edit' or check their own work
- asking for help from peers or faculty
- finding out what materials are available in the library or on the Internet.

Conclusions. Learner autonomy is an essential part of foreign language learning, which if applied correctly, can improve the learning process and yield great results. It is based on three pedagogical principles:

- Learner involvement: engaging learners to share responsibility for the learning process (the affective dimension);
- Learner reflection: helping learners to think critically when they plan, monitor and evaluate their learning (the meta-cognitive dimension);
- Appropriate target language use: speaking can only be learnt by speaking (the communicative dimension).

Learner autonomy, although not a new phenomenon, has been widely applied in various learning environments, including schools. It has proven its efficiency given the greater involvement of learners and taking responsibility for their learning process.

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