Learner Autonomy and its Implementation for Language Teacher Training

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Abstract

We think that the Romanian educational system today should put more emphasis on differentiating and catering for individual learners with different abilities and individual interests. Therefore, the present paper focuses on how to increase awareness on the role of autonomous learning through activities and implementation in the foreign language classrooms and how to prepare teachers to offer guidance and assistance to learners during the learning process, to encourage learners to take control of their own learning as to be aware of how, what and why they are learning a foreign language.

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1. Introduction

Learner autonomy means taking responsibility for someone’s own learning, which signifies that the learners study on their own in a very effective way. Thus, the learning process can be more effective when learners take control of their own process of learning, because they learn what they are ready to learn. In the foreign language classroom, since the aim is to make language learners more successful in terms of acquiring the language itself, learner autonomy is to be developed and exploited in a sense. In Romania, it is a fact that, in most cases, adult learners do not know how to diagnose their own needs for learning objectives, identify learning resources and plan strategies for taking the initiative in using those resources, or assess their own learning, and have their assessments validated. It is likely that learners aiming to learn a foreign language face lots of problems when trying to become competent enough in this process in order that they may acquire the target language in terms of several aspects. Learners come to a language course with different experiential backgrounds and learning

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achievements and teachers know little about learners’ autonomous dispositions. We think that the Romanian educational system today should put more emphasis on differentiating and catering for individual learners with different abilities and individual interests.

Therefore, the present paper focuses on how to raise awareness on the role of autonomous learning through activities and implementation in the foreign language classrooms and how to prepare teachers to offer guidance and assistance to learners during the learning process, to encourage learners to take control of their own learning as to be aware of how, what and why they are learning a foreign language. We will first look at the role of the learner in a language classroom where the spotlight has been moved from teaching to learning. Learner autonomy allows learners to work on different tasks at different times; they have the choice of both input and output of language information. Then, we will see how being aware of one’s own learning styles and provide good learning strategies can help learners in acquiring a foreign language more efficiently. Finally, we will try to provide some examples of group work activities and assessment methods to be used in the language classroom in order to foster learner autonomy. The paper will also include an example of a lesson plan focusing on language learning processes that might be used in language teacher training. We are aware of the fact that official educational policies started to encourage more the implementation of learner autonomy, but we believe that Romanian teachers tend to be more conservative and stick to methods they are familiar with. It is our belief that Romanian foreign language learners have the capacity to embrace modern, communicative and autonomous methods of language learning.

2. The roles of the learner and teacher in a foreign language lesson

Foreign language learning is not an easy process as it requires time, effort and responsibility. The concept of learner autonomy was introduced in the field of language teaching by Holec and refers to “the capacity to take charge of one’s learning (…) to have and to hold the responsibility for all decisions concerning all aspects of this learning, (…), determining objectives, defining the contents and progressions, selecting methods and techniques to be used, monitoring the procedures of acquisition, and evaluating what has been acquired.” [1] In fact, autonomy represents the core of learning and shifts the emphasis from teacher to learner, enabling the latter to play a considerable role in setting the learning goals, organizing the learning process, and fulfilling those goals [2]. With the learner-centred approach, teachers agree to share responsibility with their students, helping them to discover their own meaning instead of lecturing and controlling all classroom activities [3]. Lessons are thus organized in collaboration with the learners in regards to both material and methods. They can choose topics, working approaches, form their own groups, decide upon homework and opt for peer or self-assessment. This doesn’t mean that the teacher becomes redundant; on the contrary, students will pay more attention to presentations as they are given the responsibility of giving feedback to their peers and get involved in what is going on in the classroom. They become more autonomous as they get more conscious of the process of their own learning. They learn by doing, as they plan and implement aspects of the learning process, and by reflecting upon their progress through peer or self-assessment. Self-assessment helps them make judgments on the quality of their work and develop independence from the teacher about the next steps in the learning process.

In an autonomous foreign language classroom, the teacher’s role is that of a facilitator and counselor. Teachers are no longer seen as sources of information or facts but “serve as facilitators and guides rather than directors and moulders of (…) learning.” [4]. The collaboration between students and teachers is vital in order to foster learner autonomy: the students are allowed to decide upon what and how they learn and the teacher encourages this by giving them the tools to make informed decisions regarding their learning, also taking into consideration their age and degree of their responsibility. It is also important that the teacher should design lessons according to the different learners’ needs, skills and backgrounds. A classroom is made up of different learner types and the
teacher should take this into account when trying to implement autonomy. The learners have to be given the right tools in order to become more self-sufficient and independent, they need to know various learning strategies and be assisted in finding the methods that suit them. However, teachers must be careful not to guide the learners implicitly to the strategies they themselves prefer. [5]

3. The importance of knowing one’s learner style to choose appropriate learning strategies

Learners’ styles and pace of learning may be different from one student to another and that is why teachers need to be careful in this respect when designing a foreign language lesson. In order to avoid students’ lack of motivation, teachers need to develop learners’ metacognitive skills. Wenden identified metacognitive skills as “general skills through which learners manage, direct, regulate, [and] guide their learning, i.e., planning, monitoring, and evaluation” [6]. In other words, the term metacognition refers to what a learner knows about how he/she learns a language; it is a process of relating the language learning to the self. Finding out about learner styles and the corresponding learning strategies could be vital when our aim is to foster learner autonomy. The teachers need to apply the information about learner styles and learning strategies when negotiating a learning plan with their students and thus ensuring that the learning activities are appropriate to their needs and learning styles. A teacher that intends to encourage his/her learners’ autonomy should not only introduce various learning strategies but also help learners apply them in different circumstances.

However, Romanian teachers find it rather hard to cater for the different needs of their students. It requires extra time and preparation. They often know a lot about their learners but they fail in collecting the information scientifically, in terms of learning styles and corresponding strategies. To be able to create an autonomous atmosphere in the language classroom, they need to change materials, textbooks or even their beliefs and practices.

We developed an example of an activity to be used in a foreign language classroom in order to find out about our students’ learning styles (our students were in fact language teachers in a training programme). Our purpose was to observe in as much natural way, how the teachers in training behave as learners and which learning style they would adopt. It is an activity that helps students familiarise with the different types of learners and decide on the best learning strategies for each of them. After they had filled in a questionnaire, in pairs, on different learning styles, students were asked to match the corresponding learning strategies to each type of learner, which were in fact their own learning strategies. Afterwards, I asked them (as language teachers) to suggest various teaching strategies to match their partner’s learning strategies and learning style. The activity proved to be quite useful as they not only understood the terms dealt with, but they also acknowledged how important it is to be able to use metacognitive information in their teaching process. They all agreed that it is very important to adapt their teaching techniques to the different types of learners. Learning strategies exist to make the learning process much easier and more permanent for learners aspiring to acquire a foreign language and they also seem to be useful for the promotion of learner autonomy. To further prove the efficiency of our activity, we reproduce here the self-assessment comments that one of our teacher trainees wrote in his logbook, after he had delivered an English lesson focusing on learner autonomy in which he tried to include activities which covered all four skills and which would appeal to all learner types: “I honestly admit that this is probably the first time that I have consciously tried to change the role of student and teacher and to actively encourage learner autonomy. You can imagine my enthusiasm when, on our last lesson before the summer break, one student suggested that we all email one another over the summer to practice our English and learn from each other.”

4. Implementing learner autonomy in Romanian foreign language classrooms

Traditional foreign language teachers in Romania tend to connect the concept of learner autonomy with chaos in the classroom and learners doing what and they want to do and when they want to do it, which is actually wrong. They find it hard to move from a totally teacher-directed teaching environment to a possible learner-
directed learning environment. In the process of learning, it appears difficult for teachers to pass over a part of the responsibility to the learners, whereas it seems easier for the learners to become more autonomous. It is important that teachers and learners become a learning community working in an atmosphere of trust and respect in order to be able to foster autonomous learning.

One of the best ways to implement learner autonomy in a foreign language classroom is strong emphasis on pair and group work. Through constant use of this type of classroom activities, learners will eventually become less dependent on the teacher by learning to collaborate with their peers. They are allowed to form groups freely, based on their interests. Group activities generate learner cooperation and peer tutoring and provide support for individual learner participation as it is less intimidating for the students to communicate in a small group than in front of the whole class.

Another important feature on an autonomous learning activity is authenticity. Teachers need to provide a real life learning environment in order to help students to become genuine users of the target language, not only during the lessons, but especially outside the classroom. All language learners should follow Dam’s advice: “You are entering a foreign language classroom, forget that you are normal!” [7] It means that the communication taking place between teacher and learners and between the learners themselves, should be authentic, as if everybody in the classroom were playing his/her own role in the process of learning.

Assessment and evaluation also plays an important part in the development of the autonomous learner. Assessment can be done either individually (self-assessment) or in group or pairs (peer-assessment). This kind of assessment is vital to learner autonomy as it helps students become aware of their own progress and make informed decisions about what they have to do next in the learning process. They reflect on their own progress thus increasing their knowledge and level of competence. It can be done on a regular and daily basis.

The teacher may evaluate the students’ learning process by asking them to keep logbooks. Written in the target language, the logbook serves as a medium of communication between teachers and learners and it gives space for direct and authentic communication between them. It is also a tool of organization and reflection, both for students and teachers. The teacher can easily monitor the learning process and provide feedback. By constantly writing in their logbooks about what they do, how they do it and why they choose a specific strategy, learners start thinking about their learning in general instead of focusing on a task at a time. Teachers can follow the progress of individual learners to see where they stand in any point in their language learning process.

Finally, we will briefly add other methods that the studies in the field have suggested for implementing learner autonomy: curriculum and syllabus - there must be a mutual relationship between teacher and learner in a curriculum designed to promote learner autonomy because it is vitally important for the learners to be taken into consideration and to be respected, which makes the syllabus and curriculum more flexible; extra-curricular activities such as workshops, English clubs, TV and DVDs viewing, native speaker contacts, etc. are activities that generally develop the feeling of ownership over the learners learning because they give the chance to be able to direct their own learning process; classroom management - for the promotion of the learner autonomy, it is essential for the teachers to make a negotiation between the two faces of the learning process, teacher and learner, on the basis of rules and norms, otherwise the learners will feel miserable and have difficulty struggling with the problems occurred in the classroom.

Conclusion

The development of learner autonomy in Romania, as in many other countries, should be a success and we expect to have foreign language learners that, apart from having a high communicative proficiency, will also gain social competence by experiencing different social forms and acquire an evaluative competence of self and others thus developing enhanced self-esteem. Learners will find out how to learn and accept the responsibility of their process of learning.

While guiding their students in the process of becoming autonomous, which can be hard and difficult at times, Romanian foreign language teachers should not think that developing learner autonomy is a kind of do-as-you-like undertaking for their learners, which means learners learning on their own without the teacher taking any
responsibility. Learner autonomy is not “something that teachers do to learners, but something teachers do together with learners.” [9]. Teachers will need to adapt materials and resources, even methods to their learners’ needs, reconsider their approaches and procedures for optimal learning. Teachers need to refashion their teaching process and forget about old habits or old ways of thinking, but they cannot do this on the spur of the moment. This takes time, effort and responsibility.

As teacher trainers we will often come across pitfalls when training language teachers to develop learner autonomy. They lack sufficient confidence in their learners’ ability to be able to take over responsibility or they seem to forget about being authentic, for example, by asking questions that they can answer themselves and start teaching instead of supporting learning. Finally, they find excuses for not being able to develop autonomy, such as time constraints and having to use a course book.

Romanian foreign language teachers will realize that autonomy is a process and not something that will happen overnight. In his report on Motivation and Learner Autonomy [8], Andrew G.P. Nowlan wrote, “autonomy requires understanding one’s own strengths and weaknesses and accumulating a diverse set of resources that will maximize exposure and improvements . . .” It means that during the process of becoming more autonomous themselves, teachers will be more able to help their students and “take learning into their hands”. This should be the aim of any teacher in training for the future.

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