AUTONOMOUS LEARNING – A NEW APPROACH

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Abstract. Autonomous learning represents an educational innovation which is considered to be especially suitable in andragogy. Giving an overview of the basic theoretical concepts underlying learner autonomy, the author argues that integration of self-directed learning and self-access may be justified for foreign language instruction in tertiary settings, where it is necessary to cope with the most diverse backgrounds, needs and requirements of learners. The author suggests that a special training programme should be offered to teachers wishing to adapt the innovation. Piloting will show whether the approach has a future in the particular learning environment.

Introduction

There are four factors which globally influence developments in education today: the information explosion, the electronic revolution, the rising number of students, and the current state of thinking on language learning and language acquisition (Sturtridge 1997:66). In one way or other, like the country's overall policies and the state of available finances, all of these inevitably leave their imprint on current educational processes in Estonia, which is now on its way back to the Western world. In the present conditions of increased demand for foreign language acquisition, issues of language learning seem to be under particular challenge. The first three factors brought forth above may spell radical changes for the organization of education at all levels. In tertiary institutions, the study time has shortened, undergraduate courses now lasting for four years on average instead of the Soviet five-year path to a diploma. Accordingly, foreign language courses have been compressed, both in terms of contact hours and semesters. In the changed conditions, it has become possible for those students who are capable and motivated enough, to graduate before the assigned time. In many cases, financial pressures cause students to combine study with a part-time job, which

makes it hard for them to follow a fixed timetable. At the same time, students are more than ever willing to learn languages. Thus, the number of those who expect to be offered encouragement, supervision and assistance in their individual learning pursuits rather than straightforward teaching is growing. And, last but not least, one should not overlook the everlasting issue on the agenda: in mixed-ability language groups both top-students and those lagging behind expect to be granted a possibility of getting input by way of independent study. With the foreign language syllabus thus having to accommodate the most diverse needs of learners, it appears that language pedagogy will have to find alternatives to the established modes of teaching and learning. Autonomous learning seems to provide such an alternative.

Traditionally, learning a language has presupposed availability of three kinds of resources: teachers, materials and the learning environment. Reducing the cost of any one of these might allow one to increase spending on the others. Thus, apart from other issues it is the need to spend less on education that has made theoreticians search for new possibilities in pedagogy. A particularly interesting solution involves the development of learners' capacity to learn independently and the provision of self-access resources.

Focus on the learner

In the late 1960s and 1970s, views of the teacher' s role in the study process changed in the West, influenced by psychologists such as Carl Rogers, which made many teachers move from an image of themselves as dispensers of knowledge and instructors to see themselves as facilitators of learning rather than as the source of all knowledge, the formers of all questions, and the resolvers of all problems. Instead, teachers became to be seen as participants with the students in the teaching-learning context, giving students a greater degree of independence and responsibility for learning and doing their best to adapt to differences in learners' styles, strategies, and personalities. In the last two decades, then, as pointed out by several researchers, the center-stage role of the teacher has inexorably given way to a primary focus on the learner (Geddes et al. 1990:82). Alongside teacher training, current pedagogic terminology has been enriched with such topics as 'learner training', and 'learning how to learn' (Fernandes et al. 1990, Ellis and Sinclair 1990). It was already in 1977 that Dubin and Olshtain (1977:viii) emphasized their strong belief that the most important task that teachers take upon themselves is to help pupils become better learners. This goal is best accomplished by creating a classroom atmosphere which allows learners to do their best in their own way. Teachers who see this as their prime objective are *facilitating* the learning process rather than teaching in the old-fashioned meaning of the word.

Educationists seem to have come to recognize what Oscar Wilde wittily pointed out :'Whatever is worth knowing can never be taught' (quoted in Esch 1994:54). It is complicated to assess the cost of teaching-learning hardware and

software on an hourly usage basis, but in Britain, as S. Orr (1996:24) has pointed out, "most language schools are spending at least £20.00 on teachers for every £1.00 spent on materials. Also, the cost of a freelance teacher is now probably at least 10 times that of the best multimedia courses." In Estonia the problem is not so much the cost of teachers as their availability. Low pay in teaching jobs makes trained teachers enter other spheres of employment. Thus the situation both in secondary and tertiary education prompts the question: Can at least part of the learning process of foreign languages be in the form of self-study? Perhaps it is more important that language teachers, in addition to helping their learners to acquire knowledge and train skills, would also make them better learners who would not expect to be spoon-fed, but would be ready to assume responsibility for their own study results?

Many authors will answer this question in the affirmative. In an increasingly open and mobile society where the learners have to be ready to meet the challenge of quickly changing needs, demands and opportunities, the promotion and facilitation of learning seems to be of utmost importance. Also, the availability of books, audio cassettes , video films, as well as the advent of multimedia PCs with suitable software have considerably widened the possibilities for self-study.

Multiple intelligences and different learning styles

Of no small significance is the current understanding about multiple intelligences and a diversity of learning styles and learning preferences (e.g. Goleman 1996, Kolb in Tomusk 1993, Wingate 1996, 1997).

Some authors argue that one of the limiting factors of modern education is that it overemphasizes the analytical intellectual (cognitive) activity on account of affective and conative activity (Tomusk 1993:166–167). Goleman (1996:10) has noted that linguistic/verbal intelligence dominates most Western educational systems.

Attempts have been made to build a model of learning styles. A learning style being any individual's preferred ways of going about learning. It is generally considered that one's learning style will result from personality variables, including psychological and cognitive make-up, socio-cultural background, and educational experience. In this connection, referring to Willing, Nunan (1991:168) points out that a person's perceptions of his/her own strengths and weaknesses will also have an effect on his/her learning style.

Kolb, in his experiential learning theory, defined four phases in learning: (1) a concrete experience, (2) a reflective observation, (3) abstract conceptualization, and (4) active experimentation (Tomusk 1993:125), distinguishing between four types of learners: accommodator, diverger, converger, and assimilator, and compiling a learning-style inventory questionnaire to help learners understand their strengths and weaknesses by means of teaching them to look at themselves as learners.

More recently, Goleman (1996) and Wingate (1996) have distinguished between seven types of intelligences, *viz.* linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial (visual), musical, bodily-kinesthetic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal, which accord to seven types of learners. Wingate, on the basis of his long experience of teaching, contends that the teacher can get a picture of his/her students' capabilities as learners and can accordingly select such teaching methods for his/her language classes which would allow the students' strengths in learning to compensate for the teacher's weaknesses in teaching, and vice versa (Wingate 1997) .

An autonomous learner needs to know about his/her strengths to be able to choose the learning style that will help him/her to become a better learner.

Willing (see Nunan 1991:168) suggests that some aspects of an individual's learning style may be alterable while others may not.

Learner training

Thus, apart from teaching, language pedagogy now has to come to grips with the issue of learner training, i.e. helping learners to develop their learning ability. In other words, alongside cognitive strategies it will become indispensable in the field of learner activity to pay attention to metacognitive strategies. For instance, Westhoff (1993:13) has declared: "For an autonomous learner the metacognitive domain is most important."

A strategy has been defined as a plan of action to reach a goal. Nunan (1991:168) defines learning strategies as "the mental processes which learners employ to learn and use the target language". Synthesizing and expanding earlier lists of language learning strategies, Oxford (1990) took a comprehensive list of 62 strategies which she then divided into six broad strategy groups: *viz.,* cognitive, memory, and compensation strategies (together forming the class of direct strategies), and metacognitive, affective and social strategies (forming the class of indirect strategies). Cognitive strategies encompass practising, receiving and sending messages, analyzing and reasoning, and creating structure for input and output, whereas metacognitive strategies mean centering one's learning, arranging and planning, monitoring the execution of the plans and evaluating the results. Wenden (1991:34) defines three types of metacognitive knowledge, firstly, 'person knowledge', which is the learner's beliefs and views on how learning takes place, the factors that may inhibit or enhance learning, and on him/herself as a language learner; secondly, 'strategic knowledge', which is the learner's understanding about which strategies work best under which circumstances; and thirdly, 'task knowledge', which is the learner's understanding of how a certain task should be completed, the reason for doing the task, and the resources needed for its completion. Metacognitive knowledge is important, because only when the learner is aware of and reflects about what he/she is doing, will he/she be able to reassess and revise his/her knowledge, thus being able to control his/her learning process.

The main objective of learner training is to enable the learner to become autonomous or self-directed, or in other words, responsible for his/her learning decisions.

Dick Allwright illustrates the importance of learner awareness with a comment made by a Chinese student about a group of Chinese scholars in Lancaster at the end of their course: "They all felt very strongly that they would have done very much better if they had known what they were doing." (Huttunen 1993:14)

Hence, learning to learn procedures must include activities aimed at raising language awareness and learning awareness, at discovering and practising new learning techniques, information gathering and problem solving activities, etc. (Holec 1993:38). It is believed that learners' involvement in their own learning will increase the probability that they actually learn what they want to learn. The aim of learner training thus is to help learners discover the factors that affect their learning and single out those learning strategies that suit them best (Ellis and Sinclair 1989:2). Wenden (1991) defines the three components of learner training as learner strategies, metacognitive knowledge, and attitude. A number of modern EFL coursebooks (for recent survey see Lake 1997) incorporate activities for learner training with a view to enabling the learner to become self-directed, that is, to accept responsibility for making and implementing decisions at each phase of learning.

Differing attitudes to autonomy

With regard to autonomy, theorists adopt differing attitudes and under-standings. Some see autonomy as a new teaching/learning methodology, some as a new teaching/learning objective. In the former case, provision is made for more independent work in a teacher-assisted learning framework. Thus, learners are encouraged to study more independently. Such learner independence, as a matter of fact, has always been characteristic of work at tertiary institutions: group-work and pair-work in class are combined with individualized study for a certain outcome: making reports, writing essays, doing complementary reading tasks, etc. Also, it can be claimed that all learning is autonomous learning in the sense that it depends on the efforts of the learners themselves. However, although autonomy was associated with the concept of individualization in the early 1980s, most researchers (see, e.g. Sturtridge 1997) now prefer to emphasize like Holec (1993:36) that

> *the innovation brought about by this approach lies in the change in the roles of teachers and learners: the former have to carry out their decision-making task less and less independently from the learners, while the latter have to be less and less dependent on the teacher in that matter and take a more extensive share in it.*

In the conditions where autonomy is seen as a teaching/learning methodology, as a rule, the steps provided for autonomy in institutional contexts are confined to making a resource-centre available for students' independent work or self-study.

Holec (1993:37) calls this kind of study 'self-administered instruction', to keep the more traditional way of independent learning apart from the true self-directed activity which is characteristic of autonomy.

Researchers who see autonomy as a new learning objective, approach learning as a self-directed activity, laying the emphasis on the learner's responsibility for his/her learning rather than on mere provision of materials. Geddes and Sturtridge (1982:2) see autonomy as the ultimate goal of self-directed learning. According to their view a fully autonomous student has complete control of his/her own learning and, either alone or in a group decides what it is he/she wants to learn in the light of why he/she needs to learn, and then decides how he/she is going to tackle the problem. In order to do it, the learner needs to be aware of his/her goals, he/she must be able to monitor his/her own progress and evaluate his/her performance.

Within the constraints of University settings, the very principle of autonomy seems to be in contradiction to the compulsory nature of most language courses. Therefore it seems reasonable to take a tentative, flexible approach to autonomy, at least at the initial stage of introduction. It will be possible to promote learner autonomy, on the one hand, by way of helping the students to become aware of the learning styles and strategies which suit them best, and on the other hand, by way of leading them to materials for learner training. The question of responsibility seems to be fundamental to successful learning, hence language teaching should attempt in every way possible to enhance learner responsibility. However, accepting responsibility for the learning programme by the learner should be seen as something dynamic and transitional, "as a process which develops and changes between the beginning and end of the programme" (Holec 1985:175). Research has shown that effective language learners have the capacity to take responsibility for their own learning (Jones 1995). Or, as aptly pointed out by Anny King, "if you are a successful learner it means that you are teaching yourself well" (Forbes and King 1994:55). The educational institution on its part can support learner 'autonomization' (neologism from Holec 1985:180) by way of providing such conditions or learning environment which would be conducive to the learner becoming more self-directed, and for the teacher to see the need for his/her change of role.

Self-access

The advent of electronic media has raised the question of institutional provision of up-to-date facilities for language learners who wish to take responsibility for their own learning. Such facilities, as a rule, are made available at self-access centres, also called 'independent learning centres' (Yuen-wai Poon in Esch 1994), 'language learning centres' (Hurd in Esch 1994), or simply 'resource centres' (e.g. Abé in Esch 1994; Kjisik and Nordlund 1996). Self-access centres are defined as facilities which help the University to 'systematise the

process of learning foreign languages in such a way that each person learning will be able to identify and will have easy access to appropriate resources which are so organised that they can lead towards chosen goals along whatever path the learner prefers.' (McCafferty undated:1)

McCafferty argues that "one cannot impose self-access, one cannot even demand consistency on the part of the learner; one can simply offer a range of alternatives, guidance and information." He sees the advantages of self-access in comparison with the prescribed syllabus approach and total autonomy in the following:

> *if the prescribed syllabus approach tends to force learners along a single, narrow and often unsuitable road to where they do not particularly want to go, then 'total autonomy' may be akin to abandoning the learner, without map or compass, in the middle of a very foreign field. Self-access is the local, friendly travel agent.* (McCafferty undated: 1)

Geddes and Sturtridge (1982:1–2) give a less emotionally coloured version, defining self-access centres as a facility which can help to meet learners' needs. In such centres there are learning materials which the students can choose for themselves. They can work on them and correct or assess their own performance with little or no aid from the teacher. Accessibility is a key term for such centres. Some authors stress that the centres themselves should be easy to find and their opening hours easy to remember (Esch 1994:63). Others stress that the materials in them must be 'accessible' in several ways. Geddes and Sturtridge (1992:2) list those as follows:

> *First, the students must be able to recognize the type of work they wish to do from the catalogue or advice cards. Then the materials must be accessible in the sense that they can easily find them on the shelf or in the cupboard. Thirdly, they must be accessible in the sense that the students can do the tasks required /.../ and that they can have some knowledge of the result of their work, should they need it.*

The above authors also hold the view that self-access materials need not be restricted to self-access centres, but in many cases can be used in the traditional classroom setting, co-existing with the class textbook.

Richards et al. (1992:326) define a self-access learning centre as a room or an area in an educational institution containing resources of different kinds which students can use under supervision. It may contain computers for individual student use, video and TV monitors and audio facilities, as well as more conventional learning resources. Students may be directed to certain learning materials (e.g. grammar reviews, tests) designed to complement and support regular teaching activities in language programme.

An important aspect concerning the work of self-access systems is their need to be dynamic and flexible, i.e. they are set up to meet the needs of a peculiar population of learners and accordingly will have to respond to changes in the characteristics of the target group. Therefore in current literature on the subject

attention is drawn to the capacity of all staff – from the receptionist to the adviser – to observe and to analyze users' behaviour, to get feedback from learners and above all to talk problems through together (Esch 1994:61). Sturtridge (1997:73) emphasizes the importance of good planning and continual up-dating of materials for the success of a self-access centre.

Changing attitudes

Introduction of autonomous learning and provision of self-access facilities might help institutions of higher learning to organize language courses efficiently within a comparatively small number of contact hours. The transition to self-direction can be made progressively and dynamically, with learners gradually taking over more and more of the decisions in connection with their learning, whereby more class time will be released for such activities which are most efficiently done as group work.

Experience has shown that the success of a self-access centre depends largely on how well the learners have been prepared to use and appreciate it, and whether the teachers accept the change of role (Sturtridge 1997:72), or rather, the additional dimension in their role.

If it has been decided to introduce autonomy, it seems important that the teachers and learners involved be given some preparatory training, both in terms of psychology and methodology, that they might appreciate autonomy as a possible mode of working. Some authors (Dickinson 1987, Sheerin 1989) warn against attempts to force autonomy upon the staff. For teachers, according to Sheerin (1989:7), autonomy spells a change in role from 'parent' to 'equal' and accordingly necessitates a change in attitude which can be quite traumatic. One cannot but agree with this view – adoption or non-adoption of autonomy should be seen as a matter of choice. Autonomy should be seen as an alternative to the traditional teacher-led courses. However, in my opinion, a special training programme familiarizing language teachers with the basic concepts of autonomous learning and possible ways of application would be in order, prior to opening a self-access centre. It is important for the success of a self-access centre that it would be seen in a wider context, i.e. as a means of implementation of learner autonomy. Self-access work can be made a component part of the syllabus and teachers will be expected to refer their students to possibilities of autonomous learning.

At the University of Helsinki Language Centre autonomous learning modules (ALMs) have been operating since 1994. The leaders of the project found that a key element in the move towards autonomy was attitude change (Kjisik and Nordlund 1996). The people involved had deeply embedded beliefs about student/teacher roles as well as about language and language learning. The above authors noted that students, on the whole, were readier to adapt to new power relationships and often enjoyed the sense of responsibility, whereas some teachers

initially showed considerable confusion and apprehension. To minimize that, a training programme should be offered to teachers, which alongside the provision of theoretical insights and practical skills would encourage them and give them confidence to go about the new approach. Pilot research will be needed to show whether learner autonomy can be integrated on a wider scale.

Conclusion

In view of what was said above, it seems that learner autonomy may prove a useful tool for language learning in higher education which involves young adults, who as a rule are ready to take a greater degree of control and responsibility over the content and methods of learning than is usual in class-room language learning contexts. Taking control over learning also implies that students will work on developing their capacity to learn independently and that the institutional context facilitates that process by providing the necessary environment for self-directed learning. Integration of learner autonomy in higher education promises more effective, flexible and economical language courses. The teacher's role in the conditions of students' self-directed learning will change, becoming more that of a helper or counsellor (facilitator). If an institution wants to adopt learner autonomy, a special training programme should first be offered to those teachers who are interested in adapting the innovation to their particular conditions. Pilot research has to be carried out to see whether the approach will yield the expected outcomes.

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